

# Vocations: the link between post-compulsory education and the labour market



This summary pulls together the relevant key findings for qualification and approval bodies from the research program *Vocations: the link between post-compulsory education and the labour market*. The program comprised of three different strands:

- pathways from VET in Schools
- pathways within and between vocational education and training (VET) and higher education
- pathways in the labour market.

Current VET qualifications are based on competency-based training, which assumes a direct link between qualifications and jobs. However, past research shows that this is often not the case. This research explores the notion of 'vocational streams', which could potentially provide a better frame of reference for shaping the evolution of qualifications and jobs. Education and training in vocational capabilities, rather than in specific occupational tasks, could possibly result in a more sustainable and adaptable workforce.

**what the  
research  
says for...  
qualification  
& approval  
bodies**

## What are vocational streams?

Traditionally the link between qualifications and jobs has developed from the notion that vocations are based on specific skill sets. This tends to prepare students for a narrowly defined occupation or a particular job. A modern concept of vocations, called 'vocational streams', provides a framework for creating better connections between qualifications and jobs.

Vocational streams help individuals to be more adaptable by instilling the basic knowledge required for a number of jobs within a broad vocational field of practice, rather than for a specific occupation. This research suggests that vocational streams would prepare individuals for potentially rewarding working lives, while improving their options for career advancement through specialisation and the flexibility to move sideways into related occupations.

## Why is this research important to qualification and approval bodies?

Assuming a direct, linear connection between qualifications and jobs may exacerbate skills mismatches, as it results in narrowly focused qualifications and training. A curriculum based on vocational capabilities can improve the alignment between qualifications and the labour market by developing the person for a vocational stream.

All qualifications serve three purposes: labour market entry or progression; access to higher-level studies; and widened participation for disadvantaged students. This research identifies four types of qualifications (see box 1) with each emphasising these three purposes in different ways, depending on their relationship to the labour market and whether they are used as a signal for the specific knowledge, skills and attributes required as a precondition for entry to the occupation, or as a screen, whereby qualifications are used as a proxy for general capabilities within broader fields of practice.

**'Vocational streams' develop work-related capabilities that share common underpinning knowledge, skills and practices, rather than remaining focused on specific workplace tasks and roles that are based on existing or past practices.**

## Box 1: Four types of qualifications

The four broad qualification types vary in how they link to each other and to the labour market:

- Strong links between qualifications within the same field of education – weak links to occupations and mostly unregulated (for example, business studies)
- Strong links between qualifications within the same field of education – strong links to occupations and strong occupational pathways (for example, nursing)
- Weak links between qualifications within the same field of education – strong links to occupations and weak occupational pathways (for example, engineering)
- Weak links between qualifications within the same field of education – weak links to occupations (for example, the liberal arts and sciences)

## Key implications for qualification and approval bodies

The implications for qualification and approval bodies arising from this research are:

- While qualifications will vary in their emphasis and how they are implemented, all qualifications need to perform three roles: labour market entry and upgrade; access to higher-level study; and widened participation for disadvantaged students.
- A broader role for VET qualifications beyond preparation for workplace tasks and roles needs to be envisaged.
- Vocational streams could potentially be used as a structuring principle when redeveloping qualifications.
- Curriculum and training programs could be based on the broad-ranging knowledge, skills and attributes needed for a number of occupations within an industry.
- Those qualifications whose main role is to prepare graduates for further study could emphasise educational development, while those qualifications which aim to prepare graduates for an occupation could concentrate on broad occupational outcomes.
- Drawing together the expertise of employers, unions, professional associations, occupational and accrediting bodies, educational institutions and government in the development of curriculum and qualifications will enable a focus on both the educational and occupational purposes of qualifications.

Reform is possible in areas where employers, unions, professional associations, occupational and accrediting bodies, educational institutions and government share common objectives. Effective collaboration and the investment of resources across stakeholders will help to sustain deeper changes over time.

## For more information

This work is based on the three-year research program *Vocations: the link between post-compulsory education and the labour market*. The research was conducted by a consortium led by the LH Martin Institute at the University of Melbourne. For more information, see the final report, *Linking qualifications and the labour market through capabilities and vocational streams*, available at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2782.html>, and the research summaries for government and policy-makers; industry; and tertiary education providers and school educators, available at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2793.html>.



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