

# IMPROVING STUDENT PATHWAYS TO IN-DEMAND VOCATIONS

Submission to the Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-Demand Industries

July 2025

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.



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 student pathways into in-demand industries.

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. This ensures the best possible outcomes for students and the broader community.

This submission draws on and amplifies the lived experience of Victorian students through VicSRC's existing research including the 2024 Congress Report, our current Policy Platform, previous research into student attitudes towards Vocational Education and Training (VET) Delivered in Schools, and VicSRC's submission to the 2023 Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training. By centring student voice 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.

This submission aims to focus on how the Victorian Government Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee can best approach reforms to the delivery of VET and other vocational pathways in Victorian Secondary Schools to support pathways into in-demand occupations.

## Recommendations

The Victorian Government must:

1. Communicate clear and accessible information about vocational pathways such as VET, the VCE Vocational Major (VCE VM) and the Victorian Pathways Certificate (VPC) throughout secondary school across all education settings. These resources must include logistical details tailored to each school's offerings and detailed explanation about how vocational education can interact with other aspects of school.
2. Ensure schools promote vocational pathways with the same emphasis as academic pathways to help address associated stigma. This includes showcasing the experiences of professionals from diverse and in-demand vocational industries.
3. Support schools to work closely with students to develop resources and information packs about vocational pathways that can be distributed to students and their families. These resources will demystify in-demand vocational pathways by being accurate, easy to understand, and will avoid privileging one type of pathway over another.
4. Work with students, their families, schools and vocational education providers to address the stigma and misinformation surrounding vocational pathways. This process should be student-led and should celebrate the achievements of students who have previously undertaken vocational pathways, particularly those in in-demand and emerging industries.
5. Support schools to offer more vocational education on-site or, where that is not possible, establish partnerships with other schools in their community to create local vocational education networks. Students must also be supported to access vocational education through transport solutions and flexible timetabling that enables seamless integration of vocational subjects into their schooling.
6. Invest in professional development for all school staff to ensure they are able to answer questions about vocational pathways and provide students with the information required to make informed decisions.
7. Continue to provide meaningful opportunities for students to inform education policy by collaborating with student-led organisations and establishing mechanisms such as steering

committees and communities of practice. These should include diverse student voices, including students who the education system has struggled to engage, to ensure education reform meets the needs of all learners.

## Communication and Stigma as Barriers to Vocational Pathways in Secondary School

A lack of clear and timely communication about VET and vocational pathways in school has been repeatedly cited as a barrier for students who do, or may wish to, pursue a vocational pathway in secondary school.<sup>1</sup> Many students that VicSRC has spoken to reflected on having to more actively seek out information about vocational pathways in their school than about academic or VCE pathways, and at times, were met with discouragement or disinterest from their teachers and careers staff.<sup>2</sup>

### Early and accessible information is essential for informed pathway decisions

Students across the board, including those who have pursued vocational training and those who have not, emphasise that there is a troubling lack of information about all aspects of vocational training pathways in secondary schools.<sup>3</sup> Many have noted that the information that is available is hard to source and even harder to understand, with many teachers and careers counsellors lacking any information about vocational pathways and having no method to refer students on for further inquiry.<sup>4</sup>

From our conversations with students, it is apparent that those who have studied a VET subject also lacked sufficient access to information about VET prior to undertaking their study. Many of these students describe having to do significant independent research and self-advocacy within their schools in order to be able to study a VET subject.<sup>5</sup>

VicSRC has heard from many students who have not undertaken vocational study at school that they feel regret and resentment toward the system, as they would have preferred a vocational option if clearer information had been available during pathway selection.<sup>6</sup>

Students must have access to clear, accessible information about vocational pathways such as VET, the VCE Vocational Major (VCE VM), and the Victorian Pathways Certificate (VPC) in order to make informed decisions about their schooling, including the option to pursue in-demand careers that rely on vocational training.

Students emphasised that increasing uptake of vocational pathways depends not only on the quality of the information provided, but also on when it is provided. They stress that this information needs to be introduced much earlier in secondary school, so vocational options are seen as viable and valuable, not just a last resort.<sup>7</sup>

**Recommendation 1:** *The Victorian Government must communicate clear and accessible information about vocational pathways such as VET, the VCE Vocational Major (VCE VM) and the Victorian Pathways Certificate (VPC) throughout secondary school across all education settings. These*

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<sup>1</sup> Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) (2023), 'VET Delivered to School Students (VDSS): Surveying VET Student Attitudes and Reflections on VET at School', p. 6; VicSRC (2023), 'Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'; VicSRC (2024), '2024 Congress Report', p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> VicSRC (2023), 'Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'.

<sup>3</sup> VicSRC (2023), 'VET Delivered to School Students (VDSS): Surveying VET Student Attitudes and Reflections on VET at School', p. 6; VicSRC (2023), 'Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'; VicSRC (2024), '2024 Congress Report', p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> VicSRC (2023), 'Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'; VicSRC (2023), 'Appendix to Inquiry Submission - Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'.

<sup>5</sup> VicSRC (2023), 'VET Delivered to School Students (VDSS): Surveying VET Student Attitudes and Reflections on VET at School', p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> VicSRC (2024), '2024 Congress Report', p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> VicSRC (2023), 'VET Delivered to School Students (VDSS): Surveying VET Student Attitudes and Reflections on VET at School', p. 6; VicSRC (2024), '2024 Congress Report', p. 18.

resources must include logistical details tailored to each school's offerings and detailed explanation about how vocational education can interact with other aspects of school.

### **Normalising and promoting vocational pathways alongside academic pathways**

The reality in many Victorian secondary schools is that vocational pathways like VET and the VCE VM are still considered to be lesser options when compared to mainstream VCE.<sup>8</sup> Even students who do undertake a VET subject report feeling unsupported when considering undertaking a VET subject during school.<sup>9</sup> Students highlight the perception that VCE is the default pathway driven by the limited information provided about vocational options. This low visibility contributes to reduced uptake. Which is then often misinterpreted by schools as a lack of student interest, reinforcing the cycle of limited promotion and awareness.<sup>10</sup>

Schools that invite guest speakers to share their career journey often showcase academic or non-vocational pathways. Without visible role models or real-life examples of successful vocational careers, students lack the inspiration to consider alternatives to the conventional academic route.<sup>11</sup> Presenting VCE as the default option for all students can, and does, lead to frustration and resentment toward a system that appears to steer them into academic pathways without presenting viable vocational alternatives, often until it's too late.<sup>12</sup> One effective way to encourage interest in in-demand vocational careers is to actively promote and normalise stories of success through vocational pathways.

**Recommendation 2:** *The Victorian Government must ensure schools promote vocational pathways with the same emphasis as academic pathways to help address associated stigma. This includes showcasing the experiences of professionals from diverse and in-demand vocational industries.*

### **Challenging stigma and correcting misinformation about vocational pathways**

Stigma continues to shape the attitudes of students, families, and teachers towards vocational education in ways that discourage engagement.<sup>13</sup> Students consistently share that alternative school pathways such as VET, the VCE VM and the VPC are often viewed as being for students who are “less capable” or who have “failed” to keep up with VCE.<sup>14</sup> These attitudes create a culture in which students feel judged or marginalised for even considering vocational options.

Some students also expressed concern that many employers do not value vocational qualifications, even in industries considered vocational in nature. Whether this perception is accurate or not, its prevalence is enough to dissuade students from pursuing vocational education out of fear that it will limit their future opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

Another common misconception is that all vocational pathways lead exclusively to trades or apprenticeships. Students felt strongly that choosing VET is synonymous with becoming a ‘tradie’, signalling a reduced understanding of the spectrum of vocational pathways which sit outside of this characterisation (e.g. aged care, creative industries, IT, early childhood education). Further, many students and families misunderstand the structure and purpose of in-school vocational education, with some assuming that taking a VET subject is the same as beginning a formal apprenticeship.<sup>16</sup> These misconceptions highlight the need for better, more accurate messaging around vocational options, and for schools to actively challenge stigma which it arises.

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<sup>8</sup> VicSRC (2024), ‘2024 Congress Report’, p.16.

<sup>9</sup> VicSRC (2023), ‘VET Delivered to School Students (VDSS): Surveying VET Student Attitudes and Reflections on VET at School’, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> VicSRC (2023), ‘Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training’.

<sup>11</sup> VicSRC (2024), ‘Policy Platform’; Victorian Student Representative Council (2023), ‘Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training’.

<sup>12</sup> VicSRC (2024), ‘2024 Congress Report’, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> VicSRC (VicSRC) (2023), ‘VET Delivered to School Students (VDSS): Surveying VET Student Attitudes and Reflections on VET at School’, p. 6; VicSRC (2023), ‘Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training’; VicSRC (2024), ‘2024 Congress Report’, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> VicSRC (2023), ‘Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training’.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

**Recommendation 3:** *The Victorian Government must support schools to work closely with students to develop resources and information packs about vocational pathways that can be distributed to students and their families. These resources will demystify in-demand vocational pathways by being accurate, easy to understand, and will avoid privileging one type of pathway over another.*

**Recommendation 4:** *The Victorian Government must work with students, their families, schools and vocational education providers to address the stigma and misinformation surrounding vocational pathways. This process should be student-led and should celebrate the achievements of students who have previously undertaken vocational pathways, particularly those in in-demand and emerging industries.*

## Viability of Vocational Pathways in Secondary School

Students continue to face significant structural barriers when attempting to pursue vocational education, barriers that go beyond stigma and a lack of information. These include limited subject offerings, poor integration into school timetables, lack of staff support, and minimal opportunities for students to influence how vocational education is delivered. A meaningful increase in the uptake of vocational pathways will require a system-wide shift in how these options are presented, supported, and resourced, to highlight their viability as sound study and career options.<sup>17</sup>

### Removing practical barriers to participation in vocational pathways in Victorian schools

Vocational education is not well integrated into mainstream schooling in Victoria, despite the growing need for skilled workers in vocational industries. Less than 30% of Victorian schools offer VET subjects on-site,<sup>18</sup> and even where VET or VCE VM is available in schools, streamlined incorporation of these subjects into the standard timetable continues to remain a problem.<sup>19</sup> In a landscape where vocational subjects are already considered to be the lesser choice, additional barriers like the need to travel to appropriate facilities and potentially missing other classes make vocational education nonviable for many students.<sup>20</sup>

Students also highlighted that there is a lack of clear information about how vocational education options like VET and VCE VM interact with their ATAR. In a system where VCE is presented as the standard or “safe” option, it is easy to see why students feel like they have to choose between vocational interests and academic performance, so as not to jeopardise their education and long-term prospects.<sup>21</sup>

To ensure vocational pathways are genuinely viable, they must be accessible physically, logistically and structurally for all students.

**Recommendation 5:** *The Victorian Government must support schools to offer more vocational education on-site or, where that is not possible, establish partnerships with other schools in their community to create local vocational education networks. Students must also be supported to access vocational education through transport solutions and flexible timetabling that enables seamless integration of vocational subjects into their schooling.*

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<sup>17</sup> VicSRC (2023), 'Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'.

<sup>18</sup> VicSRC (2023), 'Appendix to Inquiry Submission - Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'.

<sup>19</sup> VicSRC (2023), 'VET Delivered to School Students (VDSS): Surveying VET Student Attitudes and Reflections on VET at School', p. 18; VicSRC (2023), 'Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'.

<sup>20</sup> VicSRC (2023), 'Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'; VicSRC (2023), 'Appendix to Inquiry Submission - Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'.

<sup>21</sup> VicSRC (2024), '2024 Congress Report', p. 16; VicSRC (2023), 'VET Delivered to School Students (VDSS): Surveying VET Student Attitudes and Reflections on VET at School', p. 17; VicSRC (2023), 'Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'.

## Equipping educators to support vocational pathways

Another major barrier to accessing vocational pathways is the lack of consistent support from school staff, such as teachers and careers counsellors.<sup>22</sup> Many students said that teachers and careers counsellors were not equipped with relevant or useful information about vocational pathways, and did not direct students towards available resources. In some cases, students said they were actively discouraged from considering vocational pathways by school staff.<sup>23</sup> This lack of staff understanding and encouragement to pursue vocational pathways creates a ripple effect amongst students who may be curious about vocational study.

Many students don't receive the guidance needed to explore their interests in a way that identifies vocational pathway as a more suitable option based on their career goals. Some students realised too late in their schooling that vocational study would have better suited their needs and aspirations, pointing to a misalignment between their early expectations of secondary school and their lived experience.<sup>24</sup>

Students currently studying VET subjects often demonstrated strong alignment with in-demand industries such as healthcare, construction, and community services. These students were clear about their vocational goals, but their path to VET was often marked by confusion, a lack of guidance, and the need for self-advocacy.<sup>25</sup> When access depends on high levels of motivation or prior knowledge, students with emerging or tentative interests are at risk of falling through the cracks.

**Recommendation 6:** *The Victorian Government must invest in professional development for all school staff to ensure they are able to answer questions about vocational pathways and provide students with the information required to make informed decisions.*

## Embedding student voice in decision-making

To truly improve the status, accessibility and success of vocational pathways, students must be active participants in shaping how these pathways are presented and delivered. Students are experts in their own educational experience, and they are best placed to identify what is working, and what isn't, within the system. Embedding student voice in decision-making processes enables policies and programs to be more relevant, inclusive, and reflective of the diversity of student needs.

This must go beyond token approaches such as consultation. Mechanisms such as student-led committees, advisory groups, must be established with representation from a diverse range of students, including those from marginalised or disengaged backgrounds, to ensure all perspectives are reflected.

**Recommendation 7:** *The Victorian Government must continue to provide meaningful opportunities for students to inform education policy by collaborating with student-led organisations and establishing mechanisms such as steering committees and communities of practice. These should include diverse student voices, including students who the education system has struggled to engage, to ensure education reform meets the needs of all learners.*

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<sup>22</sup> VicSRC (2023), 'Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'; VicSRC (2024), '2024 Congress Report', p. 18; VicSRC (2023), 'Appendix to Inquiry Submission - Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'.

<sup>23</sup> VicSRC (2023), 'Submission to the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training'.

<sup>24</sup> VicSRC (2024), '2024 Congress Report', p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> VicSRC (2023), 'VET Delivered to School Students (VDSS): Surveying VET Student Attitudes and Reflections on VET at School', p. 28.