



# A WELL-SKILLED FUTURE

## Tailoring VET to the emerging labour market

### Social area differences in vocational education and training participation by Richard Teese & Anne Walstab

To meet future workforce needs we must ensure that everyone is given the opportunity to gain skills, and VET has a unique role to play here. This research looks at VET provision in a wide range of different social contexts and the barriers to higher participation among disadvantaged groups.

#### Introduction

One of the aims of the national vocational education and training (VET) strategy is to ensure that Australian industry has a 'highly skilled workforce to support strong performance in the global economy'. Meeting this objective requires a responsive VET sector (as well as schools and higher education sectors). But how well the sector responds to emerging skill needs is by no means only a matter of institutional policies and adaptiveness (supply-side activity). It is also partly a matter of how VET is perceived and how it is used by the population. In general, the VET sector plays multiple roles, with a different balance of roles for different populations.

The VET sector is not a clean slate on which emerging skill needs at the national level can be written as a kind of labour market prescription. There are constraints on its responsiveness which relate both to the complexity of its roles and the factors which influence populations to undertake VET.

An important task, then, is to identify these different roles and to examine the extent to which they accommodate different segments of the population. While it may be possible to estimate shortages in, for example, traditional skilled trades areas, whether the VET sector can supply appropriate training is another question, given the way the sector is used by different populations.

Social context may make a big difference to the roles played by VET. There is likely to be a number of factors at work here—the availability of apprenticeships, the range of

courses on offer by public and private providers, and the accessibility of campus-based training. But there are other, more complex factors as well. These include perceptions and values about jobs and employment-based training, and income needs. The mix of these factors may vary from context to context. A range of responses is required to address the barriers to participation which different social contexts present.

#### The age pattern of participation

The national picture of age differences in VET participation provides important clues to the range of roles played by the VET sector in different social contexts. Nationally, VET participation is highest amongst teenagers and young adults aged 20–24 years. Every third teenager and every fifth young adult are participating in a VET program. VET participation falls away fairly steeply for adults aged in their mid-20s and over. However, on average, every tenth adult in their mid-20s to mid-40s is undertaking VET. Rates are much lower for older groups (from 6%, declining to 1%). The age pattern of participation suggests that the VET sector performs four major roles:

- a *platform-building* role for young commencing workers
- a *promotions or skills enrichment* role for established workers
- a *re-orientation* role for older workers
- a *personal enrichment* role for older workers or people not in the workforce.

#### Program 4:

Understanding vocational education participation and barriers

The research consortium, *A well-skilled future: Tailoring vocational education and training to the emerging labour market*, comprises researchers from the National Institute of Labour Studies and the Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning. Managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), it aims to investigate future work skill needs and work organisation arrangements, and their implications for VET.

*A well-skilled future: Tailoring vocational education and training to the emerging labour market*

CONSORTIUM RESEARCH PROGRAM



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The roles of VET are therefore *population-related*. That is, they relate to what the sector does for the population at different stages of participation in the workforce. Award levels in VET, on the other hand, may play *multiple roles*. For example, middle-level programs are platform-building for teenagers, promotional for established workers, re-orienting for individuals returning to the workforce or changing occupations or industries, and developmental or enriching for individuals no longer in the workforce.

In population terms, the VET sector is more focused on the platform-building and promotions roles, and its resources are more concentrated on the mainly young populations who depend on these services. But the re-orientation and enrichment roles are of major importance, allowing older age groups the flexibility to adapt to changes in labour markets, as well as to stages in family life-cycles (formation of families, ageing, patterns in household income and consumption, for instance).

### The award pattern for different age groups

The variable roles played by VET are clearly highlighted by the award pattern of participation for different age groups. Basic and skilled VET (certificates I/II and III, respectively) dominate the activity of teenagers and young adults. These awards are platform-building. The platform-building role diminishes in relative importance with age, while other roles become more prominent—promotions and skills enrichment, re-orientation, and personal development.

### Social patterns

The roles provided by the VET sector vary not only by age, but also by the socioeconomic status of the population. One way of testing this is to compare participation rates at different award levels (and for different age groups) for different socioeconomic bands of the population. Why is this important? Part of the answer lies in attempting to widen the social pool from which skill shortages are filled and implies identifying and tackling economic and cultural barriers (as well as possible institutional barriers, such as program emphasis and selection practices).

Social analysis is the first step to achieving this. But another part of the answer lies in the need for greater equity in the way VET currently works. For example, the rewards of VET are greater at the top end of the Australian Qualifications Framework scale than at the bottom, but social access to the top end varies widely.

In general, the platform-building role played by the VET sector increases as the level of socioeconomic status decreases. For example, at the highest socioeconomic level, only 7% of teenage girls are enrolled in certificate I or II courses (excluding those in school). This rises sharply to 17% in the second lowest band of socioeconomic status. Similarly, participation in skilled (certificate III) courses rises from 3.6% of teenage girls from the highest socioeconomic status band to 21.7% in the third lowest band. The social trend for skilled VET is humped, with the peak in participation in the middle socioeconomic status range and tapering off, especially at the high end, but also—although less sharply—at the lower end of the scale.

### School attainment

The social pattern in which basic and skilled VET activity rises as socioeconomic status falls can be regarded as a response to differences in schooling. VET's platform-building role becomes increasingly important with low school attainment, as measured by retention rates and formal achievement levels.

Schooling level affects the other roles of VET as well. Older adults with incomplete schooling or poor literacy and numeracy skills may turn to VET to re-orient themselves in the workforce or to gain more flexibility. They also use VET for personal enrichment, independently of work commitments. Finally, the role of personal enrichment is also relevant for well-schooled (including university-trained) individuals, again independently of work status.

### Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of identifying economic and cultural barriers to participation in order to assist the VET sector to respond effectively to skill shortages and also to ensure equitable access to VET opportunities and good jobs. VET provision occurs in a wide range of different social contexts, and the barriers to higher or more equitable participation are likely to vary in nature and importance. The role of schools in shaping aspirations and in preparing young people has been identified as a key part of the social landscape.

**This overview is based on the research report, *Social area differences in vocational education and training participation*. Visit <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1721.html> for more information.**