

Executive Summary

IN the past 10 years, the proportion of year 11 and 12 students undertaking vocational education and training (VET) has doubled to around 60 per cent. Changes to the school leaving age have meant schools must now cater for students who may have otherwise left to pursue apprenticeships, TAFE studies or employment. This has led to an increase in demand for VET courses in schools.

Recent changes to Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) eligibility require students to complete at least four Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) courses or a Certificate II qualification. As a result, schools must ensure that all VET pathway students have the opportunity to complete a Certificate II.

The majority of students (83%) enrolled in the VET in Schools (VETiS) program, introduced in 1997, are funded by the Department of Education (DoE). The Department of Training and Workforce Development (DTWD) funds the remaining students (17%), who are completing industry-supported qualifications through TAFE or school-based apprenticeships/traineeships or pre-apprenticeships. The DoE allocates around \$20 million to schools specifically for VETiS while the DTWD contributes almost \$30 million. But the cost of delivering VETiS is not actually known. Schools draw on a range of funding sources to allocate to VET as they see fit.

The divided funding arrangements are reflective of a broader division in regard to the purpose of VETiS. While the DoE sees VETiS as preparing students for the future by developing generalist career development skills that are transferable across a range of employment and training scenarios, the DTWD sees it as an introduction to employment in a specific industry or trade.

It has been pointed out that the term VET in Schools implies that the VET courses delivered to secondary students are different to VET delivered elsewhere, which is not the case. As such, the term VET should be used in preference to VET in Schools.

Delivery of VET to school students is varied and complex

School teachers deliver the majority of VET (70%) under an auspicing arrangement, whereby a registered training organisation (RTO) quality assures the delivery and assessment and issues the appropriate certificate. Most of the auspicing (80%) is provided by private RTOs, with the remainder provided by state training providers. Schools can also become RTOs, but the process is complicated with a heavy administrative burden. The DoE is looking at ways to alleviate this burden.

While schools like the auspicing arrangement because it gives them control over the learning environment, navigating and managing complex contracts is stressful. Support for school administrators is critical if auspicing remains the preferred delivery model.

At present, a handful of private RTOs provide more than half of the VET to schools. This poses a risk to course completion for thousands of students in the event that the RTO collapses or is deregistered. One of two regulatory bodies monitor the RTOs. The more vigilant of these – the state-based Training Accreditation Council – is responsible for only one-third of RTOs delivering to schools. The national Australian Skills Quality Authority is responsible for the other two-thirds, including the two largest providers.

School facilities must meet current industry standards before an RTO will agree to auspice the course. The high cost of providing courses that require specialist equipment has contributed to the popularity of easy-to-deliver courses such as business and sport and recreation. The DoE is exploring collaborative approaches, whereby a school develops facilities for a particular course that other schools can use. The DoE must ensure that this expands VET offerings so that a student's choice of courses is not restricted by virtue of the school he or she attends.

There is also potential for TAFE to play a bigger role. At present, TAFE's fee model for auspicing means it has to charge more than most private RTOs. This should be amended to make TAFE more competitive. The DTWD also provides funds to TAFE for a limited number of fee-free places for secondary school students, but these are restricted to a narrow range of industry-supported qualifications. The DTWD should investigate ways for secondary students to study a wider range of fee-free industry-supported qualifications through TAFE or other suitable registered training providers.

School delivery of VETiS is often limited by the availability of suitably qualified staff. Only around 14 per cent of secondary teachers currently teach VET. In addition to their teaching qualification, they require a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and the VET qualification at or above the level they are teaching, which often has to be completed once they have begun their career. This could be addressed by amending the accreditation standards for initial teacher education programs (delivered by universities) to ensure they include a vocational teaching component.

There are challenges particular to delivering VET in regional schools

The proportion of year 12 students in regional and remote schools achieving a vocational qualification at Certificate II and higher was almost the same as in metropolitan schools, at nearly 60 per cent. But the participation rate is higher in the Kimberley, Mid West and Wheatbelt regions, and is also higher for Indigenous students, at 91 per cent.

The limited number of RTOs available for auspicing and off-site delivery affects VET delivery in regional areas. In recognition of this, the DTWD provides more TAFE places for secondary students in regional areas. The DoE is also investigating the feasibility of becoming an RTO to support schools in difficult to service areas.

Securing work placements for students is also more difficult in small communities with fewer businesses. However, opportunities can be expanded if schools offer VET courses aligned to local industries. Difficulties in getting to work placements could be resolved by establishing commercial enterprises on school sites, and providing programs to enable students to obtain a driver's licence – a particular challenge in regional areas.

The DoE needs to report on initiatives to address teacher retention, and consider mandating that all schools offer one or two common VET courses so that transient students can continue their studies when they move schools.

Aligning the needs of students and industry

Evidence received in regard to the completion of the Certificate II as a requirement for the WACE was not aligned. While it has some value as an educational outcome, the value for students seeking work depends largely on how it is perceived by the employer. Some in industry are not convinced that a single qualification delivers a better outcome than a collection of units across a number of different qualifications. This remains to be seen and should be monitored.

While the current needs of industry should not be ignored, there is also a place for transferable skills for use in industries not yet identified as areas of need. There is an opportunity for the education and training sectors to learn from one another through better integration of the two aspects of VET, delivering to students a mix of practical and classroom-based work skills. This is more likely to be achievable if responsibility for delivery and funding is also integrated.

There is also a need for closer ties between schools and industry to facilitate workplace learning and training and employment opportunities. Government agencies should also be encouraged to host work placements.

Student respondents to an online survey said that they valued their work placement experiences, but they could be difficult to organise. They would like to see a broader range of courses offered and felt that VET options were not very well promoted. The State Training Board agreed that the image of VET needed a boost.

Although employers could be considered the ultimate end users of VETiS, the program is intended to serve the needs of school students. The DoE needs to support schools in providing the best possible opportunity for students to achieve a valuable outcome.