

ENHANCING THE RETENTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE TO YEAR 12, ESPECIALLY THROUGH VOCATIONAL SKILLS

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Abstract

When the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) met in Hobart on 30th April 2009, it proposed a range of education and training initiatives designed to address rising unemployment – an outcome of the economic downturn. The *Compact with Young Australians* announced at that time is intended to provide Australia's youth with access to education and training places. The Compact, through its National Youth Participation Requirement, makes participation in education, training or employment compulsory for all young people until they reach the age of 17 years. In addition it sets a target of 90 per cent Year 12 or equivalent attainment for the next decade. Retention to Year 12 and successful transition to work or further study for young Australians has become, therefore, a key policy for all Australian governments. The challenge for schools and TAFE institutes is to develop and sustain vocational programs and retention/ transition strategies that engage, support, encourage and excite young people sufficiently to build the skills they require to complete Year 12 or its equivalent and move on to work or further study.

This paper reports on the early stages of a research project being undertaken for TAFE Directors Australia and the Australian College of Educators. Funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, the project is seeking to develop case studies of innovative programs in youth retention and transition conducted by secondary schools operating independently and/ or in partnership with TAFE Institutes and vocational colleges based in TAFE Institutes. These case studies will be benchmarked against an evaluative framework developed using criteria drawn from research on youth retention and transition in Australia and internationally.

Introduction

In the 2006 Census it was noted that only 71 per cent of 19 year olds had attained Year 12 or its equivalent. In comparison with other OECD countries, participation and completion rates by young Australians fall short of what is perceived to be an acceptable mark. The *Compact with Young Australians* announced by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in April 2009, is directed at providing Australia's youth with access to education and training places. The Compact (COAG, 2009), through its National Youth Participation Requirement, makes participation in education, training or employment compulsory for all young people until they reach the age of 17 years. In addition it sets a target of 90 per cent Year 12 or equivalent attainment by 2015. Research in the area of retention and transition suggests that countries offering a range of focused and well-structured programs designed to develop vocational skills do achieve improved completion rates. Moreover, Australian research

confirms the positive impact VET in Schools programs can have upon the transition of young people from school, although such transition is not always straightforward (Woods, 2007). In acknowledgement of the potential of vocational programs and with a clear imperative to improve Year 12 completions, education and training offerings for 15 to 19 year olds have recently grown in breadth and diversity – changing significantly the post-compulsory educational landscape for this group of students. Although still small in number, school-based apprenticeships and traineeships are growing rapidly (Karmel & Mlotkowski, 2008) and other Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) programs continue to flourish (Coates & Rothman, 2008). In the TAFE sector, organisational change has seen the advent of vocational colleges and polytechnics designed specifically to address the vocational skills development of 15 to 19 year olds.

The challenge for both secondary schools and TAFE institutes is to build up and sustain vocational programs and retention/ transition strategies that attract, engage, support, encourage and excite young people sufficiently to develop the skills they require to complete Year 12 or equivalent and move on to work or further study. The intent of this research is to examine courses offered independently or in partnership by secondary schools, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes, and by vocational colleges and trade schools linked to TAFE institutes to determine the critical factors that facilitate successful completion and transition.

Background to the study

Vocational education and training together with associated work experience and career advice play a significant role in assisting young people to complete Year 12 and transition into further study or employment (Muir, Powell, Flaxman, Thompson and Griffiths, 2009). The importance of this Year 12 completion on young people's lives cannot be understated. As Lamb (2009, p.23) suggests:

...failure to complete school or gain equivalent qualifications carries serious consequences for young people including poorer labour market outcomes and greater insecurity in building career. Consistently, research in Australia and overseas shows that early school leavers are more likely to become unemployed, stay unemployed for longer, have lower earnings, and over the course of their life accumulate less wealth.

With this at the forefront of their thinking, one hundred and twenty educators and policy makers gathered in Hobart in April 2008 to share ideas and discuss the challenges associated with the provision of vocational education and training for young people in their post-compulsory years. A joint initiative of TAFE Directors Australia and the Australian College of Educators, the outcomes of this forum were encapsulated in the occasional paper *Key issues and future directions in vocational skills for youth* (TAFE Directors Australia, 2008). Drawing on the outcomes this forum, the TAFE Directors Australia submission to the recent House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training inquiry into combining school and work: supporting successful youth transitions, noted that there was considerable agreement amongst forum participants 'that Australia needs to rethink many of its current approaches to the delivery of vocational skills to young people' (TAFE Directors Australia, 2009, p.6).

Various other submissions to the House of Representatives inquiry reiterated the importance of addressing the completions issue, particularly for those young Australians not interested in

or able to engage in academic learning. Keating and Walsh (2009) writing on behalf of the Foundation for Young Australians for example, highlighted the alternative strategies being adopted across states and territories to 'accommodate the needs of students seeking greater flexibility than that provided by more traditional approaches' (Foundation for Young Australians: Submission 26, 2009, p.34). In a context where the 90 per cent completion rates for 19 year olds by 2015 has been set by COAG, much more emphasis is now being placed upon well-structured and targeted vocational education and training for young people in the post-compulsory years. The inclusion of more vocationally-focused learning in secondary curricula, Stanley (2007, p.96) suggests is an almost automatic strategy for addressing the attrition of those young people designated as 'less academically inclined'.

Research method and procedure

The broad aim of the project is to identify and document the vocational program and institutional characteristics in a small number of secondary schools, vocational colleges and TAFE institutes that make for successful retention, completion and transition.

In line with the requirements of the brief, a case study approach is being employed in the research with the aim of answering the following research questions:

1. What characteristics of vocational programs in secondary schools, TAFE institutes, vocational colleges and trade schools are critical for the successful engagement, retention, and transition of 15 to 19 year olds to further education or employment?
2. What are the relationships among the characteristics and how are such relationships influenced by different educational settings, contexts and models of program delivery?
3. In what ways are these characteristics particular to educational settings, contexts and different models of program delivery?

The project is being conducted in a number of phases, the first of which has involved an environmental scan to identify a potential pool of educational organisations and programs to include in the study. A draft evaluative framework using material gathered through an extensive review of national and international literature on the topic has also been developed. This framework has been designed to benchmark the various characteristics of the programs identified as demonstrating 'good practice' delivery of vocational skills for young people.

The next phase will entail the development of six case studies, the information for which is to be collected through focus group interviews with three key stakeholders in VET program delivery, namely:

- program coordinators and teachers: individuals responsible for the coordination and teaching of the nominated programs (eg.VET teachers, general education teachers, language, literacy and numeracy teachers)
- support staff: individuals directly involved in the provision of support for students/teachers in the program, and
- external stakeholders: individuals external to the educational institution but actively engaged in the program (eg. employers, representatives of other training providers, community agencies and industry).

This method of gathering information was seen to offer the research team ‘the opportunity to hear different accounts or voices at the ‘same’ time on the ‘same’ phenomenon’ (Steyaert & Bouwen 1994, p.128).

In parallel with the group interviews, a review of publicly available documentation relating to the vocational programs will also be undertaken. Organisational documents such as curricula, program information for students and teachers, annual reports and material captured from websites together with other contemporaneous records of activities associated with programs will be used to develop a greater understanding of the operational contexts within which these programs operate.

The final phase of the study will involve the validation of the case study reports and the evaluative framework and the development of a set of ‘good practice’ guidelines for developing, delivering and supporting vocational programs for 15 to 19 year olds.

The draft evaluative framework

The starting point

During the TAFE Directors Australia-Australian College of Educators Hobart forum, a series of strategies described as *Key success factors for upper secondary skilling* were formulated to guide and support improved retention, completion and transition through vocational programs (TAFE Directors Australia 2009, p.5). The following is a slightly modified version of the success factors, as identified by forum participants. They are couched in terms of what providers of vocational programs might do to enhance retention, completion and transition.

Providers of vocational programs need to:

1. Develop an environment that demonstrates to students and parents that vocational pathways have parity in outcome and esteem with parallel academic programs.
2. Provide strong pastoral care, personal concern and access to career counselling services.
3. Have a substantial general education program that is occupationally relevant but can lead to further study.
4. Adopt a view that basic literacy and numeracy are fundamental skills for further education.
5. Involve social partnership with employers, educationalists and the community.
6. Provide structured learning in real work settings.
7. Utilise applied and project based methodology.
8. Attempt to maximise outcomes for students socially, occupationally and educationally with a set of extra-curricular activities, and utilise sport and outdoor education as areas to promote social skills and teamwork.
9. Have a clear identity, which builds student self-esteem and a sense of pride, encompassing work based learning, respecting the unique needs of all students.
10. Have a focus on a student’s individual needs and interests.
11. Provide a structured framework for skills development and pathways into work.

Guided by these factors, an extensive review of the literature was undertaken. This focused on research into vocational education and training for young people, youth engagement, early-school leaving and research and evaluation studies on the intent, content and outcomes of programs specifically designed to prevent attrition in the post-compulsory years. The goal

of this activity was to flesh out what constituted success in such programs in order to develop a more substantial framework of success factors. This included the identification and documentation of strategies that underpin the various success factors together with examples of programs where these were evidently in place.

Building up the framework

As early school leaving is a significant issue in many educational systems, there is a plethora of research on the subject. Much of the material focuses upon academic learning and school rather than vocational education and training, but regardless of context the messages about what keeps young people in education are quite consistent. Factors seen to be critical for successful program outcomes consistently highlighted throughout the literature can be categorised under the headings of targeted information, effective monitoring, quality teaching, coordinated support, the development of student connections and organisational leadership. The following outlines the strategies that are contained in each of these factors.

a) Targeted information

Included under this heading are:

- Quality information tailored for different audiences about the options and opportunities provided by specific vocational programs. Delivered in a range of formats, information is targeted at students, parents and employers.
- Positive presentation of vocational education and training as a viable and valuable pathway to further education, training and employment.
- The availability of career counselling and guidance, tailored to suit the individual needs of students.
- For teachers, accurate information regarding student expectations and learning needs together with early recognition and assessment of students at risk.

b) Effective monitoring

Encompassed in effective monitoring are:

- Early alert systems and interventions to support retention.
- Consistent measuring of student engagement.
- Comprehensive evaluation of delivery, support services and program outcomes including completion rates, and transitions to further education and employment.

c) Quality teaching

Critical to positive program outcomes are:

- Curriculum tailored to the specific needs of the particular cohorts.
- An emphasis on learner-centred approaches.
- Flexibility in timetabling.
- Learning personalised to individual interests, acknowledging learning styles and learning preferences
- Integrated vocational, general education and foundation skills development.
- Applied and experiential work-related and work-based learning approaches.
- Collaborative learning and assessment designed to develop team working.
- Utilisation of new media to further engage learners and enhance their learning experience.

- Authentic work-focused and flexible assessment.
- Formal and ongoing and critical review of what works and what does not in teaching particular cohorts of young people.

d) Coordinated support

As with education and training more broadly, supportive strategies identified include:

- The joining up of support mechanisms into an integrated and coordinated whole.
- Maintenance of an inclusive school/college environment and inclusive practices.
- Individualised and cohort specific pastoral care.
- Utilisation of social networking as both an engagement and educational tool.
- Overt encouragement of supportive peer relationships.
- Mentoring and coaching across all areas of general, vocational and foundation skill development.
- Ongoing professional development and networking for teachers and support staff involved in program delivery.

e) Development of student connections

Included under this heading are the strategies which assist in making the important connections for students. These include activities which connect students to:

- Teachers.
- School/college activities both within and outside of hours.
- Sources and resources that support various aspects of vocational learning and work.
- The community and key community agencies.
- The world of work including individual workplaces and potential employers.
- Facilitated and structured pathways into further education and work.

f) Leadership

This element is seen as critical for program success and includes:

- A clear educational vision and direction together with the maintenance of an organisational climate that supports individual and cohort success.
- A commitment to vocational programs for youth and ongoing financial support to ensure sustainability.
- A commitment to program quality and continuous improvement.
- The engagement of partners in delivery and support including management of multi-agency activities and cultures.
- Support for intelligent risk-taking and learning from experience, both successful and less successful.
- The active showcasing of positive learning and social outcomes gained by the young participants in vocational programs.

Evidence of impact

Having developed a more comprehensive set of success factors and the strategies that underpin them, the next component of the framework focuses on the data sources that can be utilised to measure the impact of factors on outcomes. Program evaluation would seem to be a crucial element for educational institutions given the COAG imperative for improved

completions and transitions to further study and work. Whilst undertaking focus groups within the educational institutions, some attempt will be made to determine the extent of organisational data that can be drawn on for an evaluation of such programs. What indicators of success are in place? What evidence is there of successful transition to employment or further education and training? Have follow-up surveys been undertaken with non-completers? Have impact/ benefit studies been undertaken for specific programs? Have they been benchmarked against others or even replicated by other providers? Such information will provide the supporting evidence required to confirm that these programs do what they set out to do.

The next stage

At the point of writing this paper, the research team has yet to enter the field to conduct the focus groups with teachers, support staff and external stakeholders involved in the delivery of the nominated vocational programs. The examination of the literature and the development of the draft evaluative framework have provided the researchers with an idea of what might be possible in the provision of vocational programs – programs that engage, support, encourage and excite young people sufficiently to build the skills they require to complete Year 12 and move on to work or further study. Insights gained from the case studies will assist greatly in the formulation of the guidelines for developing effective vocational programs for youth and in the finalisation of the evaluative framework for use in benchmarking vocational programs and their outcomes.

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