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Working for an Australia free of poverty

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Viewed from the margins: navigating disadvantage and VET

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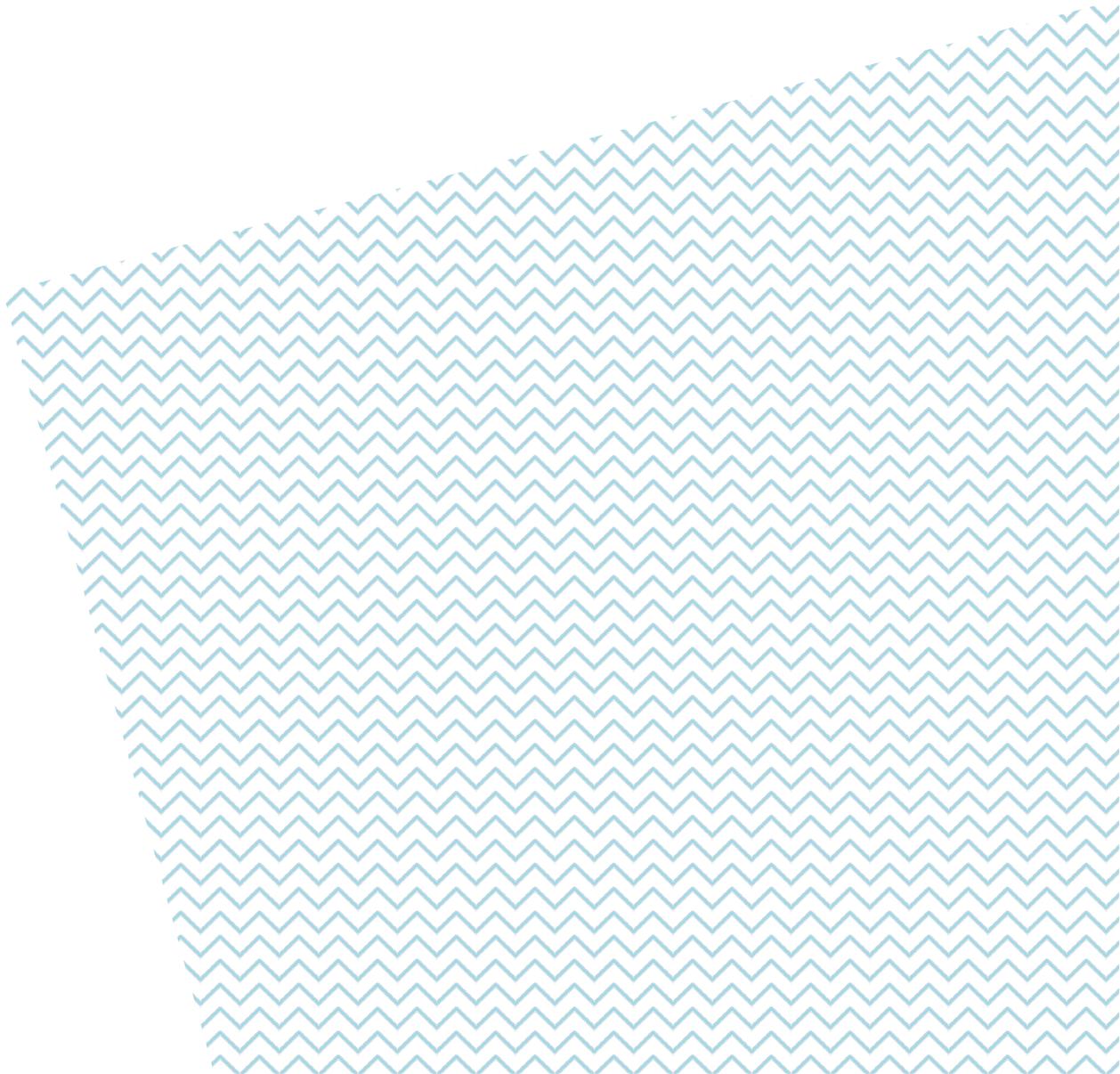


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Abstract:

It is seldom acknowledged that Australia's VET sector is now more than ever one part of a broader safety net catering for the needs of a large number of disadvantaged Australians. Although disadvantaged students are dependent on the sector to provide the skills, qualifications, networks and psycho-social resources they need, the sector struggles to respond effectively. Poor completion rates for 'equity cohorts' give rise to real concern. In this chapter we explore the experiences of young early school leavers undertaking vocational education to illuminate broader issues of equity and access. We argue that to overcome many of the sector's shortcomings, policymakers and provider communities must first affirm equity and access as central to the sector's core business. We see little recognition of this and, as a result, poor connectivity and integration of the VET sector with other community supports. There is a relatively weak commitment to 'inclusion', and a lack of understanding of the range of support needs of disadvantaged learners at key moments in their educational journeys. Our conclusion points to changes that might enable the VET sector to better respond to the needs of early school leavers and, indeed, all disadvantaged learners.

Introduction

The past decade has been a period of turbulent economic and social change. It has seen dramatic shifts in employment opportunities away from heavy industry and manufacturing, and towards sectors such as finance, health care, social assistance, education and training, at the cost of traditional entry-level and blue collar jobs (CEDA, 2015). In this context, vocational education plays a vital role in equipping Australians with the skills and resources needed to clarify vocational options, access employment and participate meaningfully in their communities. For disadvantaged learners, the stakes have become high, and vocational education is of particular importance to early school leavers and 'second-chance' learners (ACFE, 2014; Skujins, 2016; Pfeiffer, 2014; te Riele, 2006; Brown, 2017).

In this chapter we focus on the experiences of the growing population of young early school leavers – now in excess of 230,000 (NCVER, 2016; ABS, 2016) – undertaking vocational education across Australia. While early school leaving is not in itself a marker of disadvantage, there are strong correlations and causal factors at play (discussed below). And while this cohort is the focus of much attention (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016; Considine, 2005; Brown & North, 2010) it is by no means the only equity learner group of concern within VET policy, research or practice. Nevertheless, through a glimpse of the experiences of early school leavers we are able to raise many questions about the current state of equity and access in the VET sector. Lastly, while the subject of our attention is the younger cohort, the agent of change we have in view is the community of policymakers and actors who have sectoral (and sometimes system wide) influence. With 'the national' as our level of analysis, we necessarily omit some positive developments in state-based jurisdictions.¹

Views of equity and access

The contested notion of 'equity groups' has hindered the development of a clear political agenda for VET and its relationship to vulnerable learner groups. The past twenty years of shifting understanding of equity within VET policy have prevented consensus about which learner groups to prioritise (Schofield, 1999), the relevance of 'structural barriers' and/or 'individual characteristics' (Considine et al, 2005), and competing second-chance learner definitions (NVEAC, 2011; Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016). There has been tension between equity and free market agendas across state and territory entitlement arrangements (Fowler, 2017).

Before its dissolution in 2014, the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) regularly published data on VET participation and outcomes of six groups of learners: indigenous Australians, people with a disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people living in remote areas, people from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, and women (Rothman et al, 2013). Since 2014, equity reporting of VET participation and outcomes data has focused mainly on indigenous learners, those in remote areas, and learners with disabilities. This more limited equity agenda appears to have lowered expectations of training providers and their potential to act as capacity building institutions.

Equity and access as central to core business?

Much current analysis of the nation's VET sector focuses on economic and education industry issues and does not consider that the sector is part of a sprawling but not always well aligned set of community institutions. These include schools, local government and community-based support agencies, adult education providers, vocational and welfare guidance staff, Centrelink and local employers.

¹ For example, at time of writing reforms were being announced in Victoria aimed at bolstering TAFE institutions after a period of significant stagnation and decline. While many of the proposed reforms are to be commended, we see little of the profound systemic change suggested in the pages to come. See <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/training.aspx>

Together, this complex arrangement of services acts as a kind of safety net for disadvantaged or second-chance learners: young people who for various reasons do not fit comfortably into secondary school or tertiary settings. When we assume the vantage point of disadvantaged learners, it becomes clear that the VET sector is part of an arena where VET and non-VET agencies meet and where sector alignment is critical.² We argue, therefore, that there is a need to recognise that the VET sector is part of a much bigger site: one where health, finance, transport and wellbeing needs of young people intersect with their vocational interests and learning needs.

A more expansive view of the sector

In re-casting our perceptions and expectations of vocational education we need to regard it not solely as a means of gaining utilitarian ends (the competency, job, ‘gig’), but also as a key to social inclusion. Reappraisal of what constitutes VET core business is called for. Such a revised narrative would place greater emphasis on equity and access, and affirm a more outward-looking, collaborative and community-wide orientation to better assist learners of all backgrounds (Lamb et al, 2018; Davis et al, 2002).

For too long, approaches to both governance and service provision across the VET sector have exacerbated the difficulties already faced by vulnerable learners. However, the sector – and particularly its TAFE institutions – can and should be playing both networking and ‘network anchoring’ roles within their broader communities, identifying students’ learning needs and matching both VET and non-VET local services to those needs in an explicit and deliberate way (Lamb et al, 2018).

Our own research into young people’s experiences of vocational education (conducted across Australia though focused on Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania³) used a socio-ecological approach to identify and describe interactions between young people and community agencies, within and beyond the VET sector (see Myconos et al, 2016; Dommers et al, 2017). From this research we argue that policymakers should be better attuned to the encounters at the margins of the VET sector – where learners and prospective learners rely heavily on non-VET actors – and that without improved inter-sectoral collaboration, it will fail to realise its potential for the most disadvantaged learners.

The experiences of young early school leavers in VET

VET undertaken by fifteen to twenty-four-year-old Australians falls into four main categories: within senior secondary certificate programs, school-based apprenticeships/traineeships, campus-based VET, and full-time apprenticeships/traineeships. The focus of the discussion in this chapter is the approximately twenty-six per cent of fifteen to twenty-four-year-olds (over 230,000) who leave or have previously left school prematurely and who undertake vocational education. Young people from low SES backgrounds are over-represented in this early leaving group, with forty per cent of low SES young people failing to complete Year 12 compared with twenty-five per cent overall (Lamb et al, 2015). Nationally, 47.8 per cent of early school leavers (fifteen to nineteen years old) are undertaking vocational education (Table 1). Participation in vocational education by the twenty to twenty-four-year-old cohort of people of who have left school early is slightly higher at 52.1 per cent nationally.

Table 1. Early school leavers in Australia’s VET sector, 2016⁴

No. of 15–19 yo	% of total 15–19 yo	No. of 20–24 yo	% of total 20-24 yo
110,736	47.8	120,666	52.1

² We point to what are now mainstream discourses in primary and secondary schooling: e.g., where the philosophy of the New Public Health (REF) and the ‘health promoting school movement’ emphasises the importance to learning of inclusion, diversity, healthy eating behaviours, exercise and making community links.

³ Primarily through the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s Research and Policy Centre, in collaboration with the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Vocational and Educational Policy. See Myconos et al (2016); Dommers et al (2017) (Note: Funding and support for these projects was provided by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training, through the National VET Research program managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. The views and opinions expressed in this chapter are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, state and territory governments or the NCVET).

⁴ These figures are drawn from the Total VET Activity (TVA) Program Enrolments data and include learners in the two age ranges who have not completed Year 12 and are no longer enrolled in a school. It excludes fifteen to twenty-four-year-old early school leavers undertaking apprenticeships or traineeships, as the focus of discussion here is on campus and institution-based programs. This data also does not include fifteen to nineteen-year-old learners who may be undertaking VET studies alongside or within senior secondary programs.

Source: NCVER (2016) ABS 2016 Census, Community Profiles, table G16.

The 2015 VET completion rate for those aged under twenty-five (without prior post-school qualifications) is 58.3% (NCVER, 2017). Despite a rise from the 2014 completion rate (54.9%) for this cohort, the low completion rate remains a cause for concern.⁵

It is well documented that early school leavers are significantly more likely to have experienced severe hardship, raising a myriad of barriers that can all too easily bring their education to a premature end. This in turn has a direct impact on their capacity to obtain meaningful and secure employment, as well as their economic participation, social connectedness and health (OECD, 2008; Lamb, 2015).

Policy context

Among the most important recent policies affecting vulnerable young learners have been those emerging from the National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions (NPAYAT, 2009-2014), the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development (NASWD, 2009 ongoing), and the National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform (NPASR, 2012-2017).

The effect of the NPASR was to extend and entrench demand driven, contestable and market driven provision; and of the NPAYAT to induce unprecedented numbers of young people to undertake vocational education within or beyond the established TAFE sector. This occurred at a time when influential advocates for vulnerable learners were gradually being marginalised: for example through the decommissioning of NVEAC; and a reduced and negligible role for trade unions and community groups in the Industry Skills Councils and their successors, the Industry Reference Committees.

A socio-ecological reading

Engagement with vocational education and successful completion are both affected by a complex interplay of factors, within and beyond the confines of any given training provider, and this is particularly evident in relation to disadvantaged learners (Dommers et al, 2017; Schoon et al, 2017). Our socio-ecological approach (informed by Bronfenbrenner, 1994) considers student engagement factors distributed across four domains:

- private-proximate: the young person and their immediate social environment
- service provision: VET providers, and non-VET services and actors, such as health, community, youth and employment services, schools, public amenities and business/community groups
- sector: VET governance and funding regimes, provider types, training products and qualifications, or modes of delivery, as well as prevailing educational and youth policy frameworks, the mental health system and labour market policies
- macro-systemic: factors that impact on attitudes and values that in turn influence practices. This domain includes socio-cultural perspectives, gender, ideologies and organisational, political and economic trends.

This schema helps to show the ways in which VET sector fits into a broader context, and intersects and overlaps with mainstream education services (secondary and tertiary/'higher'), alternative/re-engagement, non-accredited community-based services; as well as employment, welfare, health, disability, housing and other support services.

The private-proximate

Disadvantaged learners face a range of barriers: low literacy and numeracy skills, unstable housing, physical/mental ill health, low self-esteem and confidence levels, abuse and violence, caring responsibilities, confusion and anger issues, poor access to transport (lacking driver's licences) and difficulties with personal finances and low income. For many, educational pathways and career goals are uncertain, and most are in need of intensive assistance to successfully navigate post-secondary, 'second chance' education.

Disadvantage and hardship impact directly on a learner's capacity to engage fully with vocational education. For example, training provider staff interviewees in our research commented about the number of 'couch-surfing' young people they encounter and about young people's mental health and self-esteem issues:

They often go 'No, I'm not going to tell you that, but I'm too dumb. I can't do it. I'm not smart enough. I don't understand this. I don't get it. I'm stressed ... Nah, not going to do it'. A lot ... suffer from anxiety, so [if] you put them into something that they're not going to be able to cope with, because they don't understand it or they can't read it, boom! Anxiety levels just rise and then that's it.

⁵ It is important to acknowledge that there continue to be data collection dilemmas in relation to marginalised and disadvantaged learners which mean that it is hard to collate a comprehensive picture of the VET activities of early school leavers.

(Marie, provider staff, metro Tas; quoted by Dommers et al, 2017)

[we hear] “mum’s on drugs, dad’s in jail, I’m living with grandma”, or “I’m couch surfing”

(anonymous provider staff, SA; quoted by Myconos et al, 2016)

Family members’ opinions about VET can also play a pivotal role. One trainer recalled how one young person was afraid that their parents would learn of their intentions to undertake vocational education:

We had to actually keep [their] books at the office for them because they felt like they couldn’t take them home.

(Irene, provider staff, metro Tas; quoted by Dommers et al, 2017)

One young mother noted in an interview that family and friends discouraged her from undertaking vocational education “because apparently being a mother is all I’m allowed to be” (Katherine, young person, regional Vic; quoted by Dommers et al, 2017).

The financial imposts are also significant for those with low incomes. Without adequate financial support (from government or family), disadvantaged learners struggle to pay course fees or to meet the costs associated with relocation to preferred providers. Interviewees for our research point to course costs as a major impediment:

I’d like to go do the course but it’s just their fee ... if the fee was about 100 bucks or something that’s fine, I’d be able to do that. But 355 bucks? That’s pathetic for a 12 week course ... that’s breaking my budget a bit.

(Billy, student, metro Tas; quoted by Dommers et al, 2017)

Even if they’ve got a Concession Card and with fee waivers and things, once you start talking anything over \$300 to a kid of that age, it’s too much. It’s surprising that more people don’t walk away when we start talking cost.

(Kathleen, provider staff, regional Vic; quoted by Dommers et al, 2017)

Service provision

Even though the share of (government funded) students has fluctuated between provider types, until recently enrolments in TAFEs have been in steady decline. Until 2015 this corresponded with growing numbers of learners gravitating towards the ‘for profit’ and community-based providers, many of which were precarious businesses. Those who need help to navigate the VET sector are frequently those whose education takes place at commercially driven providers least able to offer or access support.

Our research suggests that few training providers – even among the TAFEs – are able to assist in overcoming personal barriers. Most are simply ill-equipped or oblivious to the issues impeding a learner’s progress:

We often only hear that they have something going on in their lives from their youth worker or someone else. Often they won’t tell us.

(anonymous private RTO staff, Vic; quoted by Myconos et al, 2016)

Non-VET players exert influence over whether, when or even how a person’s vocational education experience unfolds. These include schools and referral agencies such as jobactive providers, group training organisations and services funded to assist second chance learners to access and benefit from vocational education (e.g., alternative education providers, Transition to Work or Victoria’s Reconnect). In many respects such actors are gatekeepers for those navigating through the vocational education and labour market landscape. Yet, many of these players are themselves grappling with the ever-changing nature of the VET sector.

It is concerning to learn from interviewees that the best interests of the prospective students are not always paramount during encounters with these services, even though it is their responsibility to assist vulnerable people to make decisions about vocational pathways. Further, we learn that many of the actors within and beyond the VET sector are at cross-purposes, operating to differing timescales (e.g., course scheduling, school census dates, etc.), financial interests, and markers of success (e.g., differing performance indicators such as referrals, enrolments, completions etc.).

Young participants in our research were often unable to access information about VET at school, some others felt they had to initiate conversations with guidance counsellors. Many participants – young and older – believed that careers guidance for students was either inadequate or offered belatedly. Training provider staff and those from community support services bemoaned the state of career guidance in schools:

Your careers teacher in the school has a teaching load or that person may be the welfare facilitator. Gone are the days where you had dedicated teachers to work with these kids.

(Judy, support services, regional Vic; quoted by Dommers et al, 2017)

We cannot underestimate the difficulties some second chance learners have in adapting to unfamiliar educational settings. Many young people are very reticent and at times experience acute anxiety when undertaking vocational education in large institutions such as TAFEs, and more so when trainers are not fully equipped to cater for 'high needs' learners:

I actually did the whole test you do in TAFE and I got in, but then I was too scared to actually go ... because of my anxiety. [So] I haven't actually been to TAFE.

(Alice, student, outer metro, Vic; quoted in Myconos, 2012)

I haven't been [to the training provider] yet because I was scared last week ... I was scared to go, I was just scared to go. Yeah, it was really scary and I was sitting like, should I go? I was that scared, I made myself sick and I just didn't go.

(Meg, student, outer metro, Vic; quoted in Myconos, 2011)

Perennial issues for learners and providers are low levels of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills. Interviewees from training providers in our research expressed concern at the demands and pressure this places on trainers. LLN issues were regarded by some as "the biggest hurdle and the root of most other problems" (private RTO staff, Qld; quoted by Myconos et al, 2016). The task for providers is made more difficult as such barriers are often undisclosed at the time of enrolment, and the associated needs only become apparent as the training or work placement proceeds (Myconos et al, 2016).

Young people with limited LLN skills often experience the adult education setting as foreign and daunting:

Because it's worded differently, they're using bigger words, and it's like I don't know what that word is, and I have to keep going back to the dictionary ... It's taking me extra time to do it, because I'm so confused ... it's the same as what I've done, but it's just so different ... so I'll read a sentence and I'll understand two words in the whole sentence.

(Julie, student, outer metro, Vic; quoted in Myconos, 2011)

For very many people – particularly those residing in outer metropolitan or regional centres – poor transport links and the uneven range of local provider options are serious barriers.

I was doing bricklaying. I didn't really get my certificate because I'd wake up at 5 of a morning just to get there [by 8am] because it takes two hours from Frankston station to Holmesglen ... I was supposed to do that for four months or something and I couldn't cope.

(James, student, outer metro, Vic; quoted in Myconos, 2012)

From those in rural centres we hear of infrequent public bus and rail services. In Colac,⁶ for example, only three services were provided to the larger regional centre of Geelong each day, and those were at times that often did not align with TAFE teaching:

So, going to Geelong, you're either there at 8 o'clock in the morning, okay, or you're there at 2.30 in the afternoon. There is a bus that comes around 5.30 or 6 o'clock. If not, you have to wait until the 8.30 or 9 o'clock train at night.

(Employment support staff, regional Vic; quoted in Myconos & McKenna, 2016)

For young women, late evening public transport services involve risk of physical abuse.

Our research also revealed that the seemingly innocuous moment of enrolment is one in which the disadvantaged prospective learners experience a level of discomfort that deters many from undertaking vocational education. Early school leavers experience enrolment processes as intimidating and at times humiliating: particularly when the prospective learner's low levels of literacy, confidence or general awareness are exposed. The administrative requirement to reveal aspects of one's life may pose few problems for many students, but hesitant young people who have experienced much failure and disappointment often recoil. Many see enrolment documentation as another set of tests they are destined to fail.

⁶ A regional town of approximately 12,000 people, 150 kilometres south-west of Melbourne.

The sector

The bewildering and seemingly ad hoc nature of state and national policy changes affecting eligibility for subsidies and other concessions has further complicated an already opaque educational setting, and made it difficult for learners of all ages to make informed decisions (Bowman et al, 2016).

Participation rates in various courses and qualification levels have been shaped by student entitlement models (i.e., the VET FEE-HELP scheme and its successor, VET Student Loans) (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016). While such initiatives were intended to improve access to the sector, they have also exposed learners to predatory behaviour by many providers (Bowman et al, 2016). In this context the young have been particularly vulnerable.

Moreover, funding has generally supported vocational education in higher-level qualifications (certificate III or higher), with less funding support for those in need of certificates I and II (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016). This approach to funding compounds an already low regard for lower-level VET qualifications (Davies et al, 2011).

While it is true that many learners respond well to competency-based training (CBT) – a system that can provide a clear indication of incremental progress – CBT can limit the capacity of the educator to build the relationships required to understand and meet broader student learning and development needs. For many, a strict adherence to CBT actually limits a deeper understanding of students and development of skills or aptitudes for contemporary work.

By extension, training packages themselves do not pay due regard to the needs and interests of disadvantaged learners⁷ and, moreover, can restrict learning to a narrow and distorted range of skills (Beddie et al, 2017). This issue is particularly important given the need to enable mobility and portability of skills for learners across sectors and an every changing labour market (Wheelahan et al, 2015).

Another concern is that pedagogies may pre-suppose a relatively high level of readiness: that is clear intent, relevant experience and adequate motivation on the part of the learner. Yet many young learners – and particularly early school leavers, who are increasingly reliant on the VET sector – have levels of dependence and inexperience that training providers struggle to address. Exacerbating this problem is the capacity of the VET workforce across all provider types to respond adequately at a time when their professional status and access to skills and resources have been so diminished.

The macro-systemic

Much has been made in this volume of the effects of marketisation and the demand-driven model of service provision. One of the worst effects of this tendency has been the erosion of training providers' capacity to assist disadvantaged learners. TAFEs have suffered severe cutbacks, undermining their commitment to the already nebulous notion of community service obligation. Numerous – perhaps most – private providers have balked at creating learning environments that include the welfare supports so vital to disadvantaged learners (Dommers et al, 2017; Myconos et al, 2016).

Far from empowering learners, the wholesale commercialisation of vocational education has not only fostered predatory or even criminal behaviours on the part of a small group of providers, but has also confused decision-making among vulnerable learners as they consider their pathway options (Yu & Oliver, 2015; Wheelahan, 2005, 2006). Policymakers have embraced the assumption that learners are better able to choose their providers when information is delivered through marketing (Myconos et al, 2016). Suffice to say, however, that those young people with the fewest resources, the least experience and with over-optimistic expectations were also those most vulnerable to marketing half-truths.

The resulting vocational education landscape is mystifying for disadvantaged learners. Its complexity is problematic not only to learners but also to a great many providers, employers, referral agencies, careers guidance staff, community services and family and relatives, upon whom disadvantaged learners rely heavily.

In addition, the sector and indeed the very concept of vocational education, now suffers a low status vis-à-vis 'higher education'. Participants in our research spoke of the low status that secondary schools gave to VET pathways:

A lot of people from the schools think that TAFE is for dropouts and I was getting a lot of that ... I got a lot of attitude from them.

(John, young person, metro Qld; quoted by Dommers et al, 2017)

It's more like they threaten you in a way, as in, 'Hey, if you don't finish school, you're going to TAFE!' (Timothy, young person, regional Vic; quoted by Dommers et al, 2017)

⁷ With the possible exception of the Foundation Skills Training Package, a framework that is designed to strengthen generic skills across multiple domains and sectors.

Our vantage point also prompts us to reconsider measures taken by policymakers across Australia affecting those who would most rely on vocational education to mitigate hardship and social exclusion. Policies premised on ‘mutual obligation’, ‘earn or learn’ or ‘legitimate access’ are too often experienced as punitive, and do little to help prospective learners to comprehend, let alone successfully undertake, vocational education. Thus vulnerable learners are often ill-equipped to gauge the suitability and value of both qualifications and providers.

Conclusion: reforms needed

Our focus on young early school leavers has necessitated omitting much about the experiences of the broader equity group population. Nevertheless, general observations emerge. It is clear that much of what transpires within the VET sector is determined by what occurs beyond it and, indeed, what has happened before the learner has even encountered a training provider, large or small, public or private. While this should surprise no-one, there is a noticeable absence in VET policymaking circles of conversations about the need to promote collaboration on the boundaries of the VET sector. The metaphor of the safety net is useful here, with the threads of that net ideally woven through and beyond the sector. From the vantage point of the vulnerable learner – young or old – we see the need for reform of the kind outlined below.

Understanding of and support for the (prospective) learners

The notions of student welfare and well-being support have been neglected across parts of the VET sector – and particularly within the community of private for profit providers. This notion, familiar to educators elsewhere, must now be embraced by the whole VET sector. Coordinated vocational education and service delivery models should be created that meet the students’ learning and broader needs. This could be achieved by linking those learners experiencing severe hardship with health services, community supports and employers. For this to succeed, advisory and enrolment regimes must be overhauled so that they are concerned as much with needs assessments as with boosting student numbers.

While the notion of needs-based funding has gained purchase in mainstream primary and secondary school education, it remains foreign to the VET sector. Such funding could help providers better to meet the needs of disadvantaged learners (Davies et al, 2011).

It takes a community ...

There is an urgent need for more meaningful and sustainable collaboration between training providers of all hue and other agencies and services that advise and facilitate disadvantaged learners to move towards the VET sector. Clearly the TAFEs are well placed to foster such collaboration and to establish hubs of interaction and exchange between, say, secondary schools, jobactive providers and sundry support services to assist the marginalised better to navigate towards and through the sector. Fundamentally there is a need to ensure important stakeholders’ interests are brought into closer alignment and then to create more malleable and nimble services.

If we are concerned with achieving success for disadvantaged learners in VET we need to think beyond the narrow confines of the sector. Facilitating this shift first requires the embrace of a more comprehensive notion of equity and access as central to the sector’s core business.

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