



**VICTORIA
UNIVERSITY**

**A NEW
SCHOOL OF
THOUGHT®**

**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY'S
COMMENT ON STRONGER
FUTURES FOR ALL
YOUNG VICTORIANS:
DISCUSSION PAPER
ON THE YOUTH
TRANSITION SYSTEM**

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A: STRENGTHENING LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN THE POST-COMPULSORY YEARS

1. What form should the proposed literacy and numeracy standards take?

The achievement of literacy and numeracy is fundamental to an individual's capacity to engage with ongoing learning and employment. While data suggests Australia's literacy and numeracy performance ranks favourably when compared to other OECD countries, other indicators point to significant inadequacies. The Australian Industry Group's *National Workforce Literacy Project* report indicates that 75% of surveyed employers reported that their businesses were affected by low levels of literacy and numeracy. This compromises workplace productivity, safety and growth. Key segments of the workforce were identified as having significant literacy and numeracy challenges, particularly labourers and clerical and administrative staff¹.

In this context, it is important that any attempt to improve language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) achievement amongst the youth cohort forms part of recognised national effort to improve standards across the whole of the Australian population. Literacy and numeracy assessments and interventions need to be designed within a consistent framework. The Australian Government's new *Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF)* provides such a framework.

Victoria University (VU) is using the ACSF as the basis of its new approach to post-enrolment assessment of language, literacy and numeracy proficiency and the design interventions to support student LLN needs. When fully implemented, the VU approach will be used to assess the needs of all enrolled students undertaking VET, undergraduate and postgraduate programs at the University.

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

A suite of LLN interventions are required to support the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. Opportunities to integrate LLN assessment and interventions within broader VET and higher education programs need to form part such a suite, as does the delivery of stand-alone LLN programs conducted prior to or in parallel with vocationally-focussed courses.

VU has a *7 Model* framework which sets out its varied approach to supporting the development of LLN in its students. These models are summarised below.

1. Deliver LLN units, guest lectures and workshop within the structure of an existing course
2. Blend the delivery of basic LLN with the delivery of broader vocational courses taught by individual teachers
3. Create opportunities for LLN-qualified teachers to team teach with other teachers
4. Structure courses to allow students to work towards dual awards – one of which focuses on their LLN needs, the other on their vocational skill development requirements
5. Deliver standalone targeted preparatory courses that address specific LLN needs
6. Collaborate with discipline-specific staff to integrate LLN/discipline-specific assessment, resources and curriculum. This collaborative approach focuses on developing LLN support resources and curriculum and assessment which is contextualised to the needs and environments specific disciplines. It also allows discipline teachers the opportunity to acquire greater professional capacity to support students' LLN needs.
7. Create formal opportunities for students to mentor and support other students requiring LLN support.

Student influencers, such as family and community, have a significant role in the youth cohorts' decision making around engaging in post-compulsory education. Therefore, investment in wider family and community LLN programs focussed on adult cohorts with low education attainment are also an important factor in improving LLN achievement amongst Victorian youth.

¹ Australian Industry Group, *National Workforce Literacy Project: Employer views on workplace literacy and numeracy skills, their impact on business and the most effective measures for improving skills*, May 2010

Fundamental to the success of these approaches is a robust LLN student assessment framework (see response to question 1) as well as appropriately qualified LLN staff. To better support institutions such as VU improve LLN support the Government needs to better resource institutions specifically to deliver integrated and personally customised assessment and interventions.

This action would further support the realisation of the 2009 COAG reaffirmation that LLN requirements are explicitly built into the delivery of all VET/tertiary programs.

B: SUPPORT FOR MAKING INFORMED EDUCATION AND TRAINING CHOICES

3. 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?

Any career and further education planning framework for young people needs to recognise the diversity of pathways available as well as the complex career progression options that exist. Career planning services also need to be appropriately resourced with dedicated staffing and means to deliver integrated learning and career planning.

In recent years there has been a significant effort devoted to improving professional development opportunities available to career advisors in schools. However, further work is needed to better ensure that careers advisors understand the full breadth of options available to young people across VET, higher education and emerging employment sectors – and that this knowledge is reflected in their support to young people.

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

Young people's decision making about their education and training options and subsequent employment goals is complex. Some youth have a strong understanding of the pathways available to them and clear motivation to utilize them. Others are unsure about which vocational paths to pursue. While the great majority of young people lie somewhere between these extreme ends two trends need to be acknowledged:

- Young people generally do aspire to further engagement with education and training. However some, particularly those from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, encounter barriers towards achieving these aspirations; and
- While business and industry shoulder some role in supporting young people's decision making about education, training and career options, it is parents/guardians, community leaders and peers play the fundamental influencing function.

Through its Equity and Social Justice Branch and School of Economics and Finance, VU has conducted extensive research into the formation of student aspirations, particularly amongst those from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Melbourne's West. VU's *Student Aspirations* research indicates that:

- in Melbourne's West, parental influence on students' post compulsory schooling decision making is consistently greater than Careers teachers' influence;
- 70% of surveyed year 9-12 students aspired to university, regardless of socio-economic status;
- 40% of surveyed year 9-12 students from low SES backgrounds did not express confidence that they would be able to achieve their educational aspirations – a perception that manifests in the reality that university participation is significantly lower amongst lower SES youth compared to those from higher SES backgrounds;
- a lack of financial ability is cited as a major impediment to realising educational aspirations; and

- physical access, proximity and cost (eg via transport links) are a important influencing issue in determining whether students choose to go to University or TAFE²³.

These findings suggest that:

- effort to improve professional development of careers teachers, while valuable, needs to be complemented by strategically targeted programs that engage parents and assist them support their children engage with education, training and career pathways. VU's extensive *Parent Information Program* and mobile *VU Community Gateways* career and study advice program are just two of this University's efforts to more broadly engage a diverse range of people in understanding pathway opportunities; and
- Government is best place to address barriers that prevent young people realising their aspirations to engage in further education and training – i.e. lack of financial resources and poor transport links.

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

VU is continuing to deliver on its Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) goal – a commitment that 25% of VU student learning be workplace-based. As part of LiWC students are not only exposed to work contexts but also garner better understanding of key occupations that inform their subsequent career decision making.

Within the post-compulsory environment, many schools offer careers and work experience programs. VU would suggest that schools work to ensure that these existing programs are structured so as to ensure specific career development/decision activity is included within them.

VU also engages significantly with business and industry through its 11 industry and community cluster. Each cluster is informed by roundtables comprising prominent industry figures. Together they shape the University's course offerings and can be drawn upon to support students' future. While it is impractical for schools to replicate these arrangements there are opportunities for them to collaborate with institutions like VU and therefore benefit from the intelligence gathered from industry engagement in that way. VU's *School Compacts* with schools in north-west Melbourne are one way in which the University seeks to support schools to this end.

The Victorian Government may also wish to consider:

- working with the Commonwealth Government to extend the role of Industry Skills Councils to include engagement with schools with the express purpose of providing intelligence which young people can use to inform the career and further education pathway decision making; and
- pursuing proposals contained in the *Report advising on the development of the Victorian Education Plan* to introduce a scheme of public sector internships to meet the work experience and learning needs of specific student cohorts.

² Denise Bett, Janes Doughney and Jo Vu, "Student aspiration, cultural diversity and confidence in Melbourne's working-class west" in *Social Inclusion and Exclusion of Culturally Diverse Communities Conference*, Victoria University and University of Tasmania, August 2008

³ Denise Bett, Janes Doughney and Chau Vu, "Fostering the dream in Melbourne's working-class west: Student aspiration, confidence and university entry" in *Crossing the Borders: Diversity in Higher Education Conference*, European Access Network, July 2008

C: ARRANGEMENTS THAT SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE YOUNG PEOPLE TO COMPLETE QUALIFICATIONS

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

While school is the most appropriate location for young people to undertake senior secondary education, VU recognises that public VET (and to a lesser degree the higher education) providers play an important role in supporting the achievement and aspirations of these students. Broadly, they:

- partner with schools to deliver educational experiences and pathways required school students and support young people build future aspirations; and
- enrol and deliver education and training to young people seeking secondary education qualifications in alternative settings.

With regard to the former, VU has a strong record of working with schools across Melbourne's West to deliver literacy, numeracy and teacher development activities which ultimately support lower-SES students to engage with learning and establish future pathways. These activities, broadly known as *VU-DEECD School-University Partnership Project Program* encompass over 400 government schools.

VU is working to build on this work by introducing *VU School Compacts*. Further details about these compacts are below.

- VU Schools Compacts aim to raise the aspirations of low SES and under-represented students and smooth the transition between school and university
- The Compacts support efforts by schools to improve high school completion rates and provide a clear pathway through to VET (and potentially Higher Education) by teaching foundation courses within the secondary school framework.
- In addition, the Compacts enables disadvantaged or low-performing students to enter University via an alternative admissions process – a combination of a portfolio of work and their ENTER score.
- Through the Compacts schools have the potential to co-locate with the University, demystifying the experience and providing first-generation tertiary students with a safe pathway into post-compulsory education.
- The VU Schools Compacts are underpinned by close relationship with schools and depend on strong and ongoing support from the Victorian Government through DEECD.

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

As the discussion paper acknowledges, completion rates at the Certificate I and Certificate II level are considerably lower than in other qualifications level. This has a disproportionate impact on young people given that these programs are targeted at early school-leavers.

VU is working to identify new ways to drive higher completion rates amongst its 6,000 strong youth cohort.

- The University is delivering Skills Victoria's *Brimbank TAFE Completions Officer Pilot Program* and will identify processes, planning interventions and support activity that has positive impact on students' completion.
- VU is also engaging with its international partners to identify best-practice activities which support better student outcomes. The experience of two of these institutions is particularly noteworthy.

New College Nottingham (UK) has a compliance based approach to retention. In the UK, student financial assistance is closely tied to college attendance. Staff dedicated to monitoring

attendance/retention are in place as are individual tutors charged with meeting the pastoral needs of a small group of up to 25 students

Houston Community College is delivering the US Government's *Achieving the Dream* program. That program seeks to engage teaching staff in student retention and success strategies. It allows teachers to self-identify the needs of individual students and design and deliver retention and success interventions that best meet these needs. A dedicated data and best-practice framework is in place to support these individual teachers.

VU believes that these and other international approaches should be considered by the Victorian Government as it considers future expansion and resourcing of initiatives such as Technical Education Centres and VU's Harvester Technical College.

8. 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?

Government needs to work with the training sector to ensure that VET programs offered to young people working towards lower certificate-level qualifications, including the secondary school qualification, are structured to allow them to build broad general education skills.

Young people undertaking senior secondary years through schools study in a broad range of areas. This allows them to acquire general skills and knowledge in areas such as mathematics, science and English language affording them general education skills. As a result, senior school graduates generally have the foundation that allows them to more easily access a broader range of education and employment pathways beyond school.

With completion of year 12 being deemed as equivalent to Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Level 3, the extent of general education skills ascribed to secondary school graduates '...well developed skills where some discretion and judgement' and the skills to 'interpret available information, using discretion and judgement'⁴

Young people undertaking equivalent programs in other settings, such as TAFE, are *generally* offered some general education opportunities and the ability to develop these capacities. However, VU would argue that a concerted effort is necessary to ensure that young people enrolled in particular programs, such as pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships, are designed so that general education units up to AQF Level 3 standard are available to all students

A failure to do so risks restricting future pathway options for young people and their opportunities to successfully engage with a fuller range of education and work choices should their interest and aspirations change.

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

The ability to track students is a key factor in retaining students within education and training and the VSN offers the opportunity for schools and other training institutions to more effectively track and monitor student enrolment.

The VSN also presents the Government with an opportunity to refine funding mechanisms to ensure that funding resources are better allocated to the education institutions that deliver specific programs and services to an individual student.

⁴ Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Advisory Board, *AQF Implementation Handbook*, 4th edition, 2007, p27.

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

Refer to VU's response to questions 4 and 8.

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

The Government has worked to create greater incentives for industry to take on and retain apprentices.

Greater non-financial support is, however, required. The Government could:

- institute a peer/mentor support system to allow experienced employers and former apprentices to be matched with newer entrants; and
- supply a larger number Field Officers to provide a greater degree of personal support to apprentices and trainees alike. As more tertiary education institutions engage in extensive student work-based learning activity with industry, VU would be interested in exploring the potential overlap there is in supporting these learning experience and Field Officers' work with apprenticeships

Refer to VU's response to question 5.

D: SYSTEMS THAT ASSIST STUDENTS TO MOVE EFFECTIVELY BETWEEN COURSES, INSTITUTIONS AND SECTORS

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

13. What other steps are required to assist schools' connection to the world of work?

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

VU would welcome the introduction of a broader basis for entry to higher education from an ENTER-based selection process towards one that includes capacity assessment and matching processes. There is evidence that ENTER is less reliable as a selection tool for lower scores. This will become increasingly problematic in a widened tertiary sector. It appears inevitable that some providers will choose to lower their ENTER requirements to attract more students.

Similarly in an expanded tertiary sector, learners may be tempted to apply for courses for which they are not well prepared. It is important to ensure that students and institutions make good choices to ensure the best outcomes for students. In this context VU acknowledges that ENTER may work well as a selection tool for well prepared learners with high ENTER scores.

However the University would support the Victorian Government and VTAC to explore alternative selection tools and processes for other students. VU is interested in developing an alternative selection process which is iterative and provides opportunities to counsel students. For dual sector institutions it would be possible to offer less well prepared students a place in the institution, rather than in a particular course. This could lead into a counselling process that results in an offer for a course or suite of courses.

In relation to improving connections to the world of work, again, the Victorian Government may wish to work with the Commonwealth to extend the role of Industry Skills Councils to include engagement with schools. Other options Government could be explored include:

- supporting institutions deliver improved induction and orientation programs
- recognising and promoting improved student selection processes and LLN diagnostics and subsequent support (see response to questions 1 and 2).

- working with schools and tertiary institutions to offer relevant opportunities for students and parents to familiarise themselves with the tertiary environment as well as education and employment pathways.

E: ARTICULATION WITHIN THE VET SECTOR AND FROM VET TO HIGHER EDUCATION

15. **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?**
16. **How can governments ensure that reforms to the VET and higher education sector address both skill needs and student demand for particular qualifications?**
17. **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?**
18. **What other actions should be contemplated by institutions and government?**

This is a critical area which would benefit from a targeted industry/occupational approach as proposed in the discussion paper. The strength of early identification of career aspirations could then be commenced in the school sector with an integrated approach to work experience and knowledge and skills acquisition. VU believes that such an approach, if introduced, would need to be highly flexible and well resourced in order to accommodate the changing nature of the labour market.

The Government could consider the introduction of a national tertiary orientation course or student induction standards, with a common curriculum design or defined academic skill set which prepares students for direct entry into a suite of national “generic” higher level VET or bachelor program.

Refer to VU's response to questions 4, 5, 6, 8, 11 and 14

F: OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO RE-ENGAGE WITH EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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

Youth Connections has the potential to be successful however it needs to be supported by a comprehensive and well resourced roll out of information programs targeted at communities, families and schools alike. Without this strategic approach the service will not be understood and used to its full potential.

20. **What services should Youth Connection service providers use to establish effective referral and working arrangements?**

Centrelink, with its established system and service points, could be a suitable partner in terms of establishing referral services. However, Youth Connections should select a range of other referral partners which are not necessarily operating under a deficiency model or engaging obviously disengaged youth.

21. **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 most effective LLENs have proven to be successful in bringing together the broad range of critical players required to support young people. Concerning Youth Connections, LLENs stand as a potential effectively service broker.

22. 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.)

Yes. However the content of what is delivered as part of each qualification needs to be reassessed particularly given that:

- the completion of year 12 is deemed as being equivalent to AQF Level 3; and
- it is essential that all young people, regardless whether in school or non school settings, are afforded the opportunity to acquire general education skills.

Refer to VU's response to question 8.