

# Course expectations and career management skills

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, state and territory governments or NCVER

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# About the research



*Course expectations and career management skills* by Marnie L Kennedy and Ben Haines

This research is a little unusual for NCVER. While most NCVER research studies focus on issues of concern to policy or practice, this report essentially deals with a methodological issue. It considers whether the accuracy of students' course expectations is improved if the students have well-developed career management competencies.

The research consists of correlating the career management competence (as set out in the *Australian Blueprint for Career Development*) of 29 vocational education and training (VET) students with objective criteria—such as tasks required in a specific job, expected earnings, skills to be acquired from training—relating to the course they were undertaking. Each individual answered 12 questions to do with expectations of their future possibilities on completing the course, of the type of work likely to result from the course, and of the course itself. At the same time, each student was rated against the *Blueprint's* three areas of competence.

The results indicated that, on the whole, students had very realistic expectations of their course. There was, however, no clear relationship between the score and this overall level of realism.

Information gathered from the students during this project indicates that:

- young people develop the skills they need to manage their careers through learning that occurs in both formal and informal settings
- parents can play an important role in providing their children with relevant and realistic career information.

Readers interested in career development may also find the following report useful: Rainey, L, Simons, M, Pudney, V and Hughes, E 2008, *What choice? An evaluation of career development services for young people*, NCVER, Adelaide.

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Managing Director, NCVER

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# Executive summary

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There is a broad literature asserting that vocational education and training (VET) students often have poor understandings of the likely employment, career, education and training pathways that are likely to stem from their particular chosen course of VET study (Quay Connection and Phillips KPA 2005; OECD 2002, 2004; Callan 2005; Ball 2004; Ball & John 2005; The Transitions Review Group 2004). These inadequate understandings are thought to be linked to the poor completion rates experienced by some VET students, including those undertaking apprenticeships and traineeships.

The Quay Connection and Phillips KPA report of 2005 found that both parents and students identified a lack of course information as a problem. Our research suggests it is not specific information on course outcomes which is lacking but, rather, the ability to successfully navigate the wide range of information sources available, and the ability to use this information to set career goals. Students need information which will inform their understanding of where their vocational choices are located in society, how to create and secure work, how to find work–life balance in terms of their own personal priorities, and how to effectively build their careers. In essence, they are seeking the skills to make informed career (life, learning and work) decisions.

Career information provision alone is not sufficient (Department of Education, Science and Training 2006; McMahon & Patton 2006; The Allen Consulting Group 2005). Those working in the knowledge economy need to possess skills that will enable them to actively manage their careers throughout their lives in a highly mobile and frequently changing employment environment. The *Australian Blueprint for Career Development: Trial version* (Miles Morgan Australia 2003) outlines 11 broad career management competencies that can be learnt and which will help people to negotiate and manage their careers.

These are:

- ✧ Area A: Personal management competencies:
  - ◆ building and maintaining a positive self-image
  - ◆ interacting positively and effectively with others
  - ◆ changing and growing throughout life.
- ✧ Area B: Learning and work exploration competencies:
  - ◆ participation in lifelong learning supportive of career goals
  - ◆ locating and effectively using career information
  - ◆ understanding the relationship between work, society and the economy.
- ✧ Area C: Career-building competencies:
  - ◆ securing/creating and maintaining work
  - ◆ making career-enhancing decisions
  - ◆ maintaining a balance between life and work roles
  - ◆ understanding the changing nature of life and work roles
  - ◆ understanding, engaging in and managing the career-building process.

Our research started from the premise that an individual's level of career management competence, as defined by the *Blueprint*, would be related to the accuracy and realism of their expectations of the employment and further educational pathways made available by their chosen course of study.

This study examined the career development stories of 29 individuals currently participating in VET. Semi-structured interviews were used to assess the career development competencies and course expectations of the students. These were compared to determine if a relationship existed.

The most surprising finding was that students' expectations of the employment and training pathways stemming from their current study were, overall, more realistic than expected, contradicting some of the literature on the course information needs of clients. Those students with broadly realistic expectations also possessed career management competencies that were developmentally appropriate. However, among the small group of students who had more unrealistic expectations of their course, overall career management competence levels were lower than would be expected of students of that age group.

It was interesting to note the existence of a small group of students who had generally poor career management skills overall, yet extremely accurate and detailed course expectations. All of these students were informed by a trusted parent on the likely outcomes of their course of study and the vocation associated with it. This is consistent with the existing literature that emphasises the important influence of parents on young people's career development. This suggests that an accurate and trusted information source, such as a well-informed parent, may lead to a student having realistic course expectations even if they have not developed high levels of career management competence. However, this may not necessarily provide the skills and understanding needed for the ongoing lifetime management of a career.

The most common career development learning experiences that students cited were work experience (including structured workplace learning; 18 students), and visiting the career service of a TAFE institution or school (18 students). Significantly, six of the students had no experience of a formal career development service or program. None of the participants, therefore, had undertaken a comprehensive and sequential career development program. This suggests that student access to programs designed to develop career management competence is limited.

This study provides tentative evidence that higher-level career management competence as defined by the *Blueprint* may be associated with more realistic expectations of course outcomes for VET students. However, accurate information from a trusted source, generally a parent, can also provide a student with realistic expectations about their course in lieu of well-developed career management competencies.

# Introduction

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## Research purpose

The national risk management strategy for the vocational education and training (VET) sector, and aspects of the broader literature (Quay Connection and Phillips KPA 2005; OECD 2002, 2004; Callan 2005; Ball 2004; Ball & John 2005; The Transitions Review Group 2004) report that VET students often have poor understandings of the likely career and further education pathways resulting from specific VET training options. Focus group research with parents and VET students also indicates that both groups believe that better information about course outcomes is required (Quay Connection and Phillips KPA 2005).

Recent research argues that lack of information is not the problem; rather, it is having the broad skills (career management competencies) required to effectively locate, navigate, and use career information (Viljamaa, Patton & McMahon 2006) and to effectively navigate the world of work (McMahon, Patton & Tathan 2003) that is important. While this perspective is common throughout the career development field, it is less apparent in the VET sector (Patton 2000).

Following Australia's participation in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2002) *OECD review of career guidance policies*, there has been a concerted national policy push towards supporting career development activities, particularly for Australian youth. The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) commissioned the development of a national framework for organising and designing career development activities, entitled the *Australian Blueprint for Career Development: Trial version* (Miles Morgan Australia 2003). The *Blueprint* proposes that there are 11 core competencies required for effective career management. A national trial of the *Blueprint* has been completed and is awaiting publication of the findings.

Contemporary career development theory would suggest that improved levels of career management competence should be associated with students having clear and realistic expectations of the likely career and further education pathways resulting from their chosen VET training programs and how these fit with their broad life/work aspirations. Accordingly, this research explores the relationship between the realism of students' expectations of the likely outcomes from their training and their levels of career development competence.

The recent report *Information needs of VET clients* (Quay Connection and Phillips KPA 2005) was commissioned by the Australian Commonwealth Government in response to issues identified as part of the national risk strategy consultation process. The report evaluated the information needs of VET participants and stakeholders and found that VET clients generally have poor knowledge of the options available within the VET sector. The report identified a general perception among stakeholders that people often end up in an inappropriate pathway for their intended occupational roles and goals. This was due to students entering the course with a poor understanding of a number of important factors: their individual suitability for that role, and the vocational options which are opened and, more significantly, closed to them as a result of choosing that particular training pathway. The report noted that the issues of poor information access, based on parents' and students' perceptions, were not related to the lack of available information *per se* but, rather, an

inability to effectively navigate the information and apply it to their own situation. The report identified the following information needs:

- ✧ linkages of aptitudes and interests to occupations
- ✧ descriptions of similar jobs
- ✧ occupations in high demand
- ✧ conditions of employment, rights and responsibilities under training contracts
- ✧ the career and occupation pathways likely to flow from various VET pathways.

That these areas of information were identified as lacking suggested that what individuals and their parents were essentially seeking was information and advice in order to make career choices, which should be a precursor to enrolment in a particular course of study. No amount of course information provided by the VET sector can compensate for this gap in the learning and work exploration that individuals need to undertake in order to make career decisions.

This perceived lack of understanding of the likely outcomes from VET study has the potential to have considerable impact on VET students. Non-completion rates from VET studies are already relatively high (Ball 2004; Ball & John 2005). Enrolling in a VET course is often an important transition point in the career of a young person and, when made with ill-informed or unrealistic expectations of the benefits and outcomes, may potentially lead to individual dissatisfaction with training and the employment options that the training leads to.

Grubb (2002) reports that the common response to supporting people's career information needs has been for governments to publish considerable volumes of high-quality information to the internet in a 'self-serve' model. The assumption that providing accurate information is sufficient for that information to be wisely used is problematic. Career information, for instance, is received, weighted and judged in different ways by different people (Grubb 2002). Economic perspectives tend to see education and training as being a rational investment decision made in light of relative returns from the different choices available, yet few young people appear to approach decision-making regarding educational pathways in a planned, rational, and context-free manner (Blenkinsop et al. 2006). Accordingly, equipping people with the skills to locate and effectively use the information they desire, amongst a mass of information, is seen under the *Blueprint* framework as one of the key career development competencies that people need (Miles Morgan Australia 2003).

There is a diversity of occupational pathways that are now open to students, and it is important to understand and accept individual career and life narratives based on individual values, goals, objectives and priorities, rather than simply viewing a career as an economic or financial activity (McMahon & Patton 2006). The issue of understanding individual motivations for undertaking a particular course of study is, therefore, a necessary prerequisite to any examination of the realism of those expectations.

There is considerable variation in the desired career outcomes of individual students. Some VET students enter the system with poorly defined lifestyle goals, accompanied by unrealistic expectations and little understanding of the information that is available and how to access it. On the other end of the spectrum, some clients (in particular mature-age VET entrants), tend to have more specifically defined reasons for entering vocational education and training, typically undertaking a specific qualification with expectations of financial, vocational, career and/or skills progression benefits (Department of Training 2001).

In response to the OECD (2002) review of the Australian career guidance system there is a strong, well-resourced, and well-supported push towards the development of a career development culture in Australia (Cameron 2006). The *Blueprint* (and the concept of career development as used in that document) may become part of the essential infrastructure informing career development activities. Given that the *Blueprint* has recently been trialled throughout Australia, it is topical to examine the

relationship between career management competence, as it is framed by the *Blueprint*, and the realism of the expectations that VET students have of their chosen course of study.

This study, then, sets out to explore the relationships between the level of career management competence that students possess and the realism of their expectations of the likely employment and further education pathways stemming from their current course of study. It was our hypothesis that having effective career management skills should lead to more informed VET choices, as demonstrated by the realism of students' expectations regarding likely outcomes.

The policy implications of this are considerable. If higher levels of career management competence, or specific types of career management competence, are linked with entering the VET system with more realistic expectations, then it is arguable that retention and completion rates should be better in students who enter the system with increased career management competence. The costs of student non-completion in the VET sector are high, and anything that improves course completion rates is likely to be welcomed by governments, students, and industry alike.

## Literature review

### Informed choice in the VET sector

Consumer choice in the VET sector is widely accepted as paramount and is seen 'as a means to promote greater diversity and responsiveness' to the needs of employers, parents/intermediaries and individual students (Anderson 2004, p.1). Individual choice in the VET sector has been described as 'complex, contingent and dynamic' (Anderson 2004, p.4), and to make wise choices requires a certain amount of information. As recently as 2003, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA)<sup>1</sup> explained its own rationale for choosing to restrict the choices made available to many clients in the VET sector by stating that 'Clients still see vocational education and training as complex, and this denies them the ability to make informed choices about the "what, where, when and how" of training' (p.3, cited in Anderson 2004).

Career decisions fluctuate intensively over time, even in people who at first appear firm and set in their choices, and career choices in young people are often opportunistic and context based (Blenkinsop et al. 2006). Widespread choice in the VET sector has an implied prerequisite of informed consumers (Anderson 2004; Blenkinsop et al. 2006), while market-based competition in vocational education and training means that VET providers are forced to market the benefits of their training (Anderson 2005). In a sector that is characterised by such variety and choice, it is clear that there are significant issues for students who are poorly informed about the likely impact of their VET choices upon their future careers.

There is an agreed national risk management approach for the VET sector. Key risk areas are established for each annual cycle, based on advice from states, territories, the Australian Government, and industry. These risks are drawn from a variety of sources, including complaints, local audits, research, student satisfaction surveys, employer surveys, and feedback from industry bodies. In response to perceived risks in the system, a major national project was commissioned in 2004 to produce sharply focused advice on the specific information needs of clients, on the basis that:

a well informed (VET) client is empowered to make better choices about VET and that in turn will improve outcomes for clients and investors in the national training system.

(Quay Connection and Phillips KPA 2005, p.3)

The report *Information needs of VET clients* (Quay Connection and Phillips KPA 2005) found that gaps exist in VET clients' access to information and their access to reliable advice prior to making

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<sup>1</sup> As of 1 July 2005, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) ceased operation and its functions were taken over by the former Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training.

training choices. The report suggests that this lack of reliable advice ‘undermines [clients] confidence in the choices they make’ (Quay Connection and Phillips KPA 2005, p.1).

VET choices are made for a variety of reasons, all of which are linked to some form of expectation of private return or individual benefit. Examination of private return typically focuses on likely employability and economic benefits. There is, of course, good reason for this, as improving career prospects is clearly a common and important reason for undertaking both VET and tertiary studies (Harris, Sumner & Rainey 2005). However, it is important to realise that students have varied expectations and desired benefits from courses and some are enrolling in courses for non-economic and non-vocational reasons. Motivations for enrolling in a VET course can commonly include general interest, a specific desire for a qualification, or the desire to gain a specific occupational skill rather than a qualification (Callan 2005). Recent research identifies two main non-vocational reasons for undertaking VET studies: ‘personal development’ and ‘for interest or recreation’ (Harris, Sumner & Rainey 2005). Vocational education and training, therefore, plays a broader role than simply improving employment or economic prospects at the individual level.

## Completion rates

Addressing poor completion rates is an acknowledged national priority, with the then prime minister noting as much (Howard 2006). For example, completion rates for certificate I and certificate II have been reported to be 33% and 43%, respectively (Stanwick 2005). There is a considerable nexus between the issues of poor completion rates in the VET sector and unrealistic expectations of course outcomes. It is common for students to leave VET before completion because the content of the course did not match student needs, and because the course did not fit the demands of the job (Callan 2005). That such a mismatch exists implies that either the VET provider’s marketing and information material was inaccurate, or the students’ knowledge of what they could realistically expect from the course was in some way flawed. Regardless of the location of fault, this implies that more realistic expectations at the onset of training could lead to improved completion rates.

The issue of completion rates according to age in the VET sector is complex, with the type of course also having an effect. Shah and Burke’s (2003) work examined the completion rates of all VET students and found that, overall, it was the students aged over 40 years that held the lowest completion rate in 2000 (28%). Nevertheless, the highest completion rate (held by the 18-year-old age group) was only 40%. There is considerable literature examining the complexities of this issue. In recent work examining apprenticeships and traineeships, the 20–24 age group had the lowest completion rates, and they were also the most ‘job-mobile’ (Ball & John 2005, p.5). Those over the age of 24 tend to have specific, focused and realistic vocational goals for pursuing a qualification (Ball 2004). In contrast, younger apprentices and trainees may have less focused goals, and their expectations of the likely benefit from the course are often less realistic. This finding is also reflected in the international literature, which shows that younger students often have unrealistic expectations of post-school education systems (The Transitions Review Group 2004). Notably, Shah and Burke’s (2003) work on overall completion rates does not delve into the complexities of the level to which particular courses are vocationally oriented, or the extent to which course completion is actually a requirement of improved vocational outcomes. Particularly for older students, it is often the case that specific units (rather than specific qualifications) can provide the desired vocational competencies without the need to complete a full qualification.

Bowman, Stanwick and Blythe (2005) have argued that having an accurate understanding of what is expected of oneself is a key driver of completion rates in the apprenticeship and trainee area of vocational education and training. That is, awareness of roles and responsibilities drives completion rates, and a lack of awareness is a key reason for non-completions and withdrawals. In line with this, the report recommends that a key factor in improving apprenticeship completion rates is the development of a strong mutual understanding of expectations and likely outcomes at the beginning of training.

## Defining careers and career development

Earlier definitions of career and career development have been related specifically to occupation and occupational choice, respectively (Patton & McMahon 1999; McMahon, Patton & Tathan 2003). However, these definitions have changed over time to reflect the changes that are also occurring in the world of work. The concept of career can now be defined as:

the sequence and variety of work roles (paid and unpaid) which one undertakes throughout a lifetime. More broadly, 'career' includes life roles, leisure activities, learning and work.

(Miles Morgan Australia 2003)

The notion of career carries with it the understanding that work is not a static entity but is carried out, and changes, over time. Patton and McMahon (1999) further suggest the term 'life/career' better reflects the integration of life and career that is actually experienced.

Career development has also become a much more dynamic concept (Patton & McMahon 1999), and it has come to be understood as encompassing not only work choices, but also the ways these choices take place across the lifespan. Recent developments within the career development field have seen a move toward conceptualising career development as involving an individual's whole life:

The environmental pressures and constraints, the bonds that tie him or her to significant others, responsibilities to children and ageing parents, the total structure of one's circumstances are also factors that must be understood and reckoned with. In these terms, career development and personal development converge. Self and circumstances—evolving, changing, unfolding in mutual interaction—constitute the focus and the drama of career development.

(Wolfe & Kolb 1980, cited in Patton & McMahon 1999, p.4)

That is, career development can be understood as a 'dynamic interaction between individuals, paid employment and life' (McMahon, Patton & Tathan 2003, p.4). A key point McMahon, Patton and Tathan make is that individuals need to be active agents in this dynamic interaction, rather than 'passive recipients of a life/career process' (2003, p.4).

Patton (2000) has pointed out the very different theoretical and practical approaches to vocational education and training and to career development. The focus of the VET sector has historically been on training (Smith 2000, cited in Patton 2000), and its relationship with industry has been the main driver for the type of training provided. Career development, on the other hand, focuses on the development of the individual in terms of the ways they manage their career. Increasingly, career development theories have focused on the *processes* involved in managing our life/career. In contrast, the VET sector's historical focus on clear outcomes, in the form of technical skills that are of value to industry, means the processes involved in translating those skills into the workplace have been less well articulated and understood (Patton 2000). More recently, changes in the area of workforce skills development were recognised in current national priorities for the *2005–2008 Commonwealth–State Agreement for Skilling Australia's Workforce* (Department of Education, Science and Training 2005). These included changes in the content of work, the type of education and training which both employers and individuals are seeking, and the skills required for employability. Similarly, the National Quality Council's work plan for 2005 focused on achieving progress on incorporating employability skills into training packages. The Annual National Priorities for 2005 also included the provision of better outcomes for young people as they move from school to vocational education and training and work. The current reform agenda has seen a review of structure and mechanisms intended to ensure that the VET sector equips individuals for the rapidly evolving knowledge economy.

## Career development and age

The age of students might reasonably be expected to have an influence on both their career management skills, and the expectations they have of their careers, for a number of reasons. First, older students tend to have more vocationally orientated reasons for choosing VET courses, in contrast to more 'lifestyle' oriented goals of younger students (Quay Connection and Phillips KPA

2005). There is also a reasonable expectation that older students would have better developed career management skills, simply through their considerably greater workforce experience and their exposure to workplace mentors and role models (Jarvis 2003).

## Career development, learning, and work expectations

Blenkinsop et al. (2006) found that schools that have effective 'career education and guidance provision' in place have students that are more likely to be 'thinking through their choices more rationally, and weighing up all of the information they received' (Blenkinsop et al. 2006, p.vii). Such students were also less reliant on family and friends and more influenced by teachers and career education and guidance officers. Schools without support strategies and career education and guidance provision in place produced students who were more likely to have varied approaches to decision-making; to change their minds about decisions over time; and to have mindsets that reflected a 'comfort-seeking' or 'defeatist' approach to decision-making.

The Transitions Review Group (2004) reported that quality career guidance activities have been shown to improve factual knowledge, transition management skills, and career exploration skills. At face value, it seems reasonable to expect that the provision of career education programs and career development services in Australia should influence the accuracy and realism of students' expectations of their VET courses.

## Career management competencies

Policy-makers are becoming aware of the important role career development can play in workforce development, as changes in the way that work is organised increase the need for individuals to manage their own careers and actively engage in lifelong learning as an adjunct to this.

One of the new paradigms of guidance provision is the need for refocusing careers education and guidance to teach career management competences to citizens as skills to be reused over one's lifetime. The possession of such skills was noted as a key factor in wage differentials in OECD countries in the OECD's (2002) Education Policy Analysis.

(European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture 2004, p.6)

The development of a career development skills framework began in 1988 through the United States' National Occupation Information Coordinating Committee (NOICC). The *US National Career Development Guidelines* were then adapted into the *Blueprint for Life/Work Designs* (Hache, Redekopp & Jarvis 2000) in Canada. Since then many career practitioners in both the United States and Canada have spent time piloting, evaluating, developing, revising and implementing the North American career development skills framework (Jarvis 2003, p.9).

In 2003, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs commissioned the development of a framework for career development in Australia based on the Canadian *Blueprint for Life/Work Design*. This resulted in the *Australian Blueprint for Career Development: Trial version* (Miles Morgan Australia 2003), which defines 11 specific competencies for managing the career development process over the lifespan. The *Blueprint* is increasingly informing the design and content of career development policies and practices throughout Australia. Many young students entering the VET sector in the future will have had access to formal programs specifically designed to facilitate the development of the career management competencies, as outlined in the *Blueprint*.

Career development, as conceptualised under the *Blueprint*, is a developmental process, one that unfolds over time and over the lifespan. The competencies are presented in a four-phase developmental framework, and determination of the appropriate learning phase of each student should, ideally, be based on an assessment of need rather than age. The *Blueprint* notes that learning and experience do not proceed in a neat linear manner. It suggests that career development is an ongoing, lifelong process of interaction between individuals and the environment that surrounds them. These interactions will shape people's learning requirements and their levels of mastery of the career competencies in different ways and at different times in their lives.

The *Blueprint* does suggest, however, that for pragmatic reasons related to the way schooling is organised, the phases can be linked to age. For example, the *Blueprint* suggests phase I can be used with students from K-Primary school, phase II with students in middle school, phase III with post-compulsory school students, and phase IV with adults (Miles Morgan Australia 2003).

The 11 career management competencies are clustered into the three broad domains of personal management; learning and work exploration; and career-building.

- ✧ Area A: Personal management competencies:
  - ◆ building and maintaining a positive self-image
  - ◆ interacting positively and effectively with others
  - ◆ changing and growing throughout life.
- ✧ Area B: Learning and work exploration competencies:
  - ◆ participation in lifelong learning supportive of career goals
  - ◆ locating and effectively using career information
  - ◆ understanding the relationship between work, society and the economy.
- ✧ Area C: Career-building competencies:
  - ◆ securing/creating and maintaining work
  - ◆ making career-enhancing decisions
  - ◆ maintaining a balance between life and work roles
  - ◆ understanding the changing nature of life and work roles
  - ◆ understanding, engaging in and managing the career-building process.

## Research question

The major research question was 'Is there a relationship between the degree of realism of students' expectations of their VET courses of study and the level and type of career management competence that they possess?'

In assessing course outcome expectations of early stage VET students, and contrasting this with their levels of career management competence, we sought to illustrate the relationship between career management competence and the ability of VET students to accurately foresee the outcomes of their chosen VET course. The ability to manage their career development well should enable students to make choices that maximise their chances of experiencing successful outcomes. Students with sound career management skills should have course expectations that reflect a realistic understanding of what the course is offering, how that fits within the wider world of work, and how well the learning pathway accommodates their own career goals and aspirations.

# Methodology

## Evaluating career management competence

There are numerous scales and measurement tools that seek to measure various aspects of career management competence. For example, in Australia Patton, Spooner-Lane and Creed (2005) have worked to develop and refine a tool called the Career Development Inventory—Australian version. However, despite the existence of various measures for assessing career management competence, there are no accepted instruments constructed to fit either the *Blueprint*, or the *Canadian Blueprint for Life/Work Designs* (Hache, Redekopp & Jarvis 2000). With the *Australian Blueprint for Career Development* still in the trialling and refinement stage, it is not surprising that an assessment instrument is yet to be developed.

The nature of the *Blueprint* competencies, taken in conjunction with the lack of existing tested quantitative instruments and the research paradigms of the career development discipline, call for a qualitative and narrative assessment methodology. Qualitative methodologies are generally considered appropriate for evaluating career readiness, career development, and the contexts in which career development choices are made (McMahon, Patton & Watson 2003; Bimrose & Barnes 2006). This research therefore adopts an exploratory approach to examining the linkages between career management competence and student expectations.

## Design

This qualitative research project aimed to elicit student stories about their career management competence. A purposive sampling technique (Charmaz 2005) was used to obtain a sample of 29 VET students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and allowed the interviewer the flexibility and freedom to encourage participants to develop and elaborate their answers until a relevant level of detail was elicited to allow later thematic analysis.

Further details about the methodology of the project are provided in the support document available from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) website.

## Participants

Participants were enrolled in courses from a range of industry sectors, as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1 Industries represented and types of qualifications participants were enrolled in**

Industry represented					
Children's services	Hospitality	Automotive & Engineering	Engineering	Other*	
3	7	3	8	8	
Type of qualification					
Short course	Certificate I	Certificate II	Certificate III	Diploma	Advanced diploma
1	1	3	13	6	3

Note: \* Other industries represented included Health, Science, Maritime and Construction.

Participants' ages ranged from 16 to 30 years; however, the majority (11) were aged between 16 and 18 years. Eighteen of the 29 participants had had work experience of some form. Seven were female, twenty-two male.

## Interview structure

The interview schedule was organised in three sections: demographic information; expectations the client has of their chosen VET pathway; and level of career competence. (A copy of the entire schedule is available in the support document.)

### *Students' expectations*

The questions in this part of the interview were designed to establish the students' expectations of the course they were currently enrolled in and the type of employment they expected to gain after completion. Responses could be mapped directly onto relevant data sources for comparative purposes and were used to assess the 'realism' of clients' expectations of the course. This section of the interview schedule was structured to elicit clear responses, which could be assessed against criteria obtained from various career information sources, which included technical and further education (TAFE), and registered training organisation-produced course information, and the myfuture and Job Outlook websites <<http://www.myfuture.edu.au>>; <<http://www.jobsearch.gov.au/joboutlook>>.

### *Levels of career management competence*

These questions, designed to establish the students' levels of career management competence, were based on the 11 core career competencies described in the *Australian Blueprint for Career Development: Trial version* (Miles Morgan Australia 2003).

## Analysis techniques

In order to establish how realistic students' expectations of their course were, students' responses were matched against already identified objective criteria (based on commonly available statistical, course and industry information) for 11 key areas. These areas included:

- ✧ future possibilities created by this course
- ✧ types of jobs the course could lead to
- ✧ specific job choice after completing this course
- ✧ tasks required in specific job
- ✧ employment prospects for this job—and the factors that students considered when coming to this conclusion
- ✧ expected earnings
- ✧ anticipated work environment
- ✧ skills acquired during the course
- ✧ course duration
- ✧ time per week the course takes up
- ✧ course costs.

Similarly, students' responses to the questions related to the 11 core career management competencies in the *Blueprint* were tabulated and compared with the appropriate performance indicators of competence.

Assessment of realism was one of the more challenging aspects of this research project. For some questions, it required a level of subjective judgement on the researcher's part. To maximise the reliability of our findings, we used a variety of methods, including assessing inter-rater reliability, and triangulating data against multiple reference sources (see support document for details). Students were rated as either realistic or non-realistic on each question (by reference to established baselines) and the total number of correct answers was used to assess overall realism.

# Findings

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## Motivation

Prior to asking participants specific questions related to their course expectations, we asked them to tell us what their main motivation for doing the course was. The intent was twofold: to elicit their desired individual private return and to contextualise participants' answers. Identifying each participant's main motivation for doing the course would then allow us to focus on the aspects of the course most valued by the student.

The students' motivations for enrolling in the chosen course could be divided into three fairly discrete groups:

- ✧ One group of (12) students had complex reasons for doing the course they had chosen. For example, one student said her course would 'set up her future' by enabling her to get a job, then progress through the industry and into the future, possibly to start her own business. The motivation for doing the course for this group involved skills in 'understanding, engaging in and managing their career-building process' (competency 11 see next section).
- ✧ A second group of (12) students were motivated simply to 'get a job'. They were seeking employment, with little comment made, or awareness demonstrated, of the relationship between the skills they were developing through the course and the impact this would have upon their future working lives.
- ✧ A third group (5) had a personal interest in the field; that is, their friends worked in the field, they had always enjoyed the topic, or it would enhance their personal life skills in some way.

## Assessing realism

Realism of expectations referred to the probability of students' expected and desired outcomes related to successful completion of their chosen course coming to fruition. Realism was assessed using 11 questions, clustered around three areas:

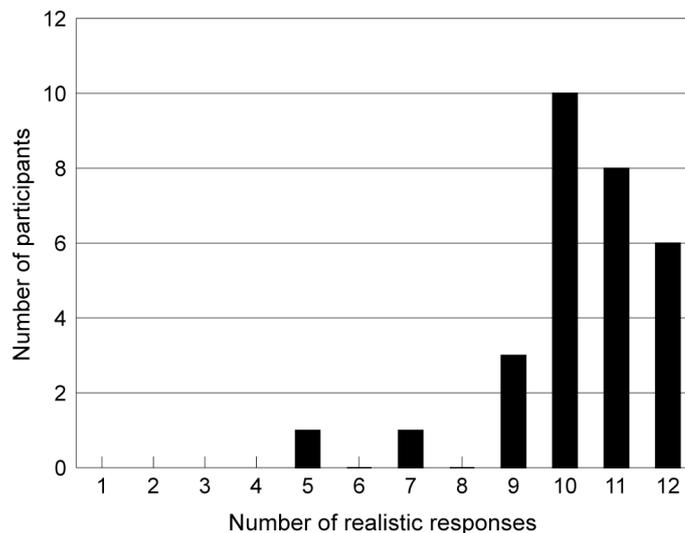
- ✧ expectations of the future possibilities that completing the course would make possible (questions 1 and 2)
- ✧ expectations of the specific work role the course would enable entry into (questions 3 to 7)
- ✧ expectations of the course (questions 8 to 11).

The first two clusters were found to be most useful in assessing realism, as all participants were realistic in relation to questions 8, 10 and 11 and only one participant was unrealistic in relation to question 9. This possibly reflected the timing of the interviews, which were conducted much later in the year than first anticipated and so students were very aware of course details like costs and duration by this stage. Table 2 illustrates the criteria used to assess realism and a summary of student responses.

**Table 2 Course expectations, data sources used for assessment and summary of participant responses**

Interview question	Data source for comparisons	Summary of responses
1 Future possibilities created by this course?	Course information, and myfuture website < <a href="http://www.myfuture.edu.au">http://www.myfuture.edu.au</a> >	24 students had realistic expectations of the future possibilities the course could lead to.
2 Types of jobs you think this course could lead to?	Course information, and myfuture website	19 participants had realistic expectations of the types of jobs their course could lead to.
3 Specific job choice after completing this course?	Course information, and myfuture website	28 identified a specific job option that was realistic.
4 Tasks you will be required to perform	myfuture, and Job Outlook < <a href="http://www.jobsearch.gov.au/joboutlook">http://www.jobsearch.gov.au/joboutlook</a> >	28 had realistic expectations of the sorts of tasks they would be required to do.
5 Employment prospects for this job- (very good – good – average – below average – limited)	Job Outlook	25 had realistic expectations of job prospects for their nominated occupation.  (The sorts of things students considered when coming to this conclusion were skills shortages and level of pay.)
6 Expected earnings	Job Outlook	17 estimated their starting salaries at or within 5% of the figure provided by Job Outlook.
7 Environment expected	myfuture, and Job Outlook	27 were clear about the type of environment they would be expected to work in.
8 Skills acquired during the course	Course information	All listed specific skills they were acquiring in the course.
9 Course duration	Course information	28 knew how long the course would take to complete.
10 Time per week the course takes up	Course information	All were aware of the time per week needed to do the course.
11 Course costs	Course information	All were aware of their course costs.

**Figure 1 Students' total number of realistic responses**



It was not possible to categorise participants as clearly realistic or not realistic; however, as figure 1 illustrates, there were two students with far less realistic expectations of their courses than the rest of the group, with one participant holding unrealistic expectations in five areas and one in seven areas. Both these students provided unrealistic responses to the future possibilities and the types of jobs the course could lead to. At the other extreme, five students provided realistic responses to all questions. A high proportion of students (8) answered only one question incorrectly, while a further nine provided incorrect answers on only two questions assessing the realism of their expectations.

Overall, students' career expectations were largely realistic and this in itself is a significant divergence from the existing literature.

However, this divergence is also a potential problem for the study. The lack of much evidence of unrealistic expectations also means that the ability to examine the link between realism of expectations and career management skills is significantly diminished. Accordingly, subsequent analysis focuses on the relationships between various aspects of expectations and career management competence levels. This allows exploratory analysis of the various relationships between patterns of understanding and the types of career development skills held.

Where participants had answered one question incorrectly, there was no discernible pattern in their responses. For example, of the eight students who had unrealistic expectations of the tasks they would be required to perform in the job, one was unrealistic about the future possibilities created by the course, two were not clear about the types of jobs they could attain once their course was completed, two were not clear about the skills they were likely to acquire during their course, and two did not know how much their course was going to cost. However, where students had provided two or more unrealistic responses (15), incorrect responses clustered around the types of jobs the course could lead to (9), employment prospects (7), and expected earnings (8).

The student with the least realistic expectations seemed to have little understanding of the course in which they were enrolled, which then led to their lack of accuracy across seven of the variables. The participant did not know what course they were studying, confusing an associate engineering qualification with an engineering qualification (with the two being very different qualifications leading to different occupations). They also dramatically over-estimated their salary prospects by more than \$150 000 (a salary for engineers, an occupation for which they were not being trained). In essence, the student answered a large number of questions incorrectly because they were enrolled in a completely different course leading to a completely different career pathway from that on which they thought they had embarked.

Most of the students were aware of specific course details, such as the types of skills they were going to acquire, and most knew how long the course would take to complete. This indicates that although some students may not have had realistic expectations of their course outcomes, with two students not even seemingly aware of the title of the course they were enrolled in, their lecturers had made all aware of the key features of their courses.

## Access to career development learning opportunities

All but six of the participants had either participated in work experience, or had visited a career development service. The most common forms of career development activity experienced by participants were work experience (reported by 18 students) and career education and services offered through TAFE or school (18 students). These were also the only formal career development activities in which students recalled participating (22). Fourteen participants did not know what career development was, and had not heard the term before—even though 12 of this number had some experience of what could be considered to be a career development program.

Almost as prevalent were their informal career development activities—for example, performing their own research using the Internet, and assessing newspapers, books and course information (13 students) or speaking to a trusted friend, mentor or family member about their experiences in the actual occupation itself (8 students). That a large number of participants relied on their own research, usually in conjunction with other forms of career development activity, highlighted the need for career information to be maintained at a high standard. The introduction of the *Guiding Principles for Career Development Services and Career Information Products* <[http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/careerdevelopment/publications\\_resources/careers\\_information\\_products.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/careerdevelopment/publications_resources/careers_information_products.htm)> by the Department of Education, Science and Training (now the Department of Education, Employment

and Workplace Relations) and the Career Industry Council of Australia may assist in ensuring that this is the case in the future, as does the increasing professionalisation of the industry as a whole.

It makes intuitive sense for so many of the participants also to rely on the face-to-face advice provided by family and friends, and lecturers; if Dad is an engineer, learning from his experience will of course be more powerful than a career information website. Parent-driven career information was accessed in a number of participants. Not only is this information more accessible than other sources, it can also be perceived as more contextually appropriate.

## Career management competence and course expectations

This section outlines the apparent relationships that exist between participants' course expectations and their level of career management competence.

Each of the core competencies for career management outlined in the *Blueprint* can be assessed at one of four developmental phases, with each phase itself expressed at four learning stages. The phases represent the expected level of competence at a particular developmental phase throughout the lifespan, with phase I representing expected K-primary level of competence, phase II representing middle school student's level of competence, phase III secondary-post-compulsory students' level of competence and phase IV adult levels of competence.

As post-compulsory students were most likely to fall within the phase III level of competence within the *Blueprint* framework, the questions in the interview schedule reflected the performance indicators located at this level. However, where students did not fall within phase III, their responses were compared with the performance indicators for the other phases outlined in the *Blueprint*. This enabled determination of their level of competence against the four phases by comparing their answers with the performance indicators for each of the four phases provided in the *Blueprint*. Overall, most participants did fall roughly within phase III, although many seemed to straddle phases II and III.

Table 4 shows where each student falls within the *Blueprint's* developmental framework and the apparent relationship between their level of realism and their career management competence. Participants have been ranked by the number of incorrect responses to the realism survey questions.

**Table 3 Ranked students' level of career management competence by phase**

Blueprint competencies by phase		Ranked students' level of career management competence by phase										
Code	No. incorrect responses	Comp 1	Comp 2	Comp 3	Comp 4	Comp 5	Comp 6	Comp 7	Comp 8	Comp 9	Comp 10	Comp 11
2	0	III	III	II-III	III	III	II	II-III	II-III	III	III	III
12	0	II-III	III	II-III	II-III	II	II	II-III	III	III	II	III
13	0	III	III	II-III	III	II-III	III	III	III	III	II-III	II-III
17	0	III	I-II	II	II-III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III
22	0	III	II-III	II-III	III	II-III	III	III	III	III	II-III	III
26	0	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	II-III
1	1	II	II	III	III	III	I-II	II	III	II	II	II-III
3	1	III	II-III	I	II-III	II-III	I-II	I-II	III	II-III	I	II
7	1	II-III	III	II-III	III	III	II-III	II-III	III	III	II-III	III
8	1	II-III	I-II	I-II	II-III	II-III	II-III	III	III	II-III	I-II	II-III
14	1	III	III	II-III	II-III	II-III	II-III	III	II-III	II-III	II-III	II-III
23	1	II-III	II	I-II	II	I	II-III	II	II-III	II-III	II	II-III
28	1	III	III	III	III	III	II-III	II-III	III	III	II-III	III
29	1	II-III	II-III	III	III	II-III	III	II-III	II-III	III	II-III	II-III
4	2	I	I	II	I-II	I	I-II	II	II	II-III	I-II	II-III
5	2	II-III	I-II	I	I	I-II	II-III	I-II	I	I-II	I-II	I-II
6	2	I	I	II	II	I	I	I	I	I	I	I
9	2	II	I	I-II	I	I	II	I	II-III	I	I	I-II
15	2	II-III	II	II	II-III	I-II	II	II	II-III	III	II-III	II-III
16	2	II	II	II	II-III	II-III	II	II-III	II	II-III	II	II
18	2	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	III	II-III	III
19	2	III	II-III	II-III	II-III	II-III	III	III	III	III	II-III	III
21	2	I-II	II-III	II-III	III	II-III	III	II-III	III	II-III	II	II-III
25	2	III	III	II-III	III	II-III	II-III	III	II-III	III	II-III	II-III
10	3	II-III	II-III	II-III	II-III	II-III	II-III	II-III	III	III	I	III
20	3	II-III	II-III	II-III	II-III	II-III	II-III	III	III	II-III	III	III
24	3	IV	III	III	IV	III	III	III	IV	III	III	III
27	5	III	II-III	III	III	II-III	II-III	III	III	III	III	III
11	7	II	I	I	I	I	I	I	II	I	I	I

Note: I = phase I; II = phase II; III = phase III; IV = phase IV

Most students did have competence levels at phases II–III, with most students at phase III; however, there seemed to be no clear relationship between the level of career management competence and the overall level of realism displayed.

## Strengths and weaknesses

The strongest competencies—that is, where the phase III or more level of competence was most common across the group—were:

- 1 *Building and maintaining a positive self-image*
- 4 *Participation in lifelong learning supportive of career goals*
- 7 *Securing/ creating and maintaining work*
- 8 *Making career-enhancing decisions*
- 9 *Maintaining a balance between life and work roles*
- 11 *Understanding, engaging in and managing the career-building process.*

This was particularly the case for those who had provided a higher number of realistic responses. In relation to competency 4, 12 students were aware that the course they were enrolled in would not provide all of their educational requirements and that further education either at TAFE or at university would also be necessary. Additionally, the fact that they were enrolled in post-compulsory education implies that they are aware of the importance of building knowledge in support of achieving their career goals. For many of the students with more realistic course expectations, this competence appeared also to have enabled them to envision possible futures and occupations for themselves that were attainable.

Strength in competency 8 relates to skills in developing scenarios that support a person's preferred future and developing methods to make them happen. Most students had performed these activities when researching courses and making decisions about how they would go about entering TAFE. For the students who had answered most of the questions assessing realism correctly, this also translated into a realistic view of the types of jobs their course would enable them to perform in the future.

Somewhat surprisingly, many of the more realistic students were unable to demonstrate skills, at a developmentally appropriate level as predicted by the *Blueprint* framework, in five out of the 11 competencies.

- 2 *Interacting positively and effectively with others*
- 3 *Changing and growing throughout life*
- 5 *Locating and effectively using career information*
- 6 *Understanding the relationship between work, society and the economy*
- 10 *Understanding the changing nature of life and work roles.*

Having the competence to interact positively and effectively with others (competency 2) is more likely to have an impact upon one's experience of, and capacity to, function as part of a particular group of students or work colleagues. It is less likely to affect a person's capacity to make an individual decision such as the selection of a course that is consistent with one's preferred future.

Competency 3 *Changing and growing throughout life* did not seem relevant to many students, as they did not feel they had experienced change or growth processes yet which could give them a knowledge of: firstly, what effects change may have on them; and, secondly, how they themselves would deal with change. These beliefs can be challenged in terms of the change and growth that has already occurred in their lives; however, without the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences, through an intentional learning activity, they are not surprising. In the context of managing one's career, the

ability to reflect on how and why change may have an impact on our lives and acquiring the tools needed to adapt to change is considered important. As with competency 2, however, this capacity is probably more important to the ongoing management of one's career, than it is to making a realistic course choice. Nevertheless, it is particularly important for those students whose course selection does not fulfil their needs.

In relation to competency 5 *Locating and effectively using career information*, 14 of the students, while sometimes aware of what career information was, often relied on only one or two sources of information—for example, TAFE course information, friends in the industry, or Job Guide. Thirteen of these students had provided two or less unrealistic responses, and so, while this may have been adequate for their particular requirements, it begs the question of whether their choices may have been more expansive had they undertaken broader learning and work exploration.

In regard to competency 6, *Understanding the relationship between work, society and the economy*, the indicators of competence require an understanding of how work contributes to community and society in general and how global trends affect the work opportunities of individuals and communities—understandings which arguably should result in more informed occupational choices. In this study it was found that unless the student was aware of particular trends within the industry they were about to enter, they had little awareness of the economy, global or otherwise, and its impact on local employment.

Similarly with competency 10 *Understanding the changing nature of life and work roles*, unless the student had actually experienced issues that related to these competencies, they generally did not understand the questions being asked of them. The most specific example of the important role experience has in the development of career management competencies was a female engineering student discussing the sexism she had faced in class. Competency 10 requires knowledge of the changing nature of work roles for men and women. For this particular student her personal experiences had increased her awareness of the challenges and the opportunities faced by women in non-traditional work roles, and meant she had a higher level of skills in relation to this competency than many of the other participants. However, most other students were oblivious to issues of gender in the workplace; the large number of males in the group and the high number of these males undergoing training in traditionally male-dominated industries may have contributed to this finding. When asked about this important issue, however, many participants began to think about how it may affect them in their workplaces. One student in particular, an automotive apprentice who had initially answered the question by stating he had never thought about sexism before, was intrigued by the idea and wanted to know more about the issue and how it may have an impact on his workplace.

According to our data, the participant with the highest number of unrealistic responses was equipped with skills across all competencies at phase I–II. According to the *Blueprint*, phase I is the level of competence that would be more appropriate for k-primary school students, rather than students in post-compulsory education, while phase II is more appropriate for middle school children. Accordingly, for the extremely unrealistic student, his levels of career management skills were also far below what would be roughly predicted for his age. This does provide some tentative support for the notion that deficits in basic career management skills are associated with unrealistic training and education choices.

Two students with less realistic expectations had similar profiles to those who appeared more realistic (participants 20 and 21 in table 4). Similarly, four of the more realistic students (participants 4, 5, 6 and 9) held similar profiles to the participant that was least realistic. In regard to the two students with less realistic expectations but with good levels of career competence, one seemed to have a misunderstanding of the education pathway he had chosen and was expecting to be able to enter postgraduate studies once completing a diploma-level qualification. This participant was also one of the two students over 25 years old, and so we would have expected higher levels of career management competence—more like the profile for participant 24, the other participant over 25 years, for example. The second participant with apparently unrealistic expectations of his course

outcomes stated at the end of his interview that he actually intended to leave his apprenticeship and enrol in an engineering diploma—indicating he may not have formulated a clear career pathway as yet.

In relation to the four participants with lower-level career management competence than expected based on their level of realism, an interesting observation was the existence of some extremely unrealistic expectations in particular areas. In the case of participant 4, he was not sure what he was studying, only that it was something to do with building—overall, however, he provided responses that were realistic. Participants 5 and 6 also exhibited profiles that seemed lower than expected on career management competence; however, both courses and associated occupations were popular (hospitality and childcare) and so would have been familiar to many students, enabling realistic course expectations. Participant 9, while holding generally realistic expectations of his course, also had a lower than expected competence profile. This student was, however, enrolled in a course that was very familiar to him as his father worked in the area. We speculate that the presence of one strong and pervasive information source (his father) was enough to generate realistic expectations for his course despite more broadly being poorly equipped to understand his career choices.

The oldest participant, having spent time in the workforce, also held the highest level of career management competency, but also registered a higher number of incorrect responses to the realism survey—a probable confound in this case, however, could be cultural as the participant was a recently arrived immigrant.

# Discussion

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These findings provide only tentative support for our hypothesis that higher levels of career management competence are associated with more realistic outcome expectancies. The reader needs to be aware that the nature of the methodology does not allow broad generalisations to be made solely on the basis of the findings presented here.

These findings indicate that accuracy of expectations is higher than one might have reasoned from the literature (in particular, see the report by Quay Connection and Phillips KPA 2005). Despite this, the proportion of students with unrealistic course expectations is certainly high enough to be of concern, in particular in the case of students who do not appear even to be aware of the name or nature of the course they were enrolled in, or those who had their course confused with a similarly named, but completely different, course.

The majority of the students interviewed had realistic expectations relating to their chosen course of study. Many students, when asked about their motivation for doing the course, gave quite complex explanations, which clearly articulated how they envisioned their own career pathway progressing. It seems probable that these students will be satisfied with the outcomes they receive from their chosen VET course. In support of our hypothesis that those with more realistic expectations would also have age-appropriate levels of skill in career management, these students also tended to have age-appropriate levels of career management competence as outlined in the *Blueprint*.

Of those in the group who had more unrealistic expectations of the vocational and educational pathways resulting from their chosen course of study, most often expectations were unrealistic in terms of expected earnings, and the types of jobs their chosen course could lead to. Of particular concern was the proportion who had overestimated their expected income—indicating that for these students the probability that they would obtain their desired private return on investment is quite low. The least realistic of the group of participants also had lower levels of career management competence; lower than would be expected at this stage of their development. These students may well end up obtaining some private benefit from their training. However, for some it will not be the benefit that they hoped to obtain, most frequently a particular level of income or a (direct) pathway into their chosen occupation.

## Relating career management and course expectations

In the analysis of the relationship between expectations and career management competence, it appeared that it was possible to have realistic expectations of course outcomes and yet not to have developed the complete set of *Blueprint* competencies. An examination across the 11 competencies outlined in the *Blueprint* showed that in students who responded correctly most frequently to questions assessing realism, competencies 2, 3, 5, 6 and 10 were less well developed. These competencies include personal management skills, and career-building skills that are underpinned by an understanding of society, the economy and the labour market. Without access to formal career development activities, which highlight these skills as important for managing their careers, students may well believe they are irrelevant. Equally, students may well be broadly unaware of these issues.

Only about a third of the students seemed to have the capacity to *Interact positively and effectively with others* (competency 2), or to understand the nature of *Changing and growing throughout life* (competency 3), possibly indicating that in relation to specific course expectations, skills in these areas are not essential.

Gaps in career management skills also existed for competencies 5, *Locating and effectively using career information*; and 6, *Understanding the relationship between work, society and the economy*. Skills in effectively using career information were apparent in only eight of the participants. Many of the students who participated in this study first required a description of career information, as the concept was unfamiliar to them. Once they understood what it was many still did not understand where or how they could access it. This did not seem problematic in terms of course outcome expectations, with many students turning to their lecturers for industry information and advice. Students, therefore, were able to locate realistic career information about their particular course despite lacking the ability to locate career information more broadly. The case was the same for competency 6, where there were few students with an understanding of the relationship between work, society, the economy and trends that could have an impact on their working lives. Again, this did not seem to be problematic in terms of their expectations of their chosen course. While such understanding is highly desirable in terms of an informed citizenry, it seemed to bear no relationship to the realism of students' expectations of their selected course.

Skills in the area of core competency 10, *Understanding the changing nature of life and work roles*, were by far the lowest, with only six students exhibiting an expected level of skill in this area, particularly in relation to gender issues. This competency requires an understanding of the ways work roles are changing. On closer examination, all six students differed from the other participants in that they were either already in a non-traditional work role; lived in a non-traditional relationship; worked in a traditional work role that was in the process of changing to incorporate more people of the opposite sex; or the participant was much older than the other participants.

An alternative explanation for the lower skill levels in these competencies is that the performance indicators of the *Blueprint* are not developmentally appropriate—a matter which may be examined further during the current testing and trialling of the framework.

## The role of parents

These findings seem consistent with the literature on parental involvement in career development (Auger, Blackhurst & Wahl 2005). This literature notes that the career development process begins in childhood, and that parental involvement is perhaps the biggest factor influencing a child's sense of their relationship to learning and the wider world of work. Morrow (1995) notes that parents who enjoy their work and share this enjoyment with their children help them to learn positive work values. We saw elements of this replicated in our sample after examining the motivation students had for enrolling in their particular course, most notably in a small sub-group of extremely focused students who had a detailed and enthusiastic awareness of the one particular aspect of the world of work that had been shared with them by their parents, other family members and friends. We therefore found incidental support for the notion that parental influence is an important element in determining the child's attitude and disposition towards the world of work. It was relatively common for parents to be the main source of career information, and this career information was very specific, consistent with the parent's specific life experience, and therefore highly trusted. Students, therefore, may well have had limited general awareness of the full range of skills needed to manage their careers in an ongoing way, but knew a considerable amount about the specific area which was of interest to them and their parents.

## Student access to comprehensive career development programs

The findings showed that, for this group of students, the most common forms of formal career development learning experiences were work experience and career education and services offered through either TAFE or school, with 22 having experienced either one or both these activities. Nevertheless, 12 of these students did not know what career development was, bringing into question the comprehensiveness of their career education. The *Blueprint* points out that many younger people in Australia ‘may not have had access to *comprehensive* career development programs, products and services’ (Miles Morgan Australia 2003, p.23 emphasis added). In this group of participants, the lack of awareness of broader issues, such as sexual discrimination in the work place and the impact of change on our lives and work, would tend to support this view, in that the formal career development learning opportunities many of them have experienced did not provide them with this sort of knowledge. Undoubtedly, career development is not always purposive, with people learning through their own experiences rather than through access to formal career development learning opportunities (Jarvis 2003). On a similar note, our findings also appear to support the notion of Blenkinsop et al. (2006) that career decision-making is often opportunistic and context based. Career choices often appeared to be grounded heavily in the specific experiences of participants and were far from being the product of a detailed evaluation of a broad range of possible options.

The level of career management competence of participants was generally either at a level, or perhaps slightly below, that expected of this age group according to *Blueprint* developmental taxonomies. However, there were clear gaps in the level of skills of participants in certain competencies, which may not have a negative impact upon course selection, but which may have restricted their options, particularly the absence of learning and work exploration skills. Similarly, the fact that many students lacked personal management competencies will possibly influence their ongoing capacity to effectively manage their careers.

Since 2003 practitioners in the VET sector have experimented with the *Blueprint* in the development of career development programs and activities, and a trial of the framework is currently being completed. Useful and innovative methods to build career management skills, both in schools and in students enrolled in VET institutions, may result from these trials. Also, as suggested above, there will be opportunities to adapt the *Blueprint* indicators where they are not found to be developmentally appropriate.

Despite the finding that most participants in this study did have realistic views on the outcomes of their chosen courses, some did not hold realistic views on many aspects of their chosen course or its impact on their careers. An increase in career development learning opportunities may ensure students have the capacity to make career-enhancing choices that are more closely attuned to their individual values, priorities, beliefs and goals, and that reflect the realities of the world of work. Importantly, for all of the students who took part in this study, formal career development learning opportunities could improve their understanding of the important role work plays in their lives. The implications for vocational education and training would be fourfold: less wasted resources through attrition; better fit between students and courses (and therefore fewer students switching courses); more motivated students; and an increased likelihood of successful transition to employment for students.

Finally, this work as a whole does indicate the potential for the development of more formal assessment tools in the context of the *Blueprint*. Given that the text is already being widely implemented and used in formal career development activities, it is only logical that this implementation could be improved with the addition of a more formalised and validated means of defining the career management competence of individual students against the core competencies defined in the *Blueprint*. Such a tool could potentially assist both career development practitioners and researchers.

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# Support document details

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Additional information relating to this research is available in *Course expectations and career management skills—Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVET's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2012.html>> and contains:

- ✧ Methodology
- ✧ Appendix A: Participant information and interview protocol
- ✧ Appendix B: Case study
- ✧ Appendix C: The career competencies and performance indicators by area and phase



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