

THE AUSTRALIAN VOCATIONAL CERTIFICATE TRAINING SYSTEM - A RURAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING PERSPECTIVE FROM S.P.E.R.A.

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The new initiative on the part of government includes a new partnership between educators and industry which provides a real challenge for rural educators. If much of this report is to be functioning by the end of 1993 then the level of cross-sectional discussion must be stepped up so that the demands and needs of rural communities can be met.

The Carmichael Report, the latest step in training reform, attempts to address the problems of low retention rates at year 11 and 12, non-participation in vocational training and the access to such opportunities.

The report refers to minimum standards for school students on the basis of six key competencies outlined in the Finn Report. Much work has been completed by the Mayer committee to identify key competency strands which would apply to key learning areas identified by the Carmichael report. Much consultation and definition will be required to fully articulate the relationship between the two, ensuring they take account of differing locations, socio-economic status and cultural identities. There is a need to work on the definition of the generic and vocational competencies to link education, training and work. We need to be sure they are worth the effort and resources, and will make a difference for young people.

The report makes many recommendations concerning Senior colleges or high schools. Is this really a viable option for rural areas, particularly the isolated regions where many students do not have access to existing facilities? The report quotes success of such initiatives in the A.C.T. and Tasmania, where problems of isolation do not exist in the same way as other states and territories. What about those who already have difficulty in accessing secondary schools and TAFE campus?

A national system, with accredited courses Australia wide will prove beneficial to those people who relocate because of employment opportunities or are traditionally on the move, e.g. shearers, fruit pickers etc. A major problem will be to achieve consistency across all offerings and through all agencies.

The flexible pathways approach will prove beneficial to rural students only if all options are available to them. Currently, rural students have limited access to education and training courses and the report does not address the need to expand these offerings in any way. Flexible pathways will be available in larger centres and metropolitan areas meaning once again that rural clients will have to move away from their home base if they are to access the full offerings.

The targets set for the Australian Vocational Certificate are optimistic. Do they realistically represent the existing situation in rural areas? Currently the retention rates for rural areas are approximately 14% lower than the national average. Retention rates will not be improved solely by making senior curriculum more relevant, the question of access and opportunity must be addressed. Unfortunately, the rural workforce has one of the lowest levels of post compulsory education and training of any industry in Australia.

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Only 25% of rural workers have any post-compulsory education. How will the new system overcome the shortfall in rural and isolated areas?

The idea of networking between providers of vocational training will be a positive move for rural areas. Flexible learning methods and co-operative delivery could mean more access to education and training. Recommendation 9, of the Carmichael report refers to "more extensive use of community learning centres ... and incorporation of open learning methods ..." The co-operative usage of equipment and centres already in existence across many sections could open up opportunities for rural youth. However this does require more open discussion and co-operation between all providers. Many innovative programmes already exist in small rural centres utilising a variety of services and equipment available. To quote the Carmichael report "several changes need to be made, and are being made but not widely enough. What is needed is to collect elements of 'best practice' as the basis for systemic solution."

Many 15-19 year olds in rural areas are already multi-skilled as a result of the employment opportunities available to them. Rural young people often have to adapt prior skills to new employment opportunities if they wish to remain in the same vicinity. Transferability of skills and credit on a national scale will prove beneficial to this group but further investigation and discussion needs to be held on this topic. Many young people work on family properties and in family businesses, will the skills they acquire in these contexts be recognised for certificate levels? These young people need recognition for "prior learning and competence achieved by any means" as stated in recommendation 1 of the Carmichael report.

One major area not addressed by this report is the lack of variety of work experience opportunities for rural young people. In many rural areas this is a problem, as is the number of opportunities available to young people. The successful T.R.A.C. programme works well in larger rural centres and urban situations, but how well will it work in more isolated areas? For 78 clients particularly in T.R.A.C. this involves 8 High Schools, 58 firms, large numbers of parents and other support personnel, where does a small country town find such resources?

The report discusses casual and part-time work being integrated into the system. What about those young people who work on family properties and small business who are not being paid? These should be included in the school based qualifications allowing credit transfer to ASF levels. This needs to be investigated as a viable alternative for rural young people. I suggest pilot studies in rural areas are essential to determine the alternatives.

The use of CAP and DSP funding to provide specific vocational opportunities has been successfully operating for a number of years. With the broad banded equity programme being discussed currently this has major implications for the funding of those programmes. There is a need to look at the resourcing of initiatives that will continue to provide opportunities that are not currently available in rural areas.

The Carmichael report does make mention of the inequitable opportunities and provision available to young people in rural areas. More needs to be done on the delivery arrangements for all disadvantaged youth groups. Barriers to vocational training and education include access to centres, transport arrangements, cost factors, accommodation, availability of courses and quotas. More investigation and use made of mobile classrooms, technology, skill share initiatives, community organisations could provide more opportunities for young people. Much could be done on the use of distance

education as a more flexible approach to learning. Allowing flexibility in the choice of courses, units and modules and the timing of these will also assist the removal of current barriers. The recommendations on Austudy, AIC and a training wage will also help to remove current financial barriers.

Much discussion in the report centres on the provision of competency based training, however, no reference is made to Primary Industry in this regard. Groups such as the National Farmers Federation, the Dairy Industry, Wheat boards etc. should be consulted and encouraged to provide their own competency based systems, perhaps in a similar way to the Hospitality and Catering industry. If we are to produce a more highly skilled rural workforce then specialist agricultural and related training needs to be offered at all levels in key industry sections.

The attempt to provide "broad, lifelong learning" through competency based training is appropriate. The assessment of performance is an area for further work, this will become more difficult to administer as distance from off the job training becomes greater.

The challenge for rural educators and trainers is to look at rural education and identify how this will fit with the recommendations in this report. Multiple pathways and flexible points of entry and exit in higher education and training courses of study require completely new approaches and attitudes to the provision of educational services to young Australian's in rural and remote areas. People living across rural Australia have the right to receive the full range of high quality education and training.

The Carmichael report appears to be based around large business enterprises, with token mention of small business and rural industry. This represents a particular challenge for rural Australia if small businesses are going to accept enterprise based training. Educators need to be encouraged to take the initiative now and provide models and strategies to make this an effective tool for rural areas.

The TAFE infrastructure is currently not fully utilised, cross sector discussion must be initiated and revitalised to encourage extension of usage and offerings. Alternative delivery modes, mixed-mode teaching and networking are all strategies which must be utilised to provide 'at the work face' opportunities for rural young people. We are capable of producing a sound, competency-based, flexible open training system. We are able to deliver high quality, nationally accredited skills training by improving our effectiveness and flexibility. The strategy required will be set out priorities for rural areas, identify goals and plan the strategies needed to achieve an improved and more efficient delivery of education and training for rural areas.

In summary, as TAFE educators for rural and isolated students you should consider:

1. How you will define vocational competencies to ensure a link between education, training and work;
2. How you will approach assessment and moderation if courses are to be offered nationally;
3. How will you expand your offerings to create flexible pathways for all rural students; and

4. What strategies you can employ to improve access and opportunity for your rural students.

As educators of rural youth I encourage you to be pro-active. We must be sure that we can deliver the new training before it is introduced. We have a responsibility to ensure our offerings meet the economic demands of rural-based industries and offer people living in the country the greatest range of opportunities our resources allow. Facilities and resources are the challenge for government agencies, your challenge is to provide a full range of high quality education and training accessible to all young people.

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