



Submission: Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training

Background

IEUA-QNT welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Education Council's Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training.

IEUA-QNT represents ~17,000 teachers, support staff and ancillary staff in non-government education institutions (including non-government schools and RTOs) in Queensland and the Northern Territory and consistently engages in industrial and education debate at both state and national levels through its Education and Industrial Committees and through its national counterpart, the Independent Education Union, which receives input from teachers in all States and Territories.

In relation to the VET sector in particular, our union represents educators working in a variety of training environments, ranging from private post-secondary colleges through to schools with substantial in-house VET programmes and those that make extensive or occasional use of external (TAFE and private) VET providers.

Our responses to each of the discussion questions are included below.

What are the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities students should expect to leave senior secondary schooling with to help them succeed in their post-school lives?

It is widely acknowledged that, to make the most of opportunities to engage with work and/or further study, students must leave school with strong literacy and numeracy skills. Similarly, there is little doubt that students are also advantaged if they are in possession of sound general capabilities. In many ways, these factors are more important than subject-specific knowledge, which can generally be developed, as required, at a later stage.

The challenge for any further education reform then, is how to ensure that all students exit senior secondary schooling in possession of the requisite skills and capabilities to engage meaningfully with the world of work or further study. Providing the personalised learning opportunities and quality career guidance that is essential to ensure smooth and productive transitions to post-school pathways is a far more complex undertaking than reflected in current education policy.

To ensure that all students get the best available support, and achieve the best possible learning outcomes, requires recognition of the current working conditions of teachers and guidance counsellors as less than ideal. Only when teachers, guidance counsellors and VET trainers are recognised as highly skilled and capable education professionals, who require professional working conditions to deliver the best possible outcomes, will it be possible for them to provide students with the individual support required.

The reality of work for many teachers, trainers and guidance counsellors is one where there is simply insufficient time to attend to the level of detail required. A truly progressive education policy would therefore, provide teachers, trainers and guidance counsellors with greater time to focus on the needs of individual students.

How can we help students make better decisions about learning pathways within school?

There is widespread agreement that access to quality career guidance while in the final years of secondary schooling is vital to selection and pursuit of a suitable post-secondary pathway. In this context, it is important to note that the recently established National Careers Institute is ideally positioned to serve as a single, reputable source of quality career advice that can be filtered by experienced career counsellors. It remains to be seen however, whether the Institute will take on this role.

Our union would urge governments at all levels to approach the creation of the National Careers Institute as an opportunity to consolidate and refine existing career guidance resources to provide a vital service to students and career guidance professionals.

How do we change negative perceptions of certain pathways?

Current perceptions of university pathways as superior to vocational alternatives have their genesis in previous government policies aimed at ensuring Australia's development of a 'knowledge economy'. As it is now evident that the aspiration to have all workers educated to university level is both unrealistic, and economically counterproductive, it is imperative that we restore the vitality and reputation of the vocational education sector.

Consultation with IEUA-QNT members indicates that there are two interrelated issues negatively affecting student outcomes in the VET sector:

1. An over-reliance on short-term and/or casual contracts of employment which limits the ability of VET practitioners to sustain quality learning experiences for students; and
2. A lack of consistent quality in VET courses.

A key limitation of the current system, which leads to the problems listed above, is that processes for development and review of registered courses and/or training packages provide for extensive consultation with business and industry, but little to no consultation with the teachers, trainers and assessors who are responsible for their implementation. Although we recognise the crucial importance of industry input in vocational education and training, we would argue that greater engagement of VET practitioners is the only viable means of ensuring the quality of educational experiences offered to VET students.

Furthermore, the nature of employment of VET education practitioners is not conducive to high-quality, professional practice. In a 'race to the bottom' following privatisation of the vocational education sector, employers adopt business models favouring short-term financial savings over long-term investment in providing quality education that delivers greater gains to individuals and communities. A persistent overreliance on short-term and/or casual contracts of employment for education professionals not only creates difficulties for individual teachers, trainers and tutors, but seriously impedes their ability to provide quality learning experiences for students.

The vast majority of teachers and trainers working for private training providers are employed on a casual, insecure basis under the *Educational Services (Post-Secondary Education) Award* (the Award). Teachers employed under the Award are paid significantly less than those employed

under the comparable TAFE Queensland Educators Certified Agreement, despite the nature of the work being the same.

Ongoing professional development is also an important contributor to the development and delivery of quality learning programs and is a requirement under the ASQA Regulations. Despite this, VET practitioners employed under the Award, are rarely paid for time spent on professional development and need to cover associated expenses (e.g. fees for courses, seminars, subscriptions, etc.) themselves.

This erosion of employment conditions under the privatisation of vocational education places VET practitioners in an invidious position. These educators are committed to providing quality learning experiences, but are employed under conditions which limit their capacity to do so. VET practitioners should be provided with secure, appropriately-paid work, and the time and resources to develop and deliver quality learning experiences for students supported by adequate provision for professional development.

Consultation with IEUA-QNT members also indicates that one of the greatest difficulties in the delivery of high quality school-based VET is provision of adequate levels of workplace experience. Adequate funding for TAFE programs offers a measure of assurance that students will be supported in finding appropriate, and adequate, work placements. Reliance on private providers to fill this need is not sufficient because, in practice, they often vary in the number of hours which students are engaged in work placement, with significant ramifications for graduates.

To counteract negative perceptions of the VET sector will also require collaboration with media outlets to ensure that “good news” stories are promoted, rather than the negative stories which currently dominate reporting on the VET sector.

How can we support young people to make better decisions about their post-school pathways?

As noted in our response to question one, providing individual students with the personalised learning opportunities required to enable successful transitions to post-secondary pathways requires teachers and guidance counsellors with time to engage in meaningful dialogue with those students, and their families.

At present, the extent of career guidance, and personalised learning opportunities, are constrained by the paucity of time allocated to teachers and guidance counsellors in schools. Unless and until the vital work of teachers and guidance counsellors is recognised as the complex, time-intensive undertaking that it truly is, unacceptably high numbers of students will continue to disengage from learning and struggle to access productive post-secondary pathways.

How can we make sure opportunities are available and support is tailored to the needs of all young people?

Both tailoring learning opportunities and providing career advice that is customised to the needs of individual students, and the expectations of their families, are complex undertakings that require teachers and guidance counsellors to develop significant relationships with the young people they are assisting. In practice, both tasks are performed by qualified, knowledgeable and experienced education professionals, but those professionals are often working under duress due to the fact that far too little time and resources are available for the amount, and nature, of the work required.

As a result, shortcomings in career advice given to students at a secondary level are then compounded when students find themselves attending tertiary institutions (TAFE, RTOs or universities) which provide even more limited, and far less personalised, support. The end result is high drop-out rates and significant numbers of young people who do not complete the qualification for which they have enrolled.

Providing tailored support to individual students therefore requires ongoing investment in teachers, trainers and career guidance professionals at all levels, and across all sectors, of education.

Is there anything else you would like the Review Panel to consider?

We note, with interest, that this Review is taking place at the same time as stakeholder consultations relating to implementation of the recommendations of the *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System*. To date, our union has participated in consultations relating to The National Careers Institute in particular and looks forward to engaging in further consultation as the recommendations of the report are implemented.

We would urge government to consider the recommendations of the *Strengthening Skills* report, and feedback from those who have engaged in consultation around its implementation, in development of future policy regarding the VET sector.

Concluding Statement

The IEUA-QNT is committed to quality education and believes that the capacity of educators to provide quality learning environments for students is crucially dependent on resourcing and enabling structures which are the responsibility of education institutions, systems and governments. Ensuring the best outcomes for all students is critically dependent on adequate and appropriate investment of time and resources at all levels of education.

We thank Education Council for the invitation to engage in consultation through this submission and would welcome the opportunity to engage in further discussion.



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