



Brotherhood  
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Submission to the Victorian Department of  
Education and Training

**Review into Vocational and  
Applied Learning Pathways in  
Secondary Schooling  
(VCAL, VETiS and SBATs)**

Brotherhood of St Laurence

April 2020

## The Brotherhood of St Laurence and applied learning pathways

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the Brotherhood continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty. We undertake research, service development and delivery, and advocacy with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating the understandings gained into new policies, new programs and practices for implementation by government and others.

Our submission is informed by knowledge and experience we have accumulated as a **VCAL provider** since 2010. It benefits also from direct consultations with staff and students at the Brotherhood's **David Scott School**. The school was established in 2017, having evolved out of the BSL 'Community VCAL' program (2010–2016). It provides the VCAL to over one hundred students aged 15 to 18. The school and its predecessor program are testament to a long-standing commitment to providing applied learning options to young people from Melbourne's south-east and Mornington Peninsula, many of whom had become estranged from mainstream secondary schooling, and experience severe socioeconomic disadvantage.

Our submission also draws on the Brotherhood's practical experience, along with its research, in related areas, including:

- **partnering with TAFEs** to support young people to access and sustain engagement with education and training. This includes establishment (with Launch Housing) of **Education First Youth Foyers** on TAFE campuses, enabling young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness to engage in education and training and alter their life trajectory
- **development and oversight of the Certificate 1 in Developing Independence** (funded by the Victorian Government) to nurture a range of capabilities—including planning and goal-setting—as well as professional and social networks for disadvantaged young people living in Education First Youth Foyers, who are in out-of-home care, and justice-attached settings
- **delivering training** to a diverse range of learners—particularly those experiencing disadvantage—through our Group Training Organisation, Learn Local and our former Registered Training Organisation
- **innovative employment support models**, sustained by philanthropic, corporate, state and federal funding. This includes delivering the youth-focused Transition to Work program, convening a national Community of Practice of (some) TtW providers and facilitating the **National Youth Employment Body**.
- **major research projects** commissioned by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research and others focusing on the role VCAL and vocational training play in helping disadvantaged cohorts to successfully pursue their education.

Brotherhood of St Laurence  
67 Brunswick Street  
Fitzroy Vic. 3065  
ABN 24 603 467 024  
Ph. (03) 9483 1183  
[www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au)

For further information:

Nicole Rees, Principal, Public Policy, Brotherhood of St Laurence  
[nrees@bsl.org.au](mailto:nrees@bsl.org.au) ph: 0407 337 940

## Overview

The Brotherhood of St Laurence welcomes this opportunity to contribute recommendations for reform to Victoria’s vocational and applied learning pathways arrangements in secondary schooling. Our submission is informed by our extensive experience as a VCAL provider. The submission is also informed by our years of research into the experiences of young people of secondary school age and their transitions into employment and further education and training.<sup>1</sup>

Victoria needs to lift its ambitions about the role and future of vocational and applied learning in our secondary school system. Here we echo the 1985 Ministerial Review of Post-compulsory Schooling (the Blackburn Review)<sup>2</sup>, particularly its call to improve the status of vocational education for young people in school so it is the equal of more traditional senior secondary and academic pathways, and for government and society to encourage participation in vocational education ‘for the purposes of greater equity, labour market participation, and benefits to society as well as individuals’. Several decades later, this vision is yet to be realised; but it is more important than ever in a globalised economy with a rapidly changing labour market. We must ensure that Victoria’s secondary school system caters for all students’ preferred learning styles, interests and future intentions.

Currently too many young—and often disadvantaged—young people are left with few realistic educational options. This is particularly so for those unsuited to a tertiary education pathway. This submission recognises the critical role of applied learning options – including VCAL – and outlines key measures to strengthen these going forward.

### Applied learning prepares young people for an ever-changing world

It is vital that we prepare young people for a rapidly changing world shaped by daunting economic, technological and social challenges. Emerging conditions—primarily the impact of COVID-19, the loss of manual ‘entry level’ jobs and the precariousness of employment—demand that we provide a broad repertoire of options for young people approaching the end of their secondary schooling.

Applied learning options are critical to this. The VCAL, in particular, is an important option as it offers a combination of curriculum-based learning, vocational training and workplace experience. Access to such a learning experience enables young people to acquire ‘in-demand’ technical, foundational and ‘soft’ personal skills. Students respond to applied learning because of its relevance, variety and the

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<sup>1</sup> Dommers, E, Myconos, G, Swain, L, Yung, S & Clarke K 2017, *Engaging young early school leavers in vocational training*, NCVET, Adelaide; Myconos, G 2016, *Supporting transitions to employment for young job seekers: a resource for program development in south-east Melbourne by Chisholm and Holmesglen TAFEs*, Brotherhood of St Laurence; Myconos, G, Clarke, KV, te Riele, K 2016, *Shedding light: private ‘for profit’ training providers and young early school leavers*, NCVET, Adelaide; Myconos, G 2014, *Lessons from a flexible learning program*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Community VCAL education program for young people 2010–2013; Myconos, G 2013, *Successes and challenges in re-engagement: evaluating the third year of a Community VCAL education program for young people*, Brotherhood of St Laurence.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://web.education.unimelb.edu.au/curriculum/policies/project/Reports/download/Vic-1985-BlackburnReport1985.pdf>

exposure to non-school settings. VCAL thus prepares young people to navigate the changing labour market.

### Applied learning plays a role in increasing school engagement and retention

There is a widespread belief among students that schools are too fixated on ATAR scores and that schools interpret educational success narrowly, equating it with transition to university. This view, along with much research<sup>3</sup>, suggests that schools often do not cater adequately for the learning needs and styles of all young people, and particularly not for those disinclined to take the university pathway.

Data on year 12 and equivalent attainments across Australia shows that those of lower socioeconomic status have consistently lagged well behind those of higher SES, with the gap ranging between 8 and 14 percentage points over the period 2012–2016.<sup>4</sup> Over the fifteen years since the introduction of VCAL, apparent retention rates in Victoria have increased by approximately 8 per cent.<sup>5</sup> A link between VCAL and retention cannot be discounted. VCAL students represent a significant proportion of senior secondary school students in the state – numbering around 126,300.<sup>6</sup> The steady increase in enrolments in VCAL (now at 24,302, with 468 providers)<sup>7</sup> is especially significant in efforts to assist the most disadvantaged cohorts.

The Brotherhood's experience is that many young people gravitate towards VCAL—particularly when delivered by non-mainstream school providers—after disruption caused by personal and social factors, including family conflict, poor self-esteem, learning difficulties, substance abuse, homelessness and isolation, mental health issues, financial hardship, bullying and violence or abuse. School-related factors include too much regimentation, overcrowding, poor relations with teachers and peers. The Brotherhood's VCAL students talk of how such factors led to falling behind in classwork, which led to disengagement from schooling.<sup>8</sup> While VCAL's *raison d'être* is not to serve as a 're-engagement' framework, it does provide an ideal model to help those whose education has been disrupted create pathways into a very new landscape.

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<sup>3</sup> Graham, P, Van Bergen, L & Sweller, N 2015, ' "To educate you to be smart": disaffected students and the purpose of school in the (not so clever) "lucky country"', *Journal of Education Policy*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 237–257; Myconos, G & Swain, L 2017, Perspectives on school absenteeism: causes and solutions, prepared for the Southern Melbourne Children Youth Area Partnership, Brotherhood of St Laurence; Myconos, G 2014, *Lessons from a flexible learning program*.

<sup>4</sup> State Government of Victoria 2018, *State of Victoria's children 2017: a focus on health and wellbeing*, <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/SOV-2017-research.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> See Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017, *Schools Australia 2017*, Cat. no. 4221.0, ABS, Canberra.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/student-numbers#View2>

<sup>7</sup> Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2019, *Senior secondary certificate statistical information 2018*, <https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/statistics/2019/2019SeniorSecondaryCompletionandAchievementInformation.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Myconos, G 2014, *Lessons from a flexible learning program*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Community VCAL education program for young people 2010–2013; Myconos, G 2013, *Successes and challenges in re-engagement: evaluating the third year of a Community VCAL education program for young people*, Brotherhood of St Laurence.

## There is great opportunity to improve applied learning options

### Vocational exploration needs to be overhauled to better inform student choices

Too many young people are directed towards vocational options when they have little understanding of vocational training, employers' expectations, or their own talents and inclinations. Success in vocational training relies heavily on the reflections, planning and decisions of students through the mid-secondary years. An intensive 'Year 10 intervention' is needed to develop a young person's understanding of their preferences, strengths and options. Secondary students must be exposed to early and ongoing careers exploration opportunities—both in and out of school, including through a network of specialist vocational exploration hubs.

### Employers and community groups have an important role to play

Quality vocational education demands effective and strong collaboration with employers and the broader community. Presently, employer contributions are ad hoc and community groups are underutilised for young people transitioning from middle to senior years. The involvement of employers and others can be boosted through regional partnerships, support for schools and VCAL providers to strengthen collaborations, and the expansion of mentoring programs.

### An increased focus on learning and wellbeing support is needed

Many young people undertaking VCAL and other VETiS options have experienced disrupted education as well as instability beyond school. Some are experiencing severe hardship and lack the skills and social and emotional resources needed to thrive in school. Many have poor literacy and numeracy skills. The youngest of the VCAL cohorts—those undertaking Foundation level—are particularly vulnerable, many lacking the readiness to engage with vocational training and to progress to Intermediate and Senior levels. Multiple and varied educational settings for VCAL and VETiS students—schools, and registered training organisations (RTOs)—provide supports of uneven quality.

It is important to raise the standard and expectations of support provided by all VCAL providers and partnered RTOs, and their commitment to collaborate across settings and to deliver the best workplace-based training possible.

An important change in the design of VCAL is called for to address the vulnerability of students prematurely pushed out of the mainstream. Foundation level students should commence VCAL with a focus on identifying and building their aspirations around what they want to be and do. They need to be supported to develop a joint plan to advance these aspirations and connected with tangible opportunities to do this. It is critical these life and planning skills be developed before young people prematurely commit to a vocational pathway. The BSL's Certificate 1 in Developing Independence could be readily adapted for this purpose.

### More funding is required to adequately assist students

Applied learning is costlier to deliver than instructional learning. It requires materials, equipment and connections with external opportunities. Out-of-pocket costs for students are typically higher—yet their families are least able to pay. Because a high proportion of young people undertaking VCAL, and other VETiS options have experienced disadvantage, higher levels of specialist wellbeing and learning supports are required.

### Improving the quality of VCAL provision requires improved outcomes and assessment frameworks

Educators tell us that VCAL's strength is its flexibility, but that this creates difficulties when gauging performance and maintaining standards. When considered across the VCAL provider landscape, this challenge erodes confidence in the certificate. Moderation of assessment of students' work across VCAL provider settings is needed, requiring the VCAA to help establish a common understanding of standards, in order to lift confidence in the quality of provision.

Changes to the outcomes framework are also needed. The measurable and reportable outcomes associated with the VCAL fail to convey the true progress students have achieved, or the benefits gained. Given that many young people are in the process of re-engaging in education, or undertaking unfamiliar vocation training, the current outcomes indicators are inadequate. An improved outcomes framework should take into account non-academic/non-technical skills (e.g. evidence of the young person's interactions and engagement with employers and community groups).

### A skilled and specialist applied learning workforce needs to be nurtured

Too few secondary school educators—across government and independent education sectors—are trained to teach applied learning options, and particularly within the VCAL. Pre-service and in-service teacher training pay little regard to this most important area—one that requires skills to prompt students to explore, think 'long-term', develop technical and non-technical skills, and build formal relationships with employers and others in the broader community at a relatively young age. There is a pressing need for teacher training institutions to provide more and improved applied learning and vocational training options. Most important is the need for degree-level programs that equip teachers with the versatility needed to teach across instructional and applied pedagogies, to better respond to signs of disengagement and to prompt pathways planning and thinking in students.

### Applied learning pathways should be promoted as valued and rewarding options

Vocational training, and particularly VCAL, is undervalued. Too often VCAL is regarded as 'lesser' than VCE or merely as a 'second chance option'. It suffers from the same bias—in favour of university-pathways and professions—that so hinders VET in general. VCAL ranks well below VCE in perceptions and prestige, in spite of VCAL's vital role in providing students—particularly those whose education has faltered—with a range of pathway options and employment opportunities. Applied learning options should be promoted to students, parents, employers and teachers. Raising the status of vocational pathways requires a community wide effort to increase awareness of their benefits.

### Seize the opportunity to affect real change through federal and state review processes

A series of comprehensive reappraisals of vocational education in Australia have recently been completed or are in process. There is an opportunity to achieve significant systemic change. Our submission aims to improve vocational education at all levels, and to do so through improvements to quality of provision, accessibility, and collaboration across sectors. We urge the Victorian Government to do all that is possible to use these initiatives to improve the standing of VET for all learners, and particularly for young people.

## Recommendations summary

### Strengthen pathways exploration

1. Start careers exploration early-from Year 7 and embed it in a wide range of subjects
2. Assist girls to defy traditional gendered roles by tailoring programs and career planning, and by involving female mentors
3. Improve support for and quality of career guidance by:
  - a. adjusting the school staff mix to include more full-time advisors, and ensure that more of their working time is dedicated solely to career advice
  - b. upskilling school career staff through better resourced training.
4. Introduce a 'Year 10 Intervention' involving work-related events, interactions, presentations and mentoring.
5. Establish a network of TAFE- based Vocational Exploration and Guidance hubs that link schools to trade training centres; provide outreach services for early school leavers; enable access to Adult Community Education providers; are linked to external welfare support services; and provide career guidance, specialised learning supports, connections to industry, and strong links to and collaboration with local community.

### Strengthen employer and community involvement

6. Ensure schools have representation on local labour market networking initiatives and strong relations with brokering agencies such as Local Learning and Employment Networks, and emerging mechanisms such as the BSL's Community Investment Committees.
7. Ensure the VCAA, in conjunction with Independent Schools Victoria and the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria, produces information kits to help employers better understand the mid-secondary and/or VCAL cohort of students, and how to contribute to the learning program.

### Enhance VETiS pathways to other education options

8. Monitor delivery of workplace-based learning commitments by schools and providers
9. Promote strong engagement with emerging place-based initiatives that help young people find a clear line of sight to employment.
10. Ensure better alignment of and student movement between diverse education sectors by:
  - a. mitigating school-based obstacles such as underresourcing of VCAL, and timetable clashes between VCAL and VCE subjects
  - b. supporting implementation of recommendations of the Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework aimed increasing access to university for young people with vocational qualifications.
11. Expand the Head Start initiative, and promote innovative pre-apprenticeship models that build awareness of options that suit the young person's preferences

### Strengthen student learning and wellbeing support across VCAL and RTO settings

12. Provide resources to eligible VCAL providers and re-engagement programs for:
  - a. improved specialist wellbeing and remedial literacy and numeracy supports
  - b. professional development that helps teachers and school staff to better respond to disengagement, and to the effects of disadvantage.
13. Tighten guidelines and MOUs to ensure frequent interaction between school and RTO staff, and regular feedback to schools on student progress.
14. Impose higher expectations of RTOs to deliver better workplace-based training outcomes for SBATs.
15. Introduce an accredited preparatory program for Foundation level VCAL students to strengthen life skills, aspirations and goal-setting matched with real opportunities. Provision should be made in the

Targeted VET funding list for such programs. The Brotherhood's Certificate 1 in Developing Independence is well suited.

### Develop a workforce skilled in applied learning

16. Provide incentives to teacher training institutions catering for aspiring secondary school teachers to:
  - a. provide degree-level programs that equip teachers with the skills and versatility to switch between 'instructional' and 'applied' learning
  - b. equip teachers with the skills needed to facilitate pathways thinking and conversations with and between students
  - c. equip teachers to develop project-based learning in collaboration with employers
  - d. enable teachers to identify and respond effectively to signs of disengagement, and particularly to the effects of severe hardship or trauma.
17. Allocate resources that enable the VCAA and VALA to develop best practice teaching materials tailored to applied learning at various levels for use in VCAL and VCAL-like programs in secondary schools.

### Ensure high quality assurance and outcomes frameworks in VCAL without compromising flexibility

18. Modify the current performance and outcomes framework to:
  - a. account for intentional non-completion at the certificate's various levels when students have found employment
  - b. indicate the 'journey travelled', and progress in retention, engagement, wellbeing and attainment for each individual relative to assessments made at their commencement
  - c. include student-initiated interactions with employers and community organisations, and volunteering activity and civic engagement.
19. Promote, through the VCAA, exemplary and award-winning VCAL student projects as reference points for assessment, and for more moderation of assessments across VCAL providers.
20. Collect and make available extensive transition data on all former VCAL students to supplement and enrich On Track data, and to improve service development.

### Provide more funding for VETiS options

21. Fund school VCAL providers so they can better access:
  - a. auditoria, meeting rooms and audio-visual equipment to allow regular involvement of employers and community groups
  - b. recording studios, workshops, IT facilities, carpentry and health care training equipment.
22. Increase the Student Resource Package and the Targeted VET funding allocation across each of the bands to match the real cost of VETiS.

### Lift the status of VCAL and vocational education

23. Actively promote the benefits of VCAL through a wide range of organisations, peak bodies and media, stressing its:
  - a. role in testing vocational aspirations and pathway options
  - b. provision of 21st century skills and opportunities, as well as its direct links to employment
  - c. capacity to build linkages beyond the educational or training setting.



## Recommendations explained

### Strengthen vocational pathways exploration

#### Young people need to consider career options earlier

From as early as possible young people should be actively involved in developing and enacting personal visions and goals. Careers exploration—whether oriented towards vocational training or otherwise—should be embedded progressively in the secondary school curriculum, and be tailored to the young person’s developmental stage, needs and circumstances. It should be available both in and out of the school setting, and include opportunities for family participation, as young people are diverse and respond differently to both the message and source.

We see great merit in the Victorian school Career Action Plans (CAPs), which commence in year 7. Through these plans young people consider a wide range of industries and careers that match their interests, skills and abilities. The importance of such exploration before narrowing options and committing to accredited vocational training cannot be overstated. We recommend enhancing the CAPs to incorporate life skills development (see below).

We also see an opportunity to modify the syllabus prior to year 11–12 to include vocational exploration in all subjects, including music, food and nutrition, design and graphics. Access to experiential learning, through which young people can explore workplaces and meet employers and industry experts is critical.

Such project and interest-based learning that prompts exploration of future pathways should be encouraged throughout secondary school. Projects can introduce future thinking and build awareness of post-school pathways. Projects involve sustained work over time and connections outside the classroom. As career inclinations emerge, teachers and careers guidance staff can assist students to explore the skills to be acquired, and to build relevant networks and contacts.

#### Mid-secondary students need to be better prepared

Our research and practice experience shows that younger secondary school students—before year 11 and/or VCAL—often have little awareness of future options and lack insight into their natural aptitudes. Many have inadequate knowledge of employer expectations, and are simply not ready for what is expected of them in the workplace. This is particularly the case for those experiencing disadvantage, as they are more likely to lack the necessary social capital—resources, networks and support—to navigate Australia’s changing labour market.

Specific challenges for mid-secondary students include:

- limited access to careers information until late in their schooling
- little exposure to information about vocational and further education options
- parents with limited capacity to provide career guidance for a changed labour market
- few opportunities to experiment with different vocational options before committing to a course or other career pathway.

### A Year 10 Intervention is vital

Colleagues at our David Scott School—delivering VCAL to over 100 young, highly disadvantaged students—emphasise the need for an intensive intervention at year 10. This is a critical moment when important decisions must be made, ideally after years of discussion.

A Year 10 Intervention is needed to familiarise young people with the world of vocational options and careers exploration. The barriers to such an awareness include:

- a VET system that is very complex, making it difficult for parents and students to navigate
- many schools that do not place a high priority on students' engagement with industry

The gendered nature of career pathways is an extra barrier for girls—whose completion rates in VCAL lag behind those of boys (e.g. 36% compared with 55% at Foundation level).

A series of activities should be staged during year 10 that sharpen young people's focus on future career possibilities. The school calendar should include:

- walkthrough tours of TAFE campuses, and visits to small-medium registered training organisations (RTOs)
- guest speaking events from young people who have successfully transitioned to post-secondary studies or employment
- tours of workplaces, as well as community organisations, sporting clubs, trade unions; and introductions to potential mentors
- presentations by year 10 students to peer and/or staff panels outlining preferred pathways
- awareness-raising events that showcase a given industry or employer expectations.

*'At my kids' secondary school [Fitzroy SC] each year 10 kid is required to present to a panel to explain why they've made their year 11 pathway choices and that's great' Parent*

### Mentoring should feature

At year 10, the current Department of Education mentoring program would be expanded and tailored to involve a broader range of community partners<sup>9</sup> from sporting clubs, services, and employers; and to include young adults who have transitioned to further education, training, or employment. Mentoring relationships established at this point would have the aim of introducing young people to new ideas and broader networks of support. Ideally, these mentoring relationships would continue when the student entered year 11 via VCAL or VCE.

### Victoria needs a network of vocational exploration and guidance hubs located in TAFEs and other high traffic areas for young people

Schools cannot be expected to satisfy all the career exploration needs of young people. Access to high-quality, independent vocational guidance and exploration is essential if they are to make informed decisions about their pathway choices. Yet, outside school there are few resources available, other than on-line platforms. In the context of Victoria's considerable investment in vocational and higher education, a network of vocational exploration and guidance hubs would entail

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/behaviour/engagement/Pages/student-mentoring.aspx>

a modest cost that could be offset by the better completion rates and labour market outcomes satisfaction that are likely to flow from informed decision making. We believe that vulnerable groups would benefit greatly from individualised support to navigate their options.

The hubs would provide face-to-face service, backed by online and phone support, and operate independently of training providers. They would be open to all young people and their families—whether in or out of school, or thinking about vocational or higher education. Hub services would also be available to schools and training providers to supplement their in-house careers guidance.

These hubs should be established on TAFE campuses across the state to provide tailored support for prospective young learners (up to 25 years), linking education, employment, youth services and other community supports and resources. They could leverage existing infrastructure. For example, they could build on the existing TAFE based Skills and Jobs Centres and be connected to Local Learning and Employment Networks.

Vocational exploration and guidance hubs are an important ingredient in a suite of reforms sought by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and conveyed in a series of submissions to government.<sup>10</sup> They will feature in the Brotherhood’s contribution to the state government’s ‘Macklin Review’ (Skills for Victoria’s Growing Economy).

<b>Key elements of Vocational Exploration and Guidance Hubs</b>	
<b>Links with schools and trade training centres</b>	Working with secondary schools and trade training centres to facilitate work experience and volunteer work, and promote better workplace learning opportunities with employers
<b>Early school leavers outreach</b>	Identification and tailored engagement of early school leavers
<b>Coherent, connected ACE and VET offerings</b>	Co-location and/or co-delivery of programs and services that provide students, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, with access to ACE providers and interest-based learning
<b>Connections to support services</b>	Connections to TAFE student support and external services such as mental health, youth justice, settlement, housing, employment
<b>Vocational guidance and pathway navigation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhanced pathways through education systems and levels – school, pre-accredited training, accredited qualifications and higher education</li> <li>Skilled and ongoing pathway planning and career development, and support for navigating the VET and university system, particularly at the point of access, enrolment and initial engagement</li> </ul>
<b>Learning assessment and Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>LLN and other relevant assessments to identify students with significant learning needs to inform pathway planning</li> <li>Connecting young people to courses and educational settings relevant to their learning needs, to foster ongoing engagement and participation</li> </ul>

<sup>10</sup> Most recently, submissions to the federal Department of Education and Employment’s consultations on the co-design of the National Skills Commission (November 2019) <http://library.bsl.org.au/showitem.php?handle=1/11783>; and to the Education Council Review of Senior Secondary Pathways (December 2019). <http://library.bsl.org.au/showitem.php?handle=1/11782>

<b>Employer and industry connections</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessing real world employment opportunities including work exposure and experience, and work placements to support training</li> <li>• Workforce planning</li> </ul>
<b>Evidence-informed, action learning which connects regional learning with national policy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A national Community of Practice to foster shared practice, learning, innovations and develop a shared evidence base.</li> <li>• Hubs as part of, or connected to, the National Careers Institute.</li> </ul>

### Case study: The KIOSC Model

The Knox Innovation, Opportunity and Sustainability Centre (KIOSC) is a good example of a hub-like model that leverages partnerships with the Local Learning & Employment Network, several schools, Swinburne University of Technology/TAFE, registered training organisations, local government and local businesses to expose young people to vocational learning.

KIOSC has a specific focus on STEM emphasising project and theme based learning for years 7–10 using contemporary themes (Inspired Technology, Genetics, Design Thinking, Geo-mapping, Food Future, Forensic Science, and Energy and Geo-Hazards). This links to the Tertiary Aspirations Programs for year 10 students, which in turn links to STEM-related VCE programs.

(<https://www.kiosc.vic.edu.au/about-us/>)

### Recommendations: Strengthen pathways exploration

1. Promote career conversations in middle years and exposure to external settings to test preferences.
2. Assist girls to defy traditional gendered roles by tailoring programs and career planning, and by involving female mentors as role models.
3. Improve support for and quality of career guidance by :
  - a. adjusting the school staff mix to include more full-time advisors, and ensure that more of their working time is dedicated solely to career advice
  - b. upskilling school career staff through better resourced training.
4. Introduce a 'Year 10 Intervention' involving work-related events, interactions, presentations and mentoring.
5. Establish a network of TAFE- based Vocational Exploration and Guidance hubs that link schools to trade training centres; provide outreach services for early school leavers; enable access to Adult Community Education providers; are linked to external welfare support services; and provide career guidance, specialised learning supports, connections to industry, and strong links to and collaboration with local community.

## Employers and a broad range of community groups should be involved

The involvement of employers and the broader community—including sporting groups and community service organisations—is vital in assisting young people to reflect on preferences and establish goals. Our experience as a Group Training Organisation has revealed that while many employers and community groups are willing and eager to assist young people, they are deterred by:

- the commitment required, which exceeds their expectations
- their lack of capacity to supervise the student
- the complicated administrative and regulatory requirements
- prescriptive, limiting agendas set by the school
- a lack of clarity as to the short, medium and long-term aims of the collaboration.

Through our GTO experience we have learnt that the ideal conditions involve clear aims and timeframes, a light paperwork load, and ability to shape the workplace experience. Employers and other external supporters need clear information that will help them understand a young person's transition between the workplace and classroom. They need guidance about the scope of their involvement, and the students' needs and expectations. They need to know whether their views are required, for example, on job opportunities in a given industry or location or on what constitutes an ideal employee.

### Regional collaboration is needed to connect education, training and employment

Diverse sectors across communities and levels of government need to work together to build investment in young people as they transition between employment, education and training. Understanding industry needs and brokering relationships with employers will enable them to advise on the skills, training and career pathways that lead to real, available jobs.<sup>11</sup> As noted by the OECD and ILO, 'providing youth with skills is not sufficient to improve their labour market outcomes if these skills do not match those demanded by employers'.<sup>12</sup>

An enabling organisation facilitates coordination and collaboration among partners. It ensures an authorising environment built on shared objectives that are mutually beneficial to employers, the community, the economy and young people themselves.

Through its enabling role within a national Transition to Work Community of Practice and the National Youth Employment Body, the Brotherhood of St Laurence is testing frameworks that recruit employers as active participants and co-designers of pathways and opportunities. Through mechanisms such as our National Employer Reference Group and locally based Community Investment Committees (CICs), BSL is involving employers as real partners to improve learning and employment opportunities for young people. For example, local employers across the NYEB CICs are co-designing youth employment courses with TAFE, while TAFE is exploring flexibility within the national training package framework to tailor courses for young people and industry. Local

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<sup>11</sup> Social Ventures Australia 2016, *Fundamental principles for youth employment*, SVA, Sydney, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> OECD & ILO 2014, *Promoting better labour market outcomes for youth: report on youth employment and apprenticeships*, prepared for the G20 Labour and Employment Ministerial Meeting, Melbourne, 10–11 September, OECD, Paris, p. 8.

employers are also being recruited to champion investment in young people with other employers, including through providing work experience or work taster opportunities, hosting industry site tours or information evenings and providing entry-level pathways including internships.

Through mechanisms such as CICs and Local Learning and Employment networks, employers are also able to advise schools on curricula and syllabi that will lead to the qualifications needed in specific regions. This frequently involves conversations between industry peak bodies and schools about growth occupations, and how to extend opportunities beyond staples such as hospitality, sport and recreation. The latter may well appeal to VCAL students, but do not always lead to good employment outcomes.

Across such initiatives, existing mentorship schemes are more likely to succeed, and these should also be expanded across the Victorian educational landscape. Schools are well placed to promote mentoring, given that many employers host VCAL students for the Work Related Skills component of their vocational training.

The importance of employment-based training cannot be overstated. As we note below, two stand-out models are the Civil Construction Federation's Civil Skills Cadetship Program, and the Australian Government funded Multi-Industry Pre-apprenticeship (MIP). Both are employment models for young people that assist in career exploration, decision-making and acquisition of foundation and technical skills, and that feature mentoring relationships.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Recommendations: Strengthen employer and community involvement**

6. Ensure schools have representation on local labour market networking initiatives and strong relations with brokering agencies such as Local Learning and Employment Networks, and emerging mechanisms such as the BSL's Community Investment Committees.
7. Ensure the VCAA, in conjunction with Independent Schools Victoria and the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria, produces information kits to help employers better understand the mid-secondary and/or VCAL cohort of students, and how to contribute to the learning program.

## Enhance VETiS and pathways to other education options

### Facilitate movement between VET and non-VET education options

Improved opportunity through better allocation of resources and timetabling

Young people are limited in their capacity to use VETiS options, and vocational education in general, to commence alternative educational pathways. Even though VCAL attainments and associated VET qualifications can be accepted as credit towards VCE, obstacles remain. In many schools, the VCAL and VETiS pathways are underresourced and undervalued. The lower status given to applied learning

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<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.careersincivil.com.au/skills-programs/civil-skills-cadetship-csc-program/> and <https://aen.org.au/mip/>

is reflected in the standard of amenities, availability of staff (and of appropriately skilled staff) and most importantly in timetabling that puts VCE and VETiS/VCAL options into conflict.

### Remove obstacles to movement between vocational and tertiary education

Students should be encouraged to experiment with vocational education without closing other options. More flexible curriculum (including micro-credentials and short courses), qualification and assessment frameworks are needed to ensure vocational education does not lead to career ‘dead-ends’, and that they provide multi-directional pathways, including between vocational training and university. There is great merit in recommendations made in the recent Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework aimed at improving movement between senior secondary, vocational and university education.<sup>14</sup>

Specific recommendations include:

- Create a credit point system that is shared by all qualifications, and to which all educational institutions can refer to assess applications for entry from students of diverse educational backgrounds.
- Develop guidelines in the AQF Qualifications Pathways Policy that facilitate recognition of shorter form credentials for credit transfer and articulation across education sectors.
- change the descriptors used for state senior secondary certificates to emphasise their role in preparing students for *both* vocational and ‘higher’ education.

### Utilise emerging labour market programs and services to provide a clear line of sight to an industry or career path for VETiS and VCAL students

Too often there is a disconnect between programs undertaken, and suitable career opportunities. Data collected by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2018) shows only an estimated 40–60% of those who enrol go on to attain their qualification, and of these only roughly 30% go on to work in the occupation for which they have trained. This is a pressing concern given the need to boost the numbers of skilled professionals in sectors critical to post Covid-19 recovery (human services, health care and allied services).<sup>15</sup> Many factors contribute to these poor outcomes—among them, the uneven quality of training and levels of support for learners. Of vital importance also is the quality of guidance and employment services, and the accuracy of information about labour market opportunities.

For these reasons, schools and all VCAL providers must become involved in, and ensure their students benefit from, local and place-based training and labour market employment initiatives. These would include Local Learning and Employment Networks, and Victoria’s Reconnect services. Of particular importance here are initiatives overseen by the Brotherhood of St Laurence through the emerging local Community Investment Committees, linked with the federally funded Transition to

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-qualifications-framework-review-0>

<sup>15</sup> National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) 2018, *Australian vocational education and training statistics: VET program completion rates 2016*, NCVER, Adelaide; Wheelahan, L, Buchanan, J & Yu, S 2015, *Linking qualifications and the labour market through capabilities and vocational streams*, NCVER, Adelaide

Work and National Youth Employment Body.<sup>16</sup> It is also imperative that educational institutions ensure secondary students gain the full benefits of a changing national and state VET landscape, particularly the National Careers Institute, and Victoria’s Working for Victoria initiative.<sup>17</sup>

### Promote innovation in workplace-based training

Ensure schools and training providers place a higher priority on workplace-based learning. There have been concerns that VETiS—across Australia—does not provide meaningful links to work or a well-rounded education. Reviews have found that VETiS is not highly valued by employers, with doubts as to its capacity to produce young people who are ‘job-ready’—in large part because of their lack of exposure to industry and workplaces.<sup>18</sup>

VETiS courses often do not provide young people with sufficient ‘real world’ work experiences or structured workplace learning. Increasing the number and quality of work placements in accredited VETiS qualifications would build relationships between young people and employers, and increase industry confidence and investment. While industry needs would be a major determinant, there is scope for both increasing the hours of workplace-based training required for existing qualifications, and introducing workplace-based training in other qualifications and accredited courses where it is currently not required.

### Promote pre-apprenticeship models

Pre-apprenticeship and vocational preparation programs in schools should be extended throughout Victoria. Stand-out models include:

- Civil Construction Federation’s Civil Skills Cadetship Program. This accelerated pre-apprenticeship model features five stages of delivery: a formalised career decision making process, cross-industry units of competency, foundation skills, Civil Industry Mentoring, and supported entry into connected jobs. The program is led and endorsed by the civil construction industry as an accelerated approach which combines soft skills development with real work.
- The Australian Government funded Multi-Industry Pre-apprenticeship (MIP) which helps year 11–12 students to find a suitable path.<sup>19</sup> This model could potentially be rolled out across all Victorian schools—to ensure that when young people start an apprenticeship, they have a clear idea of what to expect and what the employer expects of them.

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<sup>16</sup> See <https://nyeb.bsl.org.au/>; <https://www.bsl.org.au/services/young-people/transition-to-work/>

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.vic.gov.au/workingforvictoria>

<sup>18</sup> Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet (DPM&C) 2019, *Strengthening skills: Expert Review of Australia’s Vocational Education and Training System*, (The ‘Joyce Review’), <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/domestic-policy/vet-review/strengthening-skills-expert-review-australias-vocational-education-and-training-system>

<sup>19</sup> AEN’s response to the Joyce Review states that: ‘given the opportunity to trial a range of career pathways, 55% of MIP participants changed their career choice and 82% said they had a greater understanding of employer expectations in the workplace after completing the program. Employers rated the work-readiness of 75% of participants as high to very high’. See <https://aen.org.au/mip/>



## Expand the availability—across and beyond government schools—of the Head Start model

We see great merit in the Head Start model as it enables young people to keep multiple options 'alive' while trialling an apprenticeship or traineeship. The distinctive feature of this initiative is the flexibility it allows those undertaking years 10, 11 and 12. Head Start offers the student more time to complete these years of education to accommodate the time spent in paid employment through an apprenticeship or traineeship. Under this model, year 12 students are able to work three days per week; year 11, two days; and year 10, one day.<sup>20</sup>

### **Recommendation: Enhance VETiS and pathways to other education options**

8. Monitor delivery of workplace-based learning commitments by schools and providers.
9. Promote strong engagement with emerging place based initiatives that help young people find a clear line of sight to employment.
10. Ensure better alignment of and student movement between diverse education sectors by:
  - a. mitigating school-based obstacles such as underresourcing of VCAL, and timetable clashes between VCAL and VCE subjects
  - b. supporting implementation of recommendations of the Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework aimed at increasing access to university for young people with vocational qualifications.
11. Expand the Head Start initiative, and promote innovative pre-apprenticeship models that build awareness of options that suit the young person's preferences

<sup>20</sup> The Victorian Government's Head Start program, commenced in 2019, now operates in over one hundred schools. See <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/Pages/headstart.aspx>

## Strengthen student wellbeing and learning support across VCAL and RTO settings

VCAL is not designed as a 're-engagement' framework, yet it often serves that purpose. VCAL students are among the most disadvantaged young people in Victoria. A Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of student completion rates showed that 37% of VCAL students were from the lowest SES quartile, and 31% from the lower-middle quartile.<sup>21</sup> Many need intensive support if they are to overcome hardship and succeed in education and beyond. BSL experience is that wrap-around learning and wellbeing supports are key to achieving the best outcomes for VCAL.

To ensure successful engagement with education and training, VCAL providers must have the capacity to provide specialist student support, and/or to refer students to appropriate external specialists such as family therapists, mental health specialists, and housing support workers.

While schools and TAFEs provide learning and wellbeing support for students, the quality of wellbeing supports varies greatly. Within smaller RTOs, such support is seldom comprehensive. The standard of support also varies across Victoria's patchwork of small VCAL providers assisting young people to stay connected or reconnect with learning.

### Guidelines for all VCAL providers should be enhanced

The formal responsibilities of all VCAL providers, and the RTOs they engage, should be modified to promote student support.

These formal expectations should apply equally to all school sectors (government, independent, Catholic) and re-engagement programs. Changes should be made to the Department of Education and Training's guidelines for delivery of VET via external RTOs,<sup>22</sup> and to the corresponding guidelines issued by Independent Schools Victoria and Catholic Education Melbourne. Essential changes include:

- VCAL providers to include in their criteria for selecting an RTO, its capacity to provide learning and wellbeing support
- schools to ensure that a member of the student welfare team join those liaising with RTOs on matters of pastoral care
- RTOs to work with schools to create individual support plans for students with pre-existing issues (e.g. heightened anxiety, and distress leading to prolonged absenteeism).

### Stronger links are needed between VCAL providers and RTOs

VCAL is unique in that it provides concurrent exposure to three distinct modes of learning: curriculum-based and instructional; vocationally and competency based; and workplace based. Each takes place in different settings: the VCAL provider's (often a school); the RTO's (except when

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<sup>21</sup> Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis, *2011 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development data*. <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/student-completion-rates?section=30800>

<sup>22</sup> Department of Education and Training 2020, *Purchasing guidelines for Victorian government schools for delivery of VET*, <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/management/finance/Pages/purchasing.aspx>

vocational training is delivered ‘internally’); and the place of employment. Each setting has distinct professional cultures, protocols, procedures and indicators of success.

Most VCAL providers, particularly those who rely on external RTOs, must monitor and respond to progress made by students when they are not on the VCAL provider’s premises. Although they have the principal ‘duty of care’, VCAL providers often find it difficult to establish and maintain lines of communication with trainers and employers.

Any disconnect during the learning process is disconcerting for many students, who rely on strong relationships and consistency.

For these reasons, there is a need to strengthen the expectations relating to the support, governance, and responsibilities of all the stakeholders, but primarily those linking the VCAL provider and the RTO.

### Standards of support should be raised

It is imperative that higher standards for availability and quality of support should apply to all stakeholder institutions. Currently, too many young people are denied support that they need..

The suite of supports across all relevant institutions must reflect the students’ needs, including remedial and specialist literacy and numeracy support, as well as access to specialists in mental health and generalist community support.

Where small RTOs have limited capacity to maintain specialist supports, they must maintain comprehensive systems of referral to external services.

### Monitor RTOs commitments to provide workplace-based training

Through our Group Training Organisation, the Brotherhood has learnt that many RTOs pay little regard to securing workplace experience for young people undertaking SBATs. Too many opt for number of enrolments over quality of workplace-based training. Many employers also show too little commitment to the workplace learning needs of their young apprentices and trainees.

RTOs seeking to enrol SBAT students should be required to satisfy stricter criteria, including proving their capacity to maintain productive relationships with employers that share a commitment to longer term outcomes for the students. Implementation of satisfactory workplace training should be monitored.

### Specialist VCAL providers play an important role with highly disadvantaged students

The relatively high number of VCAL providers (around 488 in 2019) includes government and independent schools, TAFEs and not-for-profit community providers. Brotherhood research shows that of these, small specialist providers—educational institutions dedicated solely to VCAL—are very well placed to realise the VCAL’s potential, particularly for disadvantaged ‘high needs’ cohorts.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Myconos, G 2014, *Lessons from a flexible learning program: the Brotherhood of St Laurence Community VCAL education program for young people 2010–2013*

They are able concentrate all their energies on tailoring the program to the cohort's needs and developing innovative applied learning pedagogy.

Students at specialised VCAL providers such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence's David Scott School benefit from close contact with learning, wellbeing and career guidance support staff. The Brotherhood's VCAL students have reported that undertaking the certificate in a supportive environment—where the curriculum and applied learning components were supplemented with specialist learning and wellbeing supports—increased confidence, motivation, positive outlooks and understanding of and respect for others. They also recalled how their introduction to the more intimate, 'community-based' VCAL environment provided a profound sense of relief, security and acceptance, and changed their attitude to learning.

**The Brotherhood of St Laurence's David Scott School: a specialist VCAL provider enabling young people estranged from mainstream school to resume their senior secondary pathways**

The David Scott School in Frankston delivers the VCAL to over 100 young people who have found mainstream schooling unsatisfactory, and/or who have experienced significant hardship. The majority of this 'high needs' cohort have been expelled or 'exited' from other schools. A 75% attendance rate is impressive in this context.<sup>24</sup>

Building on earlier iterations (reaching back to 2010) the school now delivers specialised, high support and individualised programs prioritising cutting-edge applied learning. Project-based learning is combined with accredited vocational training and workplace experience.

Alongside the classroom teachers are teams dedicated to student and family support, and pathways and transition guidance. Youth coaches work with pathways officers to help young people advance their career aspirations, seek out opportunities, and strengthen relationships with their community, schools and local specialist youth services.

The school works closely with the local Transition to Work and the regional Community Investment Committee—featuring strong employer involvement—and other supports such as the state government funded Reconnect program.

(<https://www.davidscottschool.vic.edu.au/>)

**Changes are needed to improve completion rates for younger VCAL students.**

Completion rates of Foundation level VCAL—across all VCAL provider types—are well below those of Intermediate and Senior (55.6%, 72.4%, and 85.8% respectively; with females faring worse (36% Foundation level completion).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> My School website, the David Scott School, <https://www.myschool.edu.au/school/52481/attendance/2018> (2019 data in process)

<sup>25</sup> Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2019, *Senior secondary certificate statistical information 2018*, <https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/statistics/2019/2019SeniorSecondaryCompletionandAchievementInformation.pdf>

This level of the VCAL, catering for the younger students at a borderline year 10–11, presents a number of challenges for VCAL providers and students. These include:

- students struggling to understand and adapt to vocational training (i.e. the VCAL's Industry Specific Skills, and workplace based learning components), particularly when training is delivered externally by a non-school RTO
- students' residual frustrations with formal education, and with vocational training, resulting in poor decision making. Much time is wasted at a stage when students should be accumulating vocational training activity hours.<sup>26</sup>
- student indecision leading to switches between (or drop-out from) programs at different RTOs, and unanticipated costs to the VCAL provider. Students are no closer to settling on a career path or attaining formal accreditation.

All too often, the Foundation level student by year end may have satisfied the requirements of the curriculum component, but not of the VET component. They are thus ineligible to progress to Intermediate level. Even those who do complete the requisite VET activity hours often enter the Intermediate level with a clouded view of their future pathways.

A difficult start with VCAL often means that students do not realise the full potential of the Intermediate and Senior levels. Certainly, the lack of goal setting skills (mentioned earlier) contributes to this problem.

### All Foundation level VCAL students should undertake a common vocational preparation program

A common accredited course—delivered internally—should be promoted that is tailored for the younger Foundation level VCAL students. It would:

- delay a commitment to training pathways until students have formed clearer goals and can make informed decisions
- obviate the need to engage multiple external RTOs, and to monitor younger students' movements beyond the VCAL provider premises
- provide more consistent wellbeing and learning support from provider staff who have strong existing relationships with students
- ensure students would be at the same site from Monday to Friday when undertaking the curriculum and vocational training components of the VCAL.
- prepare younger students to make the most of the Intermediate/Senior VCAL experience.

This common program could be drawn from existing Certificate 1 qualifications or alternatively accredited courses or units of competency derived from training packages suited to the cohort and their needs. While the chosen options should be oriented towards improving non-technical skills, they should also have clear vocational pathways. Examples include the:

- Certificate 1 in Skills for Vocational Pathways (National Course Code: FSK10213)

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<sup>26</sup> The minimum activity in accredited learning is 90 hours per annum, before progression to Intermediate level is permitted.

- Certificate 1 in Access to Vocational Pathways (NCC: FSK10113)
- Certificate 1 in Developing Independence (NCC: 22333VIC).

To enable this, the Victorian Department of Education and Training's target VETIS funding regime should be amended to include Certificate 1 level courses (it currently covers Certificate 2 and 3 qualifications, and some Certificate 4 in exceptional circumstances).

#### **The Brotherhood of St Laurence's Certificate 1 in Developing Independence**

The Developing Independence (DI) course was designed by the Brotherhood and has been provided to young people who have experienced disadvantage, including to young people at risk of homelessness (residing in Education First Youth Foyers), young people in out-of-home care and those who are justice-connected. The certificate nurtures planning and goal-setting capabilities across the themes of education, employment, health and wellbeing, social connections, housing and living skills, and civic participation. It is designed to help young people to explore and clarify their goals and establish the interpersonal and social networks that would help them realise their aspirations. Importantly, it has an associated pedagogical ethos—Advantaged Thinking—based on positive investment in young people, focusing on developing their assets and on co-creating solutions to help them to achieve independent adulthood.

The DI is typically co-delivered by a qualified trainer and a youth support worker over 180 hours to young people between 16 and 25 years. Such co-delivery enables links to be nurtured between the worlds of employment, education, training and community supports.

#### **Recommendations: Strengthen student and staff support across VCAL and RTO settings**

12. Provide resources to eligible VCAL providers and re-engagement programs for:
  - a. improved specialist wellbeing and remedial literacy and numeracy supports
  - b. professional development that helps teachers and school staff to better respond to disengagement, and to the effects of disadvantage.
13. Tighten guidelines and MOUs to ensure frequent interaction between school and RTO staff, and regular feedback to schools on student progress.
14. Impose higher expectations of RTOs to deliver better workplace-based training outcomes for SBATs
15. Introduce an accredited preparatory program for Foundation level VCAL students to strengthen life skills, aspirations and goal-setting matched with real opportunities. Provision should be made in the Targeted VET funding list for such programs. The Brotherhood's Certificate 1 in Developing Independence is well suited.

## Develop a workforce skilled in applied learning

### Teacher training institutions should better equip teachers in applied learning

Within mainstream schools and teacher training institutions, applied learning carries relatively little status, and this impacts negatively on the quality of teaching in many VCAL programs.

Most teaching graduates have little understanding of applied learning, formal vocational training and the VCAL. While many are enthused with the prospect of teaching within VCAL, few have been equipped by their formal training with the skills needed to teach relevant, hands-on and applied content.

*'I have had many student teachers in placement situations who are excited by, and passionate about working in this field but have no notion of the approaches that are required in flexible and applied learning settings.'* Senior VCAL teacher

Such training is imperative, given the considerable demands placed on VCAL teachers. In the VCAL context a teaching team typically consists of those teaching literacy and numeracy, personal development and work-related skills, as well as those who likely have specific industry expertise. All work across multiple domains to encourage student to explore a range of vocational opportunities, to foster 'internal' motivation and individual responses.

The skills required relate to instructional, applied, portfolio and interest-based learning; engagement skills and relationship building; as well as to facilitating exposure to the 'outside world', with industry, experts and community figures.

While all effective teaching relies on strong relationship building, those in VCAL face particular challenges, given that many VCAL students has experienced difficulties with mainstream learning.

*'Until VCAL is valued as a genuine alternative pathway for young people, and staff are specifically trained in this methodology, then it will continue to struggle with credibility issues'* VCAL teacher

Re-engagement in education per se is frequently a necessary precursor to successfully undertaking VCAL.

The approach taken by teacher training institutions is critical to overcoming the inherent bias—within and beyond the teaching profession—against applied learning. Such institutions should lead the way in prompting people to reconsider their understanding of

'education' and its purpose; and not to undervalue the goal-oriented applied learning experience.

#### **An exemplar teacher training course: La Trobe University's Bachelor of Technology Education**

La Trobe University's Bachelor of Technical Education, a four-year degree, equips professionals from industry to teach Tech studies (in Design, Food, and Systems Engineering) across the year 7–12 curriculum, including subjects for preparatory VET. It covers 'teaching diverse learners', 'literacy and numeracy development', 'inclusive learning environments', 'supporting special needs of learners', 'models of applied learning', and 'human development and wellbeing'.

See <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/courses/bachelor-of-technology-education>

**Recommendations: Develop a workforce skilled in applied learning**

16. Provide incentives to teacher training institutions catering for aspiring secondary school teachers to:
  - a. provide degree-level programs that equip teachers with the skills and versatility to switch between 'instructional' and 'applied' learning
  - b. provide teachers with the skills needed to facilitate pathways thinking and conversations with and between students
  - c. equip teachers to develop project-based learning in collaboration with employers
  - d. enable teachers to identify and respond effectively to signs of disengagement, and particularly to the effects of severe hardship or trauma.
  
17. Allocate resources that enable the VCAA and VALA to develop best practice teaching materials tailored to applied learning at various levels for use in VCAL and VCAL-like programs in secondary schools.



## Ensure high quality assurance and outcomes frameworks in VCAL without compromising flexibility

To accurately gauge students' progress in a VCAL setting is a challenge. High quality VCAL provision requires an individualised approach that responds—often spontaneously—to each student's passions and learning and support needs. It must not only cater for students' needs in the classroom-based curriculum component, but also facilitate goal setting and experiential, workplace based learning, and ensure acquisition of technical vocational skills.

### A more nuanced outcomes framework is required to show the non-technical skills and experience gained in VCAL

The quantifiable measures of assessment applied throughout the VCAL—VET activity hours, unit progression and attendance—do not adequately reflect the progress made by VCAL students. Confidence, clarity of goals, application, employability and commitment are too easily glossed over in the present framework, even though they are powerful indicators of progress.

*'Success should be measured in a number of ways, not just the achievement of outcomes. For example, attendance as a comparison over time, that could show an increase or decrease from time A to B. More importantly ... students could be measured against specific employability or life-long learning skills.'* Senior VCAL teacher

Since many VCAL students—particularly those at Foundation Level—are engaged in a process of 'un-learning' entrenched attitudes and habits relating to education, conventional measures of attainment should be complemented by others, both formal and informal.

Valued attainments should include a student's initiative in establishing and maintaining relationships with employers or community partners. A student's 'outward disposition' should also be gauged with reference to their commitment to volunteering, mentoring relationships, and other civic activity carried out within the VCAL framework.

At a system level, the VCAL performance framework should also reflect the many non-standard outcomes that at first seem negative but represent success stories—for example, 'drop-out' to take up a preferred employment outcome, independent VET qualification, and/or an apprenticeship.

### Post-VCAL transition data should inform VCAL delivery and innovation

The current OnTrack Survey data fails to clearly differentiate the journeys of VCAL students, conflating them with all 'year 12 completers'.<sup>27</sup> While destinations such university, TAFE/VET, apprenticeships/traineeships, and 'not in education or training' are monitored, little is revealed about the links between the VCAL option and these destinations.

There is a need to collect and make available comprehensive data on transitions to employment, for example, from across VCAL provider settings and sectors. Data should be assembled for various cohorts—e.g. by gender and/or by age or level—and various VCAL provider types—e.g. government, non-government schools, community-based VCAL providers and TAFEs. Such data would promote a

<sup>27</sup> See <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/research/pages/ontrack.aspx?Redirect=1#link5>

better understanding of what works best, in what measure, and in what context. This is essential to establish best practice principles and raise standards.

### Assessment in VCAL should be gauged with reference to a consistent understanding of excellence

With a multitude of VCAL providers across government and non-government sectors, there is a risk of too much variance in standards and quality. A culture of assessment moderation needs to be encouraged within and across VCAL providers in order to establish identifiable standards of quality at each level of the certificate.

While flexibility is vital, there is also a need to build confidence in the certificate—not least in the eyes of employers—by ensuring a consistent understanding of standards, and in the assessment of students' work.

While standards must take into account the cohort and VCAL provider context, they should be based on a common understanding of what does or does not meet the requirements. Samples of work at varying standards should be made available on a common platform, curated by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). At the same time, as VCAL teachers we consulted emphasised, it is vital that assessment is premised on high levels of trust of the teacher who is attuned to the student and their context.

Educators working in a VCAL context felt that there is a need for a more active role for the VCAA, and for an expanded remit for such professional bodies as the Victorian Applied Learning Association. They saw the need for a store of resources that not only established benchmarks, but also offered teaching resources of exceptional quality—informed by world-class research into pedagogies and curricula.

#### **Recommendations: Ensure high quality assurance and outcomes frameworks in VCAL without compromising flexibility**

18. Modify the current performance and outcomes framework to
  - a. account for intentional non-completion at the certificate's various levels when students have found employment
  - b. indicate the 'journey travelled', and progress in retention, engagement, wellbeing and attainment for each individual relative to assessments made at their commencement
  - c. include student-initiated interactions with employers and community organisations, and volunteering activity and civic engagement.
19. Promote, through the VCAA, exemplary and award-winning VCAL student projects as reference points for assessment, and for more moderation of assessments across VCAL providers.
20. Collect and make available extensive transition data on all former VCAL students to supplement and enrich On Track data, and to improve service development.

## Provide more funding for applied learning options

Applied learning options, including the VCAL, are more costly to deliver than instructional learning options. In contrast to VCE, pathways staff must be on hand, and work closely with teachers, to deliver a certificate that reaches far beyond the school/provider premises. Staff must also devote considerable time to liaising with training providers and accompanying students to RTO settings to ease the disorientation many feel when switching from one setting to another.

Additional costs are incurred where VCAL providers maintain training facilities on campus (e.g. commercial kitchens, barista stations); and when they subsidise the purchase of materials deemed essential for the training (e.g. boots for training in construction or horticulture).

The Victorian Government's Targeted VETiS funding regime enables VCAL providers and their students to access around 45 Certificate II/III courses. However, the available funding often falls short of meeting training costs, particularly when students—through a process of exploration—change VET programs. Many of these programs require relatively expensive materials (e.g. protective clothing) that are not ultimately needed. The VCAL provider is also susceptible to market fluctuations in the cost of vocational training.

Costly wellbeing support is also an imperative in any VCAL provider setting, given that a significant proportion of VCAL students have experienced disadvantage.<sup>28</sup> Students of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to need support from family therapists, mental health specialists or housing workers, and when experiencing the effects of complex family dynamics.

*'VCAL, the poor relative, is all too often expected to cope with substandard accommodation and hand-me-down resources ... the ability of mainstream VCAL programs to create really effective applied learning programs is strangled by the timetabling and staffing priorities of the school and the attitude towards VCAL which the school community holds.'* VCAL staff member

In spite of these additional costs, many schools regard their VCAL activities as less important than VCE, and this is reflected in the allocation of materials, staffing, buildings, excursions, celebratory events and other resources.

More funds are also necessary for the initiatives mentioned earlier: more careers advice professionals, year 10 interventions, coordination efforts enabling contact with external partners (business and/or community), mentorships, and visits to workplaces.

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<sup>28</sup> The Victorian Auditor-General's Office analysis of 2011 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development data, which showed that 37% of VCAL students were from the lowest SES quartile, and 31% from the lower-middle quartile.

**Recommendations: Provide more funding for VETiS options**

21. Fund school VCAL providers so they can better access:
  - a. auditoria, meeting rooms and audio-visual equipment to allow regular involvement of employers and community groups
  - b. recording studios, workshops, IT facilities, carpentry and health care training equipment.
22. Increase the Student Resource Package and the Targeted VET funding allocation across each of the bands to match the real cost of VETiS.

## Lift the status of VCAL and vocational training across schools and the broader community

### Entrenched and negative views of vocational education limit opportunities

##The standing of VCAL is in large part determined by the wider culture, far beyond the education and training sectors. VCAL and vocational training for young people in general suffer from a society-wide bias—shared to varying degrees by governments, educators, careers advisors, parents and students—favouring university pathways. Not only does this bias devalue vocational training, but it often steers young people towards inappropriate pathways and increases their risk of disengaging from education altogether.

### Vocational education needs to be promoted within and beyond Victoria as a valued pathway

Students that undertake accredited VET training in schools—and particularly disadvantaged young Victorians—must not be viewed as having a second-rate qualification, as this places them at a distinct disadvantage in the labour market.

Changing perceptions requires first the adoption at all levels of language that does not denigrate or diminish vocational training and/or VCAL. Language that suggests VCAL is a framework for dealing with behavioural issues should be rejected. Rather, language throughout education should reflect the utility and worth of the VCAL, and vocational education in general.

The status of vocational education must be improved at all levels—in policy, funding, institutional and cultural initiatives. We see the VCAA’s Get VET Campaign as a small but important step in this regard.<sup>29</sup> However, greater collaboration across sectors and state boundaries is needed if vocational training for young people is to gain ‘parity of esteem’.

*‘VCAL’s point of differentiation with VCE is its ‘proximity’ to workplaces and to employment opportunities. This benefit of its relevance to employment should feature prominently in any promotional campaigns ... It is important that teachers, students, and the community at large do not look upon VCAL as a watered-down VCE.’ VCAL staff member*

Such efforts are underway with the establishment of the National Skills Commission and the National Careers Institute, as well as the current discussions on a national Reform Roadmap for Australia’s VET system, and the Skills for Victoria’s Growing Economy review. We urge the Victorian Government to do all that is possible to use these initiatives to improve the standing of VET for all learners, and

particularly for young people.

We believe the state government should facilitate collaborations across the national VET landscape, and encourage involvement in its promotional efforts from a wider range of agencies (e.g. Victorian

<sup>29</sup> The Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority’s GET VET campaign aims to improve understanding, perceptions and engagement in VET. It targets teachers, parents, students and industry. It highlights success stories through a combination of visual displays (online/social media and ‘hard’). Its online interface addresses myths about VET, shows various pathways, and shows how VCE-VET programs can be multi-directional pathways to accredited training and/or university.

<https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/studentguides/getvet/Pages/Index.aspx>

Curriculum Assessment Authority, the state's Learn Learning and Employment Networks, the Career Industry Council of Australia, as well as industry and education sector peak bodies).

This would entail campaigns and collaborations led by governments to promote and strengthen secondary school programs such as VCAL. Key elements of any such campaign would include:

- highlighting VET's intrinsic worth to individuals and their communities, and its vital role in the educational landscape
- educating parents about the benefits and potential of vocational training, and the steps to progress along pathways to vocations that their children will find stimulating and rewarding
- awarding prizes for stand-out success of both young men and young women who defy preconceptions in fields that are highly gendered.

**Recommendations: Lift the status of VCAL and vocational training across schools and the broader community**

23. Actively promote the benefits of VCAL through a wide range of organisations, peak bodies, materials and media, stressing its:
  - a. role in testing vocational aspirations and pathway options
  - b. provision of 21st century skills and pathways opportunities, as well as its direct links to employment
  - c. capacity to build linkages beyond the educational or training setting.