



GRADUATE PROGRAMS FOR VET STUDENTS: IS THERE A NEED?

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This *At a glance* seeks to investigate the extent and feasibility of graduate programs for vocational education and training (VET) students, excluding apprentices and trainees. Graduate programs are a type of employment targeted at recent graduates and are common in the higher education sector. Based on desktop research and discussions with key informants, this paper explores the following key questions:

- What are the elements of good and bad practice in employment programs for recent graduates?
- What are the benefits of graduate programs to employers?
- What value do employers and graduates realise from these programs?
- Is there a role for internships, cadetships and graduate programs for VET graduates?
- Are other initiatives, such as work-integrated learning, more suited to vocational education and training?

HIGHLIGHTS

- Graduate programs have the potential to improve the number of VET graduates employed in their intended occupation after training, but they are not widely available for VET students.
- These programs are usually employer-driven, so the benefits of these programs, such as lower wage costs, up-to-date knowledge and employee enthusiasm, need to be promoted.
- An alternative option is to incorporate more work-integrated learning into VET courses to improve the workplace experience of VET students. Employers could also potentially use this approach as a recruitment tool.

BACKGROUND

Graduate programs provide opportunities to experience different functions across organisations, thus accelerating their career development.

To give an idea of the number of potential consumers for such programs: over 560 000 government-funded VET qualifications were completed in 2013 (NCVER 2015a). Around 75% of VET graduates are employed six months after training (NCVER 2014) but only around 40% are employed in their intended occupation after training (Wibrow 2014). The question is: can this match be improved for new graduates?

Graduate programs (or their equivalent) have evolved as a formal entry to employment and career development in the public service and other industry sectors for students graduating from university. They can be either program-based, usually involving rotations within a company, or project-based, where the graduate works on a specific project for the length of their employment (Hegarty & Johnston 2008). They are typically aimed at providing graduates with opportunities to experience a range of functions across the enterprise and thus accelerate their career development.

However, while these types of programs are plentiful for higher education graduates – the Graduate Opportunities website gives ample examples – it appears that their availability is limited for VET students. Although some programs undoubtedly exist – programs for nursing graduates have been identified (see case study) – information on them is not readily available, so it is fair to assume they are not common for VET students.

The original scope of the study was to determine the prevalence of graduate programs for VET students, as well as undertake interviews with both graduates from a VET background employed in one of these programs and their employers, with the aim of identifying their experiences and canvassing ideas for their improvement. This *At a glance* collates information identified through the literature and the conversations with key informants and examines the benefits of these programs and the potential role of graduate programs for VET-qualified graduates.

WHY SHOULD EMPLOYERS HIRE RECENT VET GRADUATES?

There are numerous reasons why employers decide to hire new VET graduates. Younger workers tend to cost less in terms of their wages; they are easier to mould as they have less working experience; and they have good technological skills and up-to-date knowledge gained through their recent study (Smith & Comyn 2003).

Some employers also feel an obligation to train the next iteration of workers in their industry. Similarly, other employers hire new graduates as they believe they are recruiting the next generation of leaders (Industrial Economics 2003). Some also believe that hiring a recent graduate will lead to a medium to longer term commitment to the organisation from these workers (Jenner 2008).

Other employers, by contrast, do not hire recent graduates, believing that they won't remain for any length of time with their first employer after graduation (Graduate Careers Australia 2008). In addition, poor economic conditions and budgetary constraints can limit an employer's financial ability to hire graduates (Lindsay 2014). Other factors influencing an employer's decision to employ graduates include: whether an appropriate candidate can be found; inability to provide internal support; and whether they have capacity (Lindsay 2014).

Whether employers have altruistic motives or seek a skills mix, graduates need somewhere to begin their working lives/professional careers. A program, such as graduate programs, cadetships or internships, may help to ease the transition from student to employee for graduates and better prepare them for their working careers. Employers, for their part, may need to accept some responsibility for developing the skills of young people (Johnson & Burden 2003), given that some of the skills that employers may expect a graduate to possess can only be learnt in the work environment.

Reasons for hiring graduates include: lower wage costs and good technological skills and up-to-date knowledge.

WHAT VALUE DO THESE PROGRAMS PROVIDE TO GRADUATES?

Graduate programs enable graduates to compete with similarly experienced individuals for the same job.

Finding a job upon graduation can be an overwhelming experience for recent graduates as they are often competing with more experienced people for the same jobs (Walkley Hall, unpublished). These transitional programs, which are targeted specifically at graduates, help to create a more even playing field. They also provide graduates with the opportunity to acquire more working experience before starting a professional job (Institute of Leadership and Management & Ashridge Business School 2011) and strengthen their curriculum vitae (Mellors-Bourne & Day 2011). In this sense, graduates value these programs as a stepping stone on their path to employment.

Once employed in these programs, graduates experience considerable satisfaction if they are awarded responsibility, given opportunities for career and salary advancement, and are provided with job security (McDermott, Mangan & O'Connor 2006). While understanding they have more learning to do, graduates value being treated like other employees, so it is important that these transitional programs enable this to occur.

GRADUATE AND EMPLOYER EXPERIENCES WITH THESE PROGRAMS

Graduate experiences

Overall, graduates place great value in these programs as they assist them to begin their professional working careers; however, they do experience some frustrations. Graduates report receiving vast amounts of development opportunities while they are on the program but then receive nothing afterwards (Development Beyond Learning, unpublished). In some instances, graduates become frustrated because their experience in reality falls short of the promises made beforehand, such as during recruitment or induction, while others feel as if their work lacks a clear purpose and that they are removed from their work colleagues (Jenner 2008). Moreover, there can be inconsistencies in their placement opportunities (Jenner 2008); for example, some graduates within the same organisations may receive more rotations or have greater involvement in determining where their rotation will be than others.

Employer experiences

For employers, the current budget can be a major factor in whether or not they hire graduates (Lindsay 2014; Development Beyond Learning unpublished). Employers need to weigh up a possible reduction in productivity due to the initial extra guidance from other employees required to assist graduates against the enthusiasm and fresh approach graduates can bring to the workplace. Employers report that finding the right graduate, one with the right skills and attitudes, is the key to forming a mutually beneficial working arrangement (Hegarty & Johnson 2008).

Finding a graduate with the right skills and attitudes is the key to a mutually beneficial working relationship.

GOOD PRACTICE WHEN EMPLOYING GRADUATES

Good practice includes ensuring that the actual position matches the promises made during recruitment, considering the graduate's interests and career goals when deciding on rotations, maintaining a learning log and allowing mentoring relationships to develop informally.

Table 1 highlights the key elements of good practice when employing recent graduates, identified through a literature review.



Table 1 Key elements of employment programs for graduates

Timeframe	Employment programs often vary in length. Internships and cadetships tend to be 12 months or shorter and graduate programs tend to be around 18 to 24 months.
Recruitment	The recruitment phase tends to involve an extensive application and interview process (Industrial Economics 2003). Occasionally, especially for graduate programs, psychometric testing and other work-related tests (such as maths aptitude) are used. These tests can be used as a screening tool for positions. During the recruitment process it is important to be clear about the position, including the responsibilities and tasks involved, to ensure the graduates' expectations of the program match their experience (Jenner 2008; Industrial Economics 2003). If the two are not aligned, then less satisfied graduates are the consequence.
Induction	Novice workers usually require a different induction process from other employees as they are only beginning their working careers and have little experience in other workplaces (Johnson & Burden 2003). The communication style that is employed is important (Tresize-Brown 2004).
Rotations	A common element of these employment programs is rotations through different sections of the workplace. Rotations are generally of six months duration but this can vary. Rotating through the company provides graduates with a better understanding of the business, as they can experience more areas first-hand (O'Donnell et al. 2008). Graduates are often looking for variety, a challenge and career development during the program, and rotations help to meet these needs (Gilbert 2010). Best practice involves considering the graduate's interests and career goals when deciding on rotations (Industrial Economics 2003). Employers should also consider their own business needs in the decision.
Mentoring	Many programs encourage mentoring relationships for novice workers. Mentoring allows the graduates to learn from the experiences of the mentor and receive guidance and support (Brady & Schuck 2005). Generally, gradually building an informal relationship with a mentor results in a more effective mentoring arrangement than being assigned a mentor (Industrial Economics 2003). In addition, face-to-face mentoring is the preferred method and should only be complemented with online mentoring, rather than being the only mode (Brady & Schuck 2005).
Continuing professional development	A key element of these employment programs for graduates is the development opportunities they provide. Many programs offer ongoing training for graduates during the course of the program. This training can take many different forms such as technical training, conferences, on-the-job training, shadowing and the opportunity to undertake new or different tasks (Shannon & Burchill 2013). Training opportunities and their outcomes should also be linked to regular review and feedback (Johnson & Burden 2003). Maintaining a learning log can be helpful for graduates as it can assist in identifying where they have improved and whether they need training in other areas (O'Donnell et al. 2008).

Case study: employment programs for nursing graduates

On the whole, few employment programs were found for VET graduates, the area of nursing being the exception. Across Australia graduate programs in both public and private hospitals are available for enrolled nurses, who typically have a diploma-level qualification, as well as for registered nurses and midwives. These programs aim to provide a supportive environment for new nurses to boost their confidence and competence, improve their adjustment to the professional workplace and help to enhance retention in the nursing workforce (Levett-Jones & FitzGerald 2005). As the programs are additional to the placements that nurses have completed during their study, they are unique. They also tend to receive government funding, whereas employers generally bear the costs for graduate programs in other disciplines (Healy & Howe 2012).

According to the NurseInfo website (<www.nurseinfo.com.au>), developed by the Australian College of Nursing, graduate nursing programs include both theoretical and clinical practice components and are generally of six to 12 months duration. These programs are not compulsory. According to Healy and Howe (2012, p.10), the common elements of graduate nursing programs across Victoria, which are similar to other states, include:

- orientation days (for example, an initial generic orientation, a nursing-specific orientation and orientation to each new rotation)
- designated program staff (coordinators, support staff etc.)
- six to ten study days
- two or three rotations
- supernumerary days at the start of the program and beginning of each rotation
- a graduate handbook or similar
- quarterly reviews of progress and performance
- evaluation of program-related activities
- a staged approach to the introduction of shift work
- main intake in February.

The research on these programs examines nursing as a whole (enrolled, registered and midwifery), which means that the benefits for VET qualified nurses cannot be differentiated; however, they appear to be a common pathway for them to enter the field.

Graduate nursing programs include both theoretical and clinical practice components and are generally of six to 12 months duration.

The benefits of graduate programs for employers need to be promoted in order to increase the prevalence of these programs for VET graduates.

The graduate nursing program prompts concerns similar to those mentioned in the previous section, such as the uncertainties associated with the work-readiness of graduates. Other concerns included graduates' lack of familiarity with the terminology, reinforcing the view that many are not fully qualified for work and require extra support (Healy & Howe).

Overall, the persistent presence of these programs over the years indicates that both the employers and the graduate nurses appreciate the supportive environment they provide during their transition from study to the workplace.

ARE THESE PROGRAMS SUITABLE FOR VET GRADUATES?

Information on internships, cadetships and graduate programs for VET graduates is not readily available, confirming that few of these programs exist, which in turn prompts questions about their suitability for VET graduates. During the search for information, enquiries were made with a number of industry skills councils, recruitment firms, VET providers and other agencies to establish their existence (see table 2). The people to whom we spoke sometimes questioned their value in VET, given the role that apprenticeships and traineeships already have in this area. There are far more VET graduates than apprentices and trainees completing each year – fewer than 160 000 apprentices and trainees completed in 2014 (NCVER 2015b) – and many of these graduates are not employed in their intended occupation six months after training. Thus can the needs of these VET graduates be better served?

While graduate programs may have the potential to help VET graduates to break into their intended occupation, they are heavily reliant on employers having the resources for such programs. To improve the uptake of the programs by employers, the benefits for employers flowing from the programs, such as relatively lower wage costs, up-to-date knowledge and employee enthusiasm, need to be promoted. In addition, a VET graduate may be a more cost-effective option for an employer than an apprentice or trainee since they have already completed their training and may become more productive more quickly. The nursing example highlights one area where these programs can be seen to provide value for both the employee and employer. But can more be done by the VET sector?

Work-integrated learning as an alternative option

Other options that fall more within the control of the VET sector are available to improve the skills of graduates, and occur while the student is still studying. Work-integrated learning, a general umbrella term for these programs, encompasses activities such as placements, shadowing and workplace projects (Billet 2011) and is more commonplace in the higher education sector.

A benefit of work-integrated learning is that it can improve the employability skills of graduates, thereby making them more appealing to employers (Smith et al. 2014; Jackson 2013; Papadopoulos et al. 2011). The take-up of work-integrated learning in the VET sector could also provide the opportunity to put into practice the employability skills that are already embedded into training packages (Wibrow 2011). Work-integrated learning offers additional benefits for students; such an approach is likely to make their study relevant to the work context, provide an understanding of workplace culture, open up workplace and industry networks and enhance their understanding of career progression (Australian Workplace Productivity Agency 2013).

Many benefits accrue to employers who engage with work-integrated learning by offering placements and other learning opportunities to students. Employers' participation in work-integrated learning programs enables them to identify highly talented individuals for potential recruitment, utilise an extra resource for getting tasks done, and fulfil their corporate citizenship duties (PhillipsKPA 2014). The latter relates to the responsibility some employers feel about training the next generation of workers in their industry, as noted earlier. Having students in the workplace also provides professional development opportunities for staff members as they mentor or supervise the students. The students bring up-to-date knowledge about new technology or methods from their study to the organisation, along with a different perspective on workplace matters, both of which benefit the organisation (Papadopoulos et al. 2011).

However, while there are many benefits for employers, there are also some barriers, particularly for smaller businesses, to their participation in work-integrated learning. The most common barrier is a lack of resources, including both money and time, for these learning activities (PhillipsKPA 2014). Another challenge is finding suitable projects or activities for students while they are in the organisation.

Work-integrated learning can improve the employability skills of graduates and be a potential recruitment tool for employers.

It is unreasonable to expect graduates to walk straight into a role upon completion of study and be a fully productive team member.

While work-integrated learning is not guaranteed to help VET students to find a job after graduation, their workplace knowledge will improve and they will gain experience working in their field. This can only be of benefit when applying for jobs but it may not help them to compete with more experienced candidates for the same jobs.

SUMMARY

What is evident through the desktop research is that employers' expectations regarding the immediate work-readiness of graduates needs to be managed. Graduates cannot be expected to be able to walk straight into a role from study and be a fully productive team member without further input from the employing organisation, but in order to facilitate this, employers need to know what is in it for them beyond corporate citizenship duties. It is questionable whether there is enough evidence to encourage employers to implement employment programs specifically for graduates as part of their recruitment strategy. However, engaging with the VET sector by offering work-integrated learning opportunities for students enriches the learning experience for the student and also gives employers the opportunity to identify students for potential recruitment.



Table 2 Organisations contacted and their responses

Organisation type	Description of contact	Response
Recruitment agency	Spoke with graduate recruitment coordinator and other recruitment staff regarding opportunities available in the Australian public sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are limited opportunities for VET graduates, outside apprenticeships and traineeships, unless they wish to apply for lower-level jobs (ASO 1 and 2) like everyone else. • Outlined below are two opportunities available to students who either (1) would like to complete VET training while working, or (2) who have already completed a VET qualification and are interested in further study at university. One is available through the Skills for All initiative in the South Australian Public Sector, while the other is a federal initiative in the information and communications technology (ICT) field. • (1) For South Australian high school students interested in undertaking VET study, while also gaining useful work-experience, the Training Guarantee for SACE Students (TGSS) offers a useful pathway. Through TGSS, the South Australian Government offers subsidised training to students who are 16 years and over and who are enrolled in and working towards completing their SACE (or equivalent). The initiative targets students planning to complete a certificate III qualification (or higher) soon after leaving school, giving them the opportunity to undertake a minimum of 210 nominal hours of nationally accredited VET at a highly subsidised rate while being guaranteed at least 140 hours of work placement (either voluntary or paid) relevant to the qualification they're studying. For more information see: <http://www.skills.sa.gov.au/for-training-providers/training-school-students/training-guarantee-for-sace-students>. • (2) Conversely, the Australian Government offers a cadetship program for students who have completed a VET qualification and who are moving into university study. This program targets ICT graduates and offers the opportunity for the university student (with a VET qualification) to work (and be paid) for two days, while studying during the remainder of the week. Without the university component, VET graduates would not be considered for this program. Competition for these positions is very high.
Recruitment agency	Spoke with recruitment staff regarding opportunities available through their website (both within and outside the Australian public sector)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This agency only advertises graduate programs which target higher education graduates. The individuals contacted as a part of this research indicated that they have not received requests to advertise programs targeting VET graduates and are therefore unsure of the demand from employers for these graduates.

Government employer (federal)	Spoke with recruitment staff regarding opportunities available in their department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No graduate program opportunities are available for those without a bachelor degree or equivalent. These individuals are directed to lower-level roles and must compete with all other applicants for the job. • Generally, the view is that the apprenticeship and traineeship programs on offer work well and that these opportunities are sufficient for those undertaking VET study or for VET graduates. • As mentioned above, a cadetship program is on offer for students in ICT who have completed a VET qualification and are moving into university study. Without the university component, VET graduates would not be considered for this program. • There are also some separate employment opportunities which target certain equity groups; for example, Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander people or those with disability. These may or may not require a VET qualification for eligibility (it depends on the program).
Government employer (federal)	Spoke with recruitment staff regarding opportunities available in their department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No graduate program opportunities are available for those without a bachelor degree or equivalent. These individuals are directed to lower-level roles and must compete with all other applicants for the job. • As was the case with the other Australian Government Department contacted, the view was that the apprenticeship and traineeship programs on offer work well, and separate employment opportunities exist, targeting equity groups.
Government employer (state)	Spoke with recruitment staff regarding opportunities available in their department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No graduate program opportunities are available for those without a bachelor degree or equivalent. If a VET graduate is seeking a job, they are often directed to lower-level roles and must compete with all other applicants for the job. However, as mentioned above, the Training Guarantee for SACE Students (TGSS) is available for high school students interested in gaining work experience while studying VET. In addition, as described above, separate employment opportunities exist, targeting equity groups. • Although the employment opportunities for novice workers with a VET qualification are limited, one of the recruitment staff members contacted as a part of this research noted that she often received questions about opportunities for VET graduates, and wished that other opportunities existed to give these individuals the work experience needed to make themselves more 'marketable' to prospective employers.
Government employer (state)	Spoke with recruitment staff regarding 'registers' which facilitate employment for VET graduates in the South Australian public sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No graduate program opportunities are available for those without a bachelor degree or equivalent. These individuals are directed to lower-level roles and must compete with all other applicants for the job. As described above, separate employment opportunities targeting equity groups exist. • A 'skills register' exists for individuals already working in government and nearing the end of their public sector, local government or not-for-profit community sector apprenticeship, traineeship, cadetship or graduate placement and wish to continue working for the state government. • There are no 'registers' which exist to promote VET graduates who have not previously worked in government (through an apprenticeship, traineeship, cadetship or graduate placement).
Professional association	Spoke with recruitment staff regarding opportunities available in their association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No graduate program opportunities are available for those without a bachelor degree or equivalent. • It is possible to obtain entry to a program after having completed an associate degree in a relevant discipline at TAFE; however, a VET qualification alone is not sufficient. Individuals need to have completed their two-year associate degree at TAFE, plus an accredited degree in the discipline at university, to qualify.

VET training provider (TAFE)	Spoke with information line staff as well as recruitment staff regarding opportunities available in their institute or for their graduates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A cadetship program is available to individuals with a certificate III qualification – and gives them the chance to study anything from a certificate IV to an advanced diploma, while putting these skills to practical use. Generally cadetships run for 18 months to two years. <p>Note: No one contacted as a part of this research could advise whether prior government work history is a prerequisite to the cadetship program.</p>
Industry skills council	Spoke with information line staff regarding opportunities available in their industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment programs do not fall within the remit of this industry skills council. They described their role as being to develop resources and training packages for the industry. • They reported being unaware of whether any employment opportunities exist which target VET graduates.
Industry skills council	Spoke with a project officer and the Policy and Products Manager regarding opportunities available in their industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment programs do not fall within the remit of this ISC. They described their role as being to develop resources and training packages for the industry. That being said, the Policy and Products Manager maintained that employers in this industry desire employees with practical experience, and consequently strongly favour the apprenticeship model for sourcing novice workers. This industry largely employs individuals through apprenticeship programs, where they are trained, thus gaining the practical skills required to do the job. • This person stated that ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ and said that apprenticeships are the oldest form of education and work very well for people wishing to be employed in this area. They indicated there were very few roles where training wouldn’t require a significant work component. <p>They reported being unaware of any employment opportunities which target VET graduates, other than apprenticeships.</p>
VET experts	Held conversation with a group of experienced VET researchers to see if they had heard of any programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nobody had heard of any of these sorts of programs for VET graduates.
VET professional association	A contact sent information to their wider network of VET trainers, career advisors and program coordinators.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No information was received indicating that they knew of any programs.

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This document should be attributed as Wibrow, B & Jackson, L 2016, *Graduate programs for VET students: is there a need?*, NCVER, Adelaide.

This work has been produced by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) under the National Vocational Education and Training Research (NVETR) Program, which is coordinated and managed by NCVER on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments. Funding is provided through the Australian Department of Education and Training.

The NVETR program is based upon priorities approved by ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training (VET). This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector. For further information about the program go to the NCVER website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

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, or state and territory governments.

An *At a glance* is a synthesis of research focused on a particular topic of interest, drawing on information from various sources.

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ISBN 978 1 925173 45 1

TD/TNC 122.23



Published by NCVER ABN 87 007 967 311

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