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Partnering with P&Cs to
advance public education

Submission to the Vocational Education and Training Review January 2019

About WACSSO

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) is the peak body representing parents of public school students in Western Australia. Our organisation provides services and representation at State and Federal level to approximately 650 Parents and Citizens Associations (P&Cs) across Western Australia. We aim to seek, support and represent the views of parents and carers, bringing them into partnership with schools, the Department of Education and all other stakeholders in the public school system.

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INTRODUCTION

WACSSO strongly supports the provision of vocational education and training (VET) to equip students with practical skills that are transferable to the workplace. These opportunities should be to the highest possible standard and accessible for all appropriately aged students.

WACSSO regards VET as a high quality and positive option for students, not simply an alternative avenue for those who choose not to pursue a University pathway.

It is important that vocational programs lead to genuine and meaningful employment opportunities for students, that are available in their local area.

It is with these principles in mind that this submission is based.

Terms Of Reference

1) The Review will have regard to VET funding, policy and regulatory settings and how they can be optimised to support both school leavers and workers to maximise the achievement of relevant skills and employment outcomes from the VET sector.

[a] Funding

VET delivers the technical skills Australia needs for its workforce to remain competitive in a global environment. We need to ensure that the skills acquired in the VET sector are relevant and of a high enough standard to help businesses engage and survive in competitive markets.

At the core of ensuring success is the continued provision of funding as a priority, and in particular the direction and placement of these funds and resources to ensure they are used to maximum effect.

On a state level, the Western Australian government has directed additional funding to the Department of Education due to the inclusion of VET within the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) requirements. But while VET funding has increased in line with both increases in student numbers and to match CPI, our affiliates report that VET programs in some schools remain under-resourced.

For example, a recurring complaint from our affiliates is that students have experienced compromised preferences due to the lack of resourcing of the VET program. Some have cited inadequate backing for either resources at the school to meet industry requirements, or in the sourcing of a suitably-skilled registered training organisation (RTO). Others point out that government funds allocated to the school for VET are not enough to cover all that is required on a yearly basis to receive quality training (for example excursions and learning material).

Generally, the choice of VET options gets more limited the further a student resides from a metropolitan centre. The end result is that many schools are forced to offer only a narrow range of VET courses, which mean some students cannot pursue their chosen interest if the training is not able to be provided.

If students are to be able to make genuine choices, irrespective of financial barriers, there must be adequate funding in place and an increase in the availability of worthwhile, cost-free options.

WACSSO is of the position that no elective should be made based solely on financial capacity, and that support should be offered to schools to enable them to deliver meaningful options.

Another issue of concern is where families are expected to finance and accommodate various VET pathway activities, for example in purchasing protective apparel, tools and equipment, prescribed uniform/clothing and other necessary items.

There should be appropriate funding and resourcing of VET to avoid placing financial pressures on students and their families, particularly as a high number of VET students come from a lower socio-economic background. ¹

On a larger scale, continuing levels of investment should be made into infrastructure (for example, well-equipped schools) to enable full engagement with the curriculum regardless of location of the place of learning.

Funding levels for quality training providers should also be given a high level of priority, with enough resources distributed to ensure RTOs remain viable while providing quality training.

Training provider failure poses a risk to schools, students and parents, given the long auditing intervals and the fact that only a third of RTOs delivering courses to school students are under the more watchful eye of the state-based regulator. ²

The National VET regulations should support training providers and enable them to focus on the quality of training for students in the first instance which will, in turn, support the training provider to meet the regulatory requirements.

Another issue to address is student access to reliable, fast internet, as our economy transitions away from its reliance on mining and traditional manufacturing, into industries focused on services and high-tech requirements.

This has particular relevance in regional, rural and remote (RRR) locations, where unreliable access to technology and the internet remains a problem for some schools, students and families.

It has obvious implications for VET students who will be required to carry out on-line research, data processing and other requisite obligations, and who will be disadvantaged if they live in areas where reception is poor.

WACSSO believes that students in isolated areas should receive educational services at or near their home using the best available distance education techniques and technologies.

In terms of internet access, WACSSO advocates for:

- an upgrade of bandwidth capabilities for all schools
- a commitment to ensuring imminent, high-speed internet access for all students, including adequate provision for students in rural and remote areas
- the 'My School' website to include data stating the speed, quality and availability of each school's internet access so that the delivery of the Australian Curriculum at an individual school level can be assessed against their ability to fully use electronic curriculum delivery and learning resources
- priority to be given to RRR schools in areas where NBN is set for roll-out

Many rural-based students are also encumbered by the lack of adequate transport to schools which offer VET courses.

Overall, WACSSO believes that, wherever possible, fully resourced schools should be made available within reasonable daily commuting distance of all students. But we recognise this is not always possible.

While transport problems can be considered an occupational hazard for those who live with the tyranny of distance, it is nevertheless unjust for students in such circumstances to miss out on a VET program. There is sound cause for such students to be subsidised for their travel costs, or other financial assistance considered.

As an example, one of our RRR affiliates reports their students have to travel 188km each way to attend VET courses at their nearest centre, often leaving in the early morning and returning late in the evening.

An option for some students is to move to a larger centre which provides access to an expanded VET curriculum, but relocation costs can be prohibitive. Appropriate funding could be allocated to support students who are forced to move to complete their higher level certificate.

Government can also investigate the feasibility of establishing key VET locations in each state to provide accommodation for students for whom distance and location is a barrier to successful education outcomes.

[b] Priorities

Proper and dedicated government financial backing for VET is imperative. WACSSO also endorses a multi-year funding framework that extends well beyond an election cycle to allow strategies to focus on teaching without the insecurity of unexpected funding cutbacks.

In short, WACSSO calls on the Commonwealth to increase its allocations under its responsibilities as defined in the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development (NASWD)³, which identifies the long term objectives of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments in the areas of skills and workforce development.

Under the NASWD charter, the Commonwealth is charged with providing funding contributions to States and Territories to support their training systems, while also supplying assistance to support industry investment in training; Australian apprenticeships; literacy and numeracy; and those seeking to enter the workforce.

Figures from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research show that from 2015-2017, the Commonwealth component to WA has declined. ⁴

Increased levels of funding are needed to:

- help State governments fund VET programs in schools to maximise quality and accessibility
- help State governments cover the cost of VET materials
- help State governments improve facilities for VET training
- help TAFE and other RTOs to ensure their survival, while monitoring integrity
- enable all schools to offer caps on VET course prices to ensure affordability
- improve access to internet
- address problems facing remote and isolated education
- enable possible subsidisation of transport costs for those in remote areas

There are also a number of other programs which sit outside the NASWD, including the Australian National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Apprenticeships Incentives Program, the Australian Apprenticeships Access program, Apprenticeship Support Services, Group Training, and other adult literacy and workforce development initiatives.

While State and Territory Governments contribute to these areas, there is uncertainty over the funding responsibilities for all VET services, with levels varying from state to state. A rigorous model for the VET system needs to be developed, based on the need to be innovative and adaptive to changing demands, and where the funding roles of the Commonwealth and the states are clearly determined. The

functions of the various agencies, including the national VET regulator, should also be robustly defined.

2) It will examine skills shortages in VET-related occupations, in particular any tension between VET outcomes and the needs of industries and employers, and what might be done to better align these.

WACSSO has received many reports from teachers, students and parents about the difficulty of securing work placements for VET students.

In the current climate of fiscal restraint, with businesses closing and/or reducing staff numbers, many are unable to host students. And where limited certificate options are offered by a local school, there is increased competition for access to work placements.

Securing placements for students is even more difficult in small communities with few businesses. However, opportunities can be expanded if schools offer VET courses aligned to the local industries in those regions.

Additionally, placements can be offered at Government agencies, which deliver a wide range of services and are located throughout the state. We see an opportunity for Federal, State and Local Governments to work together and make an investment in education by directing agencies to host work placements for VET students.

Once established agreements are in place at these sites, it will reduce the administrative burden and time-consuming process of securing future placements. It would also provide better certainty to schools when determining the choice of certificates offered for study.

The move would certainly help alleviate the problem of skills shortages in VET-related occupations, by producing suitably trained people for the industries involved in the placements.

Generally, in equipping students for a variety of post-school situations, schools' curricula should include vocational subjects that will be valued by employers and others. VET courses should:

- be financially accessible to all interested students
- be developed in consultation with industry and others, balancing industry needs with broader educational outcomes
- be accredited
- not shift costs from private industry to the public school system

Where workplace experience is included, this must be rigorously monitored to ensure that the placement genuinely adds to students' knowledge and skills.

To ensure that all students leave school with the skills, knowledge, understanding and self-esteem to achieve their vocational choice:

- courses should support the development of broad competencies (rather than narrow skillsets for specific jobs)
- students should be provided with a range of actual or simulated career experiences
- career counselling, by people who are appropriately trained, should be available to all students

4) The Review may consider the flexibility of qualification structures, particularly for mid-career workers, and for industries seeking rapid deployment of new skills.

Schools and RTOs serving schools must be able to implement new courses and new equipment in a timely manner, to ensure they keep pace with changes to industry requirements.

VET teachers should be able to access regular upskilling opportunities to ensure their skills and knowledge remain relevant to emerging trends and needs of business and industry.

This should be rapid in nature to ensure that trainers are available as soon as new demands arise.

5) The Review may have regard to community perceptions of the effectiveness of the VET sector and the accessibility and utility of information about VET options and outcomes, both for employers and students, including information linking training options to employment outcomes.

WACSSO would like to draw attention to a perceived lack of understanding of issues faced by VET students in RRR locations, as referred to in our response to TOR 1.

Generally, students in RRR schools are less likely to attempt to gain university entry, with just under a third of students enrolling in ATAR courses, compared to 45 per cent of metropolitan students.² It is reasonable to believe that students in regional WA prefer to receive a sound vocational education.

Indeed, one of the biggest advantages of providing good vocational opportunities in regional centres would be the retention of young people in the communities where they feel most comfortable, and in the process help stem the growing trend of a population exodus to the bigger towns.

However, our RRR affiliates report that little has been done to help students in their regions to overcome various problems caused by geographical circumstances.

For example, the limited number of RTOs available for auspicings and off-site delivery affects VET delivery in regional areas. The training needs of students in regional communities are not always being adequately met, with insufficient training technology and infrastructure, and difficulties in attracting and retaining the high calibre delivery staff necessary for quality training outcomes.⁵

This often also results in regional schools only offering limited VET courses, to the detriment of students who are forced to take up a subject they have no interest in. As a result, many RRR students are not equipped with the right skills and knowledge to get started on their chosen career path.

Every effort needs to be made to attract and retain excellent, committed teachers for rural and remote schools, including those able to deliver VET courses. Government should investigate ways of helping students in regions where there are limited number of RTOs available for auspicings.

There should also be support for research into alternative curriculum options for rural and remote schools. It is ironic that while there is a very high percentage of VET students in these regions, the course selection remains limited.

Whilst there are wide ranging concerns and observations about the issues facing VET, there are some excellent examples of evidence-based best practice in the sector. Focusing on what works and learning from those who have achieved success is integral to any review process.

In Western Australia our Colleges of Agriculture provide a combination of WACE subjects and nationally accredited certificates, with a focus on the agricultural, mining and trades areas. They provide residential facilities and past students have been recipients of the prestigious Beazley Medal (VET).

There are also many secondary schools who have developed strong industry and community partnerships, delivering quality and engaging VET programs, supporting student outcomes, and enabling them to reach their individual potential. This is the standard we want to see for all students.

It is also important to highlight the contribution that the VET sector provides in teaching STEM skills in real or simulated workplaces, in close collaboration with industry and employers, making VET an ideal provider of skill development.⁸

There is a need for continued affirmation that the VET choice is a valuable and worthwhile endeavour as an alternative for students to attain their leaving qualifications.

6) It may review whether additional support is needed for vulnerable cohorts, including those currently unemployed and at risk of unemployment, or those with low literacy and numeracy skills.

WACSSO supports the principle that additional support should be provided to vulnerable cohorts, or those with low literacy and numeracy skills.

The term “vulnerable cohorts” needs to be more clearly defined, and perhaps could include students in remote areas, culturally and diverse students, as well as those with disabilities.

We believe the government education system should ensure that any student who has not achieved their educational aspirations by school leaving age will:

- still have access to secondary education;
- have access to other educational opportunities, including bridging programs to tertiary education.

(7) The Review may seek out case studies of best practice in VET, and consider whether specific trials should be undertaken to test innovative approaches likely to deliver better outcomes.

WACSSO supports this initiative. In particular, it would be beneficial to seek out examples which demonstrate how businesses and schools have successfully cooperated to ensure that VET helps prepare students for prospective employment within those businesses.

The case studies could also investigate how such links help alleviate labour shortages, and/or provide suitably-trained staff for industries which need specialised skills, and help establish recommendations to achieve successful outcomes.

Input and feedback can be sought from current and past students on ways of improving VET delivery. Children and young people do place a high value on the role of school and education in contributing to their well-being, and should not be excluded from consultation.

Past winners of state VET awards (for example, the Beazley Medal winner in WA) may also make excellent candidates for best practice studies.

8) The Review should have regard to the scope and outcomes from any previous or forthcoming reviews, consultation to date, and inputs made by industry and peak groups.

This submission draws the Review Committee's attention to the bibliography at the end of this document.

IN CONCLUSION

WACSSO welcomes the acknowledgement by Government of the importance of VET to the growth of Australian businesses, and to the capacity of millions of Australians to succeed in changing labour markets. Significant shifts have occurred in Australian industry and its workforce, with demand for skills shifting from manufacturing to the services sector and emerging industries such as advanced manufacturing and information and communications technology.

Feedback from our affiliates tells us that the VET program is running adequately at best, providing students the opportunity to obtain the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) using a certificate qualification (usually II or III) and General Courses.

We also know that some ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) students are pursuing the certificates, recognising that VET offers an opportunity to complement or to provide an alternative route to graduation, TAFE or university.

The general consensus is that the VET program as a whole meets the broad needs of students as it typically gives direction, industry-specific instruction from trainers who have worked in the relevant industries, and, at the very least, hold the qualification that is being delivered to the students. Industries rightly assume that in attaining their qualifications, VET students have had access to industry-standard equipment, were taught by trainers with relevant and current industry experience and have spent time in the workplace.

In WA, the inclusion of a VET category in the annual Beazley Medal, which grants equal status as the award given to the highest performing academic student, has gone some way in lifting the profile of vocational studies.

Introduced by the School Curriculum and Standards Authority of WA in 2001, the award recognises the growing number of students pursuing vocationally oriented studies and the increasingly rigorous nature of the courses. Many of the winners have hailed from agricultural schools or regional areas, indicating a good success rate for VET in RRR sectors.

WACSSO notes that the review has committed to the first three terms of reference, while suggesting that the remaining five terms appear to be optional and MAY be implemented. For the betterment of the VET system, WACSSO calls for all eight terms of reference to be carried out.

We welcome the collective work of the panel, schools and governments in identifying evidence-based best practice to implement sustained improvements for the VET sector.

This review provides an opportunity to create a vision and leadership in Australia's VET program, and perhaps further a national conversation on how we can better educate and train Australia in the future.

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