



## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

# Vocational education and training: the technicolour coat of Australia's education system

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Is vocational education and training (VET) really a technicolour coat that can fulfil many dreams? Does it meet all the training needs of a very diverse group of Australian students, workers and industries? What does it contribute to the economy and society?

These were some of the questions asked at the National Centre for Vocational Education Research's (NCVER) *Is VET Worthwhile?* forum. Those speaking came up with an equivocal answer: it depends.

The purpose of the forum was to air a suite of research from NCVER's 2008–10 research consortia. Four groups participated in the program: the Centre for Work + Life at the University of South Australia; the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne; the Social Policy Evaluation, Analysis and Research Centre at the Australian National University; and the Workplace Research Centre at the University of Sydney.

The Centre for Work + Life used data from the 2007 Student Outcomes Survey (SOS), the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA), and the 2006 Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey (ALLS), as well as their own survey, the

Australian Work Life Index (AWALI), and interviews and focus groups to look at the participation of low-skilled and low-paid workers in VET, and some of the issues these workers face.

The Social Policy Evaluation, Analysis and Research Centre (SPEAR) also looked at data from the ALLS survey as well as its predecessor, the 1996 Survey of Aspects of Literacy (SAL), to see how older workers interact with the workforce and VET. The Melbourne Institute used the HILDA survey and the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) to shed light on the labour market outcomes from participation in VET. The Workplace Research Centre investigated the ability of VET to respond to workforce development challenges, particularly in two industries characterised as low-skill entry points to the labour market: early childhood education and care, and meat processing. The four groups of researchers presented summaries of their research and participated in a panel discussion.

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It was Hielke Buddelmeyer from the Melbourne Institute who lit upon the analogy of VET as a technicolour coat, a patchwork of colours, fabrics, textures and patterns that represents various aspects of VET and the numerous people who consume training: students from all kinds of backgrounds and experiences, workers with differing skill levels, and employers of various sizes and industries, each with specific training requirements. Just how worthwhile VET is for all these groups depends on who you are and why you use it.

Vocational education and training can be worthwhile if it helps people to get a job and maintain their employment. The Melbourne Institute work shows that formal VET does help many people get jobs, particularly those who have not completed high school and those with a disability. Analysis from the Social Policy Evaluation, Analysis and Research Centre confirmed that older worker participation in further education and training is lower than that of younger workers. It also found that older workers are more likely to undertake training if they find their jobs demanding. Here, we need to be more specific and look at the type of VET that helps people get jobs. Research from the Melbourne Institute shows that getting a VET qualification at the higher levels – certificate III and above – is worthwhile, and people who have qualifications at certificate levels III and IV are more likely to get jobs which match their skills.

The forum took place against a backdrop of intense interest in completions, which may have prompted the extensive discussion on the role of pastoral care, support and mentoring. These were seen as crucial when it comes to increasing the uptake and completion of training by students and workers. Research from the Workplace Research Centre shows that intermediaries – such as employment service providers – suggest that VET alone doesn't always work in helping disadvantaged people who are not engaged in the labour market to find work. What are needed are other social and economic supports. The Melbourne Institute also shows that, for those with a disability, completing a VET qualification is worthwhile because it improves their chances of getting and keeping a job. People with a disability are not as likely to complete a qualification compared with others, but with

appropriate pastoral care and access to the right services they are more likely to complete their training.

Getting a job with decent wages and being adequately skilled for that job are not the only measures of VET's worth. If a low-paid worker is hoping for a promotion or more money, then doing VET does not necessarily deliver; instead, training is more likely to help them keep their job. When training increases the time and money demands on workers but doesn't generate new skills or better prospects for them, it can make things worse by falsely raising expectations and adding training insult to poor job quality injury.

There was some discussion at the forum about the value of certificates I and II. Many agreed that the lower-level certificates taught in institutional settings were not very useful in helping people to get jobs, but for some – particularly second and third chance learners – they could act as a pathway to higher qualifications. There was also the view that certificates I and II acquired on the job did have value in the labour market.

Another issue raised at the forum is the difference between workers who have access to training and those who don't. And while much of the discussion at the forum was focused on the training of permanent workers, those who are employed casually may need greater attention to help them overcome the barriers to training. A related issue, reflecting the common emphasis in such discussions on initial training that wasn't raised at the forum, is the tension between entry-level VET versus continuing training. The training needs of entry-level VET – both workplace-based and institution-based – are different from the training needs of existing workers.

Training needs also vary by size of enterprise: small-to-medium enterprises are less likely to put their workers through VET due to the financial and time burdens of training. There was general agreement that more needs to be done to encourage these businesses to invest in training for their workers – whether they are entry-level or experienced. Getting this happening means doing more to demonstrate the tangible benefits of training to employers.

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Interwoven in the discussion of whether VET is worthwhile is consideration of who is responsible for providing and funding VET. Should industry be expected to contribute more to the cost of training? Should employers, small and large, cover the training bill for their workers? Or should it be left to the individual worker and student to ensure they are suitably skilled? And just how much should governments subsidise the costs for industry, employers and individuals? The answer is not clear-cut, but the forum discussion highlighted a joint responsibility, which could be better realised through partnerships between employees and employers, employers and registered training organisations, and within and between industries and governments.

We can't think of VET without situating it within the labour market, the economy and the broader social context. And we can't expect VET to solve all the ills of the labour market, whether they are skills shortages in some industries, casualisation and low wages in others, or the highly gendered nature of some occupations. In the end, most of the forum participants agreed that the broad cloak of VET is worthwhile for many because it provides training and education that benefits individuals, employers, industry and the economy, but it could do better in recognising the unique needs of different groups.

You can find the research on the NCVET website, or just click on the links below.

### Centre for Work + Life

-  *Work-life issues and participation in education and training* (N Skinner), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2216.html>>.
-  *Juggling work, home and learning in low-paid occupations: a qualitative study* (B Pocock, J Elton, D Green, C McMahon and S Pritchard), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2369.html>>.
-  *Work, life and VET participation amongst lower-paid workers* (B Pocock, N Skinner, C McMahon and S Pritchard), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2378.html>>.

### Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research

-  *Analysis of private returns to VET* (W-S Lee and M Coelli), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2221.html>>.
-  *The incidence and wage effects of overskilling among employed VET graduates* (K Mavromaras, S McGuinness and Y K Fok), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2231.html>>.
-  *Annual transitions between labour market states for young Australians* (H Buddelmeyer and G Marks), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2247.html>>.
-  *The role of education in labour market outcomes of people with disabilities* (C Polidano and K Mavromaras), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2215.html>>.
-  *The role of VET in preventing the scarring effect of youth joblessness* (H Buddelmeyer and N Héroult), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2318.html>>.
-  *Measuring the quality of VET using the Student Outcomes Survey* (W-S Lee and C Polidano), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2327.html>>.
-  *Outcomes from combining work and tertiary study* (C Polidano and R Zakirova), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2320.html>>.
-  *The effect of VET completion on wages of young people* (N Héroult, R Zakirova and H Buddelmeyer), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2379.html>>.
-  *To gain, retain and retrain: the role of post-school education for people with disability* (C Polidano and H Vu), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2407.html>>.

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### Social Policy Evaluation, Analysis and Research Centre

-  *Literacy and numeracy skills and their use by the Australian workforce* (C Ryan and M Sinning), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2184.html>>.
-  *Skill matches to job requirements* (C Ryan and M Sinning), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2185.html>>.
-  *Job requirements and lifelong learning for older workers* (C Ryan and M Sinning), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2186.html>>.
-  *Who works beyond the 'standard' retirement age and why?* (C Ryan and M Sinning), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2291.html>>.
-  *Skill (mis)matches and over-education of younger workers* (C Ryan and M Sinning), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2330.html>>.
-  *Differing skill requirements across countries and over time* (C Ryan and M Sinning), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2428.html>>.
-  *Senior Australians and the take-up of new technologies* (C Ryan and M Sinning) coming soon.
-  *The returns to skill accumulation* (C Ryan and M Sinning) coming soon.
-  *Training requirements of foreign-born workers in different countries* (C Ryan and M Sinning) coming soon.

### Workplace Research Centre

-  *Understanding vocational education and training, productivity and workforce participation: an issues paper* (J Evesson, T Bretherton, J Buchanan, M Rafferty and G Considine), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2154.html>>.
-  *Developing the child care workforce: understanding 'fight' or 'flight' amongst workers* (T Bretherton), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2261.html>>.
-  *Work, skills and training in the Australian red meat processing sector* (K Norton and M Rafferty), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2301.html>>.
-  *Understanding the undertow: innovative responses to labour market disadvantage and VET* (T Bretherton), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2377.html>>.
-  *The role of VET in workforce development: a story of conflicting expectations* (T Bretherton), <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2406.html>>.

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NCVER is an independent body responsible for collecting, managing and analysing, evaluating and communicating research and statistics about vocational education and training (VET).

NCVER's inhouse research and evaluation program undertakes projects which are strategic to the VET sector. These projects are developed and conducted by NCVER's research staff and are funded by NCVER. This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector.

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