



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

This is one of a series of briefing papers produced by the Brotherhood of St Laurence Research and Policy Centre to provide an overview of the key aspects of Australia's vocational training and education system, from the 1970s to early 2019.

Others in the series include: *Australia's VET sector since the mid-1970s*; *Participation and transitions*; *The architecture of Australia's VET sector*; *Funding regimes in Australia's VET sector*; *The Victorian VET context*; *Apprenticeships and traineeships*.

All papers can be accessed at www.bsl.org.au

5. Emerging skills and competencies and VET's response

Key points

- Skills associated with adaptability, collaboration and problem-solving have increased in value, and now sit alongside technical skills in assessments of relevance and importance.
- **Such new skill sets are required for emerging sectors** such as health care and social assistance and others requiring interpersonal and relational literacy.
- **The VET system is slowly responding:** recognition of new skill sets is evident, and relevant reforms to curriculum and pedagogy are under consideration.
- **Many non-VET services play a key role** in helping learners acquire the skills needed to secure productive employment.

Adapting to change

Technology and the economy

The fourth industrial revolution—and its blurring of digital, physical and biological spheres—has introduced an array of new sectors, activities and, consequently, new demands on vocational educational systems worldwide. While new technologies produce opportunities for skilled workers, there is a significant decline in traditional 'blue collar' or low-skilled industries. Notwithstanding regional variations, the ILO reports a deteriorating global employment outlook, with youth unemployment in particular on the rise, and overall labour force participation stagnating or falling (ILO 2015).

Social and demographic change

Many industrialised countries are concurrently experiencing social and demographic changes that also bear on policies shaping vocational training. Ageing populations and falling birth rates have prompted an emphasis on skilling youth to provide the required current and future services. This turn to youth has, by some accounts, come at the expense of policies addressing skills obsolescence of older people (Cedefop 2018). Also increasingly evident is the role played by vocational training systems in attracting disadvantaged cohorts of all ages (dandolopartners 2011).

In recent years—and particularly in Europe—the relatively unimpeded movement of migrants has been slowed, making skills gaps harder to fill. While Australia has not experienced the degree of nativism evident in Europe and the United States, migration is no longer a politically unproblematic issue for policy makers.

Employment trends for young Australians

The broader trends in education and employment for young Australians include:

- increasing rates of unemployment and underemployment (particularly among those aged 15–19 years) since the 2008 global financial crisis
- longer periods between education and employment and diminishing chances of finding full-time jobs

- increasing and disproportionate rates of casualisation
- sizeable rates of young people not engaged full-time in education or employment (approximately 1 in 5), and not participating in any education, training and employment at all (1 in 10)
- young people with post-school degrees experiencing more difficulty finding their preferred employment, and so filling lower skilled jobs
- a significant drop in those undertaking apprenticeships and traineeships (AWPA 2014a, pp. 6–7; AWPA 2014b, p. 5; NCVET 2016).

Changing employment opportunities

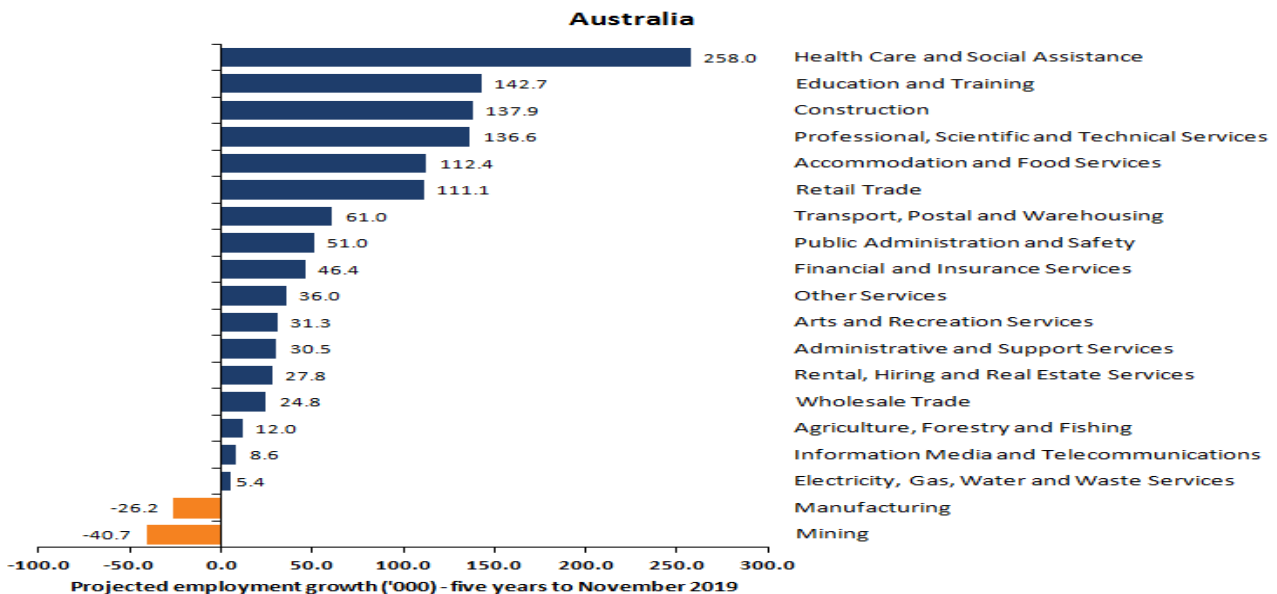
In Australia, there has been a shift from the manufacture of goods to the provision of services, which are less affected by offshoring and automation. The impact of automation on the Australian labour market will continue, and even accelerate, with jobs requiring low levels of social interaction, creativity, mobility and dexterity likely to be displaced by automation (CEDA 2015, p. 8). PwC research (2015) suggests that automation will have a significant impact on specific occupations, including:

- accounting clerks and bookkeepers (97.5% probability of being automated)
- checkout operators (96.9%)
- general office support (e.g. data entry and mail) (96.1%)
- personal assistants and secretaries (92.4%)
- farm and forestry workers (92.5%) (PwC 2015, pp. 10–11).

The same research also identifies the occupations *least* at risk of automation, which include:

- doctors, nurses and midwives (combined 1–2% probability of being automated)
- education, health and welfare managers (1%)
- ICT managers (3.5%)
- school teachers (4%)
- engineers (4%) (PwC 2015, p. 12).

Figure 1 Projected national employment growth by industry to 2019



Source: DoE 2015

The stand-out growth industry in Australia—and internationally (ILO 2015b, p. 23)—is health care and social assistance, which is forecast to generate one in every five new jobs. The top four occupations in this field are registered nurses; carers for the aged, children and the disabled; nursing support; and

receptionists. The sector requires a high rate of educational attainment: more than four in five workers have completed post-school study and 45% have a bachelor degree or higher (DoE 2015).

Employers' experience of recruitment

Much data focuses on the changing expectations and experiences of employers. Nationwide surveys by the Australian Department of Employment show that employers consider the following to be important when employing new staff:

- attitude to work (36% of employers)
- work experience (13%)
- responsibility and reliability (12%)
- presentation (11%)
- further education and training (10%)
- job search and application skills (8%)
- realistic work expectations (5%)
- negative and counterproductive employer attitudes (3%) (DoE 2014).

The Victorian Skills and Training Employer Survey (Wallis 2015) also reveals some key factors influencing recruitment. Just over half of the 5,700 Victorian employers surveyed had recruited in the preceding 12 months, and 61% of that recruitment was to cover retirements and staff turnover rather than to create new jobs (p. 11).

Regional employers were more likely to recruit to cover attrition, whereas metropolitan employers were more likely to recruit to address skill needs. However, this result could be due to differences in the size and types of businesses. Around 19 per cent of employers consulted had recruited to address a particular skill shortage in their business. Those who experienced the greatest difficulty in recruitment were smaller businesses, notably in accommodation and food services (54%), and rental, hiring and real estate services (46%) (Wallis 2015, p. 12). Overall, the main difficulties identified by employers were:

- applicants' lack of relevant job-specific skills (metropolitan 67%; regional 61%)
- applicants' lack of relevant experience (66%; 58%)
- lack of available applicants/no applicants (46%; 53%)
- applicants' lack of basic language, literacy or numeracy skills (23%; 14%)
- undesirable geographic location (14%; 19%)
- applicants' reluctance to relocate (6%; 18%).

It is interesting that three of these factors may relate to barriers at the employer end, such as the location of the job offered and perhaps undesirable conditions resulting in limited applicants.

The importance of technical and non-technical skills

A report on youth employment prepared for the International Labour Organization (Brewer 2013, pp. 6–14) identified the following skill sets as important:

- **basic/foundational skills:** the minimum literacy and numeracy skills that enable an employee to continue to learn and to acquire transferable skills
- **vocational or technical skills:** specialised skills aligned to a specific vocation or task
- **professional/personal skills:** individual attributes that impact on work habits, including honesty, work ethic and integrity.

Brewer (2013) introduces a fourth set of skills, **core work skills**.¹³ These skills are understood by employers and policy makers to be of increasing importance, particularly for young jobseekers. Core work skills comprise four main subthemes:

- *'Learning to learn'* – an inquisitive outlook that enables the acquisition of knowledge, skills, aptitudes and attitudes. This open disposition manifests in the ability to think abstractly, analyse information, work independently and better plan, manage and adapt.
- *'Communication'* – the capacity through personal interaction and a host of media to share, listen, observe, exchange, articulate and influence. This, ultimately, is a measure of how an individual is able to maintain an understanding of their changing surrounds.
- *'Teamwork'* skills – those that result in respectful, mutually beneficial and fruitful collaboration where goals, responsibilities, resource and time allocation are negotiable.
- *'Problem solving'* – the capacity to calmly assess and evaluate information or situations, to consider consequences and the range of options, before devising, planning and implementing responses (Brewer 2013, pp. 7–13).

Brewer's contention is that if young people can develop these core work skills, then they are well placed to realise the combined potential of all previous formal and informal learning and skills development.

The VET system's response

Reforms to the curriculum and pedagogy

The VET system's default competency-based training (CBT) has its limitations in developing non-technical skills (Hodge 2018). Many regard CBT as too rigid and prescriptive. CBT can also limit the educators' capacity to build the relationships required to understand and meet student needs. Strict adherence to CBT can limit development of skills or aptitudes for contemporary work.

By extension, training packages—their qualifications, and other accredited courses—do not pay due regard to the needs and interests of disadvantaged students and, moreover, can restrict learning to a narrow and distorted range of skills. This is particularly problematic given the need to enable mobility and portability of skills for students across sectors and an ever-changing labour market.

Another concern is that pedagogies may presuppose a high level of readiness on the part of the learner—that is, clear intent, relevant experience and adequate motivation. Yet many young students—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 status and access to professional development and resources have been so diminished.

A growing chorus of experts now call for modifications or wholesale changes to the system of CBT, training packages (qualifications and accredited courses), and the pedagogies they require and encourage (Wheelahen et al. 2015; Beddie et al. 2017; Shubert et al. 2018; (DoE 2017a, 2017b).

There are calls for the improvement of foundational and 'soft skills' of students—particularly the young early school leavers—who would benefit most from developing a range of non-technical skills (as above). Recommendations for change include:

- ensuring training products—starting at certificate I and II levels—incorporate and promote 'future work skills', 'foundation level skills', alongside the all-important 'technical skills' (DoE 2017a, 2017b). This will enable less prescriptive and standardised learning

¹³ The core work skills schema represents a synthesis of approaches from numerous (mainly developed) countries. These are known, variously, as 'essential skills' (New Zealand), 'key competencies/employability skills' (Australia), 'basic skills' (United States), 'critical enabling skills' (Singapore), 'trans-disciplinary goals' (Switzerland), and 'transferable skills' (France), among others (Brewer 2013, p. 7).

- overhauling the design process for qualifications and accredited courses so as to develop a broader range of skills and allow learners greater mobility within and across sectors. Such reform—expressed most comprehensively by Wheelahan et al. (2015) under the banner of the ‘capabilities approach’—is a response to the very weak links between current qualifications and their associated professions
- promoting workforce development that promotes pedagogies that nurture non-technical skills.

Designing effective interventions

The following have been identified as important measures in engaging learners lacking both technical and non-technical ‘core’ skills:

- programs supporting transition to employment that have clearly defined goals and target groups
- programs that intervene early in the period of unemployment
- identifying young people’s preferences and ambitions, employability skills and any problems which may create barriers to employment
- wrap-around support that addresses issues that make it difficult young people to gain or retain employment
- efforts to link immediate job placements with future work opportunities
- engagement with employers—with careful matching of young people to employment or work experience opportunities.

How other stakeholders look to improve engagement

Best practice in enabling effective transitions—when facilitated by those working in general and post-secondary education, as well as with a myriad of government and community-based services—include the following (Myconos 2016).

Best practice in engaging jobseekers in training

- A flexible approach to training—across pedagogy, curricula and assessment—is important, taking into account young people’s strengths, goals and interests.
- Recruiting and engaging young people may require ‘soft’ entry pathways, which include workplace ‘tasters’, work experience, accredited or pre-accredited training and mentoring.
- Programs need to provide links to ‘real’ work contexts and focus on developing employability skills and language, literacy and numeracy.
- Learners may respond better to a ‘hands-on’ approach in an informal setting with clear goals and follow-up.
- Programs need to be tailored to the social needs and cultural contexts of the young participants.

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