

Voices in VET: What is it like to be involved in VET programs in schools?

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With increased participation rates over the last five years, more students in senior high school are representative of the lower achievement band. Changes in curriculum to recognise the students who are not bound for tertiary studies have included increased provision of vocational education. This discussion paper looks at the experiences surrounding the implementation of these policies in schools and the agencies responsible as part of a pilot project to document the issues and perspectives of the stakeholders. These stakeholders include secondary students, VET teachers and other teachers, parents, employer groups, educational authorities and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. (AECG)

This study involves researching and examining two shifts in secondary school education in NSW over the past five years. The first is the growth of VET in schools and, in particular, the inclusion of VET courses in the HSC for the first time in NSW in 2000. The second is the retention of students from the lower achievement bands in the senior school. The impact of this different cohort of students has prompted an increased need for more vocational rather than academic curriculum. This change brings some interesting issues, and new voices, to the foreground.

As these VET courses are based on industry standards specified by the AQF, the emphasis is on individual outcomes aligned with industry specific standards, so that outcomes are measured against these standards rather than against the performance of other students. The teachers of these VET courses must have an industry background. These teachers not only come from a different teaching / training tradition but also must be able to assess individual student performances against industry standards. Consequently, they provide further new voices in secondary education.

Collectively, these changes reflect several major paradigm shifts in senior schooling. These include a change from traditional academic and assessment practices to a competency based model of assessment. Another change focuses on the culture, teaching mores and backgrounds of the high school teacher and the VET teacher. Also, in the VET model, students can use school-based learning in a direct way to build their industry-based credentials, which articulate with further vocational education and training programs.

This paper is also concerned with the retention and attitudes of students in these courses. There are many students in secondary schools for whom the traditional curriculum is not rewarding. A number of disaffected students leave during Year 11. In this study, there is an opportunity to examine some students who might have been expected to leave during Year 11 who are staying on because of their studies in vocational education, and the degree of satisfaction of students in VET courses.

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