Providing Vocational Education and Training (VET) for NSW Rural Schools and Students: the 'State of Play'

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A strategic framework for VET in Schools (1998-2000) was developed by the Department of Education and Training to coordinate the development and implementation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in government schools across NSW. One clear advantage of the vocational education curriculum in schools is that it offers a broader range of choices to students and has the potential to satisfy the needs and aspirations of a broader range of students than can be accommodated within the traditional curriculum. Vocational learning and VET are also emerging as major mechanisms for helping young people negotiate the complex transition from CHILD to ADULT.

The major distance education provider for NSW school and TAFE students is the Open Training and Education Network – Distance Education Directorate (OTEN-DE). OTEN-DE meets the needs of students across the state who must access vocational education and training by means of distance education, either as isolated learners or as students in smaller rural schools.

This paper explores some conceptual and practical issues associated with the provision of vocational learning and VET for students in isolated and rural areas.

The Policy Framework for Vocational Education in the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET)

Providing school students with access to vocational education options is a high priority for the NSW government. The government's White Paper, *Securing their Future - the NSW Government's Reforms for the Higher School Certificate* provided the framework, placing vocational education and training in schools within the context of a coherent and comprehensive Higher School Certificate program. The priority was affirmed in the Department of Education and Training's *Strategic Directions 2000 – 2002*, which commits schools to "enhancing the breadth, depth and diversity of secondary school curriculum through the implementation of reforms and changes such as the inclusion of nationally-accredited, industry-recognised vocational training within the New Higher School Certificate, and the establishment of new multi-campus arrangements embracing schools, TAFE institutes and universities".

Implementation of the priority is guided by the *NSW Strategic VET Plan 1998-2000* and other sets of guidelines for teachers, districts and TAFE institutes. The *Strategic VET Plan* postulates a range of benefits to young people of offering vocational education and training as part of their Higher School Certificate, including the opportunity to:

- develop vocational as well as general education skills within the context of the HSC;
- undertake learning in and obtain qualifications relevant to the workplace;
- gain a nationally recognised vocational credential or credit towards this whilst still at school;
- commence a part-time traineeship whilst still at school; and
- maximise the chances of securing employment or entry to further education and training on leaving school.

The Plan also outlines strong guidelines aimed at addressing social inequality and achieving social justice objectives by:

- making equity an integral consideration of the plan;
- ensuring that all individuals have equitable access to vocational education and training and prospects for quality participation in and successful outcomes from their vocational education and training; and
- increasing vocational education and training opportunities and improving training outcomes for members of those groups which have faced barriers in access and outcomes terms. This goal can be achieved both by improving access and support services to those in mainstream programs and by the provision of targeted programs.

These guidelines reflect the imperatives of the *NSW Charter for Equity in Education and Training* and are complemented by policy statements such as *Achieving Equity in Apprenticeships and Traineeships*; *NSW Plan of Action for Women in Vocational Education and Training*; *VET Strategy for Indigenous People in NSW*; the *Access, Participation and Outcomes Disability Project*; and the NSW Government's Policy on Adult and Community Education: *Lifelong Learning for All*.

Other related (vocational education) policy initiatives within the NSW government's plans for education and training 1999-2000 include:

- the *Ready for Work Plan* through which all students in government schools in Yrs 9 – 12 will develop individual School-to-Work Plans
- the extension of Work Education in Yrs 9 & 10 and the inclusion of more industry areas
- the *Traineeships at School* program
- TAFE NSW scholarships
- strengthening of school–TAFE links (co-location of campuses, re-entry programs for youth who have left school without completing Yr 10, Koori education programs)
- the *Helping Young People at Risk* program
- extension of the *Koori Youth Program*
- strengthening Industry-Education links (developing a charter for School-Industry Cooperation)
- further development of Regional Skills Centres

The Board of Studies *Assessment, Certification and Examination Manual* details requirements for provision of vocational education courses and procedures for credentialling these courses in the Higher School Certificate.

Policies and operational guidelines developed by DET directorates and units

The organisational units most directly responsible for the development of policy related to vocational education are Educational Development Directorate and the VET in Schools Implementation Directorate, which operate under the Deputy Director-General (Development & Support). The Vocational Programs for Schools Unit (VPSU) broadly manages VET in Schools and the Vocational Learning Unit develops programs and policies for vocational learning in Yrs 7 – 10. The Curriculum Support Directorate also contributes to the development of vocational education programs and guidelines.

Major documents which guide VET for Schools work are:

- *TAFE-Delivered Vocational HSC Course for Schools 2000* (and the accompanying *Guidelines and Procedures* manual)
- *Industry Curriculum Frameworks Information Package*

- *Part-Time Traineeships in NSW Schools*
- *Workplace Learning Handbook for Government Schools*
- *Industry Skill Needs and Planning Advice*

The Role of the Open Training and Education Network – Distance Education Directorate (OTEN-DE) in Vocational Education and Training

OTEN-DE meets the needs of students across the state who must access vocational education and training by means of distance education. A major client group of OTEN-DE is those students who are isolated by geographical location or by circumstance, and who are unable to attend school. In addition, OTEN-DE serves the needs of students in schools who are prevented, for various reasons, from accessing VET courses in their own school. These reasons may be related to the capacity of the school to mount and sustain a range of VET courses or to obtain them from another local school, TAFE or other provider, or they may be related to the special needs of the students.

Specifically, the charter of OTEN-DE requires it to provide VET programs for:

- isolated students who are denied daily access to a school. This includes geographically isolated students, those who are prevented by illness, disability, injury or other circumstance from attending a school, students in Juvenile Justice Centres and those whose commitment to their vocational talent prevents their attendance at school

- students in small rural schools where the teaching resources or general capacity of the school does not permit it to offer an adequate range of curriculum choices

- students in other schools where the Principal determines that the student can only meet the minimum requirements of the Board of Studies for the award of a Higher School Certificate by enrolling in a course by distance education

OTEN-DE also has the capacity to provide VET courses for students who are not currently engaged in any program of formal schooling

Thus OTEN-DE has a major role in preserving and promoting equity of access to VET for students across school districts in NSW. In this sense, OTEN-DE functions to support and assist school districts across the state meet their obligations in the provision of vocational education and training.

The Vocational Education Landscape as it Affects OTEN-DE

Some Conceptual Issues Associated with Vocational Education

Vocational learning and VET are emerging as major mechanisms for helping young people negotiate the complex transition from CHILD to ADULT. Schools are good at relating to the world of childhood: they are in reality major managers of childhood. In the past, the transition to adulthood was largely undertaken by WORK. This social function has been damaged by a) restricted access to work for many young people; and b) changes to the *nature* of work (disappearance of unskilled, low level work). In these circumstances, there is an increased potential for TRAINING to 'fill the void' and assume some of the transition function, because first, available employment opportunities generally require some specific

preparation and skills development, and, secondly, training usually occurs in adult contexts – in the workplace or in workplacements which simulate industry conditions. Given the tendency for young people to remain in school longer than in the past, schools are in a good position to assume some of this training (and transition to adulthood) function on behalf of society. It is a function which has relevance to every stratum of society, but it is particularly vital to those groups who are already disadvantaged (children from families with a low socio-economic status, some indigenous families, isolated rural families, etc) because these families may have the greatest difficulty in offering to their children a range of positive adult models and opportunities to engage in a range of satisfying adult experiences.

In these disadvantaged families especially, questions of effective child-to-adult transitions are related to broader questions of developing 'competence' (in the broad sociological sense) and capability – issues of self-confidence and self-worth, where capability is defined as 'a justified belief in one's capacity to act in appropriate adult ways'.

It is also important to remember that 'being an adult' is not context-free – it is defined by the individual's culture and affected by ethnicity, gender and history. For example, the roles and expectations of an adult woman in a Muslim family may be quite different from those of an Aboriginal woman. There is an obligation on the educator to recognise and understand these differences and to build the curriculum in ways that are sympathetic to the transitions each student is being called upon to make. In a multicultural community, it may well be possible to mount an argument that an effective education is one that exposes each student to a range of adult roles both within and outside the culture of the family. Vocational education offers opportunities for a variety of adults to interact with students in a variety of adult contexts that are not so naturally incorporated into the traditional academic curriculum. For isolated students (who are a major part of the Distance Education clientele) these exposures are especially valuable.

There are other, equally taxing issues to do with curriculum. Vocational education courses, as part of the broader school curriculum, need to capture and give sufficient emphasis to the *educational* components. To what extent do the industry frameworks do this? Is competency (as defined by industry) enough? Are there personal, social, moral, intellectual development goals that are not being addressed? Does industry have sufficient vision to capture the ambitions, concerns and aspirations of communities and societies? It could be argued that a major advantage of having vocational education and training embedded in a *school* curriculum (rather than having it occur solely in the training sector) is that some of these educational issues can be more readily addressed. These issues have direct implications for curriculum enactment. If the arguments of this paragraph are valid, then there *should* be qualitative differences in the ways that schools enact their vocational curriculum (i.e. when compared to a training environment).

There are potential advantages for students in these different arrangements, too. Some students (especially, but not exclusively mature-age learners) will be looking for teaching/learning approaches modelled on adult learning principles. Others will be more comfortable with a 'school' model. Having both TAFE-based and school-based vocational education provides options for learners.

Implications of these conceptual issues for OTEN-DE

As a provider of vocational education and training by *distance*, OTEN-DE needs to be conscious of:

- the importance of maximising the opportunities for students to interact with a range of teachers, tutors, workplace colleagues, employers and community people as part of curriculum enactment. This is an integral expectation of the VET curriculum

(workplacement and workplace learning) and makes the provision of VET by distance more demanding than is the case with some other subjects.

- a possible need for a 'supplementary' curriculum, for isolated students especially, developed in parallel with the official syllabus, that explicitly builds student capability in a range of unfamiliar environments. Competencies within the industry framework syllabus may not, in themselves, be sufficient for an isolated student to feel confident and competent to assume a place in the industry in a location or a cultural context which is unfamiliar, perhaps even threatening. Some students may need explicit help in acquiring these broader capabilities and achieving the self-development they need to operate in a variety of contexts. This requirement reflects the implicit expectations of VET courses that they will equip students broadly with attitudes, values and personal competencies as well as the specific skills and competencies of the syllabus.

For some clients of distance education, both these kinds of considerations may be accommodated within arrangements made at the student's home school, but it is important that they are not taken for granted, and that both the distance teachers and the local teachers are aware of, and participate in this broader curriculum. But for students who study in isolation, these considerations present an additional challenge to the distance education provider.

Student Characteristics

One clear advantage of the vocational education curriculum in schools is that it offers a broader range of choices to students and has the potential to satisfy the needs and aspirations of a broader range of students than can be accommodated within the traditional curriculum. By adopting this broader curriculum, schools are acknowledging the dramatic changes in the secondary school population and in society's expectations of graduates of the secondary school system. For some time, there have been significant portions of the secondary school population who have not been adequately served by an academic curriculum, but the alternatives offered (in many cases calling for exercise, in a simplified form of the same academic skills) have sometimes been quite limited in their capacity to prepare students for useful adult roles.

Students also vary in their readiness to make use of the available opportunities at any given time. Some are quite clear about their aspirations at a relatively early age, while others may take longer, or may reject the offerings of the school entirely. The accompanying diagram attempts to represent the varied groups of students occupying the vocational education landscape. The diagram postulates a range of student groups based on their relationship to the curriculum. The normal understandings of student diversity, based on considerations of ethnicity, gender, socio-economic position, geographic location, etc, need to be superimposed onto these groupings.

EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS TO ADULTHOOD

Vocationally Focused Students (Technical)	Vocationally Focused Students (Professional)	Academic/General Education Focused Students	Undecided Students	Unfocused or Disengaged Students
For example, people seeking 'trades', operatives, positions not requiring university qualifications.	For example, prospective teacher, brain surgeon, veterinarian, lawyer	Destination not clear – they know their future lies in academic sphere, but not sure where. Have probably rejected technical destinations, but not clear otherwise	Unclear about whether their adult life will see them as 'technical' or 'professional'. Trying to keep options open. Worried about any narrowing of education that might lock them out of choices.	Negative about education Educational attainment does not feature in their vision of adulthood Have a history of difficulties with life stage transitions Unlikely to manage transition to work without support Have either left school early, or are at risk of early leaving
Needs: • focused VET • technical, rather than academic curriculum • closed, specific outcomes (competencies) • 'training' focus • broad, general education • TAFE as appropriate provider?	Needs: • broad, general education • strong 'academic' bias in curriculum • 'open' outcomes • broad capabilities • 'educational' focus • university-oriented school curriculum as appropriate provider?	Needs: • broad, general education • 'academic' bias in curriculum • 'open' outcomes • broad capabilities • 'educational' focus • traditional school model appropriate?	Needs: • broad, general education • balance of 'academic' and 'technical' subjects • 'open' outcomes • broad capabilities • opportunity to sample 'training' products • mixture of school and TAFE provision?	Needs: • careful (probably individualised) planning and programming • a broad range of available education and training 'products' • school or TAFE appropriate?

Note: Students with disabilities requiring a specific educational response may be found in any of these groups.

Issues associated with the range of student characteristics

Some questions need to be asked about this mixed school clientele, the answers to which will have profound influences on the shape and effect of the school curriculum. Some of these questions are suggested below.

- How do these groups correspond to the normal divisions of high-achieving/low-achieving students in school?
- Is there a nexus between 'high-achievement' and the competitive academic curriculum? Should there be? Is this inevitable? Are they the same thing (i.e. does high-achievement mean success with academic curriculum?) Are the models of teaching/learning necessarily different for these groups? (i.e. is there a universal model that is equally effective for any group?)
- What sort of curriculum is appropriate for the 'undecided' group? What mix of competitive academic and vocational is appropriate? What role is there for cooperative learning? What is the range of choices that must be offered?
- How does rurality or isolation impact on these choices? (i.e. their availability and their appropriateness) Should there be any difference in the choices available to rural/non-rural students? Is there? Need there be? Why/why not? Can we do anything about it? What, if anything, needs to be done?

The OTEN-DE Clientele in Distance Education Centres

Secondary enrolments in Distance Education Centres fall into three broad groups, viz: full-time students; single-subject (single course) enrolments; and Pathways students (those students planning to accumulate credit for their HSC over a longer period). Each of these groups contains students who are affected by geographical isolation, either at home or at the school they attend. The majority of students, however, enrol for other reasons. The list of enrolment categories includes the following: Students from families of the religious group, The Brethren; Community Care School (Juvenile Justice) students; students deemed to be in Extraordinary Circumstances; students requiring a specific subject in order to support their chosen career prospects; Lord Howe Island students; PNG residents; Pregnant students/young mothers; students from Schools for Specific Purposes; students with medical conditions; students with severe behaviour difficulties; students temporarily resident or travelling overseas; travellers within Australia; and vocationally talented students. The representation of the different groups in the first semester of 2000 is summarised in the tables which follow.

FULL-TIME DISTANCE EDUCATION ENROLMENTS

	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12	Totals
Isolated Home	36	44	21	8	109
Isolated School	1	1	1		3
Other Reasons	239	383		169	791
Totals	276	428	254	175	1133

Within this group some 23 students (2.03%) are classified as ATSI, 43 (3.79%) as NESB and 54 (1.96%) as Low SES.

SINGLE SUBJECT (SINGLE COURSE) ENROLMENTS

	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12	Totals
Small or Isolated School	117	73	242	218	650
Other Reasons	317	358	1303	1389	3367
Totals	434	431	1545	1607	4017

Within this group some 56 students (1.39%) are classified as ATSI, 78 (1.94%) as NESB and 54 (4.77%) as Low SES.

PATHWAYS STUDENTS

Isolated Home	10
Other Reasons	137
Total	147

Implications of student diversity for OTEN-DE

The realities of diversity in the school student population as a whole, and within the Distance Education Centre enrolments, have particular consequences for a distance education provider such as OTEN-DE, some of which are listed below:

- Course deliverers/writers need a clear sense of 'audience' for their product (i.e. of the diversity of that audience)
- There is a need for extreme flexibility in course content, pedagogy, expectations, etc, to meet needs of different client groups (with the attendant challenges to administration and funding).
- There is a need for support for simultaneous models – attuned to the needs of diverse clientele.
- There is a need for the provider to be in tune with varying definitions of ADULT in different client groups. (This raises an interesting question: what happens if the 'local' definitions are judged to be inadequate – e.g. based on a culture of welfare dependency and self-destructive behaviours?)
- It raises questions about the professional development of teachers preparing materials for and delivering VET in schools – e.g. their knowledge

of/experience with/sensitivity to the diversity of the clientele -- and also about 'the system' obtaining the maximum leverage from those teachers, whether they are currently employed in schools or the TAFE sector.

- It raises questions also about the pedagogies and models of learning embedded in distance learning materials and processes -- e.g. transmissional or constructivist? teacher-centred or student-centred? focused on 'teaching' or 'learning'?

OTEN-DE has not yet come up with answers to these questions, but the pursuit of those answers will need to be a significant component of its policy development enterprise in the immediate future.

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