6 December 2019

Review Panel
Senior Secondary Pathways Review
Education Council

Attention: Professor Peter Shergold AC
                Review Panel Chair

LODGED ONLINE

Submission to the Senior Secondary Pathways Review

1. **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?**

Identifying and selecting essential skills for students is complex. As acknowledged by the review committee, there are different views about what comprises essential skills, knowledge and capabilities of senior secondary school leavers. If a particular student is the starting point, essential skills will be those that best progresses that particular student's future. For one student an essential skill might be to learn to speak with greater confidence; for another it might be to listen more reflectively.

While most schools are mainstream, students within them have varied capabilities and needs. Moreover, the review committee would be aware of specialised schools which cater for the needs of students with specialised needs. Essential skills, knowledge and capabilities for these students' post-school should be included in the committee's work.

As the national body representing Australia's Catholic schools, the view of the NCEC about essential skills, knowledge and capabilities and post school success is informed by the mission of the Catholic school. This mission seeks to provide an education which advances human flourishing by promoting truth, goodness, love, work, leisure and faith. Australia's Catholic schools seek to deliver a holistic education that is fully integrated and equips students with skills to develop healthy attitudes to the challenges and pressures of life and contribute constructively to society.

We believe that the model of education espoused by Australia's Catholic schools is broader than a model of education which prioritises "job readiness", "workforce capabilities" or preparation for an unknown future. The later model, rather than encouraging a mindset in young people that is flexible and adaptable, can be one dimensional and may have the opposite effect.

Ideally, students leaving school should have a foundational knowledge of literacy and numeracy, which are the building blocks of all learning.   In addition, students should have developed a thirst for knowledge in a wide range of areas, an inquisitiveness for truth, openness to the ideas of others and a respect for their place in the world and what has come before.

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

Australia's Catholic schools see education as a partnership with students and their families. Assisting students to make better decisions about learning pathways should involve the particular student, the student's family and the school, especially teachers.

As a starting point, a good knowledge of the individual student is essential. This is particularly the case for students with specialised needs.

Our experience in Catholic schools is that parents and teachers generally know students well and students' views are encouraged, freely expressed and taken into account. In selecting subjects for the senior years of school, students are usually actively engaged in discussions about post school options and which subjects might best prepare them for post school life.

Active and constructive engagement with parents about post-school options is important also. To support engagement, parents need to be informed about options in a post-schooling environment and the value of different types of study. Parental perceptions regarding university studies or vocational education and training (VET) or the multiple pathways available for study may have a limiting impact on some students. A student's decision making is enhanced when parents, teachers and friends are engaged in an informed manner about the options.

Ideally, there should be a range of supports for students, families and teachers. This is especially the case for students who need extra support including those from disadvantaged, rural and remote communities and students with specialised needs. These supports might include: - specialist career advisors, industry contacts to provide opportunities for trial work or study situations, academic institutions with transition programs for senior students, peer mentors who have leadership qualities and counsellors to provide support for students who require it. Often in the senior years, schools host careers nights and other events including talks and expos which help to guide students about post-school pathways.

The NCEC appreciates that in some communities, particularly in rural and remote locations, accessing these supports will be challenging. Technology should be utilised to ensure that students, teachers and families in these locations know about the post school options available.

While the focus in schools tends to be in the senior years, an option is to start the conversation about post school options in earlier years. In preparation for this submission, a random group of senior students in a mainstream school were asked how they thought students might be assisted with decision making. These students observed that schools tended to focus on post school pathways in the senior years. They suggested that more attention could be paid to middle year students as often this is the stage when many students begin to form attitudes about post school life. As noted above, students with specialised needs will need extra support to make decisions about post-school life. Thinking about approaches to supporting the post school pathways of these students should be included in the work of the review committee.

3. How do we change negative perceptions of certain pathways?

Sharing information and communication is key here and students, families and teachers must be engaged.

Students usually have little direct experience of different pathways. Perceptions about certain pathways as "negative" or "positive" may be altered by an experience of different pathways during the school years. This might include work experience or attendance at a university or vocational college. Such experiences may confirm or change a student's perception. School career nights and other events or advice (referred to in our previous answer) may also serve this purpose. Student peer groups can influence the status of different pathways. Programs exposing students to the positive advantages of different pathways can serve to adjust the peer thinking about the pathways.

One of the growing challenges facing work experience and placements for students is the availability of spaces in different workplaces. Any support that can be offered to employers and companies to encourage availability of these opportunities should be considered by this review. While many employers see value in work experience and placements and willingly support such programs, there is a time and financial cost associated and this should be acknowledged.

A critical element to students' formation of perceptions, is the attitude of parents and those close to the students. In some families, where there are no models of immediate family members engaged with different pathways, the challenge to introduce or assist a student to see options open to them can be difficult. To overcome negative perceptions, building the knowledge of students and parents about different pathways and providing examples of others who have successfully navigated those pathways successfully can be beneficial. Schools play a crucial role here.   Generally, our experience is that schools are well informed, but more could be done to ensure teacher knowledge is current and specialised staff are available.

In terms of sharing information, social media platforms provide an opportunity to reach young people and influence their impression of tertiary studies and work experiences.

A word about the role of schools in messaging

It must also be acknowledged that in many schools and in the broader community there are subtle messages about the value of post-school pathways. The "standard" tertiary pathway is often celebrated or emphasised as the premium pathway. This is demonstrated by the extensive media coverage following the release of ATAR results. Marketing ATAR scores is a strong focus for some schools and school result league tables add to the pressure on schools to be competitive about their ATAR score achievement.

Our view is that this emphasis leads many students and their families to view non-ATAR pathways as 'second best'.

All schools should be encouraged to celebrate the achievements and rites of passage for all students. Many schools (including comprehensive high schools) do this but some schools may need to be reminded of the subtle messaging that is sent when graduation evenings and formal assemblies celebrate certain pathways while others are downplayed. Schools projecting a positive view of different pathways is important.

For example, on occasion a student may leave a school early to take up a VET pathway. While the student is completing school early, securing this vocational position may be an ideal opportunity for that student. Schools have a role here in affirming and marking such an achievement. We believe that such messaging leaves a particularly strong impression on younger students

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

In addition to our previous responses particularly to question three, the NCEC suggests that senior secondary schooling which is relevant and engaging, will provide a sound foundation for post-school lives. The influence of families, community groups such as Churches, sporting and other groups as well as the wider society must not be overlooked. Peer to peer conversations are formative also. Schools do not operate in a vacuum. If we want students to be ready for leading successful lives, then all spheres of society need to operate effectively. The senior schooling years are important but not the sole vehicle for supporting young adults for life challenges.

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

Again, many of the issues raised in the previous responses are relevant. Prioritising informing students about post school pathways is essential. Programs should be developed and additional support provided to schools to ensure increased knowledge and improved communication among students, families and their teachers. Some schools may need to employ additional staff and others with expertise in post school pathways.

In terms of tailoring programs for students, programs should be flexible enough to work with all students and school context.

Further, as far as post school institutions are concerned, many students have had highly geared eLearning experiences during their years of schooling.   Knowledge and skills can come from many places. A fixed program of study provided by a one education provider is not necessarily viewed as the right way to learn by some students. Therefore, structures around post school institutions need great flexibility and may achieve more success if they are responsive to the expectations and needs of the learner. Compared to previous generations today's learner expects to have more control over what, when and how they learn.

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