

## Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is pleased to provide a response to the inquiry of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (the Committee) into the perceptions and status of vocational education and training (VET).

### Background

The NCEC is the peak body for Catholic Education in Australia and is responsible for the national coordination and representation of Catholic schools and school authorities.

Working collaboratively with state and territory Catholic Education Commissions, the National Catholic Education Commission advocates through effective liaison with the federal, state and territory governments, and key national education bodies. Our role is to ensure the needs of Catholic schools are served through funding, legislation, and policy.

Our work is to foster a thriving Catholic Education sector that offers parents a choice of, and affordable access to, faith-based education for their children. Catholic Education continues to advocate for fair and inclusive funding that sustains both government and accessible faith-based schools across Australia.

Catholic schools are universal in reach and open to all families who seek a Catholic Education. Australia's 1,759 Catholic schools educate one in five, or over 794,000 students and employs over 104,500 Australians. This makes Catholic schools the nation's largest provider of education outside government.

Our schools welcome students from a range of backgrounds including an increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (up 168% since 2000). Students with disability represent around 19% of attending Catholic schools and 40% of students experience socio-educational disadvantage.

### The Context of VET and Schools

As the Terms of Reference for the current inquiry highlight, VET is an area of shared responsibility between governments, employers, VET providers, and a range of other stakeholders, including secondary schools.

The *Report on Government Services 2023: Child Care, Education and Training (ROGS)* states that the objective of the VET system is

to deliver a productive and highly skilled workforce through enabling all working age Australians to develop and use the skills required to effectively participate in the labour market and contribute to Australia's economic future. To achieve this, the Australian, State and Territory governments aim to create a national training system that:

- is accessible to all working age Australians
- meets the needs of students, employers and industries
- is high quality.

Where VET programs are undertaken by school students as part of their secondary education, the Australian Government provides funding to state and territory governments as a part of the National Specific Purpose Payment for Skills and Workforce Development. State and territory governments then provide funding to both government and non-government schools for VET programs delivered to school students.

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) report *VET in Schools 2021* estimates that 28.2% of the 15- to 19-year-old school population participated in a VET program through their



school in 2021. Of these the vast majority, almost 92%, undertook a VET program other than a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship.

#### VET in Catholic Schools

The January 2023 report *Vocational education and training in regional, rural and remote Australia* by Jobs and Skills Australia emphasizes that “VET plays an important role in Australia’s regions both due to its relevance and applicability to regional-focused industries”. The picture of varying engagement with VET analysed within the report is particularly significant for Catholic Education as 38% of Australia’s Catholic Schools serve communities in regional and remote areas.

The *VET in Schools 2021* report shows that there were over 62,000 VET program enrolments in Catholic schools in 2021. Catholic schools in Queensland had the most program enrolments, followed by Catholic schools in Victoria and then New South Wales.

Nationally, most program enrolments in Catholic schools were at the Certificate II (35,690) and Certificate III (19,120) levels. The three most popular Fields of Education for Catholic school students enrolling in a VET program nationally were:

- Food, hospitality and personal services
- Society and culture
- Management and commerce.

Almost 56% of the total program enrolments were male students and just over 44% were female students. The most popular Fields of Education for female students were:

- Food, hospitality and personal services
- Management and commerce
- Society and culture.

For male students, the most popular Fields of Education were:

- Engineering and related technologies
- Architecture and building
- Management and commerce.

However, the Explanatory Notes for *VET in Schools 2021* state

VET in Schools data may not be comparable across states and territories due to differences in definitional and compilation practices used by states and territories to populate some fields.

The reliability of data is critical for NCEC. As a national peak body, working with Catholic Education Commissions in every state and territory, it is important that we are able to obtain a clear understanding of the education provided in our schools.

The lack of consistency with definitions and practices across states and territories is an area that should be addressed to better support the stated aim of Australian, state and territory governments to create a national training system.

#### Response to Particular Terms of Reference

As noted above, NCEC works collaboratively with state and territory Catholic Education Commissions some of whom will make submissions to this inquiry that are specific to their state or territory context.

The Committee should also refer to those submissions to gain further information on the perspective of Catholic Education regarding VET in their local jurisdiction.

*information available to students about VET qualifications and related career pathways ...*

The quantity, accessibility, and usefulness of the information available to students about VET qualifications and related career pathways can vary greatly between jurisdictions. Some jurisdictions provide many useful and accessible resources for students with information about VET options and career pathways. In other jurisdictions, some information may be provided but it is often less accessible and detailed than that which is provided for post-school options such as a university. The university sector invests significant resources in advertising and future student engagement, which makes the information more visible to school students.

Researchers from the Mitchell Institute at Victorian University recently noted

the growth in people going to university has come at the expense of (VET). In 1986, there were roughly the same number of young people aged 15 to 24 enrolled at vocational education institutions as there were at universities. By 2021, the split was 76% university and 24% vocational education and training.<sup>1</sup>

The difference in the quantity, quality, and accessibility of information may be one factor contributing to this shift.

It is essential that school Career Development Practitioners and VET coordinators have sufficient time in their roles to provide individual and personalised information and advice to students about career development and VET pathways. Funding should be provided to all school sectors to support personalised pathways advice to school students by educators who are employed and trained to do so.

*perceptions and status of the VET sector ...*

School students are often strongly influenced and informed by their parents and teachers, peers, and other people influential in their lives. Some of these influencers may have views and perceptions of pathways and careers which may be value-laden or outdated and not an accurate reflection of current study and career options or the employment market.

Inaccurate or unwarranted perceptions of study and career options can persuade students to eliminate pathways and occupations from consideration without students making their own informed choices about potential opportunities. Direct access to reliable and credible information about pathways together with personalised professional career education and guidance supports students to gain access to the opportunities which are available to them.

Increasing the accessibility and flexibility for students to enrol in a VET program in school, helps young people and their families to have an experience of VET while in secondary school. Students who engage in VET programs, including micro-credentials, while in school are likely to more highly value VET once they have experienced it personally. The flexibility and accessibility afforded by micro-credential programs delivered to school students have the potential to introduce VET pathways and career options to more students.

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<sup>1</sup> Melinda Hildebrandt and Peter Hurley, *The Universities Accord will plan for the next 30 years: what big issues must it address?* <https://theconversation.com/the-universities-accord-will-plan-for-the-next-30-years-what-big-issues-must-it-address-200367>

As highlighted above, the lack of consistency across states and territories regarding terminology, definitions, and other data may negatively contribute to perceptions and status of the VET sector.

For example, while some national agencies and reports and some states and territories still appear to be using the term 'VET in Schools' (VETIS), other sources and jurisdictions have begun to describe these programs as 'VET Delivered to Secondary Students' (VDSS). National uptake of VDSS should be strongly encouraged by the Australian Government, across all states and territories, agencies, and reports to encourage consistency across the entire national training system. Avoiding the use of 'VET in Schools' and/or 'VETIS' would help to counteract the perception that VDSS is somehow different from and inferior to some other 'real VET'.

Agreed and consistent use of terminology, definitions, and other information across all jurisdictions, employers, and education and training providers would reinforce that VET programs are equivalent irrespective the location in which it is delivered and to whom, and that VET qualifications are nationally recognised.

#### *Commonwealth programs which could influence the above ...*

The response to the Terms of Reference discussed above indicates that the Commonwealth has significant scope and a key role to play in developing programs which could influence the perceptions and status of VET.

Such programs could include working with state and territory governments, industry, employers, and schools to address and remove structural barriers preventing school student engagement with VET, particularly to facilitate consistent, accessible, and useful information to students about VET qualifications and related career pathways.

#### Conclusion

NCEC strongly supports initiatives that enhance and improve perceptions and the status of VET. NCEC welcomes the focus on the Committee on this important area of education and training.

Strengthening VET delivered to secondary students represents a significant opportunity to support the aim that VET is accessible to all working age Australians, meets the needs of students, employers, and industries, and is high quality.

The Commonwealth has significant scope and a key role to play in developing programs that could influence the perceptions and status of VET. Suggested policy initiatives could include:

- Improving the quantity, accessibility, and usefulness of the information available to students about VET options, qualifications, and related career pathways. Access and visibility of information reinforce VET as a valid and useful pathway.
- Funding to all school sectors to ensure school Career Development Practitioners and VET coordinators have sufficient time and professional learning to provide individual and personalised information and advice to students about career development and VET pathways.
- Increasing the accessibility and flexibility for students to enrol in a VET program in school to help young people and their families to have an experience of VET while in secondary school. Micro-credential programs delivered to school students have the potential to introduce VET pathways and career options to more students.



- Addressing the consistency of terminology and information across states and territories to better support the stated aim of Australian, state and territory governments to create a national training system. National uptake of the term 'VET Delivered to Secondary Students' (VDSS) should be strongly encouraged by the Australian Government, across all states and territories, agencies, and reports to encourage consistency across the entire national system.

Should you have any further questions in relation to this submission, please contact me via phone [REDACTED] or via email [REDACTED].

Yours faithfully



Jacinta Collins  
Executive Director

1 March 2023