

STRONGER FUTURES FOR ALL YOUNG VICTORIANS

An AEU response to a discussion
paper on the youth transitions
system

AEU Victorian Branch

Submission paper

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AEU Response to ‘Stronger Futures for all young Victorians’ – Discussion paper on the youth transitions system

Strengthening literacy and numeracy in the post-compulsory years

What form should the proposed literacy and numeracy standards take?

“While Victorian senior secondary qualifications – the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) – and accredited entry-level VET qualifications provide students with an opportunity to acquire additional literacy and numeracy skills, the attainment of the qualification is not dependent on the achievement of specific literacy and numeracy standards.” (*Discussion Paper*, p.14)

The AEU supports efforts that aim to ensure that students who complete senior secondary and accredited entry level VET qualifications have the requisite literacy and numeracy skills. The proposal by the Department to ensure that students who are yet to achieve benchmark literacy and numeracy standards, at the end of Year 9, have this as a key focus of their Managed Individual Pathway, is one way for this to be achieved.

The suggestion that students may be required to meet specific literacy and numeracy standards in order to attain a senior secondary or accredited entry-level VET qualification presumes that it is only by making such standards explicit that we can ensure students who complete these qualifications have those skills at the required level.

The AEU would be concerned about any movement to separately assess literacy and numeracy standards and make the successful completion of this assessment as a prerequisite for attainment of a qualification. We would recommend that the first step in any review of standards should be a rigorous assessment of what is already required to achieve successful completion of the units/modules which go towards attaining these qualifications.

Separate standards would be unnecessary when they already exist as an implicit feature of each unit/module. Each VCE unit, VCAL strand and VET module includes relevant literacy and/or numeracy competencies which are assessed as part of the broader assessment of content knowledge and skills.

For example, the completion of units three and four VCE History requires students to have a host of literacy skills which need to be demonstrated in order to successfully complete the course. These include analytical, synthesis and research skills, knowledge of the mechanics of written and oral language, comprehension and critical thinking skills, amongst others.

Achieving a satisfactory outcome in an individual VCE unit is not possible unless a student can demonstrate, to a satisfactory standard, an understanding and competency in literacy and numeracy relevant to that study.

Similarly, in the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning two of the four strands provide for the explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy skills at the foundation, intermediate and senior levels. The other strands provide further opportunity to enhance students' skills in these areas.

Any desire for specific standards could be best achieved by mapping the existing assessment criteria of units/modules within each certificate and emphasising the ways in which benchmark literacy and numeracy skills are already taught, learnt and assessed.

The *Discussion Paper* (p.15) cites the need for some students, who undertake a VET or ACE program, to access additional programs to strengthen their literacy and numeracy skills and advocates that the VCAL is a vehicle to provide this. Whilst the NQC and COAG report *VET Products for the 21st Century* may recommend that literacy and numeracy requirements be made more explicit in foundation and occupationally oriented courses, this should not automatically make them separate hurdle requirements for successful completion.

Any literacy and numeracy standards that are introduced should not prevent students from enrolling in vocational courses at the Certificate 3 level or above. However, for those young people who cannot demonstrate benchmark literacy and or numeracy skills, this provides an opportunity for additional support as an embedded component of the certificate they wish to complete.

This is particularly important in the context of being able to engage young people in vocational training. For many young people it is the hands-on experience of vocational learning that opens the door to better literacy and numeracy skills.

The University of Ballarat TAFE division has developed a framework – for teaching literacy and numeracy skills within the context of VET training activities (Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills). It is a teaching methodology, rather than an additional course or unit for students to undertake. Selected VET subjects are provided with extra teaching resources to integrate literacy and numeracy support. Typically, a vocational lecturer is teamed with a literacy lecturer and together they work with the students throughout the duration of the course.

The AEU supports embedded approaches which enable students to gain literacy and numeracy support through undertaking units towards gaining a certificate. In this regard, work arising from the *Discussion Paper* should look at identifying the existing literacy and numeracy skills required to successfully complete modules towards certification. The aim should be to highlight and reinforce the implicit requirements rather than adding an artificial set of teaching and learning standards or competencies.

In what other ways can the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills be strengthened in the post-compulsory years?

Ensuring that students have access to support they need to acquire core literacy and numeracy skills is critical – as are the funding/resources to deliver it. Currently schools and TAFEs have inadequate budgets to provide sustained support for the students who need it.

Diagnostic testing could be used to help determine which students need support and what type is required – this is a common approach in the earlier years of schooling.

Any improvements that enable students to better attain literacy and numeracy skills are predicated on the ability of schools and TAFEs to provide qualified and highly skilled teachers and support staff. Staff need improved access to ongoing professional development.

Literacy and numeracy skills acquisition training should be a component of all secondary pre-service teacher education courses.

Cross curriculum approaches should support student literacy and numeracy development in all curriculum areas.

Support for making informed education and training choices

Will a career plan strengthen young people's engagement with education and their capacity to make informed study and career choices both during schooling and in subsequent education, training and employment settings?

The AEU supports the development of high quality and properly resourced career and training pathways curriculum, and acknowledges that students who have access to career planning and real experiences in the workplace are better placed to make informed and meaningful decisions about education and training pathways for their future careers.

Currently some students have access to a careers curriculum from the earliest part of secondary schooling but many do not. The development of a dedicated careers curriculum as part of the National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions (NPA – YAT) can provide teachers, schools and other training providers with guidance about what students should know about planning their careers and by when. However, there is no doubt that simply adding this as another component to an already crowded curriculum space will not achieve the desired outcome.

The AEU believes that students will gain greater benefit from early careers education – as early as Year 7 – if it is embedded as part of other core subject areas.

What other actions should be taken to ensure that sound career development services are available to all young Victorians?

The NPA – YAT provides much needed professional development opportunities for some careers advisors. However, greater support needs to be provided to classroom teachers who work with students in the junior secondary years. Any curriculum that is available, is only as good as the capacity for teachers to engage students in activities that develop their knowledge about career pathways and skills for career planning. Much more consideration needs to be given to professional development and resources for these teachers.

The employment of Regional Careers Coaches through the NPA is welcome and speaks to the profound need for there to be deep and ongoing relationships between schools and TAFEs, as well as local businesses and industry, with regard to student career planning.

The Government would be well advised to increase its investment in developing the relationships between staff in schools and TAFEs (including classroom teachers), field officers and career coaches, and specifically trained staff in individual businesses and industries. The development of work experience/work placement plans for all students could be an added feature to each student's MIPs outline – such plans could be developed by the student, training provider and workplace, facilitated by a field officer or careers coach.

The AEU would encourage consideration of additional staffing resources being made available to Government school networks to co-ordinate and facilitate relationships between schools and relevant workplaces across the public and private sectors.

How can business/industry be more involved in assisting students' career choices?

Given the difficulty of finding work experience placements for many students, the AEU believes that there is a need to investigate a range of incentives for business and industry to provide placements for students who are not participating in traineeships and apprenticeships (school based or otherwise). The success of any incentive based program will rely on staff within business and industry having access to certified training that enables them to design and implement work placements that are meaningful for the student and employer. Such incentives are critically important for small and medium sized business to become more actively engaged in preparing young people for the world of work.

Arrangements that support and encourage young people to complete qualifications

What would further strengthen the delivery partnerships between government and non-government schools and between schools and VET providers?

The AEU believes that there must be much greater emphasis placed on the role of Government schools and TAFE as public education institutions. The Government has a primary obligation to ensure that effective partnerships between Government schools and TAFEs can be further developed and enhanced. Consideration should be given to the following proposals:

- strengthen the relationships between government schools and TAFE,
 - by integrating programs and co-use of facilities (see Sebastopol College case study, below),
 - introducing a program that enables school based staff to gain wider experience in TAFEs and vice versa,
 - reintroduce the teacher release to industry program;
- make the VETIS program more affordable, in terms of tuition and materials costs, especially for students with disabilities, and from low socioeconomic, indigenous, rural and 'at risk' backgrounds;
- develop comprehensive TAFE taster programs that are to help students complete programs they are enrolled in and to increase knowledge of particular careers. Students would be formally enrolled to gain recognition of basic competencies achieved during the taster programs that could be used towards certification.

CASE STUDY – Sebastopol College and the TAFE Division University of Ballarat

Yr 9 Sebastopol College students who have low literacy and numeracy skills and who are identified as 'at risk' can participate in a pilot support program with the TAFE Division of the University of Ballarat (UB).

Rather than attend special classes at the school where they would feel stigmatised, the students attend literacy and numeracy classes one morning a week at UB. They perceive UB as a learning environment where specialised literacy and numeracy skills are commonly taught and it was not out of the ordinary for them to attend this setting. In short, they felt quite privileged to be part of the adult environment. The students did not have to wear their school uniform when they attended TAFE which made them feel more comfortable in the largely adult environment. At lunch time the students would change into their school uniforms and catch the bus back to their secondary college. The program has proven to be a great success, not only improving the literacy and numeracy skills of the students, but also introducing them to the concepts of VET and higher education, and informing them of possible pathways.

Would greater levels of institutional specialisation in curriculum and qualification delivery result in improved quality of provision, and support increased student attainment of Year 12 or an equivalent vocational qualification?

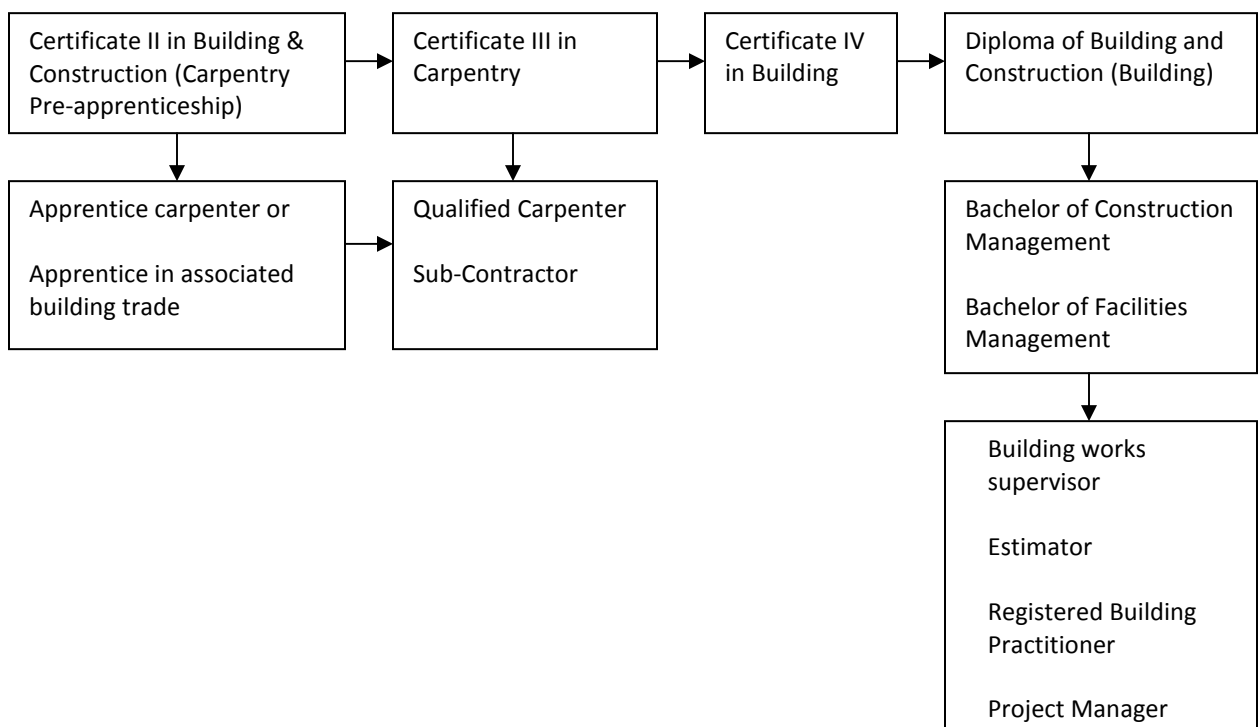
The AEU supports comprehensive provision in all Government Secondary Schools. We acknowledge, however, that some students are better suited to complete their education in non-school environments. In this regard, Government schools and TAFEs must work closely to complement provision to ensure that students have access to the pathways they need.

What additional actions should Government take to support young people to complete initial qualifications in the VET sector?

The AEU supports the development of a 'Qualification Passport' that enables improved portability of units between certificates and a more streamlined and easily accessible process of recognition of prior learning process. Some students will commence multiple entry level VET qualifications without gaining certification and often need to repeat modules in which they have gained competency because they have not sought recognition for these achievements.

Students are more likely to complete initial qualifications if it is clear to them the pathways that are open at the Certificate 3 level and above. Students and their teachers need to have a clear understanding of what can be gained by engaging further in vocational training right through to the advanced diploma level, and beyond.

The following flow chart provides a clear view of the pathways for students interested in carpentry and building. The AEU believes that there needs to improved information which articulates the reasons why students would want to complete higher qualifications and the literacy and numeracy skills needed to do them.



How should schools, VET providers and system authorities use the new transparency and accountability arrangements in Victorian schools and the Victorian Student Number to improve the completion rate of Year 12 or equivalent qualifications?

The VSN has the potential to track student enrolment and achievement throughout the post compulsory years no matter what institution they attend. The AEU supports the use of available information to ensure students who are unlikely to complete a Year 12 or equivalent qualification can get the learning and, where relevant, the welfare support that they need.

How can businesses and industry be involved in increasing completion rates – especially for apprenticeships?

Recent statistics published by NCVER show that approximately half of those who commenced apprenticeships (trade and non-trade) in 2004/05 did not complete their qualification. Whilst the economic downturn in 2008 is likely to have had an impact on this, the figure is nonetheless consistent with completion rates in recent years. The AEU believes that business and industry should have greater responsibility, in partnership with schools and TAFE, for increasing the number of young people completing apprenticeships. The *Discussion Paper* makes the good point that “the quality of the workplace environment, learning opportunities and supervision has a significant impact on the likelihood of an apprentice staying in their apprenticeship” (p.25). The creation of the Apprentice Support Officer positions and the existing Apprenticeship Field Officers do provide much needed support for apprentices and their employers. However, the AEU believes that there is a need to focus on developing the skills of those staff within workplaces who work directly with apprentices. The Government could support this by creating incentives, financial or otherwise, that encourage businesses to give their staff access to training that would enable them to better support apprentices.

The AEU also believes that business and industry must be subject to greater compliance requirements when it comes to the provision of support for apprentices. Given that employers are currently required to provide a range of supports for apprentices upon signing them up, the introduction of an audit process would help determine when support is being adequately provided and when it is not. An audit process would provide valuable information for field officers to better undertake their role and target support. If audited employers fail to provide the required support then there should be the capacity for incentive payments to be withdrawn.

Systems that assist students to move effectively between courses, institutions and sectors

How can student transition to the VET sector, higher education and full-time employment be improved?

The AEU recognises the need for schools to have effective transition programs that enable students to access further training or employment or a combination of both. We support the ITP pilot program.

The AEU also recognises that the ENTER is not necessarily the best indicator of student success in higher education courses nor the best method for selecting appropriate students. The AEU supports further work in this area and advocates an investigation into the broad array of entry requirements, appropriate to specific education and training pathways, which support student, institution and ultimately employer needs.

The Government's *Securing Jobs for Your Future – Skills for Victoria* limits the ability of students to move effectively between courses and sectors. The changes introduced to the VET system that have dramatically ramped up fees, abolished the right to concession enrolments for some students on low incomes, introduced HECS-style loans and opened up the TAFE system to competition, allowing private providers to cherry-pick the cheapest and most profitable courses. This will cause access and equity issues for many students and in particular those from low SES and rural backgrounds. Further, the only way a student will be able to access a Government subsidised enrolment is by articulating vertically. This requirement does not reflect the common way in which many students gain skills. Often students will complete multiple certificates at the same certification level before they decide on a pathway which leads to substantive employment and a career. Under the policy students will incur hefty enrolment fees if they do not progress vertically at the outset of their training. For example, students who complete Certificate II or III courses through the VET in Schools program will, once they turn 20 years of age, be liable for full fees if they wish to enrol in other courses at the same level of certification.

Student transition to the VET sector, higher education and full-time employment will be improved by making substantial changes to the *Securing Jobs for Your Future – Skills for Victoria* policy.

What other initiatives would improve school to tertiary education articulation and support young people to take advantage of the expansion of these sectors?

Whilst the AEU supports the extension of students through 'reach forward' opportunities to higher level VET and higher education, successful student participation often relies on thoroughgoing support from teachers in the student's base school. It is rare for such support to be formally recognised as part of a teacher's allotment, consequentially adding to teacher workload. Schools are not provided with additional funding to support these students. Anecdotally, teachers report that students, who

participate in higher education courses, whilst enrolled at school, do so in the absence of appropriate support from the host university. The AEU believes that planning and provision of support for students who undertake extension studies is critical.

The AEU supports the further development of partnerships between universities and schools or VET providers in low socioeconomic background communities.

Should efforts to improve VET to higher education articulation and credit arrangements focus on particular occupational pathways and skill priority areas, for example in engineering and nursing?

The AEU recognises the need to focus some additional attention on skill priority areas, but only in the context of adequate base support for all other, non-priority, areas. Moreover, the AEU would be concerned if the focus on particular occupational pathways and skill priority areas led to a narrowing of skills within the workforce and become too occupationally specific.

How can governments ensure that reforms to the VET and higher education sector address both skill needs and student demand for particular qualifications?

The AEU believes that there should be improved credit arrangements to better enable students to gain recognition for prior learning. Such arrangements are needed to improve consistency across the state to ensure students who gain a qualification or competency with one provider has it recognised by all others – adequate recognition of prior learning is essential for straightforward and timely articulation. The AEU would support the development of greater links being developed and made more explicit between training packages and higher education courses. The AEU would also support expanding the role of the VRQA to oversee standardised credit recognition arrangements.

The AEU would welcome a greater focus on and additional resources to further develop partnerships between VET and higher education providers in low SES areas and regional areas.

We also believe that consideration should be given to more explicitly mapped pathways that articulate the benefits of combined dual sector qualifications undertaken concurrently.

The Government's *Securing Jobs for Your Future – Skills for Victoria* policy focuses on vertical articulation, that is, VET qualifications through to higher education. Whilst some students do follow this pathway, the overwhelming majority move from higher education to VET. The policy means that students who move from higher education to VET will be undertaking a lesser qualification and will not be eligible for a government supported place. This will be a disincentive for students to continue to study. The skills reform policy must be altered so it is not a barrier to movement between the higher education and VET sectors.

How can governments improve provision and articulation arrangements to better support young people, especially in regional and rural areas, to access tertiary qualifications without needing to relocate?

Governments need to provide adequate funding to ensure that regional TAFEs and Universities have the capacity to offer more programs so that regional students do not need to attend metropolitan institutions to gain their qualification.

Issues related to student travel and accommodation costs provide barriers for students in rural and some regional areas.

The advancement of information and communication technologies also provides for additional provision in regional and rural areas.



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