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# Complex not simple: The vocational education and training pathway from welfare to work

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Australian Government
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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, state and territory governments or NCVER

## Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Complex not simple: The vocational education and training pathway from welfare to work—Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1987.html>.

To find other material of interest, search VOCED (the UNESCO/NCVER international database <http://www.voced.edu.au>) using the following keywords: disabled person; parent; unemployed; unemployment; welfare.

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# About the research

## *Complex not simple: The vocational education and training pathway from welfare to work* by Kate Barnett and John Spoehr

The Welfare to Work initiative aims to move people from income support to paid work. While the primary emphasis of this policy has been on getting people into jobs, many of those targeted need to undertake training in order to get sustainable employment, thus posing a new challenge to vocational education and training (VET) providers.

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) commissioned two studies to investigate the role of VET in the Welfare to Work initiative: this report, *Complex not simple: The vocational education and training pathway from welfare to work* by Kate Barnett and John Spoehr, and one by John Guenther and colleagues called *The role of vocational education and training in welfare to work*. This report is the first of these two.

### Key messages

The research found that most of those in the target groups—people with a disability, women returning to the workforce, long-term unemployed people—wanted to study. There were, however, barriers to their doing this, including:

- policies about eligibility to train and limitations on funding for longer courses
- difficulties in taking up training opportunities, for example, because of poor literacy and numeracy or other study skills, lack of transport and/or child care services
- inadequate understanding of the welfare and training systems among both Centrelink and VET staff
- the absence of sufficient student support services.

The study points to the importance of prevocational courses that address basic and remedial education needs, as well as offer personal support services. These courses provide entry into mainstream VET and, it is to be hoped, into jobs. The researchers concluded that, given its experience in promoting access and equity, the VET sector, particularly the technical and further education (TAFE) component, would be in a position to offer a pathway into work for the Welfare to Work target groups.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

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# Executive summary

The policy underpinning the Australian Welfare to Work initiative is driven by a perceived need to reduce dependency on income support payments by moving those who are considered able, or potentially able, into paid employment. This has been part of a wider process of 'welfare reform', which is evident in a group of nations, including Australia, Canada, the United States, Great Britain and New Zealand, and has been pursued by both liberal and conservative governments (Saunders 2001, p.1). Welfare-to-work programs require a fundamental shift in the traditional relationship between the vocational education and training (VET) sector and the welfare sector, necessitating the establishment of policies, structures and processes designed to support cross-sector working relationships.

In Australia, the Welfare to Work policy was implemented with the 2005–06 federal budget and took effect from 1 July 2006. Income support recipients are expected to pursue pathways that lead to paid employment through work experience, training or community work. Parents of children over the age of six receiving the Parenting Payment, long-term unemployed people, mature-age people on the Newstart Allowance and people receiving the Disability Support Pension are the groups targeted by this policy.

The majority of people in these four groups have relatively low levels of formal education (Australian Council of Social Service 2007), which means that the VET sector can play a critical role in increasing their employability. Increasing the skills and employability of people in the groups targeted by this initiative brings benefits to them, while addressing the need for a skilled workforce and skill shortages. Consequently, the VET sector is a key component of the welfare-to-work journey (Shah & Burke 2006; Australian Industry Group 2006).

The importance of educational attainment and skills acquisition to achieving employment is a recurring theme in the literature. The activities most linked to labour market success are education and training, effective job searching and paid work. Longitudinal research identifies a strong relationship between type of training and quality of employment, with short-term programs being likely to lead to low-wage, low-quality work and a higher likelihood of returning to the welfare system (Saunders 2005).

Although the Australian income support system acknowledges that training is a pathway to employment, the emphasis of the Welfare to Work policy is on moving unemployed people into work as soon as possible. It does not adequately acknowledge that high-quality employment needs to be distinguished from low-paid, insecure employment, and that the length of training and a recognised credential needs to be distinguished from 'quick fix' training. Here the difference is between training that increases skills and provides a work-relevant qualification leading to long-term employment and short courses that may not increase skill levels nor provide a credential and often lead to poor-quality employment and a return to unemployment.

# Research purpose and method

This research explored the role that VET can play in assisting the transition from welfare to work using the following research questions to guide the project.

- What are the issues faced by the Welfare to Work target group, especially parents, older people and those with a disability, in making a successful transition into employment?
- What do we know about what makes training effective for these groups?
- What is the existing state of training provision for people in receipt of welfare in Australia? Are there any examples of where this is working well?
- What are the relevant findings from international research regarding welfare-to-work education and training programs?
- What do VET providers require to ensure they deliver the most effective training possible for these specific groups of people? Are some providers better placed than others to respond to these needs?
- How can VET programs be designed to dovetail well with non-VET programs to give a complete 'package' of assistance to the affected groups?

The project was structured according to five interrelated research methods:

- a review of national and international research on transition from income support to paid employment, with an emphasis on the role played by education and training
- structured interviews with key stakeholders to explore the issues facing people with complex needs in accessing VET and the paid labour market
- two case studies of good practice, focusing on the lessons learned at the delivery level, when assisting Centrelink recipients to transition from welfare to work through the VET pathway
- a telephone survey involving a sample of 130 TAFESA students in preparatory programs who were also current or recent recipients of Centrelink payments
- five focus groups involving a total of 31 people, each group structured to allow more in-depth exploration of issues emerging from the telephone survey findings.

# The role VET can play in assisting the welfare-to-work transition

Our findings indicate that VET can provide a pathway to employment for disadvantaged students, provided it:

- addresses students' needs in a holistic way, rather than focusing on training-specific needs
- includes, where necessary, a preparatory pathway prior to engagement with 'mainstream' VET programs to assist the achievement of effective training outcomes.

The education and training pathway to employment is neither simple nor direct for most people with low educational attainment and other disadvantages. The need to integrate preparatory with 'mainstream' VET has been confirmed by several researchers (Martinson & Strawn 2003, pp.15–16; Trutko, Nightingale & Barnow 1999, p.29; Plimpton & Nightingale 1999, p.74), and is demonstrated in case study 2 of this research.

The VET sector, particularly the technical and further education (TAFE) component, has a tradition of providing initiatives that promote access and equity, but it cannot be assumed these will automatically meet the needs of the group targeted by the Welfare to Work initiative. Our findings

from the case studies show that TAFESA staff have needed to develop three specific strategies to address the challenges faced by the Welfare to Work target groups:

- the development of collaborative working relationships outside the VET sector with Centrelink, rehabilitation and Job Network providers, social workers and psychologists; and inside the sector between teaching and support staff, and between preparatory and mainstream teaching staff
- the provision of personal and learning support services to accompany VET studies
- the flexible design and delivery of preparatory vocational programs.

These strategies are seen very positively by the students interviewed and their impact has been significant, not only in terms of learning outcomes, but also in the form of personal and social outcomes. The Welfare to Work initiative has had its own impact on the VET sector—an increased workload for teaching and support staff, which arises both from the numbers and the complex needs of this group of students.

Consultations with VET sector stakeholders identified a number of Centrelink eligibility requirements that reflect a lack of understanding of how the VET system operates and which can have a negative impact on students. For example, prior to the implementation of Welfare to Work, disadvantaged students were able to attend a preparatory course. However, VET staff report that they now see more of this group of students entering programs directly, since the students believe they must get a job as quickly as possible in order to meet Centrelink requirements and that therefore they have no time for a preparatory course.

# Good practice in the VET pathway from welfare to work

Previous research, coupled with feedback from students, VET stakeholders, and our case studies, suggests a model which can be described as 'good practice'. Features of good practice include:

- case management and coordination of support services
- an individualised approach, including individual training plans
- collaboration and linkage across and within sectors
- links between VET staff and local employers
- a systems-based structure for collaboration, that is, built into the system, rather than being ad hoc and relying on the goodwill of individuals
- flexible delivery, including flexible timetabling
- professional development of VET staff/trained VET staff
- targeted induction and pre-enrolment assessment processes
- reduced costs for disadvantaged students, for example, with books and transport
- assistance with child care for disadvantaged students
- assistance with transport for disadvantaged students
- a range of learning and support services, integrated with studies
- creative combinations of work, study and support—'one-stop shop'
- provision of work–study–life balance.

Taken together, these features of good practice result in two key implications. The first concerns resources, in terms of additional VET provider time, professional development and the provision of individualised services and support. The second involves collaboration at both policy and delivery levels across sectors, which brings with it a requirement for new protocols and agreements, new methods of accountability and reporting, and an accompanying commitment to working in this way.

# Project context

## The Welfare to Work initiative

The Welfare to Work policy is part of a broader process that is sometimes described as 'welfare reform'. It is driven by a perceived need to reduce dependency on income support payments and to address the underemployment of specific groups, by shifting those considered able, or potentially able, into paid employment. Welfare-to-work programs require a fundamental shift in the traditional relationship between benefit systems and the labour market, and between the vocational education and training (VET) sector and the welfare sector. The shift can be viewed as a move from passive benefit receipt to more active engagement with paid work, with the ultimate goal of promoting self-sufficiency among more disadvantaged groups. It can also be seen as removing entitlement to benefit payment and removing a welfare safety net, with conditional and/or temporary assistance replacing both (Finn 1999).

In Australia, the Welfare to Work policy was implemented with the 2005–06 budget, building on the earlier welfare reform initiative known as Australians Working Together (2003), a key concept of which was 'mutual obligation' between government and welfare recipients. In practice, this means that income security recipients are expected to pursue pathways that lead to paid employment, for example, work experience, training or community work. Parents of children over the age of six receiving the Parenting Payment, long-term unemployed people, mature-age people on the Newstart Allowance and people receiving the Disability Support Pension are the groups targeted by this policy, which took effect from 1 July 2006. At that time, Welfare to Work policy target groups included approximately:

- 38 000 new applicants for income support who had disabilities and were assessed as able to work part-time
- 285 000 parents whose youngest child was six years or older
- 50 000 unemployed Newstart Allowance recipients or Youth Allowance recipients who had been on these payments for two years
- 110 000 mature-age people who were unemployed (Australian Council of Social Service 2007, pp.3–4).

People in these four target groups usually have very low levels of formal education. In 2006, 25% of the Australian workforce had Year 10 or less educational attainment compared with:

- 63% of people with a disability
- 72% of unemployed Parenting Payment recipients
- 43% of mature-age Newstart Allowance recipients
- 64% of very long-term unemployed Newstart Allowance recipients (Australian Council of Social Service 2007, pp.3–4).

These relatively low levels of formal education mean that people from the four groups targeted by the Welfare to Work initiative are severely disadvantaged in the paid employment market.

The Welfare to Work initiative provides for an additional 12 300 vocational education and training places over three years for its four target groups. However, this is significantly short of potential demand (Australian Council of Social Service 2007, p.10). Despite the Australian income support system acknowledging training as a pathway to employment, the emphasis of the Welfare to Work policy is on moving unemployed people into work as soon as possible. Citing Department of Employment and Workplace Relations[1] research on the employment outcomes of highly disadvantaged income support recipients receiving Customised Assistance, the Australian Council of Social Service (2007, p.5) notes that most of those who obtained employment within twelve months of receiving Job Network support had been linked to low-paid part-time and casual jobs. By contrast, former Job Network clients who had post-school qualifications were about 50% more likely to obtain full-time employment within three months than those with Year 10 or less schooling.

Therefore, it is important to recognise the difference between outcomes associated with training that increases skills and provides a work-relevant qualification leading to long-term employment and the attainment of short-term training that fails to increase credentialled skill levels and leads to poor-quality employment and a return to unemployment. The Welfare to Work pathway should be assessed for its quantitative and qualitative impacts, and for its achievement of a long-term employment outcome.

There are a number of disincentives that affect the participation of the Welfare to Work target groups in the type of training likely to improve their skills and employability. Prior to changes made in 2006, single parents and people with a disability receiving income support could study full- or part-time without any reduction in their payments. They also received a 'pensioner education supplement' of $31.00 per week to assist with education-related costs (such as books, fees and transport). Many people in these two groups will now receive the Newstart Allowance instead of pensions and will have to transfer to the Austudy payment if they undertake full-time study for more than twelve months. This means a loss of $93.00 per week if they had been receiving rent assistance while on the Newstart payment. Single parents who transfer from Newstart to Austudy lose $5.00 per week plus their Jobs Employment and Training (JET) child care assistance payment, which is usually worth some $25.00 per week. In addition, these child care subsidies cease when the parent studies full-time for more than twelve months. Those who had been receiving a pensioner concession card while on Newstart lose this benefit once they transfer to Austudy payment (Australian Council of Social Service 2007, pp.8–9).

Apart from these substantial financial disincentives to participation in full-time or long-term training, Centrelink requirements that involve time-consuming job search and/or the acceptance of job offers for up to the required number of hours per week (regardless of time spent in education and training) act to further discourage involvement in formal education and training. These new requirements place job search as a higher priority over education and training (Australian Council of Social Service 2007, p.9). Disincentives also affect Job Network providers, because the funds available to them are insufficient to support more than short-term training, and payments made for completion of part-time education and training are contingent upon the job seeker also obtaining at least part-time employment. Analysing Department for Employment and Workplace Relations data, the Australian Council of Social Service reports that Job Network providers' use of Job Seeker Accounts for training is low and declining, with funding being directed to job search training and courses involving an average of three days (2007, p.10).

[1] The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations was abolished in December 2007 and its functions assumed by a new body, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

# Key findings from the research literature

There has been a considerable amount of research examining the effectiveness of education and training as part of welfare-to-work programs (particularly from the United States and Great Britain, countries with established experience with these initiatives). (For more detail, which is given in the literature review, refer to the support document available from the NCVER website.) Across the literature as a whole, findings are mixed—in part due to research design, and in part to the varying reliability associated with the recording of individual participation in welfare-to-work programs. Many studies treat welfare-to-work programs as if they were homogeneous, when typically they are comprised of different sub-programs such as literacy and numeracy, basic education, job preparation and job search assistance, and vocational training. There is considerable diversity in the length of training interventions applied as part of welfare-to-work programs, with some involving twelve weeks or less, while others involve more than a year and lead to the attainment of a recognised credential.

Unfortunately, few studies beyond a three-year timeframe have been undertaken. When longitudinal research design has been applied, the conclusions reached about program impact differ from those that apply short-term analysis (Dyke et al. 2005, p.4). The impact can be incremental and research needs to be able to capture this. For example, eight-year follow-up studies (Jacobsen, LaLonde & Sullivan 1994, 2004) have found that earnings will be lower for the first two years following intensive classroom intervention but that subsequent earnings increase. There is a clear difference in outcome for participants between a transition to short-term and/or poor-quality employment, which brings a recycling back to welfare, and a transition to longer-term and sustainable employment.

The most comprehensive longitudinal Australian research has been undertaken by the Social Policy Research Centre (Saunders 2005). One of their key findings is that the activities most linked to labour market success are education and training, job search and paid work. It is also evident from those findings that there is no single welfare-to-work transition pathway, making it important for researchers to identify the independent and interactive impact of factors known to affect that transition. From the available research, it is reasonable to assume that the VET system can provide learning opportunities that address the needs of Welfare to Work participants.

The importance of educational attainment and skills acquisition to achieving employment is a recurring theme in the literature reviewed. Data from the national labour surveys of 25 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries show a clear pattern—the higher the educational attainment, the higher the likelihood of being employed (de Broucker 2005, p.44). The Urban Institute's analysis of research and evaluation evidence found that, without further education and training, many former welfare recipients remained trapped in low-skill, low-wage jobs (Trutko, Nightingale & Barnow 1999, p ii). In the long term, skill development (through post-secondary education and vocational training) can lead to higher earnings and successful transition to the labour market (Dyke et al. 2005; Martinson & Strawn 2003, pp.1, 11; O'Lawrence 2004, p.7).

People with low-skill and qualification levels are more likely than other recipients to remain unemployed and on welfare, or to return to welfare after finding and then losing work (Martinson & Strawn 2003, p.5). The skills sought by employers are not usually those held by most people reliant on income security and this constitutes their main barrier to successful employment (Martinson & Strawn 2003, pp.5–6).

The education and training route to employment is not necessarily a direct one for people with low educational attainment and other disadvantages. A structured pathway is usually required and this takes the form of vocational preparatory training. An overview of evaluation evidence on the effectiveness of employment programs for welfare recipients participating in 14 welfare-to-work programs in the United States found that integrating basic education with vocational training was more effective than providing education alone, because it enabled providers to address any

underlying gaps in learner capacity, for example, in literacy and numeracy (Plimpton & Nightingale 1999, p.74). The need to link preparatory with 'mainstream' VET has also been confirmed by other researchers (Martinson & Strawn 2003, pp.15–16; Trutko, Nightingale & Barnow 1999, p.29).

Researchers are often critical of welfare reform that emphasises quick job placement rather than building pathways to 'quality' paid work; that is, work which provides opportunities for job training and advancement, includes paid leave, provides or leads to better pay, and has a long-term, sustainable impact (Martinson & Strawn 2003; Danziger & Johnson 2004). Providing job placement or even basic education without addressing skill requirements has been found to be more likely to lead to poor-quality jobs and, therefore, to be unsustainable in its impact. The most successful programs are found to combine job placement and job search with education and training (Gueron & Hamilton 2002, p.6).

Local economic demand conditions are significant in obtaining employment and in moving from a poor-quality to a high-quality employment situation. Researchers have identified that training programs are more likely to lead to long-term employment if they are linked to jobs in demand in the local economy and if they are designed to reflect the needs of local employers (Gueron & Hamilton 2002; Campbell, Foy & Hutchinson 1999; Trutko, Nightingale & Barnow 1999). The importance of local-level input into welfare-to-work programs is critical because variations in local labour market conditions require tailored and localised responses. This requires partnerships and effective communication between local employers and local education and training providers.

# The importance of skill development in a changing labour market

Driven largely by the combined impact of international competition and new technologies, there has been a substantial shift in the Australian labour force towards employment in occupations and industries requiring high levels of skill. While job opportunities have increased in some low-skill jobs in particular industries (for example, retail) the overall trend has been for such jobs to decline. Instead, employment forecasts for 2016 show a shift towards high-skill occupations (Shah & Burke 2006, p.1). The Productivity Commission estimated that, in 2000, more than half of all jobs required post-secondary qualifications, compared with less than 40% of jobs 20 years earlier (Australian Council of Social Service 2007; Productivity Commission 2002). The Australian Industry Group has estimated that 86.0% of occupations now need a post-school qualification (Australian Council of Social Service 2007, p.3; Australian Industry Group 2006).

Employment forecasts for 2016 show an increase in the proportion of people in paid employment with a post-secondary qualification (Shah & Burke 2006, p.15). This is projected to involve 71.2% of the paid labour force—58.4% with VET and 41.6% with higher education qualifications. Additional people will need to be trained during the next decade to achieve these levels (Shah & Burke 2006, pp.27–8).

The demand for skilled workers is not expected to be met easily through current supply. A shortfall of 240 000 people with VET qualifications is projected in the ten years, from 2006 to 2016, but not at every qualification level. Shortfalls are expected at the advanced diploma, diploma and certificate III levels, with surpluses expected at other levels. This will require adjusting both the quantity and distribution of supply, which is seen to require an average increase of 1.9% per annum in VET completions, while maintaining the higher education sector's supply at a constant rate (Shah & Burke 2006, p.44).

Research undertaken by the Queensland Department of Education and Training using Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census Population and Housing 2001 data has identified a significant skills–jobs mismatch, particularly in jobs requiring a VET qualification. This analysis identifies a demand that involves 62.3% of jobs requiring a VET pathway against a supply of 29.9% of the

working-age population in Australia holding VET qualifications. By comparison, 24% of jobs require university qualifications and these are held by 20% of people aged 15 to 64 years. Also of concern is that 50% of the population lacks formal qualifications, while only 13.7% of jobs require no qualifications (research cited by Australian Industry Group 2006).

The Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations estimates that, by 2010, there will be a shortfall of 195 000 workers, due to population ageing (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2005). This will exacerbate existing skill shortages and presents an opportunity for underemployed and unemployed Australians to obtain meaningful employment, *provided* that they are enabled to develop the skills needed for this type of work. Consequently, the provision of a training and education pathway to employment can play a role in improving individual Australians' skills and employability, while meeting the need to develop a skilled workforce for the future.

# Research purpose

A key success factor in the Welfare to Work initiative will be the development of vocational competencies that enhance individual capacity to achieve high-quality employment, with a concomitant capacity in education and training systems to deliver learning programs in a way that also addresses the specific needs of individual learners. The more complex those needs, and the more complex the learner's life situation, the greater will be the challenge facing those systems. From policy to delivery level, it is not known how 'ready' the VET system is to address those challenges, beyond existing knowledge from access and equity-focused research. It is important that research explores the capacity of the VET system to provide for a group of learners who, for the most part, will require an inclusive and individualised learning experience that takes into account specific barriers they face in accessing VET programs. This should be examined from the perspectives of individuals moving from welfare to work via the VET system, VET stakeholders, and those with expertise in meeting the needs of equity target groups.

To explore the role that VET can play in assisting the transition from welfare to work, the following research questions were used to guide the project**:**

- ✧ What are the issues faced by the Welfare to Work target group, especially parents, older people and those with a disability, in making a successful transition into employment?
- ✧ What do we know about what makes training effective for these groups?
- ✧ What is the existing state of training provision for people in receipt of welfare in Australia? Are there any examples of where this is working well?
- ✧ What are the relevant findings from international research regarding welfare-to-work education and training programs?
- ✧ What do VET providers require to ensure they deliver the most effective training possible for these specific groups of people? Are some providers better placed than others to respond to these needs?
- ✧ How can VET programs be designed to dovetail well with non-VET programs to give a complete 'package' of assistance to the affected groups?

# Method

The methodology for this project involved five interrelated research methods which are summarised in figure 1 against the six guiding research questions.

**Figure 1 Project method against project research questions**

| Research question # | Research method component | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Literature Review | Student survey | Focus groups | Stakeholder interviews | Case studies |
| 1. Issues faced by Welfare to Work target group in transitioning to employment | | ■ | ■ | | ■ |
| 2. Features of effective training for welfare recipients | | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| 3. Existing training provision for welfare recipients—examples of good practice | | | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| 4. Research findings regarding welfare-to-work education and training | ■ | | | | |
| 5. VET provider requirements to deliver effective training for welfare recipients | | ■ | | ■ | |
| 6. Designing VET and non-VET programs to provide required 'package' of support | | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |

- An *evaluative review of national and international research* on transition from income support to paid employment was undertaken, with an emphasis on the role played by education and training. This review informed the design of the survey, key stakeholder interviews and case studies.
- *Structured interviews with key stakeholders* were also undertaken. These involved VET and Centrelink system policy personnel (to identify systemic and structural responses to welfare-to-work policy); VET providers in TAFE institutes in South Australia (to identify delivery-level responses to Welfare to Work participants, including classroom-based and student services-based); and selected experts (for example, VET access and equity officers and disability employment service representatives) to explore the issues facing people with complex needs in accessing VET and the paid labour market.
- *Two case studies of good practice* were undertaken**,** focusing on the lessons learned at delivery level when assisting *Centrelink* recipients to transition from welfare to work through the VET pathway. The case studies were developed from interviews and focus groups undertaken with teachers, current and recent past students from preparatory courses, and support service staff from TAFESA. Both case studies explored the role of preparatory learning and support in enabling effective participation in VET studies.
- A *telephone (CATI [computer-assisted telephone interviewing] based) survey* was undertaken, involving a sample of 130 TAFESA students who met the following two criteria for inclusion in this study:
  - being a preparatory VET student (preparatory courses of study were identified by TAFESA staff as having significant numbers of current or recent Centrelink beneficiaries)
  - being a current or recent recipient of a Centrelink payment.

  The interview process was commenced in the week beginning 5 February 2007 and was completed 23 March 2007.

  Information was sought from interviewees about their expectations from participating in a VET program, the challenges they faced in pursuing a training pathway from welfare to employment, their satisfaction with their VET studies and how useful these had been, and suggested improvements to facilitate the VET pathway from welfare to work. Respondents to the survey were invited to take part at a later date in a focus group.

As had been expected when the project was designed, identifying TAFE students who had also been or were currently in receipt of Centrelink benefits was the most challenging component of the project methodology because of lack of access to this information. Although permission was sought from both Centrelink and the South Australian Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology, privacy constraints and the absence of any agreements allowing access to client data for research purposes meant that we were unable to structure the sample to achieve representativeness.

Fortunately, our discussions with TAFESA and Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology representatives found a high level of enthusiasm for the project and a willingness to assist in identifying our sample. Consequently, the sample was obtained by TAFESA administrative staff contacting students from the preparatory program known as Vocational Preparation and Equity (VPE).[2] Students who agreed to be interviewed provided their contact details to the research team, using a process that obtained ethics approval from the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee.

The process used to derive the sample involved making a significant number of phone calls in order to identify students receiving Centrelink payments, and from those, obtaining a sample of people who were agreeable to being interviewed. A total of 1872 calls were made to reach 418 students who met the dual criteria of being a Centrelink beneficiary and being a TAFESA Vocational Preparation and Equity student. Of those 418 students, 168 (40.2%) agreed to be interviewed. A total of 130 students were interviewed.

It is recognised that the survey sample has not been based on a representative process because of the lack of access to an appropriate database. This was anticipated when the project was first designed.

- *Five focus groups* were undertaken, each structured to allow more in-depth exploration of issues emerging from the telephone survey findings. A total of 70 of TAFESA students interviewed agreed to participate in a focus group. Of these, 45 were approached and agreed to participate in one of four groups. On the day, 31 arrived to participate in one of the groups. The fifth group was held in a community centre that had provided preparatory training for volunteer child care workers seeking to obtain a VET qualification in child care. Participants had completed the course and many had also been receiving Centrelink benefits. All had experienced a number of disadvantages in their lives and needed a learning environment tailored to their needs. Agreement to participate in this fifth focus group was obtained through the child care centre coordinator.

  The focus groups were structured to explore the reasons motivating participants to undertake their course of study, the impact of that training on them, barriers they had encountered in participating, and improvements that could be made to facilitate participation in training. The focus groups provided rich qualitative data to complement the telephone survey findings.

[2] The VPE program is designed to build a pathway to employment, training and further education for students with complex needs and is undertaken by applicants for certificate I or II courses who do not meet minimum entry requirements. It allows students to gain foundation learning in a supported environment. The VPE program has a number of components. This includes IVEC I (Introductory Vocational Education Certificate), which targets disengaged young people and people with a disability and provides training in life skills and job-seeking skills that assist in employment preparation. IVEC 2 targets those who have left school many years ago and assists with literacy, numeracy, reading and writing skills. Other components of the VPE program are the Women's Education Program, Learn to Earn, English as a Second Language, Education and Training for the Deaf and Auslan.

# Challenges faced in making the transition from welfare to work

*Research question: What are the issues faced by the Welfare to Work target group, especially parents, older people and those with a disability, in making a successful transition into employment?*

Disadvantaged students can be expected to have needs that are significant and/or complex, and as such, they will face a range of challenges in accessing VET and employment opportunities. While these challenges may be understood by VET teachers and student services staff, the capacity to address them will be dependent upon the resources, expertise, and collaborative linkages established with professionals outside the VET sector. This section of the report provides information about the challenges identified from two perspectives—those of the students themselves and those of the teaching and support staff who work with them. Both perspectives are relevant, with significant complementarity between both.

## The student perspective

### Expectations and reasons for doing the course

The Welfare to Work initiative provides incentives for its target group to move from income support to engagement in paid work and discourages continued reliance on Centrelink payments. On this basis, it could be expected that participants may have felt that they had been pressured to study. This was the view of TAFESA teaching and student services staff, who reported that a significant proportion of students feel they have been pressured to participate in a VET course.

However, all but one focus group participant identified that their decision to study had been a clear choice made by them, and nearly 64% of the sample had undertaken their TAFESA course because they chose to do so, indicating a high level of commitment to their studies. Formal service providers, including local Centrelink officers, employment agencies, the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service and counsellors or teachers have also played a key role, highlighting the importance of working relationships between TAFESA and other agencies outside the VET sector. Families and friends have also been an important informal source of motivation to study.

This is the only area where student and staff perspectives have not matched, and it may reflect a bias in the survey sampling process, with those who have had a more positive experience being willing to contribute to this research study. Another interpretation is that the difference reflects the students' attitudes towards Centrelink decision-makers and delivery staff, with the latter being cited as assisting them to choose courses, while it was the Centrelink policy associated with eligibility and reporting that caused pressure for them.

Among the survey sample, the most frequently cited reason for undertaking the TAFESA course was *to obtain a job* (50%), followed by *to develop skills*—which would also lead to a job (30.8%) and *to obtain a qualification*—which also increases employability (23.1%). A further 6.2% were hoping *to get a better job*. The main sources of motivation were thus focused on improving access to paid

employment, with intrinsic learning and the development of 'soft skills' being less apparent. Table 1 provides details.

**Table 1 Reasons for doing the course**

| Reason/expectation | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| To get a job | 65 | 50.0 |
| To develop skills | 40 | 30.8 |
| To obtain a qualification | 30 | 23.1 |
| To get a better job | 8 | 6.2 |
| To learn interesting things | 6 | 4.6 |
| Other – to gain increased self-confidence | 6 | 4.6 |
| Other – to improve English skills | 3 | 2.3 |
| To meet new people/socialise | 2 | 1.5 |
| No specific expectations | 2 | 1.5 |
| **Total** | **130** | **100.0** |

While the key motivation for undertaking TAFE studies was to increase employability, a number of personal outcomes were identified during focus group discussions. Participants referred to 'doing something for themselves' as their children became less dependent on them. Some saw their studies as bringing improvement to the lives of their children due to the gains made in addressing mental health issues (usually depression). Many of the female focus group participants perceived that they could now provide positive role models for their children and an improved quality of life at home. This supports findings from the evaluation of the Australians Working Together initiative (Alexander et al. 2005, p.xi) which found that, when parents who had been out of the workforce undertook training or gained employment, they provided a role model to their children, which was of benefit to both.

It was common for female focus group participants to describe their lives prior to VET study as involving at best, boredom, and at worst, depression, and that they had been determined to improve their chances of obtaining worthwhile employment. Comments like: *It was time,* or *I knew if I did not do anything I would die,* were common across the four TAFESA focus groups. These women were particularly motivated to gain computer-related skills, as they could see that this was essential to living and working in an age of technological change. They discussed their previous lack of confidence with information and communication technologies prior to their VET studies, with some sharing the experience of being intimidated by husbands and children because of their lack of skills. Even when skills were acquired, many talked about not being 'allowed' to use the home computer, even for studies, if other family members were present. It was clear that access to and use of computers reflected much broader issues in their lives with these women relegated to an inferior status in the home. Over time, as their studies led to an increase in skills and self-confidence, it was also apparent that many would face significant decisions in their personal lives, particularly if they achieved economic dependence through employment.

## Barriers to participating in the course

Nearly 31% of the survey sample did not identify any impediments to their participation in their TAFESA program. Of the remaining 90 students, the most difficult challenge faced was that of meeting competing study–family–work responsibilities, and achieving some degree of *work–life–balance* (29.2%). This was particularly the case for those with children, and was intensified when timetabling of classes required parents to be on campus after 2.45–3.00 pm. *Poor health* was cited as a significant issue for around 16% of the sample (although their self-rated health compared favourably with ABS findings on the self-rated health of all South Australians). Table 2 provides these details.

**Table 2 Barriers to participating in the course**

| Type of barrier | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| There are no barriers | 40 | 30.8 |
| Competing work–life–family responsibilities (especially child care and child rearing) | 38 | 29.2 |
| Poor health | 21 | 16.2 |
| Not being used to study/learning difficulties/ concentration difficulties | 14 | 10.8 |
| Costs associated with study | 13 | 10.0 |
| Getting to and from the course – time, costs | 12 | 9.2 |
| The way the course is taught[3] | 2 | 1.5 |
| Teaching staff do not understand my needs | 2 | 1.5 |
| Course content is too difficult | – | – |
| Fitting in with other students | – | – |
| Other – poor English skills; poor communication skills due to disability | 5 | 3.8 |
| Other – timetabling, especially for people with school children | 3 | 2.3 |
| Other – child care | 3 | 2.3 |
| Other – being an external student | 2 | 1.5 |

Being able to study in the face of learning or concentration difficulties and not being used to study was an issue for 10.8%, the costs associated with study presented barriers for 10%, and getting to and from their TAFESA campus was difficult for 9.2%, because of the time involved and transport costs. This exacerbated the challenges faced by those with children. The following comments from students interviewed reflect these issues.

> The cost to do the course. Not really getting enough money from Centrelink to help with payments.
>
> The actual times of the course—if these are in the afternoons, I have to call on someone to help take care of the children.

Ensuring that preparatory courses are available across all TAFESA campuses increases the likelihood that VET programs can be accessed without travel too far from home. Some of the focus group participants described needing to take three buses following the relocation of a course in a northern suburbs campus to another campus in the north-eastern suburbs. Others discussed the impact of moving a course from a campus in the southern suburbs to the city campus. While this is a reflection of public transport limitations and, no doubt, of TAFESA resource reductions, it is the student who pays the price in terms of costs and time.

> Getting into the city—I was doing it at Panorama. Also the cost of going into the city. More time to try to get the children to school.

For students with *low levels of English proficiency*, there can be a combination of some of these barriers, requiring additional time and concentration, and if the person is a recent immigrant, a range of *settlement related* issues. External students identified as a challenge the lack of ongoing face-to-face interaction with teaching staff.

> … as it is a remote course—it is not as easy as being able to ask a lecturer on the spot.

Several women in the focus groups identified barriers arising from Centrelink requirements that reflected a lack of understanding of VET systems and of the time pressures faced by women seeking to balance study with parenting. Centrelink's definition of 'hours of study' being based on contact hours without including homework and travel time was seen as increasing work–family–life

[3] One Women's Education student felt that the course 'portrayed men in a negative light' and the other student found difficulty with the course timetable. Hence neither comment referred to the teaching style or approach.

balance pressures, especially for those with young children. Many complained about the inflexibility associated with the requirements of attending fortnightly interviews and returning forms. Interviews are restricted to office hours and clash with classroom times, and alternative drop-off times for forms can't be negotiated. Following changes introduced during 2006, there were instances of confusion over the requirements and payments associated with Austudy, Newstart and the Parenting Allowance. There was continuous reference to the inconsistent advice participants received, the fear they had of receiving the wrong benefits and later having to pay it back—*I check three or four times before I spend the money, I just don't trust them.* The difficulties described by focus group participants have also been identified by the Australian Council of Social Service (2007).

These policy-based barriers stood in contrast to the very positive relationships described with Centrelink service delivery staff, especially where ongoing/long-term involvement was present. These staff members were described by many as having been influential in encouraging them to study.

Several focus group participants described themselves as having a mental health condition that required medication and for which they were receiving the Disability Support Payment. They too spoke of the pressure they often experienced in dealing with policy-based Centrelink requirements and how this exacerbated their mental health issue. In particular, they cited the ongoing confusion related to eligibility for payments, mix-ups with payments, and requirements to attend meetings in the Centrelink offices. They also highlighted the importance of a flexible course structure to accommodate episodes of ill health.

## The case study perspective

The two case studies undertaken as part of this research project identified a number of challenges facing disadvantaged groups participating in VET studies. Some of these have been identified by both VET staff and students. Additional challenges include the following:

- lack of confidence in the ability to study, which is associated with the need to develop study patterns and behaviours (including time-management and planning skills), particularly if it has been many years since the person has studied, or if their previous educational experience has been marked by a failure to achieve
- lack of knowledge of available training programs and an understanding of their requirements
- lack of familiarity with VET and other post-secondary learning environments and, for many, feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of studying in those environments
- for some, lack of support from partners, family and significant others to study
- for those who were recent immigrants, lack of proficiency in English and lack of familiarity with Australian culture and associated norms
- for most, lack of financial resources to participate in a formal training program
- difficulties in balancing study with family responsibilities and, for some, with family and part-time work.

## The VET staff perspective

Teaching and student services staff identified a wider range of challenges facing students from the Welfare to Work target group. They can be grouped into eight categories:

- *Financial*: older students are often paying for their children's education and do not prioritise their own study needs. This affects their ability to pay for transport, course-related costs and child care. Students are often not aware of the additional course costs, such as purchase of materials (for example, hairdressing $800), with these being required in cash as an up-front payment. Not

all employers will pay for apprentices' safety equipment. This finding supports that of research undertaken with participants in Welfare to Work pilots (Department of Family and Community Services 2002), wherein approximately 40% expressed an interest in education or training, but less than 10% actually did so, with cost being the most important reason given for non-participation.

- *Transport*: this is a key issue because of the cost and the time taken to commute, especially if relying on public transport.
- *Child care*: this is an issue because of both cost and the timetabling of classes against school hours. Only Women's Education Program classes were structured to finish early to allow time for collecting children from school.
- *Internet access or a computer at home, or e-learning skills*: these are issues for many.
- *Poor literacy and numeracy skills*: this is also an issue for many.
- *Study habits, time management skills, planning skills, research skills and essay writing*: many have not studied for years and/or left school at Year 9 or 10 and need to develop skills. Most also need assistance with *course and career planning*.
- *Counselling and ongoing support*: this group of students is usually more stressed than other students.
- *Informed choice*: this is a key issue for most Welfare to Work students, who are described by TAFESA staff as being unsure about their Centrelink entitlements and their eligibility, as well as lacking an understanding of VET study programs and their relevance to their employment and life goals. The VET system and the income support systems are both complex and require a level of knowledge and experience to negotiate. As a result, many choose courses for convenience and cost only.
- *Pressures arising from Centrelink policy*: this was identified as a challenge for these students. TAFESA staff described students feeling pressured to leave training in order to enter employment, regardless of the quality and sustainability of that employment, and pressure to move to Austudy payments, which do not include rent relief but allow a higher number of hours of paid work before the payment is reduced. This increases the amount of time students need to spend in paid work at the expense of study time and interferes with the achievement of a training outcome. It also creates significant stress for students.

# The role VET can play in assisting the welfare-to-work transition

*Research question: What do we know about what makes training effective for these groups?*

*Research question: What is the existing state of training provision for people in receipt of welfare in Australia? Are there any examples of where this is working well?*

*Research question: What do VET providers require to ensure they deliver the most effective training possible for these specific groups of people? Are some providers better placed than others to respond to these needs?*

## Overview of findings: The pathway within the pathway

The main findings from the literature review, from the survey and focus groups with students from the Welfare to Work target group, and from interviews with key stakeholders indicate that VET can provide a pathway to employment, provided it addresses students' needs in a holistic way, rather than focusing on training-specific needs. For most students this involves providing a preparatory pathway prior to engagement with 'mainstream' VET programs to ensure that effective training outcomes are achieved, thus increasing the capacity to obtain high-quality employment.

In providing a pathway to employment for people from the Welfare to Work target groups, the VET sector, particularly the TAFE component, can draw on its experience in providing a range of access- and equity-promoting initiatives. However, this does not mean that the Welfare to Work initiative has no impact on the sector. The findings show that TAFESA staff have needed to develop three key strategies to address the challenges faced by the Welfare to Work initiative involving:

- the development of collaborative working relationships outside the VET sector with rehabilitation and Job Network providers, social workers and psychologists and Centrelink staff; and inside the sector between teaching and support staff, and between preparatory and mainstream teaching staff
- the provision of personal and learning support services to accompany VET studies
- flexible design and delivery of preparatory vocational programs.

The importance of the vocational preparatory pathway is summarised by this comment from a TAFESA stakeholder:

> It is unrealistic to expect them to gain foundation concepts and confidence … while also undertaking a demanding vocational program. The VPE [preparatory] curriculum allows them to gain the foundation concepts in a supported environment with trained literacy and numeracy specialists while also undertaking vocational electives and work experience placements to prepare them for focused vocational skills development. The outcomes from these programs have been excellent.

# VET provider preparatory strategies: In detail

## Collaborative working relationships

Disadvantaged students benefit from a holistic approach; this means VET staff must take into account a range of needs beyond those of learning and training, and this in turn requires that they build effective working relationships with experts outside the VET sector. TAFESA staff identified a range of collaborative working relationships that have been initiated at the delivery (but not at the policy) level. This includes student services officers working with employment services to broker employment opportunities to graduates, and to provide part-time work and training in 'soft' skills, such as job applications and resume writing. Teaching and student services staff are working collaboratively with rehabilitation and Job Network providers, social workers and psychologists, as well as local Centrelink officers.

## Personal and learning support services

A range of support services is also necessary to meet both remedial learning needs and personal needs. Student services officers provide one-to-one and small-group tuition that involves basic skills in literacy and numeracy, as well as personal counselling, financial counselling and career/course counselling. Each TAFESA campus has a student services officer to provide learning support, and students can access study support groups that are heavily subsidised, costing students only 60 cents per hour.

TAFESA has a Disability Support program coordinated by one disability advisor who works across all TAFESA campuses to address barriers to VET participation; this officer also provides workshops for staff on frequently encountered student issues, which include (limited) resources to purchase special equipment.

## Flexible design and delivery of vocational programs

Flexible delivery is essential for students with complex needs and underpins the various strategies being pursued by TAFESA. This includes off-campus delivery programs in selected areas involving community centres and, in one case, a local primary school (targeting mothers who lack the confidence to seek training in a post-secondary institution). A number of preparatory programs were also identified:

- ✧ The Learn to Earn program is designed to provide practical activities in an off-campus setting. It has a strong work placement focus and assists with social skills, workplace skills (such as, punctuality), communication skills and basic life skills.
- ✧ IVEC 1 (Introductory Vocational Education Certificate) provides an introduction to workplace and work culture and basic work skills, often achieving paid work at certificate II level. The Certificate II in Vocational Preparation provides one day per week of work placement, and employers often offer paid employment for this time. Students accrue 'points' for transfer to certificate III courses. Work placements are also being introduced for IVEC 2 courses. Good working relationships are reported to have been established with employers—a strategy that has been found to be important for students in gaining work. (Refer to the support document for more information on this topic.)
- ✧ Short courses focused on the Welfare to Work target group are also being provided. These involve six weeks of training developed to meet the needs of an identified industry, for example, police or military forces and community services. The courses include a focus on improving literacy and numeracy and computing skills.

# Student satisfaction with TAFESA preparatory training

Students participating in the survey were asked to rate their satisfaction with the Vocational Preparation and Equity (VPE) program of TAFESA. As table 3 shows, their ratings are extremely positive, with 88.5% providing a rating of 4 or 5.

**Table 3 Degree of satisfaction with TAFESA preparatory program**

| Rating | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| 1 – Not at all satisfied | - | - |
| 2 – Fairly dissatisfied | 1 | 0.8 |
| 3 – Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied | 14 | 10.8 |
| 4 – Fairly satisfied | 47 | 36.2 |
| 5 – Very satisfied | 68 | 52.3 |
| **Total** | **130** | **100.0** |

The comments below also illustrate the positive impact of the VPE program, and again this finding was reinforced by focus group participants, some of whom have related extremely difficult life stories, but emphasised how their TAFESA IVEC studies have provided a turning point.

> It has given me a lot of confidence. It has turned my life around. I was in gaol.
>
> I have finished the course. At the time I hoped to be learning something new—applying myself. Now I can say I actually learnt how strong I am—a greater appreciation for my family/culture/what [sic] was given to me by the family.

# Impact of VET preparatory study on students

Six key and positive forms of impact were identified by all those participating in focus groups, and these include the following:

- ✧ significantly improved *self-confidence* and self-esteem
- ✧ improved *health* due to being happier, less isolated, and more confident
- ✧ increased *personal support networks*—particularly for women in the Women's Education Program at TAFESA. Many referred to the support they received from staff and other students urging them to persist with their studies. This was contrasted with the lack of personal support from partners and husbands experienced by many, ranging from passive failure to provide encouragement, to active bullying and criticism. The personal support that was part of the training environment had also increased the *self-help* capacity of most of the participants
- ✧ *motivation to continue with their studies*, either by completing their TAFESA program, by beginning certificate-level studies in child care or another VET program or, in some instances, continuing on to study at university
- ✧ motivation to find employment, paid or volunteer, applying the skills acquired from their VET course, the confidence gained, and the recognised qualification obtained
- ✧ *paid employment*: six of the ten community centre-based focus group participants had obtained paid employment, attributed to their increased employability (for example, due to enhanced self-confidence, being more informed about work and training opportunities).

There was a very strong trend for female participants to describe lives that were characterised by extreme disadvantage, with significant challenges, which included extreme violence, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness (their own or a family member), poverty and isolation. Many talked about their past experience with depression and contemplation of suicide. Their stories varied, but the common thread for many was a sense of being disconnected from mainstream society and an overwhelming loss of confidence in themselves and in the possibility of a positive future.

Throughout their studies these women had coped with disadvantage, loss and overwhelming fear about their ability to study. They emphasised the importance of having had the time to develop confidence and skills and how it had taken months before most of them could speak in class or make eye contact with other people. The importance of the preparatory pathway was evident.

# The impact of Welfare to Work on TAFESA

It is often the case that policy made in one sector has discernible effects (not normally intentional) on other sectors. The Welfare to Work initiative, designed to reduce unnecessary reliance on income support payments by increasing the employability of Centrelink payment recipients, has had an impact on the VET sector. Our findings indicate that working relationships have been developed at the service delivery level across both sectors, but these rely on individual goodwill rather than on systems-based change. As such, their sustainability is dependent on chance rather than design. Feedback from managers and staff providing TAFESA vocational preparation courses and student services indicates that there has been a significant impact arising from the implementation of the Welfare to Work initiative. This has been described as involving the following.

- The case load and teaching load have increased, especially in the Certificate III Aged Care and Vocational Preparation and Equity programs. Although preparatory programs have always targeted the typical Welfare to Work client group, there has been an increase in numbers since its implementation. The additional workload arises both from the numbers and from the complexity of need of this group of students.

  Within the overall increase in numbers, TAFESA staff report that there has also been an increase in the proportion of students with mental health disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and self-declared attention deficit disorder. These students require higher levels of support, but are unlikely to disclose these issues at enrolment, and enter courses without staff being able to prepare for them. VET stakeholders report that teachers are not trained to support them and these students usually require resource-intensive assistance for which additional funding is not provided. This means that already-limited resources are further stretched. One of TAFESA South's responses has been the provision of a training course, Mental Health First Aid, which is open to all staff.

- TAFESA staff also report that there has been an increase in the number of students who struggle to complete their courses. They meet the minimum entry requirements, but these do not identify someone who has been disengaged from study and/or work for many years and who may enter TAFE programs lacking confidence and skills in computing, essay-writing, literacy and numeracy.

- The financial and money management issues experienced by many in the Welfare to Work client group are associated with a pattern of late payment for requirements such as police clearances, which prevents them from commencing vocational placements on time. This can portray TAFESA in a negative light to employers and requires additional time and effort on the part of TAFESA staff to ensure an effective vocational placement. Poor attendance and behaviour in work placements by those students who feel they have been forced into VET study by Centrelink policy produces a negative outcome for all TAFESA students, as employers are described as tending to regard the minority as representative. One TAFESA stakeholder made the following observation:

  > Some students clearly do not want to be involved and they feel that they have been pressured into studying. These people often have a negative attitude, which affects the classroom dynamics and puts an extra burden on staff who try to catch these students up because of their often frequent absences … This negative attitude and poor attendance pattern also influences industry's attitude towards TAFE students at particular certificate levels as the temptation is there to generalise from the few to the many.

- Centrelink eligibility requirements, due to their impact on students, are also described as having a specific impact on TAFESA. TAFESA staff need to be fully informed of those requirements

and the changes made to them; moreover, staff also feel the need to make changes to their own processes for the benefit of their students. The absence in Centrelink of policy based on consultation with the VET sector is evident, with a number of requirements in place that reflect a lack of understanding of how the VET system operates. Prior to the implementation of the Welfare to Work initiative, disadvantaged students were able to attend a preparatory course for six months, but staff now see more entering mainstream programs directly. Staff report students' perceptions that they must get a job and that they do not have time for a preparatory course.

- TAFESA has attempted to design programs for students receiving the Parenting Allowance by timetabling around child care needs and providing short courses that involve less of a time commitment, to enable their part-time work and family responsibilities to be maintained—without jeopardising Centrelink requirements. However, TAFESA's capacity for manoeuvre is limited. Stakeholder feedback identifies the need for Centrelink eligibility requirements to reflect the importance of training that produces the skills and qualifications required for high-quality employment (that is, long-term work and all it implies—access to leave, further training and other benefits). TAFESA staff report that short-term training is likely to lead disadvantaged students to poor-quality employment and back to the income security system. As noted earlier, this has been a key finding of international research studies based on longitudinal data collection (Committee for Economic Development 2000; Dyke et al. 2005; Gueron & Hamilton 2002; Johnson, Johnson & Corcoran 2003; O'Lawrence 2004; Martinson & Strawn 2003; Plimpton & Nightingale 1999; Trutko, Nightingale & Barnow 1999; Zargari 1997).

# Good practice in the VET pathway from welfare to work

*Research question: How can VET programs be designed to dovetail well with non-VET programs to give a complete 'package' of assistance to the affected groups?*

The findings from feedback provided by students and VET stakeholders suggest a model which can be described as 'good practice'. The features of this model have been identified consistently by these different sources and are confirmed by previous research and highlighted in the literature review. This section of the report combines these different perspectives into a single model.

Many of the features identified carry resource implications and it is understood that these are implicit in most. At the same time, it is also evident from the feedback provided by TAFESA staff that existing resources are not able to meet demand levels for TAFESA students from the Welfare to Work target groups.

## The VET staff perspective

The features identified by VET stakeholders for a model of good practice in providing a VET pathway can be categorised into six strategies.

- Adoption of a *case management* approach is a means of addressing multiple and complex need, by coordinating VET, employment and human service programs according to the needs of individual students. This requires collaboration among professionals within and across sectors and is based on a holistic approach that considers the family and social context of the student. This is time- and resource-intensive and funding is not provided to VET to play this role. For TAFESA staff it means monitoring students throughout their study, assisting them to broker employment when their course is completed, and providing support during at least the first year of their employment. It also means providing learning support for students with English language, literacy or numeracy needs, referral and advocacy for individual students, liaison with teaching staff regarding student needs, and collaborative work with other key agencies outside the VET sector (particularly Centrelink, Job Network providers, psychologists and social workers).
- It is also important that an *individualised approach* to teaching is followed, and this is complementary to case management of students with multiple and/or complex needs. An example is the provision of significant choice in modules, so that a learning program can be tailored to student needs and interests. Effective career and course counselling for Welfare to Work students includes exploring individual aspirations and abilities and matching these to courses and potential employment opportunities.
- Good practice is based on the development and maintenance of *linkages and collaborative working relationships* within the VET sector and across other relevant sectors. This includes linkages between:

- vocational preparation staff and mainstream course lecturers. The latter are often from industry and are not necessarily trained in teaching practices that meet the needs of students with language, literacy or numeracy issues, or with learning difficulties and complex needs
- VET teaching and support staff and professionals in other sectors—employment services, rehabilitation services and human services; in particular, there is a need for coordination between TAFESA, Centrelink and Job Network providers
- VET teaching staff and local employers, to ensure relevant training provision and to facilitate students' employment. Some TAFESA managers are linked to specific businesses in demand areas for retraining and training of their staff while developing future employment opportunities for VET students. Researchers have identified that training programs are more effective if they are linked to jobs in demand in the local economy and if they are designed to reflect the needs of local employers (Gueron & Hamilton 2002; Campbell, Foy & Hutchinson1999; Trutko, Nightingale & Barnow 1999)
- VET teaching and student services staff and Centrelink (see following point). Ideally, this would begin at the policy level and ensure that eligibility requirements for income support payments affected by participation in VET programs are designed in consultation with VET sector representatives. At the service delivery level, a strong working relationship between Centrelink and VET providers is essential. Because of the complexity of the income support system, it is crucial that VET staff are kept up to date with information and changing requirements to enable them to provide accurate advice to their students.

  One of the recommendations from students participating in focus groups for this research project was that Centrelink have an officer on each TAFESA campus to enable students to obtain direct information and to fulfil fortnightly reporting requirements. Many low-income parents who are studying, especially those who rely on public transport, find it extremely difficult to meet those obligations during office hours—while combining their studies with collecting children from school.

- The ability of stakeholders working at the VET delivery level to meet the needs of disadvantaged students is affected by the presence or otherwise of a *systems-based or structural framework*. Without this underpinning, effective collaboration and program delivery relies entirely on the goodwill of individuals. If an individual leaves the system, there is no guarantee that their good work will be continued or that the working relationships they have fostered will be sustained. Two examples of gaps in a systems-based approach to delineating the role of VET in assisting the welfare-to-work transition follow.
  - The current VET funding model does not support case management or the provision of support outside the VET sector. A responsive funding model is needed that supports cross-sector case management of students with complex needs and which enables VET staff to continue support into the early phases of paid employment. Current funding does not reflect the cost of support services, child care, student amenities or for depreciation and maintenance costs of goods and services.
  - Independent assessment (that is, undertaken by a body that is not under pressure to meet enrolment targets) of student capability in English language proficiency, literacy and numeracy is needed to ensure that those with poor skills in these areas are directed to appropriate preparatory programs, and to identify additional learning support required for students.

- There are a number of features of VET *program delivery* that have a critical impact on training outcomes. VET stakeholder feedback has identified the following.
  - It is important that program delivery is flexible and includes self-paced study, adult learning methods (rather than traditional lecturing methods) and regular breaks during teaching periods; it is also important that students are able to take advantage of online self-teaching websites. VET teaching facilities can be intimidating environments for disadvantaged groups who are not familiar with post-secondary education and who lack the confidence to pursue study opportunities at this level. Therefore, the capacity to deliver training from community centres and other outreach locations can be pivotal to equitable access and participation.
  - It is important that vocational preparation and bridging programs are not limited by restrictive application and intake procedures; students should be able to enrol at any time,

thus meeting Centrelink requirements, while benefiting from a flexible delivery strategy. These programs should be based on timetables that reflect school hours to enable participation by parents.

- The training program needs to be accompanied by a program of support that includes financial advice and assistance, study skills support, personal and career counselling and referral to other services. On-site child care and assistance with transport costs are also important.
- Teaching staff report that learning needs to be directly applicable to real life and work situations and should include a significant work placement component to enable the provision of 'hands-on' experience.

✧ The final feature of good practice involves *professional development* that enables VET staff to meet the complex needs of disadvantaged students. It cannot be assumed that vocational teaching staff will have the skills to manage students with complex needs, have language and literacy need awareness, and knowledge of available community services, such as mental health services.

# The VET student perspective

Only 30.8% of the student survey sample identified improvements that would facilitate their participation in VET studies, and these suggest that good practice requires the following.

✧ *Improved induction and preparation processes*: focus group participants from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds advised that it would be helpful to have access to pre-enrolment advice and assessment to ensure that their English levels were appropriate to the requirements of their program of study. (Interviews with TAFESA lecturing staff also identified the need for more accurate assessment of English proficiency—and language and numeracy—prior to commencement of study.)

✧ *Provision of classroom support for students with a disability*: to acknowledge the range of ability levels present in class groups; this also applies to those with learning difficulties.

✧ *Reduction of costs*: this can be achieved by providing text books, equipment, and travel assistance, as the following students' comments illustrate:

> Have the tools to carry out the stuff I do—that is, a computer would help.
>
> The cost of travelling to and from each week because I have to attend several different classes. I took minimal hours but that was still spread out over two days—so that was four transport trips. I did not qualify for transport allowance.

✧ *More flexible timetabling*: this would to assist parents with school age or younger children (also identified by focus group participants). Some timetabling has had the effect of preventing many participants from enrolling in subjects that would make them eligible for additional benefits and/or enable them to finish the courses earlier.

Other features of good practice identified by focus group participants involve the following:

✧ *Child care* services are provided by TAFESA for children under the age of five; however, there are no provisions for child care for older children, which presents a problem at times when there are student-free days etc. All of the parents participating in the focus groups identified the need for child care and timetabling arrangements that assisted in the achievement of work–family–study balance. Where formal child care was unsubsidised, the costs were usually prohibitive.

✧ *Transport assistance* is another key area of need, with most participants relying on public transport or sharing a private vehicle. This need was exacerbated by insensitive timetabling that failed to take account of parental responsibilities (collecting children from school) or reduced the availability of particular courses to certain TAFESA campuses, adding enormously to the amount of time spent in travelling.

- Finally, because of the complex and multiple needs of many participants, there was a need for *stronger linkages between training programs and support services* and other programs that can be of assistance to disadvantaged students.

These features all address the challenges previously identified for Welfare to Work participants in VET.

# The case study perspective

Two case studies were undertaken to highlight good practice and to enrich quantitative and other qualitative data collected for the project. The case studies selected reflect lessons learned and good practice models which enabled welfare recipients to make the transition to employment through a VET pathway. They highlight the importance of acknowledging that many welfare recipients will need structured learning and support as part of preparatory training before they can participate effectively in VET programs. Without this pathway, many will fail to achieve a training outcome, which in turn reduces their ability to achieve meaningful engagement in paid work. Instead, their experience will be one of 'churning' between poor-quality jobs and reliance on welfare payments.

## Case study 1: Pathway to child care training

This case study illustrates the importance of tailoring a course to meet the needs of students with low levels of confidence in participation in formal education or training, and in so doing, of building a preparatory pathway to VET or higher education. Many of the students undertaking the course were, or had previously been, receiving Centrelink payments—usually a Parenting Payment and, for some, a Disability Support Payment.

The course was delivered in a community centre located in a lower socioeconomic suburb west of Adelaide. The centre offers a wide range of adult and community education (ACE) programs, and provides free child care for daytime classes. One of the courses offered is Créche Care for Community Centres Program, and over a nine-week period it provides training in exchange for 30 hours as a volunteer in a community centre crèche (rather than payment of a fee). The course includes a 'mandated reporting certificate', a 'senior first aid certificate' and early childhood development education. A number of other learning programs and support services operate from the centre, which is a focal point for the social and learning needs of the local community.

The Créche Care for Community Centres Program addressed two sets of need: one affecting the students of the program and the other affecting the community centre. The community centre was one of 15 such centres which partnered to develop a training program for volunteers providing child care, while adults participated in classes and activities. Volunteer workers were also interested in developing their child care skills, but most needed encouragement and preparatory study to participate in formal learning.

The program was designed to address the challenges faced by their volunteers in participating in formal training and education. The following were its key features:

- provision of training in a familiar and comfortable environment—the community centre
- training costs paid in the form of 30 hours' child care provided to their sponsoring community centre
- participants' own child care provided by other community centre volunteers
- program delivery designed to increase confidence through the development of study habits and the achievement of learning goals.

The lessons learned from this training initiative suggest the following features of a model of good practice in providing a pathway to VET studies and employment:

- ensuring that participants' literacy, numeracy and English proficiency levels match the demands of a course of study
- providing on-site child care and timetabling arrangements that assisted in the achievement of work–family–study balance. Providing child care at no cost or very low cost is also critical for the access of low-income people
- ensuring that teaching staff are sensitive to the needs of participants and are able to provide or link them to required supports
- providing information about VET and higher education programs and their requirements to enable informed choices about future study.

### Case study 2: Pre-vocational training and support

This case study illustrates the importance of building a pathway to VET through preparatory study that is designed to link 'mainstream' VET programs. The case study involves TAFESA's Vocational Preparation and Equity program and Student Services program, which work together to train and support a significant number of current or recent Centrelink beneficiaries.

The Vocational Preparation and Equity program is designed to build a pathway to employment, training and further education for students with complex needs and is undertaken by applicants for certificate I or II courses who do not meet minimum entry requirements. It allows students to gain foundation learning in a supported environment. The Vocational Preparation and Equity Program has a number of components. These include IVEC 1 (Introductory Vocational Education Certificate), which targets disengaged young people and people with a disability and provides training in life skills and job-seeking skills, which assist in employment preparation. IVEC 2 targets those who have left school many years ago and assists with literacy, numeracy, reading and writing skills. Other components of the Vocational Preparation and Equity program are the Women's Education Program, Learn to Earn, English as a Second Language, Education and Training for the Deaf and Auslan.

The lessons learned from this training initiative suggest the following features—in addition to the four aspects identified in the case study described above—of a model of good practice in providing a pathway to VET studies and employment:

- using a case management approach—monitoring students throughout their study and assisting them to broker employment when course is completed
- providing a range of learning and support services to underpin the teaching process
- ensuring that lecturers have working links with local employers to ensure relevant training provision and to facilitate students' employment; it is also important to have effective working links between Vocational Preparation and Equity staff and mainstream course lecturers
- using flexible delivery strategies, combined with an individualised approach to teaching
- providing professional development for staff to enable them to address the complex needs of the Welfare to Work target group.

Each case study highlights the importance of providing both learning and support to students who are disadvantaged, including those from the Welfare to Work target groups. Many of these students have yet to experience formal education and training in a positive way and are unlikely to complete mainstream VET programs without significant support and preparatory studies.

## Good practice findings from the literature review

The research literature has identified a clear role for vocational education and training in welfare reform. However, this role does not operate in isolation and is most effective when it is part of an

integrated package of services and supports. Integration is both horizontal—operating across the education, training, welfare and employment sectors—and vertical—with built-in links and bridges from one component to another, such as between preparatory and 'mainstream' VET programs, and between training and employment. Such integration is an outcome of systems-based design; it also encourages effective working relationships and partnerships.

A number of researchers have identified the need for closer linkages between vocational and technical education providers and the welfare system (Zargari 1997, p.93; Finn 1999, p.130). Traditionally, the two have operated in parallel, with clearly delineated boundaries between them. The different target group definitions and different service providers, all supported by diverse funding streams, promote fragmentation rather than coordination in the delivery of welfare and employment programs. A lack of coordination and coherence has reduced the effectiveness of policies and programs, and several researchers have found that the impact of welfare-to-work initiatives has been more contingent on local labour market conditions than it has on program design or agency capacity (Finn 1999, p.130, citing Manpower Research Development Corporation 1997). While the significance of local labour market conditions has not been specifically explored in this study, the findings do highlight the importance of linkages between TAFE providers and local employers. Campbell, Foy and Hutchinson (1999) reviewed the available literature and concluded that local partnerships represent a critical determinant of successful welfare-to-work programs. Finn, in drawing together the available evidence from the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, makes the following conclusions:

> It seems that the art of delivering an effective strategy, of creating new bridges between welfare and work, is to build in flexibility ... In this context local partnerships and interagency collaboration seem to offer the best way of delivering the types of flexible provisions that will be necessary over the longer term. (Finn 1999, p.165)

In synthesising the research evidence (Manpower Research Development Corporation 2005; Committee for Economic Development 2000; Fisher & Martin 1999; Gueron & Hamilton 2002; Trutko, Nightingale & Barnow 1999; Plimpton & Nightingale 1999; Martinson & Strawn 2003), a good practice model is identified as having the following features:

- ✧ an individualised training plan structured to promote work–life–study balance
- ✧ an assessment of individual need prior to commencing training, followed by close monitoring of individual progress and adjustment as needed
- ✧ an integrated program of academic (including remedial where needed) education, occupational skills, and work-based learning
- ✧ extensive support services, including on-site child care
- ✧ case management to coordinate different services and supports, according to individual needs, which requires working across sectors, particularly the welfare, education and training sectors, as well as linking to local employers
- ✧ employment of staff who are trained to work with disadvantaged students
- ✧ flexible delivery of training, and tailoring services and hours of participation according to individual need
- ✧ strong ties with local employers and training in specified job skills that reflect demand in the local labour market and aggressive marketing of trainees to these employers
- ✧ creative combinations of work, study and social support, using a one-stop shop model
- ✧ high-quality jobs targeted, rather than the first available job
- ✧ hours of participation in employment preparation structured to enable a work–family–study balance.

Figure 2 summarises the features of good practice in providing a VET pathway from welfare to work that have emerged from the five components of the project methodology.

**Figure 2 Features of good practice in providing a VET pathway from welfare to work**

| Good practice feature | Methodology component | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Literature review | Focus groups | Student survey | Interviews | Case studies |
| Case management, coordination of supports | ■ | | | ■ | ■ |
| Individualised approach, including Individual training plan | ■ | | | ■ | |
| Collaboration, linkage across and within sectors | ■ | ■ | | ■ | |
| Links between VET staff and local employers | ■ | | | ■ | ■ |
| Systems-based structure for collaboration | | | | ■ | |
| Flexible delivery, including flexible timetabling | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| Professional development of VET staff/trained VET staff | ■ | ■ | | ■ | ■ |
| Targeted induction and pre-enrolment assessment processes | | ■ | ■ | | |
| Reduced costs for disadvantaged students e.g. books, transport | | | ■ | | |
| Assistance with child care for disadvantaged students | ■ | ■ | | ■ | ■ |
| Assistance with transport for disadvantaged students | | ■ | | ■ | |
| Range of learning and support services, integrated with studies | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| Creative combinations of work, study and support – one-stop shop | ■ | | | ■ | ■ |
| Provision of work–study–life balance | ■ | | | ■ | ■ |

# Conclusions: Pathways within pathways

The VET pathway to employment for disadvantaged students is often neither direct nor simple. Due to the complex needs inherent to Welfare to Work target groups and their generally low levels of prior educational attainment, participation in VET can be assisted by a structured preparatory pathway that links to 'mainstream' VET programs. The preparatory pathway combines basic and remedial education with introductory VET studies and with a range of personal and learning support services. It requires linkages to services outside the VET sector, particularly with human services, rehabilitation and employment services. The time spent in preparatory VET is also crucial, because (provided its content and delivery meets the range of students' needs) it enables the development of much-needed self-confidence and study habits. At face value, the VET pathway from welfare to work appears simple, but the findings from this research project and from previous research reinforce its complexity.

The findings from this research suggest the need for future reform at the interface of the VET and income support sectors. Although TAFE providers have long-standing experience with disadvantaged students, this is not sufficient on its own to guarantee learning outcomes for the Welfare to Work target group that will lead them to sustainable employment. Such outcomes are

also influenced by policy decisions that affect eligibility for Centrelink payments. This includes the existence of disincentives for undertaking study of more than twelve months' duration, thus discouraging participation in training that could lead to long-term, high-quality employment and also participation in preparatory programs that enable the successful completion of accredited VET studies.

Although most government policy occurs within sector and portfolio boundaries, the importance of cross-government and whole-of-government planning is increasingly recognised—much of it driven by the Council of Australian Governments policy reform. The role of VET in assisting the welfare-to-work transition is limited by the absence of collaborative planning and policy development between the income support and VET sectors. It is further constrained by the absence of a funding model that supports VET teaching and support staff to work with other sectors on behalf of individual students; the sector acknowledges the additional time and resources required to meet the complex needs associated with disadvantage.

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# Support document details

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Complex not simple: The vocational education and training pathway from welfare to work—Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1987.html>. It contains a literature review and further information about the survey method and findings.




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