

**VET IN SCHOOLS FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS:
'HANDS ON', 'DEFAULT', OR PROMISING?**

Angela Hill* and Sue Helme

*Correspondence to:

Dr Angela Hill
Senior Lecturer
School of Education
James Cook University
Douglas 4811
Queensland
Australia

angela.hill@jcu.edu.au

Ms Sue Helme
Research Fellow
Centre for Post Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning (CPELL)
University of Melbourne

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Abstract

A comparatively large number of Indigenous students participate in Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) programs. This paper draws on data from two national studies: a survey of 20,000 young people and their experience of vocational learning, and a qualitative study of VETiS in 21 schools in diverse settings, which included interviews with 118 Indigenous VETiS students and 160 school staff and other stakeholders. It provides a rare insight into the way in which VETiS is experienced by Indigenous students, and of the role VETiS plays in addressing their educational needs and vocational aspirations. Students' views of VETiS, including their reasons for enrolling, what they valued about it, and their critique of VETiS subjects are summarised. While much of the interview data supports previous research on the need to support individual Indigenous students systematically, successful engagement in VETiS is demonstrated to require broader system and school support, including wide ranging policy commitment and engagement with principles of social justice.

Introduction

With the continued expansion of Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) over the last five years, it is important for policy makers and educators to focus attention on the nature of participation and the experience of students undertaking this expanding curriculum area. While almost 95% of schools offer VETiS (MCEETYA, 2001) recent studies have noted the variations in patterns of participation (Johns, Kilpatrick & Loechel, 2004) and the different experiences of students within the programs.

The motives for introducing VETiS range from providing greater curriculum breadth to re-engaging and supporting the retention of students in the post-compulsory years of schooling and providing pathways to employment. Such motives are potentially compelling incentives for policy makers and educators, but perhaps most important for Indigenous students, whose participation in post-compulsory schooling remains critically below that of non-Indigenous students. Apparent retention rates for Indigenous students from Year 7/8 to Year 12 have improved in the last ten years but the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous remains relatively constant. From 1994 to 2004 the apparent retention rate for Indigenous students improved from 34.7% to 39.5%. This compares to the 2004 apparent retention rate of non-Indigenous students, which stands at 75.7% (ABS, 2005).

A focus on whether VETiS can improve the retention of Indigenous students is clearly important. Wide-ranging literature reviews examining Indigenous students'

disaffection with schools highlight a range of structural and relational causes for poor school retention (Long, Frigo & Batten, 1998; Teese, Polesel, et al 2000; Herbert, Anderson, Price & Stehbens, 1999). These include long-term school/community engagement problems, racism, and poverty in addition to issues of student/teacher relationships, literacy, and teacher expertise. The introduction of VETiS is unlikely to immediately impact on these complex issues, but national policy agendas including the Australian National Training Authority's strategic initiative '*Partners in a Learning Culture*' suggest that VET has the potential to support Indigenous students to stay at school, through the development of more relevant and practical learning experiences.

Several studies have explored the potential of VETiS for Indigenous students providing some insight into the capacity to improve schooling and post-school employment options. Quantitative indicators such as improved attendance, and school completion rates were noted by McRae et al, (2000) and Schwab, (2001) with Malley, Keating, Robinson & Hawke (2001) reviewing the improved employment outcomes for Indigenous students following VETiS programs.

While these studies highlight the potential of VETiS for Indigenous students, this paper reports on two major national studies completed in 2003 that add significantly to previous understandings about patterns of participation of Indigenous students in VETiS and the quality of those experiences.

This paper reports data from two national studies, the *Young Visions* Survey, commissioned by the Education and Career Enterprise Foundation (ECEP) and conducted in 2002, and *Hands on the Future*, a national qualitative study of Indigenous students' experience of VETiS. *Young Visions* explored the participation patterns of Indigenous students in VETiS, their reasons for participating and made comparisons between the patterns of participation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. A key finding of *Young Visions* was that Indigenous participation in VETiS was almost twice that of non-Indigenous participation. Boards of Study data for 2002 from all States and Territories confirmed this difference. Nationally, Indigenous participation was 60%, and non-Indigenous participation was 34%. In each State and Territory, participation rates were higher for Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students.

One year later, a follow up study was undertaken, which documented the destinations of 2271 school leavers and 458 continuing students who had participated in the original *Young Visions* survey (Helme and Polesel, 2004). This study analysed the impact of a range of demographic and cultural variables on post-school destinations, and examined the role of VETiS programs.

The qualitative data reported in this paper were obtained from *Hands On The Future*, which reported the findings of a national study commissioned by ANTA in 2003. This study comprised 21 case studies of VETiS programs, and documented how Indigenous students are experiencing VETiS. These case studies draw on interview data with 280 Indigenous students, teachers, school administrators and school support personnel.

The role of VET for indigenous students

This section discusses features of VET that appeal to Indigenous students, based on the *Young Visions* survey and the interview data obtained in the national qualitative study, which may explain the higher participation in VETiS of Indigenous students. Four key roles were identified: improving engagement with school and curriculum; broadening pathway options; providing workplace experience; and providing a pathway to employment. These are elaborated below.

Improving engagement with school and curriculum

One important role of VETiS is to accommodate students who are struggling with the mainstream curriculum. The survey data revealed that about three in four students reported enrolling in VETiS because it was more practical and less academic, regardless of Indigenous status. Gender differences were evident, and held for Indigenous students: boys were more likely than girls to report that they enrolled because VET was more practical and less academic (86% compared to 66%). This suggests that Indigenous boys in particular appreciate the practical, 'hands on' nature of VET studies. Indigenous students were also more likely to report that they had been encouraged by their school to enrol in VETiS (52% compared to 42%). Amongst Indigenous students, boys were more likely than girls to report this reason for enrolling in VETiS (61% compared to 46%), reflecting their weaker academic position.

A similar trend was apparent in relation to the impact of VETiS participation on other aspects of schooling. Indigenous students appear to be more likely to report that VET has improved their attitude to schoolwork, and helped with their other subjects. This aspect of VET appears to be stronger for boys than girls: male students were more likely than female students to report that VET subjects had improved their attitude to schoolwork (70% compared to 59%) and helped them with their other subjects (57% compared to 43%).

Interviews with Indigenous VET students highlighted the role of VET in maintaining their engagement with school through course content, work experience, and information about post-school opportunities.

Sometimes I wasn't turning up to school, so this is helping me, doing something that I like cos it's got a lot to do with football. So it's keeping me busy as well (Year 12 VET Fitness student).

Some programs designed for Indigenous students at risk had – in their own eyes – re-established a connection with school and learning. Students enrolled in one particular program that combined completion of the senior school certificate with an Aboriginal School Based Traineeship were happy to discuss how they had successfully re-engaged with school because of this program.

That [the program] is the main reason I've come back, pretty much. I wasn't going to come back this year, but then I didn't want to just sit at home and bum around. And I'd seen the program and what it was all about so I thought I'd give it

a try. And I tried it out and it was good, so I stayed at school (Year 11 student-School Based Traineeship).

These same students had been surprised by the extent to which their attendance had improved since starting the program. Their comments concur with reports by parents and staff that VET programs, conducted within a supportive school environment, have a profound impact on attendance.

They've got a thing now on our attendance, and none of us used to come to school, but now like, everyone's in the school ... So it's pretty good. Everyone's been coming, so it must be doing something. ... Last term, they showed us how much we'd missed (Year 12 student, Aboriginal School Based Traineeship).

It doesn't seem like that much until you see it [number of days absent] in writing (Year 11 student, Aboriginal School Based Traineeship).

Because last year like, a lot of us didn't come to school. Like I dropped out, like for a while. But now I'm come back and I haven't missed much [this year], 4 or 5 days. It's better to go. You're in the same class with the same people, stuff like that so it's good (Year 11 student, Aboriginal School Based Traineeship).

Almost every student interviewed mentioned the experiential, or hands-on, nature of VET as the key aspect that appealed to him or her. VET provided a welcome contrast with their other more theoretical subjects:

It's a bit more hands on. It's fun. Most of my other subjects are theory...I like it, it's good. I need that because my other subjects are theory (Year 11 VET Dance student).

Hands on, that's it... Best thing is taking things off motors, taking parts off (Year 10 Automotive student).

I'm more of an outdoor person. I'd rather be outdoors teaching people things like sport than being in a classroom writing on a board all day... It's more outdoorsy stuff you do, you get out there and experience what you want to do instead of writing it down and saying I'm going to do this when I get out of school, you've actually got the opportunity in school to do it (VET Sport and Recreation student).

If you've got hands-on experience you're doing something. You're not just sitting in the classroom getting bored out of your brains... I've got to be able to do something with my hands instead of just sitting there. I've got to do something. I've got to move (Year 12 VET Agriculture student).

I like physical learning better. Outdoors. If I can do it outside. If I can have someone explain it to me and I do it outdoors, instead of having to write it down I'd so much sooner do that than sit inside and write 2 or 3 pages out... (Year 11 VET Agriculture student)

Although students sometimes struggled with the theory and academic demands of VET programs, they valued the way in which theoretical knowledge and hands-on experience complemented each other to enhance their learning experiences.

You still have to use your mind and know how to cut things...The theory that you do, you really learn from it...The teacher actually explains it to you and you get your hands-on with the animals... I could go on to apprentice farmer or rouseabout, but coming straight from grade 10 you probably wouldn't get far because you haven't got the hands-on experience and the knowledge. A lot of farmers want you to have some knowledge as well as the practical (Year 12 VET Agriculture student).

Broadening pathway options

Most VET students combined VET study with traditional academic subjects. VET thus enabled students to broaden their learning beyond the traditional academic curriculum whilst still keeping their options open for university study. The survey found that this role of VET was strong for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Over 80% of all VET students believed that it increased their career options, and over 70% reported that VET allowed them to keep their options open for university. Amongst Indigenous students, girls were more likely than boys to report that VET still allowed them to keep their options open for university (78% compared to 66%). This gap reflects the stronger academic position of girls in general.

The case study data revealed that some saw VET as directly linking them with a career path whilst others saw VET as an opportunity to explore a range of possible career directions, and, through Structured Workplace Learning, experience different workplaces.

VET gives students experience to see if they like something or not...There's some that go through uni and everything to do things like aged care and (then) can't stand washing people for instance. So this gives the experience to be able to see if they like it or not (Year 13 Community Studies student).

To give us, to help us out, to make us have choices in our careers, doing it young, getting certificates for it. I think they're just trying to help us, give us alternatives (Year 11 Business Administration student).

To know what it feels like in the mainstream (Year 11 Aged Care student).

You do learn a lot more because you're there to get the certificates... With other classes you do get what you have to do to pass, but there's not a certificate involved. There's not the same opportunity to go further (Year 12 VET Agriculture student),

VET Opened my eyes to what's out there in the workforce, 'cos I believe school doesn't really prepare you for it but with the VET courses they do, which is a bonus. I reckon if I didn't complete them I wouldn't be here doing what I do now (Home-School Liaison Officer, Indigenous Education Support Unit).

Some students interviewed perceived their VET subject as a bonus, by providing additional points towards university entrance (in a State where VET results contribute to university entrance scores) and others as a safety net in case plans to attend university did not eventuate.

Providing workplace experience

According to the *Young Visions* data, the most important reason for enrolling in VET given by all students, whatever their background, was the opportunity for workplace training. Indigenous students were slightly more likely than non-Indigenous students to nominate this reason (96% compared to 93%).

Interviews with Indigenous VET students revealed that most students welcomed the opportunity VET provided for workplace experience, and benefited from their placements. Many comments illustrated the role of Structured Workplace Learning in building student self-confidence, developing generic work skills and providing a pathway to future employment.

You get better communication skills, you're meeting new people and building your confidence up (Year 11 student, Aboriginal School Based Traineeship).

I've always wanted to be a secretary and have an office job. With Business Operations I get to go out to different workplaces and learn heaps of new things. By working there it will help me get a job later on, when I leave school I'll get Certificate III and go straight into a job (Year 12 Business Operations student).

It's showed me different approaches and ... how to work with and deal with other people not like myself (Year 12 student, Aboriginal School Based Traineeship).

The important role played by workplace mentors and role models was a strong theme of the interviews. Several students referred to the need for having access to someone in the workplace they knew, or with whom they felt comfortable asking for assistance. Wanting to work in Indigenous workplaces was not generally the case, but some students clearly appreciated having at least one Indigenous person at work to whom they could go for help or support. Students appreciated work placements where they were engaged in interesting and meaningful work and where they felt their contribution was valued.

The quote below highlights the importance of the opportunity to practice relevant skills, as well as contact with other Indigenous people in the workplace:

(My) first work placement (was in) fitness. It wasn't really related to what we had to do. He made us clean the place the whole time but we were in there to learn about how to help people correct their movement when they use the gym equipment. But the second one in the Indigenous Sports Program was really worthwhile, because (my supervisor) took us along to meetings, we took down notes for her, we did admin, it was a good learning experience. She was the only Indigenous person in the whole entire place... I prefer to work in an Indigenous (organization) because I feel more comfortable being with my own people. Most of

the workers here I've known since I was about 2 years old (Former VET student now employed as an Indigenous Education Support worker).

A pathway to employment

According to the *Young Visions* survey, getting a job was more important to Indigenous students than to non-Indigenous students as a reason for doing VET (79% compared to 70%). Access to post-school VET was also seen as more important to Indigenous students (75% compared to 69%). Another key difference was evident in relation to the role of Structured Workplace Learning in helping them secure future employment: 85% of Indigenous students reported that their work placement could help them move into a good job in the future, compared to 76% of non-Indigenous students. This finding suggests that in the eyes of Indigenous students VET has a strong role in providing a pathway into training and/or employment. They were also more likely to see VET qualifications as a means of securing a part-time job whilst studying (67% compared to 57%), reflecting the greater participation of Indigenous students in school-based apprenticeships.

Jobs were the most frequently mentioned perceived benefit of VET. In their interviews, Indigenous students generally reported enrolling in VET to gain entry-level training, or a 'ticket' that they believe would enhance their prospects of employment.

I didn't know about getting the job and certificate. I thought it was just a lesson but you can pass a certificate and get a job with it. It's a good thing for when I grow up, so I got a job there ready (VET Land Management student).

I wouldn't mind doing plastering. Good job I reckon. Last week of term we have to do work experience and I'm thinking of getting work experience with a plasterer and I might get an apprenticeship with him. If I don't get an apprenticeship I'll come back to school next year and do Year 11 (Year 10 Automotive student).

On my second work placement I went to the XX hotel and two days after I got the job. Still working there three nights a week (VET Hospitality student).

Given high levels of unemployment amongst Indigenous peoples, and intergenerational unemployment, VET has a key role in creating links between school and work.

The end result is that you walk out with the experience you need as well as the certificate certifying that you can actually do the job that a lot of people are asking for... You've got a certificate saying I can do this, I've done this, and so they have to recognise you before they recognise just a normal person looking for a job... If I've got a few certificates under my belt I'll be better qualified than the regular person (VET Retail student).

For some students, the skills gained through VET were also seen as a means of making a difference in their community. This is a significant finding as it suggests that VET is seen as having a broader community-building role as well as one of individual advancement.

Indigenous students also perceived VET as enabling them, through their contact with the workplace, to develop self-confidence, valuable generic skills and useful contacts for future employment.

When the course finishes there isn't a guaranteed job but there is a good possibility of staying on if they are happy with my work (Year 11 Business Administration student).

While VET programs in general enrol proportionally many more Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students, the gap is even greater in the case of School-Based New Apprenticeships. Indigenous students were four times more likely than non-Indigenous students to report that they were in School-Based New Apprenticeships (8% compared to 2%). School-Based New Apprenticeships (SBNAs) allow students to undertake paid employment and structured training as part of a senior school certificate. These students clearly valued being paid for their work:

You get paid to go to work! That's the best thing probably. You get your own money for what you've done. You're not sitting at home on the dole (Year 11 students, Aboriginal School Based Traineeship).

Interviews with a small number of former students who undertook this form of VETiS indicated that, with appropriate support, these young people were able to make a successful transition to post-school employment.

The *Young Visions* Follow up survey included a small number of Indigenous respondents. Although based on small numbers, the data suggest that Indigenous school leavers were almost twice as likely to enter apprenticeships and traineeships than non-Indigenous school leavers (21.4% compared to 12.8%). VET in School participation for boys appeared to be strongly associated with transfer to apprenticeships; four of the five boys surveyed who participated in VETiS programs found apprenticeships the following year.

Issues and difficulties with VET

The interview study revealed a number of difficulties that students experienced with VET. Pedagogical issues were foremost, related to teachers' subject knowledge and teaching skills. Some students mentioned teachers' inability to provide assistance with the literacy, language and numeracy demands of VET subjects. Also, students' criticisms reflected inadequate information about course content and unfulfilled expectations. In some instances, students were unaware that they were doing VET subjects until alerted to this research project. This issue seems to be a product of structural arrangements for the delivery of VET in which modules are embedded in mainstream subjects. Interviews with staff raised concerns that some Indigenous students were being inappropriately channelled into VET subjects.

Course content and pedagogy

A common criticism of VET was that it wasn't hands-on enough. Although this could be attributed to unrealistic expectations or poor information given to students prior to enrolment, it also indicates significant pedagogical issues.

The worst thing is doing the modules, but you have to do them to pass the course. Too many books. Every second week we get a new book. We get about 30 books this year. We do theory nearly every week. Once in a blue moon we do hands-on... You don't do much prac. We want to do more prac, fixing cars (Year 10 Automotive student).

We need to do a bit of practical, cause you can't just be stuck in there all afternoon just doing theory. We need to actually get a bit more experience (Year 11 Aged Care student).

I don't like to sit and listening to him talk all the time. I like writing down and doing stuff, not just sitting there for like half an hour and just listening (VET Land Management student).

These comments echo those of a VET Cluster Manager who felt that students were being sold VET on the basis that it was 'hands-on' and were consequently disappointed about the relatively high theoretical content.

In some schools students complained that the work was not interesting enough. This appeared to be partly due to inappropriate course content and partly due to the inability of teachers to present material in a way that engages younger learners:

The work needs to be a bit more interesting...well they just give us a booklet and say answer the questions. And it's not interesting. It's just really really boring. I've avoided it so much it's not funny... We thought it was going to be dance, making up a dance. And then we get all this theory work and our teacher says just finish this and you'll be right. And then we get another booklet and another booklet... Some of it's a bit hands-on but Occupational Health and Safety is just boring. Just answer questions. You can't make it more interesting. My teacher says sorry but you have to do this (Year 11 VET Dance student).

These comments reflect difficulties in some settings in locating suitably qualified and experienced staff who can effectively engage young people in learning.

As well as expressing concerns about course content and teaching strategies, students were critical of teachers who they believed lacked important subject knowledge and relevant industry experience:

We're just learning out of a book and working on a computer. We also have another teacher, a lady who talks to us about communication skills... We listen to her read out of a book. It sounds like she doesn't know much herself. It's not very hands-on (Year 11 Business Administration student).

I don't think the teacher is as qualified as what she makes out to be as there's some things that we've asked her that she's not really sure about. It's like you're a VET course teacher, you're meant to know this stuff (VET Retail student).

Literacy and numeracy

Consistent comments from schools highlighted the barriers for successful participation in VET for students with poor English language and literacy skills, with some schools defining the lack of skills in this area as the major barrier for Indigenous students. VET teachers noted that generally the literacy skill level required for VET was grossly underestimated. This problem was exacerbated by the reality in many settings of Indigenous students speaking English as a second, third or fourth language. In one Northern Territory school, the percentage of students for whom English was not the first language was between 80-90%.

The mismatch between students' ability to perform VET skills and ability to write about what they did, as required for assessment, was noted in several schools. One VET teacher in a South Australian school expressed his frustration that several of his Indigenous students would not receive the credit he felt they deserved because of their low literacy skills.

I've got one lad that can go out to the fish factory and he can fillet sharks and that with the best of them, and you ask him to try and do a little bit of reading or something like that and he just can't. And yet to employ him as a person that's going to work with seafood and prepare it and everything like that, he's as good as you'll get. And yet he probably won't pass ... a writing based [task] that the kids have to put in 250 words. He's going to have trouble stringing them together, but if he could put 250 fillets of shark on the table he'd do it with no trouble at all.

Although students themselves generally felt well supported with meeting the academic demands of VET courses, this is not always the case:

A lot of us are not coping well with the maths.... All of a sudden we have to go back to mental maths and half the class isn't coping with it at the moment.... We're in a computer room so it's hard with a big class of 20 or so working in a computer classroom. The room is inadequate and we're separated from each other (Year 12 Retail student).

Some students reported difficulties asking for help from teachers. Students in rural and remote locations whose first language was not English were less confident about asking for assistance, often believing that teachers did not know they spoke another language at home.

It's sometimes hard to ask for help. People might laugh or something at what you say. I find it hard to ask for help because I don't speak English properly. The teacher tells me to speak English. He thinks I'm talking behind his back or something.

VET by default?

Although school staff asserted that Indigenous students, as with non-Indigenous students, were offered the full range of curriculum choices, there was evidence that some Indigenous students were being channelled by default into vocational pathways.

At some sites, the concern was expressed that high levels Indigenous participation in VETiS served to diminish students' post-schooling opportunities. As one VET coordinator commented:

The kids look at the subjects they want and they look at the timetable. They've gotta have an English, they've gotta have a maths. Some of our Indigenous kids aren't capable of doing a science stream and they don't want to do Soc Ed or LOTE or whatever. So a lot of our kids are pushed toward the VET stream just to pick up a subject because VET is the only thing left on that line.

Timetabling decisions sometimes resulted in VET being timetabled against other popular choices, particularly sport, which was an issue for some students:

... I don't like Wednesday's because we get out of sport and (VET) cuts out our sport lessons (Year 10 VET Broadcasting student).

In smaller schools, timetabling restrictions also meant limited choices of VET, so that students found themselves doing VET subjects that they would not otherwise have chosen, because there were no other suitable subjects available in that timeslot.

Support required for successful experiences

The case studies revealed that in order to deliver and maintain quality vocational education and training programs for Indigenous students, support was required at a system, school and personal level. The kind of support required was in some instances linked to desirable support mechanisms for all VETiS but on other occasions, the assistance required was viewed to be specific to Indigenous students, and reflective of the structural barriers Indigenous students face in participation in education.

System supports around funding and regulatory frameworks

School administrators spoke consistently about the need for a shift away from short-term funding arrangements, and the need to systematically resource schools to provide quality VET programs. Such systemic constraints were perceived to limit the expansion of VET generally as well as VET for Indigenous students.

A NSW principal expressed this frustration in relation to the lack of coherent and ongoing funding with the following comments:

You apply for funding in December of one year and it's supposed to be there in January and you don't see it until July- I mean what do you do between January and July?

Similarly, a curriculum coordinator in South Australia described the need to address the ongoing resourcing requirements of VET.

The resources that you need to deliver this are gargantuan. But a lot of these grants are one off things. What you need is a program that you can put into place and continues. And the school itself can't afford to pay for all that. So financing is a big issue for us.

A NSW principal described how most school communities had little notion of the funds required to establish appropriate infrastructure, but still tried to find ways to support programs.

[...] People would have no conception of how much it costs to set up hospitality, we are looking at hundreds and thousands of dollars. [...] the P&C have in fact said that if it's a good project, that they would like to make up the shortfall.

The requirement to 'top up' VET program funds from community resources raises clear issues of equity. School funds link to the socio-economic resources of the school community and given the status of Indigenous Australians, a necessity to draw on student or community funds reinforces educational disadvantage.

In addition to the high levels of infrastructure costs, a South Australian Employment, Education and Training Officer described a further source of disadvantage in meeting maintenance costs.

I mean the infrastructure's been set up. The trouble that we have with the program out there is the recurrent costs. Infrastructure's no worries, students are no worries, it's the recurrent costs that's the killer- power, water, electricity etc.

As both Luke (2004) and Reid (2003) outline, school systems in Australia are expected to distribute equivalent educational outcomes within an increasingly commodified policy framework. The resource differences between public schools, and between public and private schools is now well documented. In the case of VETiS, a further layer is added to the school funding equation.

Funding for VET is steeped in the culture of neo-liberalism (Anderson, Brown & Rushbrook, 2004). Since 1994, funding for VET, whether located in schools, TAFE or private providers has undergone a systematic process of marketisation that is marked by a model of "user choice" and separation of purchaser and provider. Short term competitive tendering and business style accountability requires teachers to engage with VET in quite different ways to school funding. Such differences require school staff to recognise the tensions of negotiating different funding paradigms in the context of their community resources.

As a Queensland study noted, the imposition of the different funding models for VETiS is problematic for schools, (Andrews, Kenman & Smith, 2000), but for Indigenous students, the destabilising nature of non-recurrent funding potentially compounds already unequally distributed economic resources.

Other system issues raised in this study related to the introduction of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) where compliance with physical and human

resource requirements limited the scope for VET programs, particularly for Indigenous students in rural and remote communities.

Resource and staffing limitations were cited regularly across states as areas of concern. One Queensland school principal described the situation of trying to meet compliance standards in staffing, noted their frustration with the perceived overregulation of qualifications for VET providers.

I have teachers with Masters of Arts in all sorts of areas who are spot on teachers but because they don't meet the checklist [...] a man with a PhD in Agriculture [...] he's got to do Certificate 4 in damn TAFE. I do know why he has to and I don't think it's a bad thing but for us it's just another compounding factor. If he leaves you do it all again.

Another school described the barriers to meeting physical resource demands for accredited programs. A rural Queensland boarding school aimed to include hospitality subjects but found it difficult to get past the legal barriers even in their own kitchens with qualified chefs.

Limited teacher availability is not an uncommon concern in rural or regional communities, (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Regional Services, 2000) but compliance requirements of the AQTF have placed further restrictions on the type of VET offered. For Indigenous communities in rural or remote locations, the limited availability of staff and the AQTF compliance requirements and the tendering out of VET programs has impacted on the provision available.

In one Western Australian example, a training provider working with a school had collapsed after the introduction of the AQTF, and had left a group of Indigenous students halfway through a program with limited options for future training. In a remote Queensland school, the distribution of funds in the open training market meant that local training providers were not always providing the training. Instead, the training contract was awarded to organizations that operated on a 'fly-in, fly-out' model. The school expressed concern about the suitability of this mechanism to develop locally relevant training.

School support systems for Indigenous students

Since the early nineties, school systems across Australia have had varied but ongoing responses to promoting social justice policies for disadvantaged groups. Such policies include participation and access targets, anti-racism policies, and inclusive consultative mechanisms in schools (Lingard, 1998). The case study data in this study revealed that in VETiS, there was both a legacy of working within a framework of social justice and an abandonment of social justice ideals.

School support included ready access to tutoring and academic assistance, development of a positive physical environment for use by Indigenous students and on-campus childcare. Within the schools, a number of sites described a range of activities to promote cultural awareness. Critical to the success of these initiatives

was the role of Indigenous staff who provide a vital link between students, teachers and families, in addition to their status as role models. An Assistant Principal sums up this role.

Other kids wouldn't think twice about asking for an extension, an Indigenous kid generally won't ask so they'll miss the deadline and be penalised and come to me and ask what they can do....It's very difficult for them to ring someone and say they're not coming in. They will avoid doing that and simply not go. Indigenous students at that age also have 'baggage'. In their mind they believe that an Indigenous student won't get listened to, can't bargain on an equal footing with a non-Indigenous adult or authority. (Assistant Principal, Senior College)

Beyond these important school support measures, VET programs also required other school support mechanisms. Preparing employers to host Indigenous students was cited by one school as crucial to the success of a structured work placement.

If I know a kid is a bit apprehensive and might not go, we get them out to meet employers, we take them out and have a look at the site beforehand. We place them with employers we know, that they will get on with, that we've used before... We use tried and true employers that we know will look after them. And we also have a word with employers if we think it's necessary, let them know if a student is apprehensive, to watch out for them for the first couple of days. We haven't had a lot of trouble with kids not turning up. Normally we have contact with employers two or three times over the two week period but if we think the students might have problems we're on the phone to them every day for the first few days and we ring the students at night just to make sure that everything's OK. The ones that have had trouble we bring back here and work through whatever happened and try again the next time around (VET Construction Teacher).

Schools in a number of states however, did not appear to address important social justice requirements of working with Indigenous students, instead speaking of the need to 'treat all students as equals'. The tension between clearly identifying support needs of Indigenous students and singling them out as a group was described in a number of case studies, indicating a misunderstanding of educational and social disadvantage. The following examples of teachers' comments from the Northern Territory indicate this tension.

I think opportunities should be the same for Indigenous students as for anyone else. We just have to watch what direction we are headed in and take into account all Indigenous and non- Indigenous people.

While school leaders have a responsibility to develop appropriate and responsive programs for Indigenous students, several schools tried to develop support structures that were responsive to community concerns to not single out Indigenous students. One Queensland school indicated their concern about providing special treatment to Indigenous students. Special or different treatment for Indigenous students was not regarded as necessary. In this school however, participation in VET amongst Indigenous students was very low.

The configuration of social justice practices within a school impacted on the nature of support provided to Indigenous students undertaking VET. Some sites noted with concern an 'enclave' approach to Indigenous student support. Without whole school ownership and involvement in supporting Indigenous students, the effectiveness of support was reduced. One Northern Territory Indigenous education worker describes the limitation of the 'enclave' approach.

[...] everything Aboriginal just came to us. No one was worried too much. It was mainly just dumped on us.

Significantly the study noted the complex interaction between views from school leadership about VET in general and the needs of Indigenous students. To support Indigenous students in VET programs schools needed a dual commitment; a priority for VET programs and a commitment to the needs of Indigenous students. Without this dual commitment, teachers and students found implementation of VET problematic. As one teacher expresses, developing a shared school culture committed to both VET and Indigenous students is critical to sustaining successful programs.

Just the way you can hear teachers saying these kids don't deserve these opportunities, Why do the Aboriginal kids get these opportunities and other kids aren't ... feel the sense of having to justify things a lot when I don't feel we should have to do that. I feel we should be told just to get on with things.

Teacher skill levels to engage with VET programs, particularly aspects of structured workplace learning (SWL) and Indigenous student needs are also noted as a requirement for successful programs. Teachers noted the fundamental changes in the nature of teachers' work within VET and VET for Indigenous students.

Going out and seeing students in the work place, negotiating with employers who's doing what; it has a welfare component to it, which is fine for me as an Aboriginal teacher because I do that all the time, but I think teachers probably resent the fact that they're not actually teaching, they are actually doing something they never ever signed up for and I don't think they're quite along the lines of moving with that idea.

Empathy with Indigenous student needs was noted as required for successful programs, and some school personnel noted how such empathy was limited outside of the school site, particularly in TAFE or private training providers. One Western Australian teacher described concerns in working with training providers who did not display the empathy required to relate effectively to Indigenous students, and the impact of such inflexibility on students' success.

I've had problems with the lecturers at TAFE not being particularly understanding if the kid's late, or the kid doesn't have the right uniform because they stayed at Auntie's the night before and not at their normal home... And TAFE is not like this school here where we say you know, OK, we'll roll with it. If they're not there at 8 o'clock, if they come at 10 minutes past 8 they don't let them in. So if they don't

complete those competencies at TAFE, they're going to have a problem with the traineeship.

The support structures in the school are very important – the key personnel are not in every school... I see a difference in outcomes for aboriginal students depending on what support there is in the school for those students. It's very easy for kids to drop off, drop out of courses, drop into unemployment without someone, or a group of people preferably, all taking a little piece and saying, 'well, look at the subjects that you're doing, these things need to be done, let's speak to your teacher. How can we get that back on track. What about after school? Have you filled in the application for this training body'; there's just a very big welfare role for kids whether it be VET or other programs in the school and some schools don't have that, in a nutshell. And the ones that do, the students and the programs are better matched and they have some chance of success. So my experience is that, why we've been successful is that we've been able to spread the load and we've had good leadership, support for aboriginal education from the top and then layers of aboriginal people taking their small parts on all the kids that are in the school. And then you can move things forward and I've seen it happen. (Indigenous VET Construction teacher, small rural school)

Such comments and debates within school communities reflect a struggle around the principles of social justice and how schools and systems need to work to support individuals. A focus on issues of social justice have declined or been muted within many educational jurisdictions (Smyth, Dow, Hattam & Shacklock, 2000), as managerial discourses around outcomes and school performance have reframed many education settings. Systematic support for social justice frameworks in schools remains critical if individual Indigenous students are to succeed in VET.

Support for individual needs

The case study data revealed much about the ongoing educational support needs of students undertaking VET programs and Indigenous student needs. Promoting attendance at school, and supporting literacy and numeracy requirements were consistent themes in each site, confirming these aspects of previous Indigenous education issues. Undertaking VETiS however, highlighted the further support requirements for individual Indigenous students.

Aligned to a requirement for empathy of VET teachers, individual Indigenous students required differential support to succeed in VET programs. School staff and in particular Indigenous support staff in schools described the need to systematically engage with the reality of the living circumstances of many Indigenous students, where varying housing, income and family health circumstances create barriers to participate in any educational program, with VET programs exposing students to expanded demands on their personal presentation, punctuality and participation, particularly where periods of workplace learning were involved.

Teachers needed to be cognisant that students may not have a permanent home, and with low levels of financial resources for transport, materials or clothing required for

SWL, participation in VET was difficult. While some schools had developed clothing banks and other mechanisms to distribute required resources, these were not always utilised. Other schools established a range of ways to support students' transport requirements, particularly in more remote settings. Such solutions were dependent on support from school leadership, as a VET coordinator from NSW asserts.

[...] getting out of bed sometimes, getting dressed in appropriate clothing to go to work, can be a really big issue for some of them, it can be as simple as that; you have to be there at nine o'clock- how can I do that; we don't have a train, the bus doesn't run there, what do I do it's a big task and our kids are very good and we have lots of support. There are people around, throw them in a car and drive them there...w ring up, get parental permission, and throw them in the car and take them, but you have to do that flexibly. I'm lucky; my boss is very considerate and he realises the different and never-ending demands on my job.

In addition to the support from school leadership, individual teachers needed to be proactive and responsive to clear needs, particularly those related to survival. One South Australian VET teacher explained her personal response to a clear issue of need:

There was one point at the beginning of the term, where I wasn't aware of it, but they hadn't been eating, some of them, because they had no money. So you know how you're going to be in the class, really listless. Well then we found out that, and we established a breakfast room, a lunchroom over in the gym which has been really successful for them. And we're well aware now about the food issue. But when I've thought about it, I've thought here they've been coming to my class all this time and they're so hungry. And I've thought, oh gosh, I didn't even notice. I knew they were listless, but they didn't say that they hadn't been eating.

The requirement for punctuality and attendance in VET programs, particularly work placements, was also described as problematic when students were often undertaking significant carer responsibilities. As a Western Australian curriculum coordinator described, the carer role inevitably interfered with a work placement and presented a barrier to successful participation:

A couple of students have not been able to attend the workplace because their parents are unwell. Given the health issues in the Aboriginal community, you need an employer to be understanding of this.

Numerous other examples of student circumstances provide a timely reminder of the need for flexibly resourced and individualized support to ensure ongoing participation in VET programs.

VET programs generate new sites and participants in the learning process- other vocational education providers and employers, in particular. Support from these participants is critical for successful experiences in VET, and in some cases Indigenous students and school personnel expressed concern in relation to these relationships and how they nurtured a student through VET program. This study

revealed whilst some employers provided ideal work placements, there were numerous accounts of negative perceptions of Indigenous students, particularly by employers, despite an overall climate in schools to promote Indigenous students. Various participants in this study describe their experiences with racism in the workplace and its impact on Indigenous students undertaking VET.

I mean we've still got our –what can you say- our racist people in town. You ring up and book a kid in for work experience and some just book them in no worries, others say is that an Aboriginal student? You say yes- “Oh no sorry”. That sort of stuff. So we still come across a lot of that (Victorian Indigenous support worker).

It's a matter of proving a lot of people wrong. Showing that these kids will attend school, they will work, they will graduate. It's like the indirect nature of a lot of racism. It's indirect obstacles, lack of cooperation (Western Australian VET Coordinator).

I don't like to use labels like racism- but preconceived ideas say employers have. [...] Let's say I ring up an employer and I don't let them know that they're Indigenous on a lot of occasions. That can cause problems (Western Australian teacher).

There are huge problems I would say. Often I've had employers that I'll send a kid along for an interview- because they always go for an interview before they start their work placement- and they'll come back and say oh no they can't take anybody. And it's often because the kids are Aboriginal, I'm sure of it, but you can't ever prove this fact. It's really hard to get employers to take them on (Western Australian VET teacher).

Conclusions

The data from these two national studies reveal the possibilities for VETiS to make a difference to the educational outcomes of Indigenous students. Improved engagement in school and the curriculum, exposure to post-school pathways and experience in workplaces provide real potential to improve retention in senior schooling for Indigenous students. VET also has an important role to play in supporting the transition from school to training and/or employment.

For teachers, this research provides insights into how the aspirations of Indigenous students for VET are at times realised and other times not. Indigenous students themselves undertaking VETiS recognise its potential but also express considerable concern about the delivery. A promise of hands-on curriculum is not consistently realised, and the school-based nature of the experience, including school timetabling undermines the promise of engagement in 'real' work. This research indicates that success in VETiS, as in any curriculum area, remains dependent on the adequacy of literacy and numeracy skills. Further support in this area is clearly indicated.

For schools, the development of systematic support for the individual needs of Indigenous students needs to be revisited as a priority. A reinvigoration of a social justice framework for working with Indigenous students, particularly given the different profile of resources needed by Indigenous students to participate in VET- such as transport to workplaces, funding for work equipment - is essential for real engagement.

Finally, funding bodies of VETiS need to hear concerns about the fragmented and short-term project based nature of the current arrangements. For disadvantaged communities, these arrangements place additional pressures on schools and their communities.

Over the last decade, as the number of VET participants has dramatically increased, it is the 'white collar VET' areas, particularly hospitality, business, information technology, and retail that are now increasingly acceptable, especially in private schools. The strong participation of Indigenous students in school-based traineeships in these areas also creates the potential for improved school retention and a smoother transition to post-school training and employment. While these trends potentially set out a different future for VETiS, a future that supports Indigenous students will require systematic engagement with wide ranging support mechanisms, both school and system based.

Dr Angela Hill is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at James Cook University, Townsville, Australia.

Sue Helme is Research Fellow at the Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

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