

IMPROVING STUDENT PATHWAYS TO VET

Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training by the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, Parliament of Australia

March 2023

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body and leading advocate representing school-aged students in Victoria. We were created by students to be a voice for all primary and secondary school students at the highest levels of decision making in Victorian education. Our vision is an education system that is student-led, student driven and student-focused.

The recommendations in this report were developed in collaboration with members of the Student Executive Advisory Committee. VicSRC is thankful for the support and expertise of everyone who contributed to this work.



VicSRC respectfully acknowledges and recognises the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the custodians of this land. We pay our respects to the ancestors and Elders past and present of all Aboriginal nations in Victoria and across the wider continent.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training.

As the peak body for primary and secondary school-aged students in Victoria, VicSRC believes all students deserve the opportunity to engage in education that is meaningful, flexible and relevant to their needs. We recognise the importance of an education system that is tailored to the needs of students, embedding student voice at every level of decision-making to ensure the best possible outcome for students and the broader community.

This submission draws on and amplifies the lived experience of Victorian students through engagement with current members of VicSRC's Student Executive Advisory Committee. By centring their voices in this submission, VicSRC hopes to highlight the unique perspective students bring to education reform and emphasise the value of embedding student-led practices in policy-making processes.

The submission aims to focus on how the Australian Government, alongside the state and territory governments, can enhance the status of vocational education and training (VET). The submission provides VicSRC's views and recommendations relating to available information about VET and perceptions of VET.

Recommendations

1. Schools must provide relevant and accessible information about VET to students and their families, at equal measure to the information they provide about non-VET subjects. This must include information about how VET subjects can be undertaken alongside other VCE subjects and contribute to a student's ATAR.
2. Support schools to work closely with students to develop resources and information packs about VET that can be distributed to students and their families. The information should be accurate and detailed, and not prioritise certain subjects or pathways over others.
3. Invest in professional development for all school staff to ensure they are able to answer questions about VET subjects and provide students with the information required to make informed decisions.
4. All schools should have the facilities and capabilities to deliver VET subjects within the school grounds. Government must work with schools by providing adequate resourcing and support to ensure every school in Australia is delivering VET subjects on-site.
5. Government must work with students, their families, schools and VET providers to address the stigma and misinformation surrounding VET pathways. This process should be student-led and should celebrate the achievements of students who have previously undertaken VET and TAFE courses.
6. Schools must diversify the guest speakers they invite to speak to their students, ensuring genuine diversity of lived experience, education background and chosen career pathway.
7. Work with employers to understand their needs and provide support to address barriers to accessing meaningful employment faced by students who complete TAFE-level courses.
8. Provide meaningful opportunities for students to inform education policy, including by collaborating with student-led organisations, and establishing mechanisms such as steering committees and communities of practice for students to engage in an ongoing capacity.

Available information about VET

Students identified the scarcity of accurate, accessible information about VET subjects and its associated benefits, believing this to be a key contributing factor to the lack of knowledge and understanding about VET subjects in the school community. They highlighted the impacts this has had on perceptions of VET, impacting uptake of VET subjects and further entrenching the existing stigma associated with VET subjects and VET providers.

Exposure to VET

A common theme arising from conversations with students was that most students and their families aren't familiar with VET and have limited exposure to help them understand what VET subjects are. Due in part to schools' emphasis on university education pathways, many students only receive information about VET subjects at information sessions or one-off forums about VCE subject selection broadly. Those that are interested in pursuing VET subjects are often met with confusion, a lack of knowledge and sometimes outright discouragement from school teaching staff. This results in many students searching online or contacting their local VET provider to gather more information so they can make an informed decision about their subject selection.

One student commented on this challenge, highlighting the cycle that is perpetuated by a lack of information resulting in less students undertaking VET subjects. This often leads schools to believing there is a lack of interest in VET subjects, therefore doing little to improve communication about VET subjects to their school community. Without clear, accessible information for students and their families, the perception of VET is likely to remain unchanged, and the number of students who consider VET subjects a viable option will remain limited.

Many students also discussed how schools prioritise university pathways as the superior option post-secondary school, expressing concern that the emphasis on one pathway undermines the value of alternative subjects and career pathways. Students believe the current system fails to recognise that they each have their own goals and learning needs, and whilst university pathways are suitable for many, VET subjects are equally valuable and should be promoted in the same way.

Recommendation 1: *Schools must provide relevant and accessible information about VET to students and their families, at equal measure to the information they provide about non-VET subjects. This must include information about how VET subjects can be undertaken alongside other VCE subjects and contribute to a student's ATAR.*

Recommendation 2: *Support schools to work closely with students to develop resources and information packs about VET that can be distributed to students and their families. The information should be accurate and detailed, and not prioritise certain subjects or pathways over others.*

Factors influencing student choices

For students who are interested in pursuing a VET subject, they face multiple barriers to enrolling and undertaking their preferred study options. Many students we spoke to stated that they don't know anyone who is undertaking a VET subject. In addition, a significant proportion of schools in Victoria don't deliver VET on-site. This adds to the barriers students face in accessing VET subjects as it can be highly inconvenient to travel to another facility. One student identified that the delivery of VET subjects at a different site adds to the stigma, particularly for students at high-fee independent schools where families want to maximise students' access of the school facilities. For some, it also has the added effect of their families being less likely to support their engagement in VET if it is delivered by providers that they don't know or have contact with.

One student shared their own experience, speaking about the confusion they encountered from their own teachers when querying the availability of a particular VET subject at school.

When I first started looking into doing VET, it was difficult to tell if I could do the subject at my school or if I had to travel somewhere else. I spoke to my teacher and she didn't even know. At first I don't think she even knew what VET was, and then after I sent her a bunch of information I found online, she spoke to the school and eventually confirmed that I could do a VET subject and it would be delivered at school.

-Year 10 student, government school in regional Victoria

This experience highlights the importance of clear communication to educators as well as to school communities. If teachers aren't aware of the options available to students, they are ill-equipped to respond to queries from students and their families, which can have the unintentional consequence of discouraging students from pursuing VET.

Recommendation 3: *Invest in professional development for all school staff to ensure they are able to answer questions about VET subjects and provide students with the information required to make informed decisions.*

Recommendation 4: *All schools should have the facilities and capabilities to deliver VET subjects within the school grounds. Government must work with schools by providing adequate resourcing and support to ensure every school in Australia is delivering VET subjects on-site.*

Perceptions of VET

Students spoke at length about the stigma and negative stereotypes that exist about VET and TAFE, and how this impacts the likelihood of students enrolling in VET subjects. Many described VET to be perceived as an inferior option created for students who are considered less academic, further stigmatising those students and the course itself as a valuable option for all students.

VET and TAFE are not the same

Many students spoke about the misconception that choosing to do a VET subject is synonymous with becoming a "tradie". For some, the understanding of VET amongst their peers and families was that students must leave school to undertake what they believe is an apprenticeship. For others, they noted that few people realised VET subjects contribute to a student's ATAR and can be completed as part of VCE, instead assuming it was in addition to their already heavy workloads making it less likely students would select to take on a VET course. One student noted that people who undertook VET subjects or went on to complete TAFE courses are rarely celebrated in the school environment, with most (if not all) guest speakers having university level qualifications.

Whenever we have guest speakers come to talk to us about career options and different pathways, they always went to uni and now work in STEM or other academic areas like law and finance. I know they want us to hear from lots of different people who work in different areas, but they never invite anyone who's done a trade or who didn't finish school and went to TAFE instead, and I think that adds to the stigma around TAFE and means students don't have access to diverse subjects outside of the normal VCE pathway.

-Year 11 student, independent school in Melbourne.

Recommendation 5: *Government must work with students, their families, schools and VET providers to address the stigma and misinformation surrounding VET pathways. This process should be student-led and should celebrate the achievements of students who have previously undertaken VET and TAFE courses.*

Recommendation 6: *Schools must diversify the guest speakers they invite to speak to their students, ensuring genuine diversity of lived experience, education background and chosen career pathway.*

Improving partnerships with employers

To increase the number of students undertaking VET subjects, more needs to be done to educate employers on the value of non-university level qualifications, such as certificate levels III and IV and diplomas. For students choosing to undertake VET, the career pathways associated with VET subjects are clear, and many providers do a good job of promoting this information. However, schools still focus on university pathways and most members of the school community still associate TAFE courses with traditional apprenticeships and trades. This has resulted in students with an interest in areas such as youth work, individual support work, aged care, hospitality, and tourism to prioritise university over TAFE, because they are led to believe employers won't value a certificate or diploma level qualification. Not only does this contribute to the de-valuing of TAFE level qualifications, it ignores the extensive hands-on experience provided to students who undertake a VET subject and contributes to the pressure students experience to go on to university, whether or not they believe it to be the best option for them.

Recommendation 7: *Work with employers to understand their needs and provide support to address barriers to accessing meaningful employment faced by students who complete TAFE-level courses.*

Embedding student voice in the process

To ensure the perceptions and status of VET is improved within the education system, government must first acknowledge the need to involve students in the conversation, recognising their expertise as current students and providing them with the opportunity to lead this work. Students are best placed to know what students need, and can work in partnership with schools, families, VET providers, employers and government to inform education policy and ensure it is relevant and suited to the needs of students.

Recommendation 8: *Provide meaningful opportunities for students to inform education policy, including by collaborating with student-led organisations, and establishing mechanisms such as steering committees and communities of practice for students to engage in an ongoing capacity.*