

11 June 2010

Via email: [stronger.futures@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:stronger.futures@edumail.vic.gov.au)

Dear Sir / Madam

RMIT University welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Victorian Government's Discussion Paper "Stronger Futures for all young Victorians".

As acknowledged in the paper education has a transformative role to play both within individual's lives and society as a whole. It enables individuals to explore and reach goals no matter their background, contributing to an equal and democratic society; and by building innovative capacity increases the prosperity of the nation as a whole.

In recognition of this the University has implemented various strategies to attract, retain and support students from all backgrounds and to address the complex factors that may cause educational disadvantage and disengagement. Strategies include a School Network Access Program (SNAP), a non-competitive, non-ENTER based admissions scheme involving over 40 State secondary schools in Melbourne's northern metropolitan corridor, specifically those schools with low numbers of students continuing onto post-compulsory education and training. Throughout 2010 and 2011 RMIT is working to expand the network of SNPA schools to encompass a number from across regional Victoria. Further RMIT has implemented an Indigenous Access Scheme, also a non-competitive, non-ENTER based admissions scheme which draws the majority of applicants from regional Victoria.

The University also recognises the importance that pathways play in providing students from diverse backgrounds and possessing varied capabilities with educational and subsequently vocational opportunities. As the largest dual sector provider in Australia RMIT has significant experience in developing pathways between our VET and Higher Education sectors. In fact, nationally RMIT supports one of the highest levels of TAFE to HE articulation at 20%.

It is based on this experience that the University offers the following response to specific questions posed in the Discussion Paper.

## **1. Strengthening literacy and numeracy in post-compulsory years**

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

There are two key aspects of this issue that require consideration:

1. the development of generalist literacy and numeracy skills which are essential for individuals to engage fully with their community and society; and
2. the development of specialised literacy and numeracy skills that are required for individuals to pursue, and progress within, a chosen vocation.

In order to support the above the University would argue for funding directed at the development of appropriately contextualised support mechanisms to assess, and cater to, individual needs.

It is important that language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) in the post compulsory years is contextualised and not taught as a separate unit. Students need to see the purpose of what they are doing but also need skilled specialists who are able to analyse tasks and learning units and identify the LLN demands of the learning. LLN specialists have the skills to do the analysis and to assist with the development of real life and purposeful learning for students with LLN needs. Students also need to understand what aspects of LLN they need to focus on if they are independent learners.

The University would support targeted professional development initiatives for VET practitioners in the LLN sphere e.g. team teaching partnerships involving LLN specialists and vocational teachers to analyse the learning and assessment and determine how the learning can be scaffolded to assist learners with these needs.

For learners who are looking for work options the LLN needs to be embedded in this discipline of work where possible so they have the LLN specific for where they will be employed.

## **2. 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 University supports development of a more comprehensive approach to career planning for all young Victorians and believes that a career plan is one useful tool in assisting them to make more informed choices. However, the model needs to be supported by applied experiences to allow young people to test and revise their plans as appropriate. The concept of life-long learning should also be promoted with the career plan. So that young people understand there are multiple opportunities to re-engage with education as their life-circumstances and goals change, enabling them to up-skill or re-skill, to further their careers or change careers entirely. The career plan should not be seen as a fixed document but something to be periodically reviewed.

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

We would recommend Government support of richer cross-sectoral collaborations, such as the Tertiary Aspirations Network. This Network brings together equity and diversity/social inclusion units from Victorian universities (including dual sector institutes) to develop and deliver pathways, as well as transition and career development information to the middle years of secondary schools, with an explicit focus on low SES cohorts and communities.

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

It is important that business/industry is involved in providing real life experiences as part of students' education, so that students can obtain a sense of the dynamics of working in particular industries. The University actively works to provide these experiences for our students and has implemented a policy so that work-integrated learning experiences are available for students in every program. We would support incentives for business/industry to partner with institutions to further develop initiatives that provide these 'experiences' of disciplines for students at earlier points in their education.

### **3. 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 new eligibility criteria announced as part of Skills Reform can disadvantage young people by closing off pathways through lower level qualifications. The University therefore recommends the following amendments to these rules:

- VET programs undertaken by secondary school students should be exempt from the eligibility rules for future VET programs.
- Students enrolled in school completion programs delivered by TAFE Institutes should also be exempt from the eligibility rules to ensure that options for further study remain open and flexible e.g. students completing VCE, equivalent Certificate II, are not eligible for government supported training in other Certificate II trade or pre-apprenticeship programs.

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

The University is concerned that some of the changes announced as part of the Skills Reform package may act as deterrents for individuals in completing an initial qualification. The University recommends that less stringent concession regulations be reintroduced for VET qualifications and that the contribution levels for what are generally perceived as pathway programs (Certificate 1-4) are reduced.

In addition, these students require various levels of pastoral care to adjust to a new learning environment and balance their studies with work/life obligations. The University would recommend targeted funding support through programs such as Managed Individual Pathway Programs provided by VET institutions to provide this care. The higher level of weighted student contact hour funding provided for 15-19 year olds should also be extended to the up to 24 year old cohort.

*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?*

A similar competency based completion system should be considered for introduction into the school system, so that students only complete year 12 after they have proved competent across key skill sets. This of course would require a flexible learning environment.

*What other strategies could be introduced to lift qualification completion rates for young people in the schools and VET sectors?*

The implementation of systems that allow VET Providers to track students at work to allow for greater levels of work based assessment and recognition of prior learning.

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

Research would suggest that the majority of apprentices do not complete due to various employment related issues e.g. pay, conflict, unreasonable expectations from their employer; and less so about the formal training. The implementation of exit interviews by Government

Apprenticeship Field Officers could provide data to inform appropriate support mechanisms for both apprentices and employers.

#### **4. Systems that assist students to move effectively between courses, institutions and sectors**

##### 4.1 Articulation from school to VET and higher education

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

Evidence would suggest that where young people are supported to understand their passion or interest for a discipline area, then that is a strong driver of engagement and attainment. The University would like to see Government funding for experiential initiatives designed to build a greater understanding of opportunities for young people beyond their compulsory schooling years.

As an example, in 2009 the Equity Group at RMIT piloted a 'pathways game' in collaboration with two other Victorian Universities, with support from the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs). Over 100 students from local secondary schools participated in a day of workshops and transition development. The 'Pathways Game' used the Nursing profession to create an applied learning experience where students were given identities representing different levels of achievement and preparation of post compulsory education and training, and different motivators, life experiences and material conditions. This pilot is being developed for expansion into other discipline areas. It remains however, quite distinct from much careers guidance, which focuses on destination (University or TAFE or apprenticeship) rather than vocation or profession.

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

The University would recommend the development of initiatives with associated incentives that support greater partnerships between the sectors to provide a "seamless" transition, suggested initiatives include:

- Greater alignment of school based curriculum and competencies with those of first year VET and HE.
- VET certificates offered in VCE for all students (not just VCAL).
- Advanced study units (HE) undertaken at VCE level.
- Government funding for VET and HE staff to teach in schools, particularly rural and regional schools.
- School based further education preparatory programs delivered in partnership with VET and HE providers to prepare secondary students for the demands of further study.
- Greater support for VET in schools program and visa versa VCE delivered at tertiary institutions. For example, VCE at RMIT offers students a wide variety of subjects in an adult learning environment. Students of all ages and backgrounds attend, some returning to study after some absence from school and others looking for a change from the conventional school experience. For many students the intensive case management and support offered, along with the adult learning environment, has lead to good outcomes and transition into HE courses.
- As referred to above the University has also implemented a policy so that work-integrated learning experiences are available for students in every program. We would support incentives for business/industry to partner with institutions to further develop

initiatives that provide these 'experiences' of disciplines for students at earlier points in their education.

#### 4.2 Articulation within the VET sector and from VET to higher education

*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 University would support the development of a Victorian articulation and credit transfer framework to encourage and facilitate pathways from VET to higher education. This would provide an opportunity for VET and higher education providers to align their programs and courses to the framework, where desired. It would be important, however, that adherence to the framework remain voluntary so that alignment could occur where it supports a university's strategic intent. Therefore, while the University supports the development of frameworks across all disciplines, adoption and implementation of the framework should remain a university's choice, based on industry demand and the institution's specific needs and future directions.

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

The University would support amendments to training packages so that employability skills are made more explicit and quantifiable. We would also argue that the apprenticeship system should be reviewed and would support the development of new and varied models to improve the flexibility of the system.

*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 re-locate?*

The University would support improved funding for auspice programs and projects in secondary schools, including: advanced study units (HE) undertaken at VCE level; Government funding for VET and HE staff to teach in schools, particularly rural and regional schools; and greater support for VET in schools program and visa versa VCE delivered at tertiary institutions.

*What other actions should be contemplated by institutions and government?*

There are many obstacles that act as barriers for young people in pursuing further education, key to those are financial considerations and affordable accommodation that is accessible to student's studies, work and support networks. The University would support improvements to financial support (e.g. youth allowance) for young people as they study and partnerships between Government, institutions and private enterprise in the development of student centred, affordable accommodation.

## 5 Opportunities for young people to re-engage with education and training

*How can Youth Connections be implemented in Victoria to most effectively re-engage young people with education and training?*

The University endorses Youth Connections, and would be concerned about the introduction of any new body in the already complicated area of guidance, service provision, brokerage, and collaboration. We recommend Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) remain the

hub of Youth Connections, recognising also the geographic specificity of patterns of post-compulsory outcomes, and the strong engagement of local government in areas such as the Cities of Hume and Whittlesea.

*Should LLENs be provided some flexibility to facilitate and broker service provision to young people 20 and over, in line with the flexibility in Youth Connections service provision?*

The University endorses some flexibility for LLENs to support those over 20, as long as this doesn't direct attention away from the specific needs and vulnerabilities of 15 year olds.

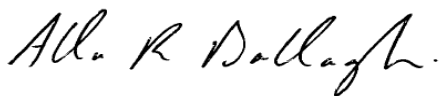
*Is the range of qualifications on offer to re-engage young people adequate? (Existing qualifications include VCAL, adult VCE, the General Certificate of Adult Education and the Diploma of Further Education.)*

The outcomes of VCAL, as they currently stand, are limited for young people beyond year 12 attainment. As such it appears to be an effective retention qualification but offers limited opportunity for the sort of further post-compulsory education and training, beyond apprenticeships and traineeships, that a year 12 graduate should be able to access. This issue requires a collaborative approach regarding tertiary entrance systems. The University would support a collaborative approach between Government, VTAC and tertiary institutions to develop alternative mechanisms for measuring prospective students' preparation for tertiary success, such as 'citizenship'—the individual as an active member of their community—with employability and study readiness skills.

The impact of Skills Reform on the Diploma of Further Education (DFE) should be reviewed. Completion of the DFE as a tertiary preparation and development program should not preclude access to commencement of a pathway in a specific para-professional pathway at Diploma level in a Government Supported Place.

Once again, thank you for this opportunity to provide comments.

Yours sincerely



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