An Evaluation of the VCAL Pathway Development Pilot Projects: Pathways to TAFE and University

Case Study Report

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Contents

Introduction ......................................................................................................................1
VCAL Pathways to TAFE and University .................................................................1
Methodology .................................................................................................................2
Findings .........................................................................................................................2
Issues for Further Consideration ...............................................................................5
Recommendations .......................................................................................................7
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Introduction

This report explores the findings and issues that have emerged from the case studies of the VCAL Pathway Development Pilot Projects (PDPP): Pathways to TAFE and university that were developed in 2004 for delivery in 2005.

The purpose of the case studies was to review the development and to provide advice and recommendations on items specific to the PDPP: Pathways to TAFE and university. Two of the three projects did not attract sufficient numbers of students to run. The third project which has an adult focus, commenced with five students, all of whom are continuing. In this light, one of the imperatives for the evaluation was to investigate the reasons for the lack of take up for all three projects. Also, given that considerable effort had gone into developing these programs to address perceived student and industry needs, the evaluation investigated lessons learned about partnership program development, marketing and recruiting.

In reporting the findings about these and other issues that emerged in the course of the evaluation, we have structured this report in the following way:

1. A brief description of the three projects
2. A brief description of the methodology
3. An overview of the findings and associated recommendations
4. The set of recommendations
5. Case Number One: RMIT
6. Case Number Two: Debney Park Secondary College
7. Case Number Three: Gippsland Education Precinct

VCAL Pathways to TAFE and University

The three VCAL Pathways to TAFE and university Pilot Programs were jointly developed by the VCAL provider, or cluster of providers, the TAFE and/or university partner, and the industry partner, where relevant, in each project. These programs were developed at VCAL Senior Certificate level. Therefore, for ease of expression and reading, hereafter, the VCAL Pathways to TAFE and university will be referred to as the Senior VCAL (PTU) except where the context identifies it as such.

RMIT University Department of Access and Preparatory Studies

This project developed a Senior VCAL (PTU) program with a focus on advanced manufacturing and engineering with strong links to industry. The idea was developed by RMIT’s Quality and Planning unit in discussion with RMIT’s Education Access and Preparatory Studies team and industry partners. The Senior VCAL (PTU) in Advanced Manufacturing grew out of RMIT’s awareness of the ongoing need to work with industry groups to address skill shortages in the manufacturing industry.

Debney Park Secondary College

This project involved a partnership with Debney Park Secondary College, Victoria University’s TAFE and Higher Education Divisions and the Maribyrnong and Moonee Valley
LLEN. The project developed a pilot for the development of a Senior VCAL program that identified pathways into undergraduate information technology and accounting courses at university and related Diploma courses in TAFE. The proposed Senior VCAL (PTU) Pilot included an enhancement program that was designed to empower young people to prepare for tertiary studies and included units such as ‘Reflective Learning’ and ‘Learning to Learn’.

Gippsland Education Precinct

This project was developed jointly with a range of VCAL providers in the Gippsland Education Precinct to provide a pathway to TAFE or university qualifications in Business and related studies through a Senior VCAL program. The focus of this Pilot was on adults and young people who had left school and were seeking access to higher education.

Methodology

Three sites were investigated using case study methodology. At each site this involved:

- semi-structured interviews with partners, students and providers. (At one site parents were also contacted for comment); and
- analysis of documentation associated with each of the three programs.

In total, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 partners, 7 students, 11 providers and 1 parent across the three sites.

Findings

Applied Learning

A shared understanding of the concept of an applied learning pathway to higher education is fundamental to the success of Senior VCAL (PTU) Pilot Programs. Case study informants at two of these sites felt that teachers in schools (including VCAL and VET teachers) and universities did not understand the concept and strengths of applied learning and its potential to provide pathways to higher education.

Informants reported that since its inception, schools and the broader community have tended to consider the VCAL as a pathway to employment, apprenticeships and vocational studies, rather than a pathway to higher education. As such, the VCAL has been targeted at cohorts of students who are felt to be unlikely to achieve, or are not interested in pursuing their ENTER through the VCE. Yet, in order to gain the participating universities’ agreement to offer guaranteed places to Senior VCAL (PTU) graduates, two of the projects reviewed were required to incorporate VCE subjects in the Senior VCAL (PTU). This move saw the proposed Senior VCAL (PTU) Pilots moving away from the applied learning focus of the VCAL. The case study informants felt that, as a result, the aspirations and learning styles of the Intermediate VCAL students targeted for the Pilots, often did not match those of the proposed Senior VCAL (PTU) courses. Subsequently, the institutions concerned tried to attract students completing Year 11 who were planning to undertake the VCE at Year 12.

Interview informants made several comments about the importance of applied learning in general and how it might open up pathways to higher education studies. Some felt that the VCE would benefit from being modified to incorporate subjects or strands with an applied learning focus rather than to attempt to redesign the VCAL to provide university pathways. All informants felt that the Pilots would benefit if universities entered into further dialogue with government and industry about the importance of graduates with applied learning skills.
One informant suggested that the broader community might better understand applied pathways if the TAFE sector maintained closer working relationships with school communities from Year 7 onwards. In this way, TAFE would establish partnerships with schools and develop curriculum connections with students that would gradually increase from year seven through to year twelve or school completion, culminating in progression to full enrolment in a TAFE program.

See Recommendations: 1-3

**Developing Partnership Programs**

Whilst the success of the Pilots is partially dependent on project coordinators having strong relationships with industry and education partners, the number and variety of sectors and departments brought together for the development of the Senior VCAL (PTU) Pilots proved more complex than was able to be managed by two of the partnerships and their project coordinators in the timeframes available.

Industry partners made significant in-kind contributions to the Pilots and were enthusiastic in assisting with the development of Senior VCAL (PTU) curricula that would have the capacity to meet existing and emerging industry needs. All non-school partners, including industry, TAFE and higher education settings were interested in developing long term, sustainable partnerships that would operate well beyond the life of the pilot. It was felt that the Pilot timeframes did not acknowledge the time needed to develop partnership commitment over the long term.

Each step of the Pilots was reliant on a series of partner negotiations before it could proceed. For one project, the industry partners insisted on a new certificate three curriculum. However, the program could not be marketed until the curriculum had been accredited but the ITAB responsible for curriculum accreditation did not sign until November, delaying the marketing of the Pilot. By the time the institution’s marketing material was ready, the targeted students had elected to study elsewhere for 2005. Each series of partner negotiations unfortunately held up each subsequent process. The result was that the programs at two sites did not run. The third project, which is underway, relies heavily on the work of the coordinator to maintain the links between partners and manage students’ programs.

See Recommendations: 4-6

**Marketing**

Marketing efforts were greatly delayed by the time taken to develop the pilots; build partnerships and sign off memoranda of understanding; and develop appropriate curriculum models. Case study informants felt that these delays had serious impacts on their capacity to market the program to students.

In addition, informants felt that school and community perceptions of the VCAL as a program which directs students toward employment, apprenticeships and vocational studies rather than toward higher education studies, acted against their capacity to attract students to the Senior VCAL (PTU). Informants felt that developing the Senior VCAL as a pathway to higher education may have caused some confusion in schools and the broader community about the purpose of the VCAL.

Further, RMIT felt that the community’s perception of it as ‘not-local’ might have acted against their capacity to attract school-aged students who were reluctant to travel to the city for their Year 12 studies. Students’ perceptions of Victoria University as ‘not their preferred destination’ may have had a similar impact. Nonetheless, each of the Pilots felt that if they had had longer to develop the programs, and their marketing strategies, and that if the concept
of the VCAL as a university pathway had operated in schools from Year 10 onwards or earlier, their capacity to attract student enrolments may have been improved.

The Gippsland VCAL Adult Business Studies Project, despite undertaking a comprehensive marketing strategy to adults already employed in business roles, only managed to attract one student in this category. Whilst meeting an identified workforce need in the region, it clearly failed to connect to employees. However, a potential new market was discovered in second and third year apprentices employed in a large group training company. The five students undertaking the VCAL Adult Business Studies Project praised the program because, in addition to gaining an apprenticeship, they were also gaining a senior secondary school qualification and a TAFE business qualification. They, along with other informants, felt that now that new ground had been broken in adding value (VCAL Business Studies) to apprenticeship training, there was potential to develop this market. The maturity and experience that came with one or two years in the workforce has proven an important factor in confirming student’s career interests.

All three Pilots appealed to the 19-22+ age groups, who had largely left school and worked for one or more years, deciding to return to study to improve their longer term employment prospects. The RMIT program initially had a market available through a group-training provider (Manufacturing Industry Training Service) who provided Intermediate VCAL studies and school based new apprenticeships to young people who had left school, were interested in manufacturing futures and might also be interested in undertaking higher education studies. As the programs at Gippsland and RMIT both appealed to apprentices, it may be worth exploring whether there would be more extensive markets made available through industry-based apprenticeships, cadetships and scholarships.

In conclusion, the case studies point out the need for providers, who are considering offering the Senior VCAL (PTU), to reflect more thoughtfully, in the planning stages of the project about:

- who their market is;
- how the Senior VCAL (PTU) course might match the needs of their market; and
- how they would best promote the program to their market.

See Recommendations: 7-8

Articulation

Informants commented that in order for universities to agree to provide guaranteed places for Senior VCAL (PTU) graduates they insisted on the Senior VCAL (PTU) incorporating VCE subjects. As a result, in two of the projects, the Senior VCAL (PTU) pilot curricula were injected with VCE/VET subjects such as Maths Methods Units 3 & 4, Chemistry and Physics and studies at Certificate IV level, depending on the student’s preferred course pathway. This hybridisation of the Senior VCAL (PTU) was perceived to have created confusion in students and school communities about the nature and purpose of the VCAL. This confusion could not be adequately dealt with given the timeframes available for the projects.

Further, the Senior VCAL (PTU) failed to appeal to students from either the VCAL stream or the VCE stream in schools. The Senior VCAL (PTU) was felt to be moving away from the applied frameworks upon which the VCAL was originally based. The VCE students, on the other hand, saw no apparent advantages in studying the Senior VCAL (PTU), as VCE

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1 This company subsequently closed but has since been taken over by an organisation with the same focus who will open centres in both Laverton and Knox and may also be interested in directing some students toward RMIT’s Senior VCAL in Advanced Manufacturing.
students with low ENTER scores could already access the special entry pathways made available at the universities participating in the pilots.

In addition, the case study informants felt that a stand-alone Senior VCAL (PTU) might have difficulty attracting school students from existing school-based programs. Suggesting that for the VCAL to be seriously considered as a pathway to higher education it would need to have these trajectories embedded in the VCAL from Foundation Studies level onwards.

Whilst TAFE was seen as having an existing culture that embraced applied learning, pathways universities were not. Informants suggested that universities still remained to be convinced about the potential of a Senior VCAL to provide appropriate pathways to higher education.

See Recommendation: 2

Cost, Sustainability and Equity

The case study informants commented that the Senior VCAL (PTU) Pilots were resource intensive to develop and run and consideration might need to be given to how their ongoing costs would be met beyond the pilot stage.

In addition, the informants felt that, beyond the Pilot stage, there were course related costs that would inevitably be passed on to students enrolled in the Senior VCAL (PTU), which might not be borne by students completing school-based programs. For example enrolment fees charged by tertiary institutions would be passed on to students beyond the pilot stage.

Further, the special entry university places to be made available to the Senior VCAL (PTU) Pilot graduates are, in many university settings, fee-based. A question which then arises is: Are Senior VCAL (PTU) students to be ‘positioned’ into fee-based futures? And if so, is this desirable/affordable?

An existing OTTE fee concession scheme available to VCE and VCAL students, aged 15-19, who complete their studies in a TAFE or higher education setting, may be of assistance.

See Recommendations: 9-10

Issues for Further Consideration

Is the concept of a Senior VCAL that provides pathways to TAFE and university addressing a gap?

This question cannot be easily answered, given the small size and scope of the Pilot. All three programs appealed to the 19-22+ age groups who had left school and wanted to return to study to enhance their employment options, but they did not appeal to school students. As can be seen from the case studies there were many reasons why the pilots failed to attract enrolments from schools. It is possible that the themed pathways are not appropriate for school students who are not yet ready to commit to a particular study pathway. It also seems clear that universities have not yet embraced applied learning pathways to higher education. It may be appropriate to conduct further investigations into the purpose of applied learning models and their potential to provide pathways to higher education. Little is known about how effectively the current pathways and special entry programs to TAFE and universities are operating. For instance: which students do they attract; from which providers and programs; and what are the post-completion destinations for the students who access these special entry programs?
Complex negotiations may prove difficult to guarantee

TAFE units within TAFE/universities, such as RMIT, do not always have the authority to negotiate industry partnerships nor guaranteed pathways to the higher education sector. This lack of authority may undermine Pathways Projects that require guaranteed access to university courses for Pilot graduates and memoranda of understanding to be developed with industry partners.

VCAL to TAFE and then TAFE to university?

VCAL to TAFE pathways are less complex to negotiate as the TAFE sector has an existing culture of applied pathways, alternative pathways and bridging program options available to students with low or no ENTER scores. The university sector does not yet have these sorts of alternative pathways consistently in place. Therefore, TAFE informants considered that a VCAL to TAFE pathway was a more logical pathway to pursue and that a TAFE to university pathway might then be negotiated after completion of related TAFE courses. One TAFE sector informant suggested that TAFE to university articulation discussions were only just commencing in her institution and, whilst they were proving very positive, would probably take another 1-2 years to complete.

The potential for the VCAL to act as a safety net?

As the three pilots had stronger appeal to the 19+ age group, than to school students, informants felt that programs, which created pathways to particular TAFE and university studies, may be more appealing as a post-year 12 option. In this way the program might act as a safety net, keeping pathways to higher education open for those students who had left school before completing year 12.

However, if a VCAL safety net program were developed, consideration would need to be given to how it might position itself in respect to the growing number of short bridging courses already on offer in the TAFE and higher education sectors.

Perceived narrowing of students’ post-school options

Given the current dominance of the ENTER score in university selection processes, participating universities would only countenance the Senior VCAL (PTU) as providing a pathway to higher education if it incorporated VCE subjects. As mentioned, this hybridisation of the Senior VCAL (PTU) undermined its applied learning frameworks and subsequently lost much of its appeal to current VCAL students whilst failing to attract students who had completed their VCE Units 1 and 2 studies as it narrowed their pathway options, contained too much applied content associated with VCAL studies, whilst offering no new pathways to TAFE and university studies.

In the development of the Senior VCAL (PTU) Pilots, the providers may have made assumptions about students’ career interests that were not confirmed by subsequent enrolments. Case study informants considered that school students were, at this stage, often not ready to commit to enrolling in limited, themed, university pathways. Some informants concluded that a themed Senior VCAL (PTU) might be problematic.

School students interviewed appeared to have strong preferences for some tertiary institutions as study destinations over others. This institutional bias may act against the success of Senior VCAL (PTU) pathways offered in some post-secondary settings.
**A new role for Industry?**

Industry partners were very enthusiastic about being involved in the RMIT Pilot. However, they were not interested in supporting a Senior VCAL (PTU) that had outdated qualifications embedded in it. Industry representatives, in the RMIT Pilot, viewed the pilot as an opportunity to extend the current redevelopment of outdated engineering qualifications being undertaken at TAFE and university level across Victoria. They were prepared to throw their full support behind the Pilot by contributing to the development of industry-relevant curriculum; providing workplace opportunities for Senior VCAL (PTU) students and offering scholarships to assist students with fees related to their subsequent TAFE and university studies.

In commenting on the communities’ failure to take-up the RMIT Pilot, one industry representative suggested that cadetship programs, developed in partnership with TAFE and universities, with guaranteed work placements, that offered employment post completion of the qualification, might be a way to gain community support for specific industry-related VCAL (PTU).

**Recommendations**

If the Senior VCAL (PTU) is to be considered as a pathway to higher education, we recommend that:

**Applied Learning**

1. The VQA investigate the full range of existing special entry pathways to TAFE and university with respect to:
   - which schools/providers promote these pathways to students;
   - whether VCAL students are gaining access to higher education studies through these pathways; and
   - the destinations of students who complete their post-secondary studies via these pathways.

2. The VQA investigate how variations within the VCAL Certificate might provide applied learning pathways to TAFE and university.

3. The VQA encourage providers to take advantage of the flexibility of the broad VCAL framework from Foundation through to Senior level, to link students to both vocational and higher education options.

**Developing Partnership Programs**

4. The VQA factor in a lead-time of 18 months to permit the development of sustainable partnerships, industry-relevant curriculum and to market the Senior VCAL (PTU) to appropriate groups.

5. The VQA encourage providers to engage with industry in the development of Senior VCAL (PTU) curriculum to ensure that qualifications being offered meet industry needs.

6. The VQA encourage industry linkages to Senior VCAL (PTU) programs through such industry-based initiatives as apprenticeships; cadetships; traineeships and scholarships.
Marketing and Recruitment

7. The VQA promote an understanding of the concept of applied learning and the range of applied learning pathways amongst schools, the broader community, the post-secondary education sectors and peak bodies.

8. The VTAC Guide be considered as one vehicle for promoting the benefits and role of the VCAL as a pathway to TAFE and university.

Program Costs and Equity

9. Resources be provided to applicants to support the ongoing costs related to developing and maintaining partnerships; building industry-relevant curriculum; designing and implementing effective marketing strategies and providing program coordination.

10. The VQA investigate the equity issues related to costs to students entering a VCAL Pathway Development Program for both the Senior VCAL (PTU) Certificate and subsequent TAFE and university pathways.