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# Does VET in Schools make a difference to post-school pathways?

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Sue Fullarton is a Research Fellow at ACER, where she is primarily engaged on the program of Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth. She has wide-ranging professional experience in education; teaching mathematics at secondary and tertiary level, lecturing in statistics, computing and research methodology at tertiary level, working with medical doctors in using appropriate research methods and data analysis. Her major research interests lie in the area of engagement with learning, particularly in mathematics, but broadly as well. Her work at ACER has included management of a major international professional development project in science and mathematics, in-depth analysis of data from TIMSS examining school and teacher effects in addition to reports for the LSAY program on subject choice at Year 12 and VET in Schools.

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## Background

Most Year 12 curriculum structures in Australia have evolved from frameworks that were traditionally oriented towards university study. However, the 1980s saw profound changes to the face of secondary schools in Australia. Due to a combination of a declining youth labour market, changes in student financial support and efforts to broaden the appeal of senior secondary school, the apparent retention rate to Year 12 increased dramatically from 35 per cent in 1980 to a peak of 77 per cent nationally in 1992. This marked rise in school retention led to reconsideration of the emphasis of senior secondary schooling.

In all states and territories major changes were made to the provision of programs in the senior secondary school to accommodate the requirements of a broader range of students. A variety of alternative studies were introduced into the curriculum, however these were not usually linked to forms of continuing study. During the 1990s these alternatives were largely brought into the 'fold' of the senior secondary certificate. The 1990s also saw the emergence of another form of alternate program, Vocational Education and Training in Schools, which was linked to the VET system and provided pathways to employment or further education for students. The introduction of VET subjects into the senior secondary school was seen as a means of providing real choice for those students not inclined towards academic studies, and to provide alternatives for those students at-risk of early school leaving.

There are a number of reasons that students should be encouraged to remain and complete their secondary schooling. One is purely pragmatic. Evidence from a variety of research studies suggests that those who leave school early are at risk. Students who leave school early earn less money, face a greater chance of unemployment, a higher probability of obtaining low skilled work, and a higher probability of not being in the labour force at all, compared to their peers that remain and complete Year 12 (Lamb & Rumberger, 1999; Kirby, 2000; Marks *et al.*, 2000).

There is also evidence that a curriculum that fosters closer links between school and work results in higher levels of student satisfaction (Warner, 1992; Batten & Russell, 1995), and a key aim of recent policy in post-compulsory education and training has been to strengthen these links. This focus has seen the development of structured workplace learning programs involving collaboration between schools and local industries, and collaborative arrangements between schools and local Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges and some private VET providers.

The inclusion of VET subjects in secondary schools also adds a further dimension to education. VET in Schools ideally promotes the concept of lifelong learning by presenting students with a picture of a world in which education and work are intertwined, providing them with opportunities to enter either work or tertiary education, or some combination of the two. For most young people, there will be a need for participation in some form of education and training throughout their lives, thereby "'learning-to-learn' for new job opportunities in an advanced knowledge, communications and technological society" (Kirby, 2000, p37). Students who remain in school and complete a recognised course of education are more likely to be able to respond to such requirements. Recognising this, MCEETYA (1999) stated explicitly in the Adelaide Declaration on *National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century* that all students should have had access to vocational education and training programs while in their senior secondary years, and access to education that provides clear and recognised pathways to employment and further education and training.

## Nomenclature

The term 'VET in Schools' in Australia refers to vocational programs that comply with the National Training Framework and which also form part of a senior secondary certificate. This definition includes programs incorporating structured workplace learning as well as a large number of school-based vocational

programs that do not necessarily involve work-based learning or school/industry partnerships. The term refers to programs where the curriculum and assessment are based on designated competencies, and outcome standards are industry-based.

The largest portion of VET in Schools programs do not involve students being engaged in a work or wage-based training contract as part of their studies. Recent years have also seen the introduction of *School-based New Apprenticeships* (SBNA). In this type of program a young person attends school for off-the-job skills training and subjects associated with the end of school certificate, but also works as an employee engaged under a New Apprenticeship contract. The configuration of school and work in this type of program differs from state to state and between industry areas, but generally takes the form of a young person studying for their end of school certificate while simultaneously being indentured to an employer.

### Data for this study: The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth

The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) program at ACER studies the progress of several cohorts of young Australians between school, post-secondary education and training and work. The oldest cohort in this study was born in 1961, while the youngest was a nationally representative sample of Year 9 students selected in 1998. The data used in this study were from the 1995 cohort of LSAY, which was first surveyed in their Year 9 class in 1995 and at the time of the 2000 interviews had, for the majority of sample members, completed Year 12 two years earlier in 1998. This cohort have been surveyed each year since 1995 and asked a broad range of questions examining participation in education, training and work, and including questions that tap into students' beliefs about education, teachers and schools.

For this study, participation in VET in Schools was defined from positive responses to questions on the 1997 and 1998 surveys asking students whether (in Year 11 and Year 12 respectively) they were participating in any form of VET in Schools. Responses to these items helped categorise the respondents into one of three groups:

- those students who took no VET in Schools;
- those students who took VET in Schools in *either* Year 11 or Year 12; and
- those students who took VET in Schools in *both* Year 11 and Year 12.

The extent of VET participation is an indication in some ways of how seriously the student has taken participation in VET in Schools. Some students pursued vocational education to a greater extent than others, who may simply wish to "sample" VET during their senior years.

Around three-quarters of the original Y95 sample of students participated in Year 12 in 1998 (Marks *et al.*, 2000). Of these students, 15 per cent said that they had taken some VET in Schools subjects at either Year 11 or 12, and around 7 per cent that they had completed subjects at both Year 11 and Year 12.

The question raised in this paper is "Does VET in Schools make a difference to post-school pathways?" There are difficulties in attributing causality that should be acknowledged. Outcomes may be more about the aspirations and preferences of students than about participation in VET in Schools, and choices may well reflect students' interests or abilities. As well, we have only a brief period of time after completing school for which we can examine outcomes. In this study we are essentially looking at positive associations with VET in Schools, in which case we should begin by looking at which students participate in VET in Schools.

### Participation in VET in Schools

A recent analysis of participation rates for VET in Schools for the Y95 data (Fullarton, in preparation) has described the following differences, from an "other things equal" analysis which included state, achievement in literacy and numeracy in Year 9, school sector, locality, parents' country of birth, parents' occupation and gender as controls.

- Compared to students in New South Wales (21% participation rate), students from Queensland (41%) and Western Australia (29%) were more likely to participate in VET in Schools and students in Victoria (12%) and South Australia (18%) were less likely to participate.
- Students from the lowest achievement level were the most likely to participate (37%, compared to 29% for the lower middle achievement level).
- Those from non-Catholic independent schools were less likely to participate than those in government schools (14% compared to 26% in government schools).
- Those students whose parental background was from a non-English speaking country, and those whose parents were employed in professional or managerial occupations were less likely to participate.
- There were no gender differences in participation, and, all other things equal, no differences by school locality.

A further multivariate analysis was carried out using data from the *Quality of School Life* subscales that students answered in Year 9. These subscales represented students' general satisfaction with school, opportunity (the student's belief in the relevance of schooling), achievement (a sense of confidence in one's ability to succeed), and attitude to teachers (a feeling

about the adequacy of the interaction between students and teachers). Holding other things equal, it was found that a student's strong self-confidence in their ability was predictive of their non-participation in VET in Schools. However, students who held strong beliefs that what they learn in school will be useful in the future, that it will be a resource that will provide opportunities, in other words that schooling is relevant to them, are more likely to do VET in Schools.

## Pathways from school to employment, education and training

The paper examines the immediate post-school destinations of the 1995 cohort of Year 9 students who completed secondary school in 1998. These outcomes were broadly categorised as working (full-time or part-time, with or without study, or enrolled in an apprenticeship or traineeship) or not working (studying, unemployed or not in the labour force).

VET in Schools participants were much more likely than their non-VET peers to be in the workforce in their first year after completing school. Of those students who did no VET in Schools, some 19 per cent were working full-time in 1999, compared to 29 per cent of those who did one year VET in Schools and 32 per cent of those with two years. A further 7 per cent of those with no VET entered into apprenticeships or traineeships, compared to 15 per cent of those with one year and 17 per cent of those with two years VET in Schools.

Correspondingly, students who had not participated in VET in Schools were more likely to be in tertiary education. Around 63 per cent of the students who did not participate went on to tertiary study in their first year after school, compared to around 44 per cent of the students who did VET in Schools. The latter group were more likely to move on to TAFE than university, with around one-quarter enrolling in TAFE and one in five enrolling at university. For those who did no VET in Schools, almost one-half enrolled at university while one in six enrolled in a TAFE course.

## Gender differences: An example of the effect of participation in VET in Schools

Most noticeable when the data were disaggregated by gender were the marked gender differences in participation in full-time employment or tertiary study and the interaction with level of VET in Schools study. For young females, level of participation in VET in Schools was not associated with either the level of participation in full-time work or the level of enrolment in tertiary study. Participation in the full-time workforce was highest for those who had participated in VET in Schools and lowest for those who had not. Correspondingly, enrolment in tertiary education was highest for those females who did not

participate in VET in Schools and lowest for those who had. Whether it was one year of VET in Schools or two years however, made little difference.

However, for young males there were striking differences. Levels of participation in full-time employment were lowest for those who did no VET in Schools, increased for those who had completed one year, and were substantially higher for those who had completed two years of VET in Schools. Correspondingly, levels of participation in tertiary education were highest for those males who had no VET participation, substantially lower for those with one year participation and lower still for those who had completed two years of VET in Schools. It may be that the types of program that young males and females undertake are substantially different, with a stronger likelihood that the type of program that is undertaken by young males will lead to full-time employment.

## Conclusion

This research examines a number of ways in which participation in VET in Schools might be associated with different post-school pathways. There are a variety of reasons that participation in VET in Schools is of benefit to a significant proportion of students in our schools, and it is important that participation and outcomes are monitored.

This paper describes levels of participation in VET in Schools, finding that participation is higher in some states than others, and that participation is highest among those students in the lowest achievement quartile, from government schools, from an English-speaking background and among those whose parents are employed in unskilled manual occupations. The paper also examines post-school destinations, and presents evidence that there are gender differences in these destinations that are associated with the level of participation in VET in Schools.

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