Hands on the future: project for improving access for Indigenous students in VET in Schools programs: final report.

Helme, Sue....[et al.]

Melbourne: Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning (CPELL), University of Melbourne, 2003.

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HANDS ON THE FUTURE:
Project for improving access for Indigenous students in VET in Schools Programs

Final Report

SUE HELME
ANGELA HILL
JOSEPHINE BALATTI
GAIL MACKAY
ANNE WALSTAB
TANYA NICHOLAS
JOHN POLESEL

Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning

The University of Melbourne

November 2003
Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank the many organizations and individuals who assisted us with this project; School Principals, VET Coordinators, teachers, support staff, and members of Indigenous communities.

Our special thanks go to the students for their thoughtful comments and feedback, and for bringing this report to life.
## Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>AEA</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AITAC</td>
<td>Australian Indigenous Training Advisory Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANTA</td>
<td>Australian National Training Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATAS</td>
<td>Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSPA</td>
<td>Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEST</td>
<td>Department of Education, Science and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECEF</td>
<td>Enterprise and Career Education Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLEN</td>
<td>Local Learning and Employment Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCEETYA</td>
<td>Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAIDOC</td>
<td>National Aboriginal and Islander Day Of Celebration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTO</td>
<td>Registered Training Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBNA</td>
<td>School Based New Apprenticeship (also referred to as school-based traineeship)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWL</td>
<td>Structured Workplace Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEGAS</td>
<td>Vocational and Educational Guidance for Aboriginals Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VETiS</td>
<td>Vocational Education and Training in Schools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Definitions

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| School Based New Apprenticeships (SBNAs) | School Based New Apprenticeships allow students to undertake paid employment and structured training as part of a senior school certificate. While different implementation models have been adopted by the States and Territories, the defining features are that they:  
  - Involve a Training Contract linked to an industrial award or agreement (signed by both employer and the trainee), with training delivered by an RTO  
  - Include attainment of the senior secondary certificate and a VET qualification  
  - Require attendance at school, work and training. |
| Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) | The on-the-job component of a VET in Schools program (also called workplace learning and work placement). The skills or ‘learning outcomes’ commonly reflect nationally recognised, industry-defined competency standards. The student is not paid by the employer. |
| VET In Schools (VETiS) | VET in Schools allows school students to combine vocational studies with their general education curriculum. Students participating in VET in Schools continue to work towards their secondary school certificate, whilst the VET component of their studies gives them credit towards a nationally recognised VET qualification. |
| Work Experience | A period (usually one or two weeks) of unpaid work undertaken by secondary school students as part of their careers education, to provide some insight into the world of work. It is not formally linked to the curriculum, and does not contribute to a certificate or qualification. |
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Executive Summary

Background

This project investigated the role of VETiS for Indigenous students. Several data sources informed the results of this project, including previous literature on VET in Schools and Indigenous education, a national survey of students’ experiences of post-secondary education and VET conducted in 2002, and case study material from interviews with over 280 individuals in 21 schools from diverse settings in all States and Territories of Australia.

In brief, the main purpose of this study was to:

- Identify ‘good practice’ in the provision of VETiS to Indigenous students;
- Identify the factors that constrain the accessibility of VET to Indigenous students; and
- Make recommendations for increasing access for Indigenous students to VETiS.

The student experience of VETiS

- The literature on VETiS and the 2002 survey data indicated that Indigenous students participated in VETiS at approximately twice the rate of non-Indigenous students, and that Indigenous take-up of School-based New Apprenticeships was about four times the rate of that for non-Indigenous students. Whilst these trends are encouraging, they must be viewed in the context of retention rates for Indigenous students to post-compulsory education that are approximately half those of non-Indigenous students.

- National survey data indicated that Indigenous students were less likely than non-Indigenous students to plan to go on to university study and professional careers, and more likely to expect to undertake TAFE study, apprenticeships, traineeships or enter the workforce directly from school.

- National survey data indicated that, like their non-Indigenous counterparts, Indigenous students enrolled in VET for the opportunity of workplace training and to gain a nationally accredited qualification. The case study data confirmed that Indigenous students viewed VETiS primarily as a pathway to future employment. Other reasons for enrolling in VET included using VET to broaden career choices, increase tertiary entrance scores or to create a ‘fall-back’ option if aspirations to engage in tertiary study did not eventuate.

- National survey data indicated that Indigenous students were more likely than non-Indigenous students to report that VET had improved their attitude to
school and schoolwork (particularly boys). The case study data confirmed that Indigenous students endorsed the value of VET in maintaining engagement with school.

- The ‘hands-on’ nature of VET was its most frequently reported positive feature. This practical approach distinguished VET from other school subjects. Other valued aspects of VET were off-site learning, which students with a break from their regular school environment, and the flexibility of VET in allowing accreditation for partial course completion.

- Consistent with national data, Indigenous students in the case studies endorsed the value of Structured Workplace Learning, particularly in settings that offered culturally appropriate support and assistance. Shortfalls in structured workplace learning were however reported, including inadequate support and the lack of opportunity to practice relevant skills.

- Students identified significant shortcomings in VET curriculum and pedagogy in some settings. These included the inadequate industrial knowledge of teachers and their inability to engage students in the theoretical components of VET; insufficient information about VET courses prior to enrolment (students were sometimes unaware of the volume of theoretical material they were expected to complete alongside practical components); difficulties in completing academic requirements compounded by inadequate language, literacy and numeracy skills; and insufficient support offered to address these difficulties.

**Good practice in VET for Indigenous Students**

The case study material generated five key principles that contribute to the successful implementation of VET for Indigenous students. The distinguishing feature of good practice was the ability of schools to combine all five aspects:

1. **Focus on individual needs**

Fundamental to schools’ success in engaging and retaining Indigenous students in VET were positive and supportive relationships with individual students and their families. Key strategies included:

- Provision of special attention and support in response to students’ individual needs and preferences;

- Careful selection of SWL according to individual needs;

- Ready access to staff members who could counsel students and/or advocate on their behalf; and

- Indigenous support staff who knew each student and their family well and were able to mediate relationships between the school, the students and their families.
2. **Supportive school environment**

Success in creating a supportive school environment was demonstrated through a commitment by leadership to acknowledge and embrace Indigenous cultural values and identity. Strategies used to create a supportive environment for Indigenous students included:

- Cultural awareness raising activities for staff and students;
- Academic assistance through individual tutoring and homework classes;
- Employment of Indigenous support staff to provide essential links between students, teachers and families, and also to enhance cultural awareness;
- Provision of cultural identifiers in and around the physical environment, which affirmed the presence, and acknowledged the contributions of Indigenous students. Rooms set aside for Indigenous students also promoted a sense of belonging;
- Engaging students in self-support programs such as student-student mentoring;
- Employment of Indigenous teaching staff to provided sustained support and role models and enhance Indigenous students’ engagement with learning and the school community; and
- Recognising cultural sensitivities associated with achievement and success and acknowledging these in an appropriate manner.

3. **Relevant and engaging curriculum**

Good practice was exemplified by a strong and well-supported VET program combined with curriculum programs that successfully attracted, engaged and retained Indigenous students. In some schools, Indigenous-only programs played a key role in supporting and engaging Indigenous students in some schools, whilst others focused on a whole-of-school approach to meeting the needs of Indigenous students. School-based traineeships were well regarded as an alternative to conventional VET. They appeared to be effective in retaining students at risk of leaving school, and in facilitating the transition to post-school employment.

Key features of good practice included:

- Engaging and relevant VET curriculum;
- A flexible approach to VET delivery and assessment;
- Curriculum programs at all levels that engaged (and re-engaged) Indigenous students; and
- Indigenous-only VET programs that were appropriately targeted and well supported.
4. **Links with other education and training providers**

Good practice was exemplified by cooperative relationships with other education and training providers such as nearby schools and TAFE Institutes, which enabled schools to offer a broader VET program, particularly in situations where program breadth was constrained by school size.

Indigenous students generally benefited from the opportunity to attend classes at another location, but in some cases this was problematic.

5. **Community links and partnerships**

Strong links with agencies within the local community (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) were a feature of good practice. These relationships:

- Facilitated the development of VET programs that were closely aligned with local employment opportunities, particularly in regional locations;
- Enhanced opportunities for SWL placements and post-school employment in Indigenous and mainstream organizations;
- Provided a basis for extra funding for new programs and infrastructure.

**Constraints on participation and delivery of VET to Indigenous students**

The case study material identified several factors that constrained the effective delivery of VET to Indigenous students:

1. **Systemic constraints**

   - Regulatory barriers were linked to AQTF requirements of schools including staff qualifications, difficulties in meeting resource requirements, and the restrictions on offering VET programs to Indigenous students below Year 11.
   - Dependence on short-term funding was considered to be a serious constraint on the long-term effectiveness and viability of programs. Funding issues were seen as a major impediment to program promotion, expansion, and in some cases program survival. Recurrent funding costs, and the costs involved in providing adequate support for Indigenous students were also identified as barriers.

2. **School based barriers**

   - Schools varied in their recognition of Indigenous students and the availability of systematic support of this group’s needs, particularly when these needs related to financial support to participate in SWL, or other VET resource needs. Some
Schools with limited successful participation failed to distinguish Indigenous students’ needs from other students’ needs.

- School location had an influence on the success of VET programs for Indigenous students. Several schools in rural and remote locations described their limited access to external training providers and suitable employers (both for SWL and paid employment) as a barrier.

- A recurring theme across the case studies was the challenge of attracting and retaining appropriately qualified staff in the context of often uncertain funding programs. School coordinators lamented the shortage of secondary qualified staff who were able to meet the requirements of accredited VET.

- Pedagogies used for teaching VET subjects were a major barrier. Students outlined a range of concerns about their experiences in VET programs. The clearest expression of this frustration existed when students were unable to distinguish between VET and other subjects.

3. Experience as an Indigenous student

- Generational unemployment, low levels of financial resources, lack of transport, housing problems, cultural obligations such as caring for ailing relatives and attending funerals were all described as barriers to sustained involvement in education and VET.

- School data revealed a range of obstacles for Indigenous students participating in VET. Work placements and training within VET link to a particular view of the importance of work, income and a vocation. At times this frame was seen to conflict with priorities held by Indigenous students and their families.

- Comments from schools highlighted the barriers for successful participation in VET for students with poor English language and literacy skills, with some schools defining this lack of skills as the major barrier for Indigenous students. Teachers in the VET curriculum area noted that generally the literacy skill level required for VET was grossly underestimated.

- Consistent with the educational research on Indigenous success at school, irregular attendance was seen to be a major barrier in completing VETiS programs.

- Some sites described relationships with various stakeholders, particularly employers, as defined by racism. There was also evidence of resentment within some schools that Indigenous students benefited from specially targeted resources.
4. Community and locational barriers to VET for Indigenous students

- Schools in remote and rural settings in particular noted their concern about linking to viable and relevant employment options for Indigenous students. Tapping into supportive employment opportunities in local communities at times proved problematic.

- The need for all community members including family and significant members of Indigenous communities to support Indigenous students’ endeavours in VET was highlighted in a range of case studies. Often parental knowledge and involvement was very limited.

Conclusions

This study provided a national perspective on the role of VETiS for Indigenous students, using data from a national survey of over 20,000 students, and interviews with over 280 school staff, students and other stakeholders. VET was seen to have four key roles for Indigenous students: engaging students in meaningful “hands-on” learning; enhancing school retention; providing needed workplace experience (through SWL); and facilitating the transition to post-school employment and training.

Good practice in the delivery of VETiS to Indigenous students was characterized by a focus on developing supportive relationships with individual students and their families within a school environment supportive of Indigenous cultural values and identity that offered engaging and relevant curriculum, delivered and assessed with flexibility. Partnerships with other educational and training providers, and relationships with employers and other community stakeholders (including Indigenous communities) enhanced the quality of VET provision and maintained its relevance to local needs and opportunities.

Several factors constrained the effective delivery of VET to Indigenous students. Barriers that related to the sustainability of VETiS programs in general included financial and resource constraints, and regulatory frameworks that impacted on staffing and resourcing VET, and disallowed access to VET for students below Year 11. School-based barriers to participation of Indigenous students included location of school, attracting staff, and shortcomings in VET curriculum and pedagogy.

Barriers linked to the experience of education as an Indigenous person included poverty, lack of family support, limited school attendance, and conflicting worldviews of the role of education and employment. The language, literacy and numeracy requirements of VET were also seen as significant barriers to the successful participation of Indigenous students. Lower expectations of Indigenous students by teachers were also noted, whilst in some settings there was evidence of negative attitudes to Indigenous students in workplaces, indicative of racism.
Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Improving teacher training and professional development

- That the training of VET teachers in schools and other settings include a focus on the delivery and assessment of VET units of competency being more responsive to the needs, strengths and circumstances of Indigenous students, and incorporate cultural awareness, cross-cultural communication and the teaching of students for whom English is a second language.

- That strategies for increasing the number of Indigenous VET teachers be explored.

Recommendation 2: Improving VET in Schools teaching, learning and assessment strategies

- That VET teaching, learning and assessment strategies recognise and reflect the preference by Indigenous students for experiential learning, and are refined to ensure there is a balance between the theoretical and practical components of VET.

- That appropriate language, literacy and numeracy support be provided to Indigenous students as required to assist them with their VET in Schools programs.

Recommendation 3: Improving the quality of Structured Workplace Learning

- That education systems adopt measures to ensure that supportive work placements are provided for Indigenous students, and that this include mandatory preparation for work, careful and focused selection of employers and ongoing support for students on placement.

Recommendation 4: Maximising resources for VET in Schools

- That as current funding arrangements for VET in Schools programs are reviewed, more integrated and coordinated approaches are developed that reduce the dependency of programs in which Indigenous students participate on short-term special grants.

- That consideration be given to the introduction and funding of innovative programs that aim to increase the retention of Indigenous students. Mentoring and “elder in residence” programs are two examples from this study that warrant further attention and development.
• That schools providing VET in Schools programs in which Indigenous students participate be facilitated to form cooperative relationships with other schools, with TAFE or other providers in order to offer breadth of VET courses, particularly where school size constrains that ability.

Recommendation 5: Increasing access for younger students

• That education and training systems explore the educational and resource implications of developing additional vocational programs (including accredited VET) for students in Year 10 and below as a strategy to retain Indigenous students in schooling.

Recommendation 6: A coordinated approach to informing Indigenous communities about VET in Schools

• That a coordinated promotional campaign be developed and supported by resources for schools to inform local Indigenous communities about VET in Schools programs.

Recommendation 7: Better outcomes data collection and ongoing support

• That data collection processes for measuring outcomes of Indigenous students for VET in Schools and School-based New Apprenticeships be progressed as a matter of urgency, and that longitudinal studies be undertaken to assess the long-term outcomes for Indigenous students in these programs.
Chapter 1:
Background and Methodology

The policy context

In 1996 the ANTA Board established the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Training Advisory Council to provide advice on ways to increase participation by and outcomes for Indigenous peoples in vocational education and training.

In May 1998 ANTA published *A Bridge to the Future* – Australia’s National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 1998 – 2003 to be used as a guide into the new millennium. Objective 3 of this strategy was to achieve equitable outcomes in vocational education and training. One of the suggested priorities for the initiatives outlined for the objective was “increasing participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in vocational education and training, particularly higher level award programs, improved retention and completion rates and improved employment outcomes” (p. 16).

Following that report the ANTA Board agreed that The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Training Advisory Council (ATSIPAC) should develop a specific national strategy to achieve equitable outcomes in vocational education and training. The strategy was developed in consultation with a wide range of Indigenous and other stakeholders. The published result was *Partners in a Learning Culture – National Strategy*. From this strategy a national taskforce developed the Blueprint for Implementation, which sets out the actions required to achieve the four objectives from *Partners in a Learning Culture*, and the Australian Indigenous Training Advisory Council (AITAC) was set up to monitor the implementation of the Blueprint.

The documents describe a new vision for the participation of Indigenous peoples in vocational education and training:

*A vocational education and training system which renews and shares an Indigenous learning culture with all Australians in a spirit of reconciliation, equity, justice, and community economic development and sustainability* (*Blueprint, p. 2*).

The blueprint for implementation outlines how this vision is to be achieved through a partnership between Indigenous communities, governments, industry and training/education providers. Its four objectives are:

Objective 1: Increasing the involvement of Indigenous people in decision-making about policy, planning, resources and delivery.

Objective 2: Achieving participation in VET for Indigenous people equal to that of the rest of the Australian community.
Objective 3: Achieving increased, culturally appropriate, and flexibly delivered training, including use of IT, for Indigenous people.

Objective 4: Developing closer links between VET outcomes for Indigenous people and industry and employment.

**Background to the Project**

This study is concerned with VET in Schools. In the past decade, significant growth in participation in VET in Schools programs has occurred. However, overall levels of participation mask important differences in access to school-based VET. This issue is of crucial importance to Indigenous students. The role that VET in Schools may play in addressing early leaving and its impact on the educational outcomes of Indigenous students need to be understood. While the apparent retention rate to Year 12 for full-time Indigenous students has increased, the levels of participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in VET in Schools programs remain obscure. Many of the published data on enrolment patterns and participation fail to report Indigenous participation rates. This is not through neglect, but rather the result of unreliability of Indigenous identifiers on some state-level Board of Studies files.

It is known that VET in Schools plays a strong compensatory role for some low achieving groups (among whom Indigenous students are over-represented). However, Indigenous students are a group with high levels of early leaving. For such groups, the provision of VET programs in the senior years may well have come too late.

**Aims of the Project**

This project aims to increase understanding of the role played by VET for Indigenous students. In particular, the aims of the project are to:

- Identify features and approaches of existing projects, programs and strategies for Indigenous VET in Schools (VETiS) programs (including examples of good practice in rural, remote and urban settings);
- Identify barriers to Indigenous students taking part in VETiS and describe strategies for overcoming them, including the provision of appropriate support mechanisms;
- Assess the degree to which existing programs improve retention rates and educational outcomes for Indigenous students and make recommendations for strategies for improvement;
- Identify the needs of Indigenous students as they relate to VETiS program delivery, work placement and to School-Based New Apprenticeships;
- Assess how well VETiS programs provide pathways for Indigenous students into further training and employment.
Methodology

The project was conducted in three stages, as outlined below.

Literature Review

The Literature review provides an overview of the development of VET in Schools programs. This is followed by an examination of the literature on the main factors that impact on the success of Indigenous children in secondary school and how VET in Schools programs are responding to these factors. While there is extensive literature on the former there is a relatively small amount of specific research on how VET in Schools programs are responsive to these general issues. A discussion of some specific VET in Schools programs follows. The review concludes with a summary of the characteristics displayed by VET in Schools programs that have been relatively successful in engaging Indigenous students.

Analysis of national survey data

This analysis is based on participation data provided by Boards of Studies in all states and territories and a major national survey commissioned by ECEF and conducted in 2002. This survey, which included students in urban and rural settings in every state and territory, examined several aspects of young Indigenous peoples’ experience of vocational learning, and made comparisons with their non-Indigenous peers.

Case Studies

This phase of the project comprised case studies that examined the delivery of VET to Indigenous students in all states and territories. Schools were selected on the advice of the Project Steering Group, State Departments of Education and Indigenous Education bodies, and were intended to reflect good practice in urban, regional and remote locations.

Interview data was collected from 21 schools that delivered accredited VETiS programs, in settings that included remote towns (2 schools), rural towns (4 schools), provincial cities (5 schools) and capital cities (10 schools). School enrolments ranged from 302 to 1060, and all but two were government schools. Indigenous enrolment ranged from 3% to 75% (see Table 1).

At each school, several staff members and students were interviewed, and sometimes parents. The exact composition varied from site to site, but usually comprised the Principal, VET Coordinator, VET teachers (some of whom were Indigenous), Indigenous support staff, Careers Counsellor, Indigenous liaison staff, parents, representatives of the local Indigenous community, and Indigenous VET students. In all, 284 interviews were conducted, including 133 school staff, 33 other adults (including parents and representatives of Indigenous communities) and 118 students and former students, most of whom were interviewed in small groups.

These consultations provided important information on the key characteristics of schools that have built successful VET programs, and the constraints that have limited their effectiveness.
Table 1: Summary of Case Study Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Territory</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Approximate population*</th>
<th>Brief description</th>
<th>Enrolment</th>
<th>Indigenous Enrolment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Rural town</td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>P-10</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>69 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural town</td>
<td>6000</td>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>60 (13%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural town</td>
<td>8000</td>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>983</td>
<td>125 (11%)</td>
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<td>VIC</td>
<td>Provincial city</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>23 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provincial city</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>7-12, non-govt</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>36 (5%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>80 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td>P-12</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>127 secondary (57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>90,000</td>
<td>8-12</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>Approx 110 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30 km from</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>8-12, non-govt</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>162 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural town</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Provincial city</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>47 (16%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>8-12</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>Approx 70 (20%)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>8-12, non-govt</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>182 (46%)</td>
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<td>302</td>
<td>47 (16%)</td>
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<td>389</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>28 (3%)</td>
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</table>

*Population of town or city in which school is located (non-metropolitan only)
Structure of the Report

The report is divided into seven chapters, as follows:

1. **Background and Methodology**

   This chapter outlines the policy context for the current study and explains the methodology used to collect and analyse the data.

2. **The Literature on Indigenous Students and VET**

   The literature review presents an overview of VETiS and documents its contribution to positive educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

3. **Indigenous Students and the Young Visions Survey**

   This chapter discusses the data obtained from a national student survey of VET and post-compulsory education. It examines the experiences of Indigenous students and makes comparisons with their non-Indigenous counterparts.

4. **The student Experience of VET**

   This chapter explores Indigenous students’ experiences of VETiS. It is based on interviews with 118 students and former students from 21 schools in all States and Territories.

5. **Good Practice in VET for Indigenous Students**

   This chapter synthesises the case study material, and outlines the key features of successful VETiS programs for Indigenous students.

6. **Constraints on participation and delivery of VET to Indigenous Students**

   This chapter discusses key issues that impact on the participation of Indigenous students in VET, and on the successful delivery of VETiS programs.

7. **Conclusions and Recommendations**

   This chapter sets out the key findings of the project, based on the analysis contained in the earlier sections, and recommends strategies for improving VETiS for Indigenous students.
Chapter 2:
The Literature on Indigenous Students and VET

This review begins with background information about the development of VET in Schools programs, which precedes a discussion of issues associated with the participation of Indigenous students in post-compulsory education, and the role of VET in Schools in addressing their educational needs and aspirations.

This is followed by an examination of the literature on the main factors that impact on the success of Indigenous children in secondary schools and how VET in Schools programs are responding to these factors. While there is an extensive literature on the former there is a relatively small amount of specific research on how VET in Schools programs are responsive to these general issues. A discussion of some specific VET in Schools programs follows. The review concludes with a summary of the characteristics displayed by VET in Schools programs that have been relatively successful in engaging Indigenous students.

VET In Schools: Background

VET In Schools programs emerged from the vacuum in vocational education that arose in the mid 1990s due to the collapse of the youth labour market, and the corresponding demise of traditional technical secondary education.

In the early 1960s, when the expansion of Australia’s education system was in full swing, dual secondary education systems operated in which a strong system of technical schools prepared students so inclined for an apprenticeship, whilst high schools offered a general curriculum for those seeking careers in the professions, business or public service. A hungry labour market was able to absorb unskilled and inexperienced school leavers. These parallel systems developed their own curriculum forms and pedagogy, which were shaped by the institutions, social classes and communities they served.


During this time of structural change, the youth labour market declined sharply and school completion rates rose, assisted by two recessions in the early 1980s and the early 1990s. The dismantling of the technical school system which occurred during the 1980s resulted in increasing numbers – and greater diversity - of post-compulsory
students, and consequently a growing need for greater flexibility in curriculum choices, including vocationally-oriented programs.

A major shift in vocational education and training policy emerged in 1992, commencing as a series of responses to these critical reviews, including the establishment of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), and in a short space of time the provision of VET was prescribed through a series of national standards, procedures and qualifications. Federal government funding was provided for the development of VET in Schools programs.

Two forms of recognised vocational provision are now in place: VET in Schools and School-based New Apprenticeships (SBNAs). VET in Schools is generally embedded into a school completion certificate with students studying vocational subjects or modules or competencies to national industry standards. SBNAs allow young people to participate in a wage-based contract of training with an employer and continue with studies at school leading to a school completion certificate.

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) defines VET in Schools as follows:

**VET in Schools** allows school students to combine vocational studies with their general education curriculum. Students participating in VET in Schools continue to work towards their secondary school certificate. The VET component of their studies gives them credit towards a nationally recognised VET qualification. In this way, participants can keep their options open to pursue further full-time or part-time vocational training or to move into tertiary studies after school.


As defined by MCEETYA, a VET in Schools program:

- *Is based on national industry/enterprise competency standards based on Training Packages where endorsed, or involve modules based on available industry/enterprise competency standards;*

- *Relates to, or provides, VET certificates within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and senior secondary certificates endorsed by State and Territory Boards of Studies.*

Accordingly, MCEETYA considers a VET program to be a VET in Schools program if:

- *It is undertaken as part of a senior secondary certificate; and*

- *Its completion by the student provides credit towards a recognised qualification within the Australian Qualifications Framework.*

The role and purpose of VET in Schools

As originally conceived, the principal aim of VET was to provide greater breadth of choice to the more diverse populations making use of senior secondary schooling, and viable pathways into training and/or employment for students not intending to apply for university.

VET in Schools has evolved over time, and now has a well respected and recognised role in post-compulsory education, which includes the following:

- Increase retention into the post-compulsory years, by motivating disengaged students/reluctant learners to re-engage in meaningful and useful learning through more practical ‘hands on’ and problem-based experiences. This in turn builds their skills and confidence to continue with education and training.

- Broaden students’ career options, assist them to make better-informed career decisions and increase their knowledge of industry and business. The provision of Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) is a key element of this goal. Through SWL, students learn relevant workplace skills, and gain exposure to workplace culture and standards of behaviour.

- Give students a qualification that may lead to further study or direct entry to the workforce. This may also include training and a qualification for a part-time job to support them financially at school, or during tertiary study.

- Build partnerships between employers and education and training providers, and thus enhance student employment outcomes whilst developing a workplace training culture and meeting employers’ needs for recruits with relevant skills.

- Provide all students with the opportunity to broaden their learning beyond the traditional academic curriculum so that they are better prepared for the transition to work, further education or training, and more aware of a broader range of study options and career opportunities.

Participation in VET in Schools

The need for vocational programs in schools, and their success, can be ascertained by the significant growth that has occurred in the number of young people undertaking VET programs in schools. In the early 1990s, for instance, about 13 per cent of Year 11 and 12 students participated in some form of vocational education. Since the mid-1990s, when major reforms to vocational education took place, participation has expanded significantly. Between 1996 and 2000, this proportion grew from 16 per cent to 38 per cent, or 153,616 enrolments (MCEETYA, 2001). These programs were offered by 2038 schools, or 94.9 per cent of all schools offering senior secondary programs. In 2001, 59.6 per cent of students participating in VET in Schools programs undertook SWL.

Over 10,000 school students undertook School-Based New Apprenticeships in 2001. Of these, 5,755 were new commencements. This means that while studying their senior secondary certificate they were also trainees and employees, participating in a work based pathway. (ANTA, 2002a).
However, overall levels of participation mask important differences in access to school-based VET and structured workplace learning (SWL), both in quality and in the impact of VET on the transition to further education, training and employment. The extent to which Indigenous students are able to access post-compulsory education (including VET in Schools), and successfully navigate this transition is the central theme of this review, and is addressed in the following sections.

**Indigenous participation in Education and Training**

Despite recent improvements, Indigenous participation in school is below that of the overall population. Apparent retention rates for fulltime Indigenous school students from Year 7/8 to both Year 10 and Year 12 have continued to rise over the last five years: the rate to Year 10 increased from 75.8% in 1996 to 86.0% in 2001, and the rate to Year 12 increased from 29.2% to 36.3%. (ABS, cat 4221.0, 2001). This contrasts with the rate of 75% for non-Indigenous students (MCEETYA, 2001). Moreover, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is significant, and begins to grow as students move from Year 9 to Year 10 (89.7 per cent compared to 98.6 per cent). The most noticeable difference occurs with the transition from compulsory schooling into Year 11 (67.6 per cent compared to 89.4 per cent) (ABS National Schools Statistics Collection, 2001).


Absenteeism is higher for Indigenous students. In a national investigation of this issue, Bourke, Rigby and Burden (2000) noted that, despite variations and inconsistent estimates of attendance, there was a consistent pattern of differences in attendance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The gap in average attendance widened in the early secondary years to about 15 per cent, then narrowed slightly among students in the final two years of schooling. The report noted a wide range of issues affecting the attendance of Indigenous students, and grouped these under three broad categories: systemic factors, school/staff issues and parents/community factors.

Academic achievement is also lower (McRae, Ainsworth et al, 2000, p. 150). The *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training* (2001) noted that Indigenous students were less likely than non-Indigenous students to obtain a tertiary entrance qualification, but generally achieved VET in Schools credentials at rates comparable to non-Indigenous students. This pattern of poorer attainment is suggested by the way Indigenous students reflect on their learning experience in Year 10. Teese and Polesel (1996) found that Indigenous students in Year 10 were much less confident than non-Indigenous students of getting good or very good results, and were much more likely to report doing poorly. These results indicate much higher levels of doubt about their capacity to continue at school. Indigenous students also had lower expectations of their school in helping them achieve a range of academic, vocational and developmental goals, and were also less likely to consider their school to be successful in meeting these goals. Year 10 Indigenous students also had lower aspirations than their non-Indigenous counterparts.
The report cautioned against regarding Indigenous students as a homogeneous group, noting for instance that socio-economic status and gender also influenced perceptions and outcomes; Indigenous girls were consistently more positive than boys about their relationships with teachers and the overall quality of their school experience.

The *Partners in a Learning Culture* report notes that a major concern to Indigenous communities is the fact that existing VET in Schools programs target students at the post-compulsory years of secondary schooling –by which time the majority of Indigenous students have ceased schooling for one reason or another. In addition, access to Years 11 and 12 is not always possible for Indigenous students in rural and remote communities. The report recommends that vocational and enterprise learning be offered to students in the compulsory, as well as the post-compulsory years, through strategic partnerships between schools, business, industry and the wider community.

In a review of the research and the statistics on the Indigenous school-to-work experience, Long, Frigo and Batten (1998) presented the following amongst its key findings:

- Indigenous youth experience disadvantage at each of the transition points namely, primary to secondary, junior to senior secondary schooling, school to further education, school to higher education, school to work and unemployment to school or work.

- Indigenous youth have a lower secondary school retention rate than that of non-Indigenous at every age level.

- Indigenous youth in rural and remote Australia experience more disadvantage.

- Indigenous youth have a higher unemployment rate than non-Indigenous and that as a percentage more Indigenous than non-Indigenous youth are in part-time, low-paid, insecure employment.

It is important to note that the Indigenous student population is diverse. The *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training* (2001), in citing lower attendance rates for Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students, cautions that the lower attendance rates for Indigenous students may be skewed by poor attendance from just a few Indigenous students. Similarly, Bourke, Rigby and Burden’s (2000) detailed analysis of the available data concerning Indigenous retention and attendance rates notes that 25% of Indigenous students have excellent attendance records and that poorer attendance rates exist for Indigenous students in rural and remote areas of Australia in comparison to urban regions. Indigenous boys are more likely to frequent school less than girls (see also Gardiner, 1996).

**VET in Schools and Indigenous students**

Amongst its recommendations, the *National Report* (2001) noted the need for “practically oriented and meaningful educational activities for adolescent Indigenous males, particularly in remote areas” (p. 4), which indicates a strong role for VET in providing a more adult form of training appropriate for these young men that is more consistent with and respectful of their status in the Indigenous community. These recommendations reflect the views expressed in the ANTA (1998) document *Partners*
Hands on the Future: Project for improving access for Indigenous students in VET in Schools Programs

in a learning Culture, which argued (p. 13) that VET in Schools helps Indigenous students stay at school, by increasing the relevance of schooling and providing opportunities for work-based learning which might not otherwise be available to them. It recommended improvements to the promotion of VET in Schools to Indigenous students, including focusing on the industries and competencies Indigenous students are interested in. It also stressed that learning and assessment (both school and work-based) must match the cultural, linguistic and community context of students. The document also noted that Indigenous students in VET in Schools may also need special assistance to help them with low levels of English Literacy and numeracy (p. 21).

There is evidence that VET in Schools has the capacity to improve the quality of learning experienced by Indigenous students at school and the prospects of employment after schooling. (ATSIPTAC, 1998, Malley, Keating, Robinson & Hawke, 2001). Improved attendance, retention and completion rates are some of the indicators used (McRae et al, 2000, Schwab, 2001b).

However, many Indigenous students have already left the school system well before being able to access VET in schools programs, which are usually offered at Years 11 and 12. Although this situation is changing, with VET now being offered in Year 10 in some states, relying on VET in Years 11 and 12 (and sometimes Year 10) as the only form of vocational learning for Indigenous students discriminates against young Indigenous people and other ‘at risk’ early leavers. The Learning Lessons Report (1999) which reviewed Indigenous education in the Northern Territory recommended that VET be introduced into junior secondary if it is to be any use to Indigenous students in bush schools, and recommends ANTA funding for VET programs for students who are not in formal year 11 or Year 12 classes.

While the above definition of VET stresses its credentialling and pathway-generating aspects, VET in Schools is in fact a suite of curriculum choices with their own objectives, pedagogical practices, and assessment regimes. Schools are trialling different models of vocational education and training (Malley, Keating, Robinson & Hawke, 2001, DETYA 2000c, http://www.schoolvet.info/schools/). The positive outcomes experienced by at least some Indigenous students through VET in Schools programs suggest that as a formal learning option, it has been able to successfully respond at least in part to the issues that impact on Indigenous participation in schools. The next section lists ten of the major factors that influence the quality of the Indigenous student’s learning experience through school. It draws on the research literature relating to the school experience generally and, where available, to that of VET in Schools specifically.

Factors impacting on successful engagement with School

Substantial research has been conducted that identifies the reasons for Indigenous students having lower than average attendance and retention rates. The ten listed here concern the teacher/student relationship, the school/parent relationship, school/community engagement, teacher expertise, relevance, literacy, the student’s home situation, racism, self-identity and accessibility to resources.
1. **Teacher/student relationship**

Positive relationships between teachers and students are integral to positive school relationships (Munns, 1998). A survey of over 470 Aboriginal children from 10 to 17 years of age revealed that teachers’ attitudes set the ‘tone’ of the school for the children and impacted on students’ well-being (Godfrey, Partington, Harslett & Richer, 2000). The teacher/student relationship is critical to creating a “safe, secure and supportive learning environment for Aboriginal students” (Herbert, Anderson, Price & Stehbens, 1999, p. xiii). Rigney, Rigney and Hughes (1998) also argue that a positive relationship with a teacher and/or counsellor is critical to successful outcomes for Aboriginal children. No specific research on the nature and the significance of the relationship between students and teachers/trainers in VET in School programs exists.

2. **School/parent relationship**

Herbert et al’s study of the factors affecting participation of Aboriginal students in secondary schools (1999) showed the importance of developing a relationship between the school and parents. This involves effective information exchange and a common purpose. The study found that the language and formality of the school setting prevent many parents/caregivers from becoming more involved in the school lives of their children.

Lester’s (2000) evaluative research on the Aboriginal Careers Aspiration Program for Aboriginal students in New South Wales confirmed the importance of the school/parent relationship in the context of VET. He states:

The most comprehensive finding of this research … was that family (extended in the case of Indigenous students) and in particular parents/care givers are outstandingly the most important source of advice for all students. Parents have indicated that they are looking to the school to provide valuable leadership in filling in the gaps in the parents (sic) knowledge of career information. It would be logical to conclude that the school or some other provider like TAFE work directly with parents to increase their career knowledge, so that their base knowledge can be increased and hence improve their further influence on students. If schools are to embark on positive programs in careers or for that matter any educational initiative then it is paramount that it be done in close partnership with the Indigenous community (p. 41).

3. **School/community engagement**

The curriculum development process in a school should have input from the community but rarely seems to do so (Herbert et al, 1999). The value of vocational subjects depends on their meeting the needs of the local community thus making partnerships between schools and local business and industry essential (Purdie et al, 2000). Schwab(2001b) stressed the importance of community relevance, and argued that successful VETiS programs arose out of a clearly identified community need, where Indigenous students are drawn to practical fields of study that are immediately relevant to and highly valued by the Indigenous community.

Lester (2000) identifies other reasons for the necessity of school/community engagement that have to do with increasing community knowledge about work and career options. Because the students’ primary advisers and role models are
community members, it is important they become more knowledgeable, especially in communities where work experience is limited.

In remote and rural regions community engagement in VET in School Programs is critical to their sustainability (DETYA 2000c). High turnover in teaching staff, the small number of potential employers in the local area and the limited resources available make community support and liaison between schools, community organisations, government and agencies essential. Bettison (2001) argues that present funding arrangements do not adequately meet the cost of delivering VET in remote communities. She also notes the need for more support for schools and local industry, including professional development to support local delivery of training and work placements, believing that Indigenous workplace coordinators and trainers are central to the delivery of programs in a culturally appropriate manner. Lack of learning and career resources suitable for Indigenous students, the high cost and poor quality of telecommunications, and problems with the system for payment of Abstudy are also seen as problematic.

4. Teacher expertise

Relevant teacher expertise in cultural awareness, cross-cultural communication and teaching English as a second language impacts on the quality of learning experienced by the Indigenous student (Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000, Herbert et al, 1999). Similar expertise is required by vocational education and training staff (DETYA, 2000c). In addition, staff in small rural and remote schools can lack relevant expertise in vocational training itself. In a review of VET in School programs in rural and remote areas of Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia it was found that:

School staff and community members have limited knowledge of vocational education and the work pathways that are relevant to their communities. In remote communities and many rural communities teachers and community members have limited skills or experience in the delivery of vocational education and vocational learning programs. Few schools remain abreast of the constant change occurring in the vocational education and training sector. Because of school size and distance professional development is costly for small rural and remote schools and many are reluctant to make the outlay given their small proportion of year 11 and 12 students. Many schools do not know what professional development is available. Some schools require assistance simply to identify the new skills they require (DETYA, 2000c, p. 53).

5. Relevance of school experience to student needs

Student participation in school is a function of how relevant the experience is perceived by the student (Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000). Cultural relevance in terms of cultural programs is one dimension (Herbert et al, 1999). Cultural relevance in terms of curriculum responding to the local cultural context is another. For example, Bourke et al (2000) report that traditional adolescent Indigenous males in remote areas tend to regard school as a childish enterprise in which they refuse to engage. More productive learning is experienced through practical training including vocational education and training (DETYA, 2000b, p. 104, Purdie et al, 2000).

While VET in Schools programs have the potential to provide more relevant learning experiences to Indigenous students there are some concerns. On the one hand,
Indigenous students are over-represented in vocational education and training in schools (Gray, Hunter and Schwab, 2000) and particularly in courses that require low skill level (Long, Frigo & Batten, 1998). On the other, Malley (1999) reports that in order to meet employer expectations, schools can be selective about who enters VET programs. For a particular VET program to be relevant, there needs to be the appropriate match between student needs and wants and the program itself.

The relevance of school organised work experience for Indigenous students was shown in Smith and Green’s (2001) study of school students’ learning from paid and unpaid work. While no generality of the findings pertaining to Indigenous students can be drawn from the study because of the small number of students who completed the survey (26 respondents), the responses indicate that school plays an important role in introducing students to workplaces to which they would not otherwise have access. Smith and Green suggest that the lack of relevant networks of family and friends restricts access to workplaces. The case studies and employer interviews undertaken in the study further suggested that Indigenous students’ entry into particular kinds of work is hampered by a lack of confidence and a lack of desire to enter industries where there are no Indigenous people.

6. Literacy

While there is a large body of literature on school based literacy and numeracy in relation to Indigenous students, Bourke, Rigby and Burden (2000) argue that “there appears no definitive evidence in the research literature as to whether poor attendance is a cause of the problems experienced by Indigenous students in this area of school learning or whether it is an effect of these problems” (p. 5). There is also a large body of research concerning literacy and numeracy and adult vocational educational and training (see Watson, Nicholson & Sharplin, 2001 for a literature review). However, another recent review of the research on literacy and numeracy in vocational education and training (Falk and Millar, 2001) noted that no specific research has been done on literacy and numeracy as it relates to VET in Schools. The review recommended that research is required in literacy and numeracy as it pertains to students’ learning experiences as well as to teachers’ and trainers’ professional development.

The recent ECEF review of IYPI projects Breaks in the Road concluded that VET programs appealed to Indigenous students, contributing to maintaining their engagement in schooling, which in turn contributed to broader educational outcomes, including improvements in literacy and numeracy.

The evaluation of the vocational education and training in schools element of the Commonwealth School to work program (DETYA, 2000b) expressed concern about the low literacy and numeracy levels in remote areas and of Indigenous students. The evaluation did find that embedding literacy and numeracy in vocational training courses prior to Year 11 is an effective way of improving student literacy and numeracy (p. 104).

7. Student home situation

Some Indigenous students find engagement with school difficult because of home-related factors. These may include issues to do with poverty, poor health, the law, high mobility related to family and cultural obligations, and Indigenous inter-group

8. Racism

Indigenous students in schools experience racism from fellow students and staff. The Herbert et al’s study (1999) showed that school personnel acknowledged the existence of racism but did not consider it had a direct relationship to student attendance. Other studies have identified that such a relationship does exist (Groome & Hamilton, 1995, Rigney, Rigney & Hughes, 1998).

Through consultations with students and staff in 22 urban schools (primary and secondary) Groome and Hamilton identified overt racist practices from teachers such as racial abuse and vilification and prejudicial treatment. They also noted a less overt but equally as influential form of racism that was often invisible to non-Indigenous staff. They explain that racism is also the failure to acknowledge the culture of Aboriginal people within the everyday practices of the school which they attend. Rigney, Rigney and Hughes (1998, p. 11) provide other examples of this form of racism:

> Structural racism exists in some schools in the form of institutional and racialised practices and is exemplified in teachers’ low expectations of students of Aboriginal descent. It is also reflected in schools’ distribution of human resources, as well as ideologically at the pedagogical level in the construction of knowledge which informs curriculum content.

Racism impacts on Indigenous students’ job and career aspirations. In a study of young Aboriginal women’s career aspirations, Gool and Patton (1999) found that the young women anticipated the possibility of racism when applying for jobs and sometimes encountered it. In the evaluation of a careers aspiration program Lester (2000) found that racism continues to be experienced in the school and in the workforce. Work placements which are at the heart of such programs can be damaging if the students find themselves placed in racist workplaces.

9. Student self-identity

A study on the self-identity of Indigenous students in primary and secondary schools reveals that the above factors impact on the self-identity of students which in turn affects school participation and performance (Purdie et al, 2000). The researchers concluded that while positive self-identity as Indigenous people is not necessarily linked with successful educational outcomes, positive self-identity as a student is likely to be associated with school success.

According to Purdie et al. (2000), the factors associated with positive self-identity as a student include:

- school—where students have a sense of belonging;
- teachers—who are warm, supportive, and have positive expectations;
- curriculum—which has relevance; and
- support and encouragement from family, peers and community.
The same study found that the relevance of vocational education and training in schools impacted positively on students’ self-identity (p. 16).

Similarly, Mercurio and Clayton (2001) concluded that a key aspect of Indigenous students’ success in completing secondary education was their ability to imagine themselves as successful students. Also crucial was the encouragement and assistance given by teachers, tutors, Aboriginal Education Teachers (AETs), school principals and friends.

**10. Accessibility to resources**

The complexity of the factors involved in determining the quality of the school learning experience makes many of the responses resource intensive (Herbert et al., 1999).

Vocational education and training is especially resource intensive in rural and remote Australia where vocational education and training opportunities are relatively limited for the many Indigenous students who live there (DETYA, 2000c). Distance, isolation and the smallness of schools and communities prevent ready access to the necessary infrastructure and impose heavy costs on implementing programs. The unique needs of Indigenous communities add to the resourcing cost.

**Effective VET in Schools practices**

In the context of a general paucity of detailed case studies of Indigenous VET in schools, one recent study *Breaks in the Road* (ECEF, unpublished) provides a detailed account of several projects funded through the Indigenous Youth Partnership Initiative (IYPI), including projects delivering accredited VET in Schools programs. Amongst its findings was the success of the ‘hands-on’ nature of VET in engaging Indigenous students. VETiS was found to contribute both to employability and broader educational outcomes such as literacy and numeracy. This report recommended that VET be made available to students in Years 9 and 10, and possibly Year 8, and concluded that school-based apprenticeships are an effective mechanism for delivering VET to Indigenous students, as they provide a ready-made mentoring and support system to facilitate the school to work transition.

Descriptions of successful programs can also be found in the literature review by Long, Frigo and Batten (1998) and in McRae et al.’s (2000) report on ten diverse VET in Schools projects across Australia conducted in the series of Strategic Results Projects under the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program. A suite of case studies on models of delivery of vocational education and training in schools in rural and remote areas has been produced by DETYA (2000a). In contrast to these more descriptive case studies, Schwab (2001a, 2001b) presents three detailed case studies one each from Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia. Johns, Kilpatrick, Mulford and Falk (2001) draw attention to leadership and community capacity in the analysis of the reasons for the success of a VET in Schools program in a remote region of North Queensland.

The literature reviewed reveals considerable diversity in VET in Schools programs for Indigenous students. Programs operate in remote areas such as the Indulkana Anangu School Radio program in the Pitjantjatjara Lands of South Australia (Bennet &
Edwards, 2002), in major urban areas such as the Future Skills – Northland project in Melbourne (ECEF, 2003b) and in regional towns such as the Students’ Link with Industry project in Mackay, Queensland (ECEF 2003d). Some programs revolve around a single site e.g. St Mary’s Millennium Art project in Broome, Western Australia (ECEF, 2003h), while others involve cluster arrangements such as the Macleay Valley Workplace Learning Centre which involves a partnership between six schools in the Kempsey region of New South Wales and the Booroongen Djugun College, an independent adult education institution. Some programs serve multiple communities e.g. the Darwin VET in Schools Work Placement Centre and the Indulkana Anangu School Radio program. In all case studies reviewed Indigenous students comprised a major group in the school population. While some case studies focus on Years 11 and 12 students, other such as the Indulkana Anangu School Radio program have been extended to Year 8. In the next section specific programs are discussed in terms of their rationale, their community significance, the ways in which they celebrate success, the ways in which they affirm cultural values and how they are resourced.

1. Rationale for programs

Most of the programs have evolved to address the low attendance rates of Indigenous students and to encourage students to complete their secondary schooling. For example, Northam Senior High School in Western Australia introduced its alternative VET course in 2001 to address the tendency for Indigenous students to leave school prematurely and fall into unemployment (ECEF, 2003c). The program at Trinity Bay High School in Cairns, Queensland was motivated by the disparity in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. An additional complication for Trinity Bay is the dislocation of students from their home communities. These students leave their homes in the Torres Strait to study in Cairns where they are culturally distinct from Aboriginal people in the region and are separated from their homes by great distances (Schwab, 2001). Other common concerns were the absence of significant qualifications and the high unemployment rates amongst Indigenous peoples in the communities served by the schools. In some communities the students are third or fourth generation unemployed. They have limited career knowledge, partly because many careers have been unavailable to local people (Bradley & Scorey, 2003).

2. Community significance

One of the critical success factors highlighted in the case studies is the relevance of the programs to the students and to the local community. The Macleay Valley Workplace Learning Centre evolved from the Booroongen Djugun College which developed courses in community care in response to Indigenous community concerns for the care of elderly Indigenous people in the region (Schwab, 2001a, 2001b). The Tiwi Island New Apprenticeships program offers a Seafood Operations Certificate with work-based training at the Barabase barramundi farm (ECEF, 2003f). In the Future Skills – Northland project students develop their skills in IT and multimedia and apply those skills to the benefit of the whole community (Galati-Brown, 2003). It is therefore important that the community is intimately involved in the planning and, where possible, the delivery, of the program. The Macleay Valley Workplace Learning Centre recognizes that many of its students have had little success in mainstream schools and emphasizes the positive impact of study at an institution that
is seen as an extension of the Indigenous community. In this program there is the added benefit for students in working in the potentially less threatening environment of an Indigenous owned and operated aged-care facility (Schwab, 2001a, 2001b). In the Indulkana Anangu School Radio program an Anangu Education worker has been trained and assessed in Certificate II in Community Radio and now serves as a role model and mentor in the program (Bennett & Edwards, 2002). Northland encourages all members of the community to participate in the program alongside Years 8 to 12 students (Galati-Brown, 2003).

However, although community relevance and involvement is seen as desirable in all programs, it has not always been a reality. The Cape and Gulf VET Network provides for students in Doomadgee, Normanton, Kowanyama, Palm Island, Mornington Island and Yarrabah. The remoteness of these communities has generally meant that the project is more closely aligned to the skills of the available staff than to the needs of the community. When community members are involved in the program, their opinions are often affected by the suggestions of outsiders who have a wider knowledge of the possibilities available (Bradley & Scorey, 2003).

3. Celebrating success

Most of the programs try to identify ways in which students can showcase their success. Radio Station 5NPY media schedules a weekly session time for Anangu students to present their program across the Pitjantjatjara Lands (Bennett & Edwards, 2002). The Youth Art Gallery associated with St Mary’s College, Broome showcases student work and is open to the public, including the many tourists who visit the area (Schwab, 2001). Northlands students have developed websites (Galati-Brown, 2003). Such public demonstrations of success are important in developing the confidence of students in their skills and of the community in the students and the program but also in changing public attitudes. Northam Affirmative Action Program sees the promotion of the course’s success stories as a major strategy in countering the negative attitudes of local employers which create a barrier to the work placement arm of the program (Enterprise and Career Education Foundation 2003c).

4. Affirming cultural values

Respect for Indigenous culture and consideration of cultural differences are seen as critical to the success of the programs. St Mary’s Millennium Art project has developed a range of strategies for showing respect for Indigenous culture, not the least of which is the display of Indigenous art. Schwab (2001a) sees this as more than window dressing and goes on to list other indicators such as an acceptance of the validity of Indigenous languages, Creole and other forms of non-standard Australian English and an understanding of Indigenous family structures and responsibilities. Trinity Bay High School is challenged by the need to bridge cultural divides (Schwab, 2001a). The Macleay Valley Workplace Learning Centre cites the problem of balancing the expectations from two cultures. While Aboriginal English is accepted as valid and a model of “Aboriginal learning styles” underpins approaches to teaching and training, the outcomes of the program are not compromised (Schwab, 2001a).

5. Critical resourcing factors

There is a strong correlation between the sustainability of programs and ongoing adequate resourcing, in terms of dollars, personnel and project partners. Effective and
coordinated use of resources is a feature of many of the successful programs through clustering arrangements, maximizing the flexibility of funding sources and the entrepreneurial activity of staff in seeking additional funds. However, the uncertainty of the continuation of funding with some one-off grants seen as ‘seed’ funding is an ongoing problem. The Indigenous Students in Vocational Education project at Erindale College, ACT has been discontinued because of inadequate resourcing (Nield, 2003) and the Murri School Workplace Learning Program at the Aboriginal and Islander Independent School in Brisbane has been unable to expand because of funding constraints (Enterprise and Career Education Foundation, 2003d).

This problem is exacerbated in Queensland where tension between the State and Commonwealth governments has resulted in funding being provided on a yearly rather than a triennial basis. The Headstart program at Kuranda High School was producing results but when funding was withdrawn after a year and not replaced with State funds, the program was discontinued (Bradley & Scorey, 2003).

Programs have also had to put considerable effort into the development of personnel and project partners. The Indulkana Anangu School Radio program has enhanced the radio skills of its teachers and involved them in the development of curriculum support materials. The program partners now include Batchelor College, Alice Springs as well as 5UV Adelaide and the program offers Diploma qualifications as well as Certificates (Bennett & Edwards, 2002). The Murri School Workplace Learning Program has become a Registered Training Organisation (ECEF, 2003d). The Indigenous School Based Traineeship Program in Western Australia has attempted to streamline operations and demands on personnel by having traineeships arranged at the school/community level with a central body securing funding, promoting the program and monitoring its implementation and outcomes (ECEF, 2003a). Support is provided to the Cape and Gulf school in Queensland through the Cape and Gulf VET in Schools network and by organizations such as Ariginisle (Bradley & Scorey, 2003). The Wadu resource, Vocational Learning for Indigenous Australians, aims to promote the development and implementation of high-quality vocational education programs for Indigenous students through the provision of professional development activities and resources. As part of the Wadu Strategy, ECEF provided financial support for a number of demonstration projects to test out innovative vocational education programs for Indigenous secondary students (ECEF, 2003i).

Resourcing is seen as the most critical factor for schools in the Cape and Gulf area of Queensland where problems of access provide additional complications. Programs are threatened by the high turnover of staff and the relative inexperience of many of the teachers appointed to those schools. At Doomadgee an early childhood trained teacher was required to run the VET program for Year 9 students and come to terms with life in a remote community at the same time. Access also impacts on the availability of quality providers. Trainers have to be flown in at considerable expense. Suitable accommodation is not always available and requires additional expense. When the trainer is there, considerable time may be lost by infrastructure failure e.g. loss of electricity. For these reasons training organizations would prefer to conduct the training in block mode. However, schools have other priorities and the problem of capturing student interest over a longer period has to be addressed. Numerous solutions to this problem have been trialled. Technology has proven either unreliable with videoconferencing frequently dropping out or not in tune with the low literacy
standards of most students e.g. internet. The concept of clustering schools in the one project still involves considerable resourcing to fly the trainer between communities and also requires all schools to be working in the one area. Any links with community needs are therefore tenuous. One possible solution being considered is to take advantage of a registered training organization coming to the community for another purpose e.g. for Community Development Employment Programs or to use the trainer brought to the schools for community purposes. Through the ‘Adopt a Chef’ program, students complete a week’s training during which they prepare a menu for a different community group each night. Negotiations are underway for this trainer to also work with the community in areas such as nutrition (Bradley & Scorey, 2003).

**Characteristics of successful VET in Schools programs**

A number of lists of conditions and/or characteristics of successful VET in Schools programs have been compiled. Five lists are produced here for purposes of comparison. The first (DETYA, 2000b) is a general list of features of a successful VET in School program. The next two (McRae et al, 2000, Schwab, 2001a, 2001b) pertain specifically to VET in School programs that are successful for Indigenous students. The fourth list identifies the characteristics of VET in Schools programs in rural and remote regions of Australia (DETYA, 2000c) and the last list is drawn from the conclusions of the ECEF (2003j) evaluation of the IYPI initiative.

The final evaluation of the vocational education and training in schools element in the Commonwealth School to Work program (DETYA, 2000b) noted that successful programs responded effectively to local needs and resources. Key features of these programs included:

- broad community understanding and commitment to VET in Schools;
- active parental and student participation;
- commitment by schools to incorporating VET into the mainstream educational programme;
- partnerships between schools and stakeholders, especially involving high profile individuals involved in regional and local industry and business;
- assessment of students prior to formal participation, including pre-vocational training, and specialised support for “at risk” students; and
- co-ordination and administration of significant VET in Schools programs by schools, rather than external organisations (pp. 10-11).

The review of the ten VET in Schools projects for Indigenous students by McRae et al (2000, p. 117) identified the following key elements common to successful programs:

- The design and delivery of the courses were tailored to local needs with a high degree of flexibility and generally involving the cooperation of a number of parties such as training providers, community groups, employers and representatives of the Indigenous community.
Students were provided with individualised information about careers and pathway planning.

Programs displayed strong cultural support through strategies such as mentoring.

Programs provided workplace experience.

In analysing three cases of VET in Schools programs that produced good results for Indigenous students, Schwab (2001a), summarises the critical success factors as follows:

- Respect for Indigenous culture;
- Indigenous staff;
- Vision and leadership;
- Committed and creative staff;
- Community engagement;
- Relevance of program to students’ needs;
- Effective and coordinated use of resources;
- Recognition and celebration of the individual; and
- Empowerment of young people.

Schwab (2001b) summarises these characteristics by using the notion of “cultural fit” by which he means the “the alignment of curriculum, delivery and pedagogy with local Indigenous cultural assumptions, perceptions, values and needs”.

A review (DETYA, 2000c, p.2) of different models of VET in Schools in remote and rural regions showed that success depends on at least the following six factors:

- Use of culturally appropriate, and where possible, local trainers;
- Incorporation of vocational learning with accredited vocational education;
- Use of appropriate distance and online learning;
- Awareness in schools and their communities of their roles in successful vocational education initiatives;
- Flexibility of programs and their ability to respond to local needs; and
- Professional development of teachers and their need to access information.

The ECEF review of the IYPI initiative concludes that the basic elements of a successful approach to VET programs include:

- Agreement by all stakeholders to address youth transition issues holistically, using a ‘joined up services’ approach;
• Empowerment of communities to set the VET in Schools agenda;

• The need for an energetic, creative and entrepreneurial community liaison coordinator to engage with communities, parents, business, government agencies and educators; and

• Longer term funding commitment from state and federal government to ensure sustainability of programs.

Conclusion

This brief overview suggests that VET in Schools programs are subject to similar contextual factors as other curriculum choices offered by schools in addition to factors particular to the nature of vocational education and training. The case studies of programs that are producing good outcomes indicate that the quality of learning experienced by Indigenous students depends on how well the programs account for these factors.
Chapter 3:
Indigenous Youth and the Young Visions Survey

Background

The data in this chapter is based on a major national survey commissioned by ECEF and conducted in 2002. The survey related to a range of aspects of young people’s experience of vocational learning, including the following:

- Participation in VET in Schools and the reasons why some students do not enrol in VET programs;
- Experience of VET (including reasons for enrolling and perceptions of its benefits);
- Young people’s satisfaction with school (including perceived quality of careers advice);
- Views of work experience and work placement;
- The role played by part-time work in the lives of young people;
- Future study and work aspirations.

This chapter explores the experiences of Indigenous students in post-compulsory education, and makes comparisons with their non-Indigenous peers. In particular, this chapter examines:

- The participation of Indigenous students in VET in Schools, reasons for participating, and barriers to participation;
- Students’ experiences of VET in Schools programs;
- The school experiences of Indigenous students: students’ attitudes to schoolwork, their relationships with their teachers and their confidence in their ability to succeed at their studies;
- Students’ plans for the future, including their plans for further study/employment and career aspirations;
Sample

The survey covered 20,671 students from Years 10, 11 and 12 in all states and territories, and in metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations. The survey included students from 86 Government, Catholic and Independent schools.

A total of 451 respondents (2.3%) in the study identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI). The proportion of Indigenous students in the sample is consistent with ABS data on ATSI participation in Years 10, 11 and 12, which is estimated to be 1.96% (ABS, 2000, cat 4221.0).

Indigenous students were clearly a minority within the schools they attended: Indigenous students were spread across 76 of the 86 schools in the survey and the number of Indigenous students in these schools ranged from 1 to 23, with a median of three Indigenous students per school.

Male and female Indigenous students were present in equal proportions: of those who recorded their gender, 49.9% were male and 50.1% were female.

Indigenous students in the survey sample were more likely than non-Indigenous students to attend schools in non-metropolitan areas; 14% of Indigenous students attended schools in non-metropolitan areas, compared with 8.9% of non-Indigenous students.

Table 2 (below) indicates the States/territories in which Indigenous students in the sample attended school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Territory</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Proportion of Indigenous sample (%)</th>
<th>ABS data on States’ share of Indigenous school students (%)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAS</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>451</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* ABS (2002). Schools Australia (Cat 4221.0) Primary and Secondary combined
The proportion of Indigenous students in the sample differed somewhat from the proportions expected on the basis of the ABS data, reflecting the realities of sample variation from state to state.

**Participation in VET**

Vocational learning is seen as an important tool in catering for the needs of Indigenous students and in promoting their continuing participation and engagement in education and training beyond the compulsory school years. The only question mark over this strategy is whether VET in Schools programs, which are clustered in the final two years of secondary schooling, may be simply too tardy a response for the many Indigenous students who leave school before reaching Year 11.

About three in ten Indigenous students (28.6%) reported that they were doing, or had done, VET in Schools subjects. The structure of the Indigenous sub-sample, broken out by Year level and participation in VET in Schools programs, is presented in Table 3, below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year level</th>
<th>Number enrolled in VET in Schools</th>
<th>Percentage enrolled in VET in Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 indicates that about four in every ten Indigenous students in Years 11 and 12 participated in VET in Schools programs, compared to only about one in ten Year 10 Indigenous students participating in VET. These differences reflect differences in access to VET, since VETiS programs are not available to students below Year 11 in the majority of school systems. As Figure 1 (below) indicates, this participation pattern is also apparent for non-Indigenous students. Figure 1 also indicates that the Indigenous students in this sample were more likely to participate in VET than non-Indigenous students in Year 11 (42.9% compared to 29.5%) and Year 12 (39.8% compared to 28.3%)

These data, broken out by State/Territory, are shown in Figure 2 (below). In each State/territory, participation rates are higher for Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students. The magnitude of the differences vary somewhat from state to state, but given differences in the nature of the data available (eg. which Year levels were included), and differences in the role played by VET in different state certificates, no definite conclusions can be drawn about interstate differences.
However, the general trend is that in all states and territories, the participation rate of Indigenous students in VET in Schools programs is almost twice that of non-Indigenous students.

Figures 3 and 4 (below) show these data for male and female students separately and indicate that this trend is similar for both male and female students. These figures also suggest that amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, males are slightly more likely to participate in VET than female students. The participation data derived from the Young Visions Survey (Figure 5) are broadly consistent with the national figures, with some variations that may reflect sampling issues.
Figure 2: Participation in VET: Indigenous and non-Indigenous students broken out by State/Territory (Boards of Studies data)

* Years 11 and 12 combined
** Years 10-12
+ Year 12 only
^ Includes ungraded secondary enrolments

Figure 3: Participation in VET: Male Indigenous and non-Indigenous students broken out by State/Territory (Boards of Studies data)

* Years 11 and 12 combined
** No discrimination between year levels – may be inclusive of Years 10-12
+ Year 12 only
^ Includes ungraded secondary enrolments
% Males and females combined
Figure 4: Participation in VET: Female Indigenous and non-Indigenous students broken out by State/Territory (Boards of Studies data)

Figure 5: Participation in VET of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, broken out by gender (Young Visions survey data)
Figure 5 indicates that for those Indigenous students who reach Years 11 and 12, participation in VET in Schools programs is substantially greater than for non- Indigenous students. This finding must be viewed in the context of substantially lower retention rates of Indigenous students compared to non-Indigenous students. Indigenous participation rates from Year 7 to Year 12 is 36.3% compared to 75.8% for non-Indigenous students. (ABS, 2001), which essentially halves the participation rates for Indigenous students in VET at Year 12. If the participation rates for Indigenous students shown in Figure 2 were halved accordingly, VETiS participation of Indigenous students in all states and territories would be less than that of non- Indigenous students.

Consequently, if we allow for issues of access to schooling and school retention, the proportion of Indigenous students who eventually participate in VET may be lower than the proportion of non-Indigenous students who participate in VET. Accordingly, it can be argued that VET is not as accessible to Indigenous students as it is to their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Nevertheless it is important to explore the reasons why those Indigenous students who do reach the senior secondary years are more likely to enrol in VET programs than their non-Indigenous peers. Does this trend demonstrate that VET programs are more responsive than traditional academic programs to the learning styles and aspirations of Indigenous students; or are they being used as a means of relegating Indigenous students into non-academic pathways? This issue is addressed later in this chapter, and again in the case study material.

**Barriers To Participation in VET**

The previous section found that Indigenous students who reach senior secondary years are more likely than their non-Indigenous counterparts to participate in VETiS programs. The literature review identified a range of factors that contribute to student attrition in senior secondary schooling. This section focuses on factors that impact on the participation of Indigenous students in VET, with a view to identifying barriers to Indigenous participation in VET.

**Year level**

As a means of assessing barriers to participation in VET, students were asked to respond to a list of possible reasons for not enrolling in VET. These were broken out by Year level, and presented in Figures 6, 7 and 8.

Year 10 students’ reasons for not doing VET subjects were dominated by the fact that it was not available to them, which reflects the fact that in most states, VET is not offered to students below Year 11. Given that reasons associated with negative perceptions of VET do not figure strongly in these data, we could speculate that many of these students (whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous) would take up VET study if it were made available to them. This finding, as well as the fact that very few Indigenous students cited a focus on an academic pathway as a reason for non-participation, is strong evidence of an unmet need for VET programs amongst Year 10 students, including those of Indigenous background.
Figures 7 and 8 compare the reasons given by Year 11 and 12 Indigenous and non-Indigenous students for not participating in VET programs.

A notable difference between Year 11 Indigenous and non-Indigenous students was that non-Indigenous students were consistently more likely to report a focus on an academic pathway as a reason for not enrolling in VET. In contrast, Indigenous students were more likely than non-Indigenous students to report that VET was not offered, which provides some evidence for an unmet need for VET at Year 11 level.

By the time students reach Year 12, non-availability does not figure as an important reason for non-participation in VET. By this stage, all students (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) tend to cite an academic pathway as their main reasons for not doing VET, suggesting that by this stage, students have consolidated their study pathways towards an academic focus. It may also be noted that considerable attrition has also occurred among Indigenous students by this point in their schooling.

Similarly to non-Indigenous students, negative perceptions of VET were relatively unimportant as reasons for avoiding VET at all Year levels. Rather, as discussed above, non-enrolment is more likely to be based on non-availability (particularly in Years 10 and 11) or a focus on academic pathways.
Figure 7: Reasons for not doing VET: Year 11 Indigenous and non-Indigenous students

Figure 8: Reasons for not doing VET: Year 12 Indigenous and non-Indigenous students

Gender

Figure 9 illustrates gender differences in the reasons Indigenous students give for not enrolling in VET. Because the numbers are small, the data need to be interpreted with caution. Given that caveat, the data in Figure 9 suggest that girls, who appear to be
more likely than boys to have given thought to doing VET subjects, are also more likely to report that VET is not available, or that there is no VET subject they want to do. Girls are also more likely to cite a university trajectory and a focus on other career pathways as reasons for not enrolling in VET.

Figure 9: Gender differences in reasons for not enrolling in VET: Indigenous students

Location

Of the 86 schools in the survey, 14 (16.2%) were in non-metropolitan locations. About one in ten students in the survey (9.7%) attended these schools. As discussed earlier, Indigenous students in the sample were more likely to live in non-metropolitan locations than non-Indigenous students (14% compared to 8.9%).

Overall, students in non-metropolitan locations were slightly more likely to participate in VET than students from metropolitan locations (26.3% compared to 21.8%). This trend was more pronounced for Indigenous students: Indigenous students in non-metropolitan locations were almost twice as likely to participate in VET than Indigenous students in metropolitan locations (46.6% compared to 25.6%).

This may reflect the greater academic focus of Indigenous students in metropolitan locations, or better opportunities for participation in VET in non-metropolitan locations. However, it must be noted that the majority of survey schools in non-metropolitan locations were in large provincial centers rather than in rural locations, where program opportunities are more limited.
Living Arrangements

Indigenous students were more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous students to live away from home to attend school (20.0% compared to 6.7%). This difference reflects the greater need for Indigenous students from rural and remote locations to leave their communities to attend senior secondary school. No gender differences were apparent in the proportion of Indigenous students who lived away from home to attend school.

Students who lived away from home appeared to be slightly more likely to participate in VET than students who live at home (34.7% compared to 28.3%) but the small sample size does not allow us to make any firm conclusions.

Academic background

As discussed previously, Indigenous students are much less likely than their non-Indigenous peers to continue their education beyond the compulsory years. Only about 38% of Indigenous students remain at school from the commencement of their secondary schooling to Year 12, compared to about 75% of non-Indigenous students (MCEETYA, 2001) and the many barriers to access and success in school education faced by Indigenous students have been well documented.

Vocational learning, then, is potentially an important tool in catering for the needs of Indigenous students and in promoting their continuing participation and engagement in education and training beyond the compulsory school years. The only question mark over this strategy is whether VET in Schools programs, which are clustered in the final two years of secondary schooling, may be simply too tardy a response for the many Indigenous students who leave school before reaching Year 11.

Although students of both academic and non-academic orientations now access VET, its clients are still predominantly those whose skills do not fit into the traditional academic mould. For instance, Polesel and Teese (2002) found that in Victoria, Year 12 VET students were over-represented in the two lowest achievement quintiles (based on scores in the General Achievement Test) and under-represented in the two highest quintiles, whilst non-VET students were evenly distributed across the five categories.

As a means of comparing the academic orientations of different groups of students, Year 11 and 12 students were categorised according to the amount and level of mathematics they studied. Students studying tertiary-entrance mathematics were categorised as “high maths”, students studying mathematics subjects that did not count towards university entry were categorised as “low maths”, whilst students not studying any mathematics subjects were categorised as “no maths”. This process created three broad categories of maths enrolment that reflect different academic orientations.

Figure 10 compares Indigenous and non-Indigenous students on the basis of this categorization and shows that non-Indigenous students were more likely than Indigenous students to study mathematics (75.8% compared to 65.1%), particularly subjects that count towards university entrance scores (43.7% compared to 26.3%).
These data are therefore consistent with reports of educational disadvantage amongst Indigenous students.

![Bar chart showing level of mathematics studied by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Year 11 and Year 12 students (excluding Tasmania)](chart)

**Figure 10:** Level of mathematics studied by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Year 11 and Year 12 students (excluding Tasmania)

The Young Visions research found that VET students in general were more likely to enrol in lower level mathematics subjects than non-VET students. When Indigenous VET students were compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts, we identified a further ‘layer’ of academic disadvantage affecting Indigenous students in that Indigenous VET students were less likely to be studying mathematics than their non-Indigenous peers (See Figure 11).

These are findings that reflect less on academic ability than on the cultural and social advantages associated with participation in high status subjects like university-entrance level mathematics (see Teese & Polesel, 2003). There is evidently a need for Indigenous students to have equal access to these prestigious and economically rewarding areas of the curriculum. But there is also a need to increase access to VET programs which may better suit the learning styles and aspirations of some students.
Students’ experience of VET

Students’ reasons for non-participation in VET were identified in the preceding section in order to capture major influences on decision-making and in order to identify barriers to participation. This section compares Indigenous and non-Indigenous VET students’ reasons for participation in VET programs, and discusses how students rate VET programs in their school.

Reasons for enrolling in VET

Indigenous students reported participating in a wide range of VETiS subjects, representing the majority of certificate areas. The reasons students gave for enrolling in VET, broken out by Indigenous status, are shown in Figure 12.

The reasons given by Indigenous students for enrolling in VET show a similar pattern to the reasons given by non-Indigenous students, in terms of relative importance, but there are some interesting differences.

For both groups of students, the most important reason was the opportunity for workplace training. Students recognized the value of practical experience, skills development and the contact with employers provided by structured workplace learning, experience which may be difficult to access, especially in remote communities.
Also highly rated was the qualification itself. A VET qualification represents, in the eyes of these students, the very skills, competencies and experience that workplace training will provide. It is also likely that for many of them, it will be their only qualification upon entering the labour market. Indigenous students appear to be slightly more likely to see VET as a means of getting a job in the VET subject area, and to see VET as a way of accessing a TAFE course.

Indigenous students were more likely to see VET qualifications as a means of securing a part-time job whilst studying, which may reflect a greater interest in the paid employment associated with school-based traineeships. That Indigenous students were four times more likely than non-Indigenous students to report that they were a school-based new apprentice (8.4% compared to 2%) is evidence of the appeal of this mode of VET study to these young people, and the role of SBNAs in facilitating pathways to post-school employment and/or training.

Although less important as reasons for enrolling than those mentioned above, the encouragement and support of parents, school or friends were rated as more important by Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students. These differences reflect the importance to Indigenous students of community and family support, particularly for boys, who were more likely than girls to report that they enrolled in VET because of school encouragement (60.5% compared to 45.8%) or parental encouragement (46.3% compared to 38.6%).
Amongst Indigenous students, boys were also more likely than girls to report that they enrolled because VET was more practical and less academic (86.4% compared to 65.5%), indicating that boys appreciate the practical, ‘hands on’ nature of VET studies. On the other hand, girls were more likely to report that VET still allowed them to keep their options open for university (79.7% compared to 65.9%), reflecting their greater academic orientation, and the possibility of VET being used as a ‘safety net’ if plans for university did not eventuate.

**What VET students think about VET and SWL**

Figure 13 provides student feedback on various aspects of VET in their school. The key difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is their perceptions of the role of VET in relation to their other schoolwork. Indigenous students appear to be more likely to report that VET has improved their attitude to schoolwork, and helped with their other subjects. This aspect of VET appears to be stronger for boys than girls: Male students were somewhat more likely than female students to report that VET subjects had improved their attitude to schoolwork (69.8% compared to 59.3%) and helped them with their other subjects (57.1% compared to 43.1%).

![Figure 13: What Indigenous and non-Indigenous students think about VET](chart)

These findings suggest that, for Indigenous students, VET has had a positive impact on morale and is perceived to facilitate learning in other subjects. The cooperative and practical aspects of VET learning may better reflect the cooperative, rather than individualistic, approaches to social organization found in Indigenous communities. Accordingly, these findings suggest that VET has an important role to play in
contributing to student retention in the post-compulsory years by maintaining students’ engagement, interest and motivation.

SWL appears to have a stronger role for Indigenous students, consistent with their reasons for enrolling in VET. They were slightly more likely than their non-Indigenous counterparts to report that they learned more at their work placement than at school (53.0% compared to 49.5%). Another key difference was in relation to the role of work placement in helping them secure future employment: 85.1% of Indigenous students reported that their work placement could help them move into a good job in the future, compared to 76.0% of non-Indigenous students. However, Indigenous students were slightly less likely to report that they felt supported by their employer (80.0% compared to 85.3%) and that their work placement helped them with their self-confidence (75.0% compared to 79.6%). Although these differences are small, they suggest shortcomings in the quality of SWL for some Indigenous students.

Students’ experience of school

A major purpose of this chapter is to obtain a snapshot of students’ feelings about their school, their studies, and how well their school prepares them for the transition to further study, training and employment. Such data enables us to ascertain how well Indigenous students’ needs in the post-compulsory years are being met.

Students’ feelings about school and their teachers

Figure 14 below illustrates students’ views on a range of issues relating to their school and their teachers, broken out by Indigenous status and gender.
Figure 14: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Students’ views of school and their teachers, broken out by gender

Whilst Figure 14 indicates that on most items students are generally happy with school, the views of Indigenous students towards school and their teachers appeared to be slightly less favourable than those of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

The most striking feature of the chart is the greater tendency for Indigenous boys to report that they ‘don’t see much use in schoolwork’, indicating a greater degree of disaffection with school for these young Indigenous people as compared to their sisters and non-Indigenous counterparts. Within each subgroup, VET students were slightly more likely to hold this view than non-VET students, lending further support to the view that VET students’ needs are not being adequately met by the traditional curriculum.

Table 4 shows the proportion of students who would like to be working instead of going to school, broken out by Indigenous status and gender.

Table 4: “I would rather be working” by Indigenous status and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>3170</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>2496</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, the data indicate a higher degree of disaffection with school amongst Indigenous students, particularly boys.

These findings concur with previous research investigating the causes of poorer retention and educational outcomes of Indigenous students. These are many and complex, but within the school setting may include a non-supportive school environment, poor teacher-student relationships, feelings of insecurity and alienation in the classroom, and the lack of cultural affirmation. (See for example Rigney et al., 1998).

These findings highlight the importance of VETiS and other programs that provide academic support and facilitate the transition to post-compulsory education, training and employment.

Images of school

The Young Visions study indicated that the images of school that were most often selected were that of the ‘stepping stone’ (selected by 41% of all students) and the ‘prison’ (selected by 24% of all students). These images reflect strongly contrasting views of school. The prison is a strong image of disaffection and disempowerment, whilst the stepping stone reflects a view of school as a positive stage in one’s life journey.

The data for the stepping stone and prison images of school items, broken out by gender and Indigenous status, are shown in Figures 15 and 16.
Because of the small numbers of Indigenous students in this breakdown, definitive conclusions cannot be drawn. However, Figure 15 indicates that non-Indigenous students are more likely than Indigenous students to regard school as a stepping stone, and girls are consistently more likely than boys to hold this view.

Figure 15: The ‘stepping stone’ image of school, broken out by Indigenous status, VET enrolment and gender.

Figure 16 indicates that Indigenous boys are more likely to regard school as a prison than any other group. Importantly, VET enrolment appears to reduce the likelihood of this perception, which suggests that for Indigenous males especially, VET enrolment has a positive effect on their perceptions of school.
Figure 16: The ‘prison’ image of school, broken out by Indigenous status, VET enrolment and gender

Students’ expectations of success

Table 6 compares Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in terms of the level of confidence they have in achieving success in their studies. Because of the small numbers the data was not broken out into Year levels.

Table 6: Students’ confidence in their studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations of success in studies</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good / very good results</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>6090</td>
<td>6857</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>73.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed results</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2192</td>
<td>2388</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor / very poor results</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While it is clear that most students expect to perform to a ‘good’ or ‘very good’ standard, Indigenous students are three times more likely than non-Indigenous students to expect to do poorly. It is also interesting to note that males in both categories are almost twice as likely than females to expect that their school results will be ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’.
These results broadly concur with those of Teese and Polesel (1996) which found that, amongst Year 10 Indigenous students, boys were substantially more likely than girls to report that they were coping not well or poorly, and alert us to issues of poor morale, low satisfaction, poor academic progress and subsequent early leaving amongst Indigenous students.

**Students and their future plans**

**Future study plans**

Through the *Young Visions* survey, students were given the opportunity to nominate their intended study trajectories for 2003.

As shown in Figure 17 (below), eight out of ten Indigenous students expect to continue on to Year 11, as compared to nine out of ten non-Indigenous students. This difference reflects the tendency of Indigenous students to pursue non-academic employment-related pathways, but also signals that once Indigenous students reach Year 10, the majority intend to stay on at school. Not unexpectedly, Indigenous girls were somewhat more likely than Indigenous boys to signal their intention to continue into Year 11 (87.4% compared with 74.7%).

![Figure 17: Future study plans of Year 10 students](image)

Figure 18 illustrates the intended pathways of Year 11 students. It was encouraging to see that over 90% of Indigenous students intended to be engaged in some form of study in 2003, with almost 80% intending to continue on to Year 12. Indigenous students were more likely than non-Indigenous students to nominate TAFE as an intended destination, consistent with their greater orientation towards an employment-oriented pathway.

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As indicated in Figure 19, University was the option of choice for 58% of the non-Indigenous year 12 students, compared with 33% of the Indigenous year 12 students. Indigenous students were slightly more inclined to nominate TAFE or other study, and almost twice as likely as non-Indigenous students to nominate ‘no study’ (28% compared with 15%), indicating the strong desire amongst many Indigenous students to move directly into the workforce.
Future work plans

In addition to their proposed study plans, students were also asked to nominate their intended work plans for 2003. Non-Indigenous students were more likely than Indigenous students to indicate that they would like to be engaged in some form of part-time work during 2003 (72% compared with 51%). This difference reflects the intentions of non-Indigenous students to combine tertiary study with part-time work.

In accord with the findings on study plans discussed above, Indigenous students were almost three times as likely to want to undertake a traineeship or apprenticeship (21% compared with 8%) or get a full-time job (10% compared with 6%).

The intended work plans of the 2002 cohort of Years 10 and 11 students are shown in Figures 20 and 21. In comparison with their non-Indigenous counterparts, Year 10 Indigenous students showed a stronger orientation towards apprenticeships and traineeships: Indigenous Year 10 students were almost three times as likely as non-Indigenous students to nominate these destinations (23% compared with 8%). These data affirm that a significant minority of Indigenous students want to combine work with some form of post-secondary VET. Amongst Year 11 students, this trend was evident, with 19% of Indigenous students nominating this pathway compared with 6% of non-Indigenous students.

Figure 20: Future work plans of Year 10 students
Figure 21: Future work plans of Year 11 students

Figure 22 (below) shows these data for Year 12 students. Again, Indigenous students were more likely than non-Indigenous students to intend pursuing a work-related pathway, with 21% expecting to be working full-time (compared with 14% of non-Indigenous students), and 16% of Indigenous Year 12 students expecting to do an apprenticeship or traineeship compared with 9% of non-Indigenous Year 12 students.

Figure 22: Future work plans of Year 12 students
Future career aspirations

The Young Visions survey also gave students an opportunity to consider their preferred career paths. From a list of 47 possible alternatives, students were able to select up to two career areas. The top 10 preferred career choices for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students were identified from the raw data are listed in Table 6. Figure 22 (below) presents the combined data from both lists, and highlights differences in the aspirations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Table 7: Future career aspirations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Indigenous Percent selecting occupation</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous Percent selecting occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sportsperson</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>Artist &amp; related</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food services</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Media &amp; publishing</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism/hospitality</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>I.T specialist</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairdresser</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Business management</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automotive mechanic</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist &amp; related</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary teacher</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Sportsperson</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Tourism/hospitality</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business management</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Primary teacher</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Substantial differences in preferences are evident between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, with Indigenous students showing a keen interest in sporting careers and several vocational/trade areas such as food services, hospitality, hairdressing and motor mechanics, whilst non-Indigenous students were more likely to favour careers in art, information technology, media and publishing, engineering, business management, and psychology.

Because of substantial gender differences in preferences, these data were broken down by gender, as shown in Tables 7 and 8. It is important to note that all data should be treated with caution, as the Indigenous sample size is small. Nevertheless, there are some notable differences worthy of comment.

The most striking aspect of the data for boys is the dominance of professional sport as a career aspiration for Indigenous youth. This highlights the importance of sport in the lives of Indigenous youth as an avenue to self-esteem, recognition and success. Engineering and Trades are also well-represented, particularly automotive mechanics, building, electrical trades and hairdressing. Security services (eg defence forces, police) are more strongly endorsed as future job pathways by Indigenous boys.
Figure 23: Future career aspirations broken out by Indigenous status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Indigenous Percent selecting occupation</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous Percent selecting occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sportsperson</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>I. T. Specialist</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automotive mechanic</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airline pilot</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>Sportsperson</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>Business management</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food services</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Media &amp; publishing</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building trades</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>Building trades</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security services</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Artist &amp; related</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical trades</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Automotive mechanic</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.T. specialist</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>Electrical trades</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairdresser</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9: Future career aspirations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous girls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percent selecting occupation</td>
<td>Percent selecting occupation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary teacher</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>Artist &amp; related</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism/hospitality</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>Primary teacher</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>Tourism/hospitality</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>Media &amp; publishing</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairdresser</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social &amp; Community</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food services</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist &amp; related</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>Business management</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sportsperson</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>Doctor/Dentist/Specialist</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business management</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Health worker</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indigenous girls, similarly to Indigenous boys, are more likely than their non-Indigenous counterparts to select vocational/trade areas such as professional sport, food services, hairdressing and social and community services, whilst non-Indigenous girls were more strongly oriented towards careers in art, media, psychology and medicine. Both groups expressed a strong interest in primary teaching, law, business and tourism.
Chapter 4: Indigenous Students’ Experience of VET

The case studies, conducted in twenty-one schools in all states and territories, afforded a unique opportunity to explore the VET experiences of Indigenous students. 118 students were interviewed in a range of settings and school types, and their reflections and feedback offer important insights into the quality of VET programs. This chapter explores students’ reasons for enrolling in VET programs, and examines their perceptions of the benefits they expect VET to confer. Student interviews also offered useful information on barriers to success, and feedback on ways in which schools could improve VET provision. The chapter concludes with a discussion of student experiences of SWL.

Reasons for doing VET

The reasons students gave for doing VET were broadly consistent with those outlined in the previous chapter, which reported that the majority of students nominated the opportunity for workplace training, to gain a VET qualification, to enhance one’s career opportunities and to gain a job in the VET subject area. Although pathways-focused reasons clearly dominated students’ responses, a notable minority of students also mentioned VET’s role in maintaining their engagement with school, enhancing their tertiary entrance ranking (a key motivator in a system where VET results contribute to this) and as a safety net if university aspirations are not reached. These themes are discussed separately below, but it is important to highlight that many students see VET meeting multiple needs, as illustrated below:

To give us a better education...to get out in the workforce... giving more opportunities to get in to what you want to do...gives you a head start before you finish your schooling... gives you a good direction into what you want to do. (Year 11 Business Administration student)

A pathway to employment

As mentioned above, students generally reported enrolling in VET because of the opportunity it afforded them for entry-level training, or ‘tickets’ that would enhance their prospects of employment:

I thought it would be fun and if I wanted a job, I could get a job there at the radio station. (Year 10 VET Broadcasting student)

To give us, to help us out, to make us have choices in our careers, doing it young, getting certificates for it. I think they’re just trying to help us, give us alternatives. (Year 11 Business Administration student)
I thought it would make it easier for me to learn more skills when I go out into the real world. (small rural school student)

To know what it feels like in the mainstream (Year 11 Aged Care student)

You do learn a lot more because you’re there to get the certificates…With other classes you do get what you have to do to pass, but there’s not a certificate involved. There’s not the same opportunity to go further. (Year 12 VET Agriculture student)

A ticket can get you a lot further than just a report card. (VET Sport and Recreation student)

I didn’t know about getting the job and certificate. I thought it was just a lesson but you can pass a certificate and get a job with it. It’s a good thing for when I grow up, so I got a job there ready. (VET Land Management student)

The extent to which students saw their current VET study linking in with future training or employment varied considerably. Some saw VET as directly linking them with a career path whilst others saw VET as an opportunity to explore possible career directions without necessarily following any of them. They also saw VET as enabling them, through their contact with the workplace, to develop valuable generic skills and useful contacts for future employment:

VET gives students experience to see if they like something or not…There’s some that go through uni and everything to do things like aged care and (then) can’t stand washing people for instance. So this gives the experience to be able to see if they like it or not. (Year 13 Community Studies student)

VET enabled some students to expand their vision of future possibilities, whilst maintaining their engagement with school:

I wouldn’t mind doing plastering. Good job I reckon. Last week of term we have to do work experience and I’m thinking of getting work experience with a plasterer and I might get an apprenticeship with him. If I don’t get an apprenticeship I’ll come back to school next year and do year 11 (Year 10 Automotive student)

The following students’ pathways indicated a direct pathway from school-based VET to further TAFE training:

I’ve always wanted to be a secretary and have an office job. With Business Operations I get to go out to different workplaces and learn heaps of new things. By working there it will help me get a job later on, when I leave school I’ll get Certificate III and go straight into a job. (Year 12 Business Operations student)

Students enrolled in SBNAs were generally happy in their workplaces, and keen to continue with their current employer, reflecting the potential advantages of this pathway for assisting students make a seamless transition to future employment:

When the course finishes there isn’t a guaranteed job but there is a good possibility of staying on if they are happy with my work. (Year 11 Business Administration student)
Other reasons for enrolling in VET

More academically oriented students saw VET as a bonus, particularly in systems where VET results contribute to tertiary entrance scores: *It’s better for your ENTER score, it boosts it. It’s a bonus.* (Year 11 VET Dance student)

A VET certificate was seen by some students, particularly those with academic aspirations, as a ‘safety net’ to fall back on if their plans do not eventuate:

*Just in case it doesn’t work out I’ve got something to fall back on.* (Year 11 Business Administration student)

*If I wanted to be a nurse or if I change my mind, I’ve got something to fall back on in a resume or something.* (Year 11 VET Health student)

Some students saw VET as instrumental in improving student engagement and retention:

*So people won’t leave school. They can do a VET course and won’t leave school and have no job.* (Year 10 Automotive student).

There was also evidence for the way in which VET can successfully engage students by capturing and extending their interests:

*I like music, so I like playing music and I like talking a lot and that’s what I like about it.* (Year 10 VET Broadcasting Student)

For these students VET is fulfilling its role of engaging students at risk of early leaving and providing a reason for them to remain at school.

Perceived advantages of VET

Students cited multiple aspects of VET that were attractive to them, and which consequently enhance their engagement with learning. The most frequently mentioned aspect of VET that students liked was that it was hands-on. This was the most frequently liked aspect of VET as well as the feature that distinguished VET from other school subjects. Hands-on learning was clearly a strong means of engaging students. Also important for some students was the opportunity to learn off-site, which gave them a break from the routine of school, and extended their social networks. Students also valued the expertise of VET teachers and the flexibility of VET.

Students’ comments also provided valuable insights into the role of VET in engaging students with poor attendance or those at risk of early leaving.

Consistent with students’ reasons for enrolling in VET, the most frequently mentioned benefit of VET was its perceived ability to give students a greater chance of post-school employment. For some students, VET was seen as a means of overcoming intergenerational unemployment and poverty, or providing an opportunity to make a difference in their community. Some students were focussed on gaining employment in an Indigenous organization, whilst others wanted to ‘go mainstream’.

Students often mentioned several valued aspects of VET within one comment:
It’s flexible, the teacher lets us work at our own rate. It’s interesting, as we move on to different things each lesson. And if you want to get into the workforce they’re good for that as well. We were given $8,000 from the government to do a project so we’re doing up an old VW. We had to replace the gearbox, strip down the motor, paint it etc. There’s six of us. I’m the only girl. I don’t care. I love working with guys. We’re down there every Friday fixing it up. I’ll go to TAFE and do an Auto course and hopefully do an apprenticeship. (Year 12 Workplace Skills student)

The following discussion explores these perceptions of VET in more detail.

**The hands-on nature of VET**

Almost every student interviewed mentioned the experiential, or hands-on, nature of VET as the key aspect that appealed to them. VET provided a welcome contrast with their other more theoretical subjects and gave students the opportunity to ‘do’; to go beyond the traditional school activities of talking, reading and writing.

It’s a bit more hands on. It’s fun. Most of my other subjects are theory… I like it, it’s good. I need that because my other subjects are theory. (Year 11 VET Dance student)

Hands on, that’s it… Best thing is taking things off motors, taking parts off. (Year 10 Automotive student)

Some students also referred to their VET subjects as meeting their need to be physically active:

I’m more of an outdoor person. I’d rather be outdoors teaching people things like sport than being in a classroom writing on a board all day… It’s more outdoorsy stuff you do, you get out there and experience what you want to do instead of writing it down and saying I’m going to do this when I get out of school, you’ve actually got the opportunity in school to do it. (VET Sport and Recreation student)

If you’ve got hands-on experience you’re doing something. You’re not just sitting in the classroom getting bored out of your brains… I’ve got to be able to do something with my hands instead of just sitting there. I’ve got to do something. I’ve got to move. (Year 12 VET Agriculture student)

I like physical learning better. Outdoors. If I can do it outside. If I can have someone explain it to me and I do it outdoors, instead of having to write it down I’d so much sooner do that than sit inside and write 2 or 3 pages out… (Year 11 VET Agriculture student)

Although students sometimes struggled with the theory and academic demands of VET programs, they valued the way in which theoretical knowledge and hands-on experience complemented each other to enhance their learning experiences:

You still have to use your mind and know how to cut things.

The theory that you do, you really learn from it… The teacher actually explains it to you and you get your hands-on with the animals… I could go on to apprentice farmer or rouseabout, but coming straight from grade 10 you probably wouldn’t get far because you haven’t got the hands-on experience and the knowledge. A lot of farmers
want you to have some knowledge as well as the practical. (Year 12 VET Agriculture student)

When students perceived that this balance was not achieved, they were highly critical of VET. This issue is explored in more detail below.

A change of scene

Students enrolled in SBNAs valued the opportunity to break up the school week with their work placement (either one or two days) and, in some cases, off-campus training. In schools where some VET was delivered off-campus by a TAFE Institute, a community provider or in another school as part of a cluster agreement, students also enjoyed the chance of getting into a new environment, sometimes with students from other schools.

The opportunity to interact with people they would not otherwise come into contact with, and to develop relationships with others in the community (including the Indigenous community) was clearly valued:

*It’s a nice environment, it’s good to get out of school and go somewhere else. Lots of people from other schools. It’s good. We get along very well.* (Year 11 VET Business Administration student)

*It’s like you get out of school and you’re not in school all day. It’s something different. It’s alright, pretty good.* (Year 11 student, Aboriginal School Based Traineeship)

Accordingly, students involved in an aged care course delivered by an Indigenous aged care facility expressed their pleasure in the contact it afforded them with Indigenous elders:

*We get to interact with the old people, they sit down and tell us their stories… Yeah, they tell some tricky stories.* (Year 11 Aged Care student)

VET enhances engagement with school

Students generally spoke highly of their VET classes and teachers, reflecting a strong sense of belonging. Students expressed confidence about approaching teachers with any difficulties. Also apparent was the sense of pride many felt in their learning and their ability to contribute to their families and communities:

*Sometimes I wasn’t turning up to school, so this is helping me, doing something that I like cos it’s got a lot to do with football. So it’s keeping me busy as well.* (Year 12 VET Fitness student)

Some programs designed for Indigenous students at risk had – in their own eyes – re-established a connection with school and learning. Students enrolled in one particular program that combined completion of the senior school certificate with an Aboriginal School Based Traineeship were happy to discuss how they had successfully re-engaged with school because of this program.

*That [the program] is the main reason I’ve come back, pretty much. I wasn’t going to come back this year, but then I didn’t want to just sit a at home and bum around. And*
I’d seen the program and what it was all about so I thought I’d give it a try. And I tried it out and it was good, so I stayed at school. (Year 11 student, School Based Traineeship).

More schools should run a program like it. Most definitely. Cause you know you can’t fit everyone in, and you’ve got, you know, heaps of teenagers dropping out. How many Aboriginals make it to Year 11 and 12? You’ve got all our class who – well I would’ve dropped out if it wasn’t there. It’s given us an opportunity to make something of ourselves, rather than sitting at home waiting for something to come along. (Year 11 student, School Based Traineeship).

These same students were amazed to see how their attendance had improved since starting the program.

They’ve got a thing now on our attendance, and none of us used to come to school, but now like, everyone’s in the school ... So it’s pretty good. Everyone’s been coming, so it must be doing something. … Last term, they showed us how much we’d missed. (Year 12 student, Aboriginal School Based Traineeship)

It doesn’t seem like that much until you see it [number of days absent] in writing. (Year 11 student, Aboriginal School Based Traineeship)

Because last year like, a lot of us didn’t come to school. Like I dropped out, like for a while. But now I’m come back and I haven’t missed much [this year], 4 or 5 days. It’s better to go. You’re in the same class with the same people, stuff like that so it’s good. (Year 11 student, Aboriginal School Based Traineeship)

These comments concur with reports by parents and staff that VET programs, conducted within a supportive school environment have a profound impact on attendance.

What I noticed [is] that the kids were coming to school, their attendance was really good, their behaviour’s changed, and their attitude just towards life has changed; that through the VET courses, things can happen and it can show you what they can do with support and people helping them. (Parent, small rural central school)

VET develops self confidence

Many students mentioned the impact of VET on their self confidence, and sense of pride:

My family love it, because I help them out so much with the money I get. They just like me going to school and they are pleased I’m not on the streets making trouble like a lot of other kids... They’re real proud of me. (VET Hospitality student)

My family really love it, because I’m bringing things back, like different ways of doing things, and getting my tickets, so they think it’s really good. (Year 11 VET Agriculture student)

VET provides preparation for work

Consistent with their reasons for enrolling in VET, many students commented on the advantages of VET in exposing them to the world of employment, giving them an
understanding of what it means to be employed, and preparing them with relevant skills. The following student was confident that her VET training and qualifications would give her a competitive edge in the post-school employment market:

*The end result is that you walk out with the experience you need as well as the certificate certifying that you can actually do the job that a lot of people are asking for... You've got a certificate saying I can do this, I’ve done this, and so they have to recognise you before they recognise just a normal person looking for a job... If I've got a few certificates under my belt I'll be better qualified than the regular person.* (VET Retail student)

In the words of a former VET student who is now working full-time, and planning to undertake further study to become a primary teacher:

*VET Opened my eyes to what’s out there in the workforce, ‘cos I believe school doesn’t really prepare you for it but with the VET courses they do, which is a bonus. I reckon if I didn’t complete them I wouldn’t be here doing what I do now.* (Home-School Liaison Officer, Indigenous Education Support Unit)

**Knowledgeable teachers**

Students valued the skills and expertise of teachers with first hand knowledge of the workplace:

*The teacher’s real helpful...I think he’s got his own workshop. He knows what he’s talking about.* (Year 10 Automotive student).

**VET has flexibility**

Students also appreciated the flexibility of VET, which, unlike their regular subjects, gives them recognition for partial completion:

*With ours, if you drop out or stop the course, you still get a certificate for what you did and you can always go back and do it again.* (Year 11 VET Aged Care student)

**Issues and difficulties with VET**

In their interviews students raised several issues that impacted on their experience of VET. Pedagogical issues were foremost, related to teachers subject knowledge and teaching skills. Some students mentioned teachers’ inability to provide assistance with the literacy, language and numeracy demands of VET subjects. Also, students’ criticisms reflected inadequate information about course content and unfulfilled expectations. In some instances, students were unaware that they were doing VET subjects until alerted to this research project. This issue seems to be a product of structural arrangements for the delivery of VET in which modules are embedded in mainstream subjects.

**Course content and pedagogy**

A common criticism of VET was that it wasn’t hands-on enough. Although this could be attributed to unrealistic expectations or poor information given to students prior to enrolment, it also indicates significant pedagogical issues.
The worst thing is doing the modules, but you have to do them to pass the course. Too many books. Every second week we get a new book. We get about 30 books this year. We do theory nearly every week. Once in a blue moon we do hands-on… You don’t do much prac. We want to do more prac, fixing cars (Year 10 Automotive student).

We need to do a bit of practical, cause you can’t just be stuck in there all afternoon just doing theory. We need to actually get a bit more experience. (Year 11 Aged Care student)

I don’t like to sit and listening to him talk all the time. I like writing down and doing stuff, not just sitting there for like half an hour and just listening. (VET Land Management student)

These comments echo those of a VET Cluster Manager who felt that students were being sold VET on the basis that it was ‘hands-on’ and were consequently disappointed about the relatively high theoretical content.

In some schools students complained that the work was not interesting enough. This appeared to be partly due to inappropriate course content and partly due to the inability of teachers to present material in a way that engages younger learners:

The work needs to be a bit more interesting…well they just give us a booklet and say answer the questions. And it’s not interesting. It’s just really really boring. I’ve avoided it so much it’s not funny…We thought it was going to be dance, making up a dance. And then we get all this theory work and our teacher says just finish this and you’ll be right. And then we get another booklet and another booklet… Some of it’s a bit hands-on but Occupational Health and Safety is just boring. Just answer questions. You can’t make it more interesting. My teacher says sorry but you have to do this. (Year 11 VET Dance student)

These comments reflect difficulties in some settings in locating suitably qualified and experienced staff who can effectively engage young people in learning.

**Teachers’ subject knowledge**

As well as expressing concerns about course content and teaching strategies, students were critical of teachers who they believed lacked important subject knowledge and relevant industry experience:

We’re just learning out of a book and working on a computer. We also have another teacher, a lady who talks to us about communication skills…We listen to her read out of a book. It sounds like she doesn’t know much herself. It’s not very hands-on. (Year 11 Business Administration student)

I don’t think the teacher is as qualified as what she makes out to be as there’s some things that we’ve asked her that she’s not really sure about. It’s like you’re a VET course teacher, you’re meant to know this stuff. (VET Retail student).

**Timetabling constraints**

Timetabling decisions sometimes resulted in VET being timetabled against other popular choices, particularly sport, which was an issue for this student:
... I don’t like Wednesday’s because we get out of sport and that cuts out our sport lessons. (Year 10 VET Broadcasting student)

In smaller schools, timetabling restrictions also meant limited choices of VET, so that students found themselves doing VET subjects that they would not otherwise have chosen, because there were no other suitable subjects available in that timeslot.

**Academic support**

Students generally felt well supported with meeting the academic demands of VET courses. However, The following excerpt indicates that this is not always the case:

*A lot of us are not coping well with the maths…. All of a sudden we have to go back to mental maths and half the class isn’t coping with it at the moment…. We’re in a computer room so it’s hard with a big class of 20 or so working in a computer classroom. The room is inadequate and we’re separated from each other.* (Year 12 Retail student)

Some students reported difficulties asking for help from teachers. Students in rural and remote locations whose first language was not English were less confident about asking for assistance, often believing that teachers did not know they spoke another language at home.

*It’s sometimes hard to ask for help. People might laugh or something at what you say.*

*I find it hard to ask for help because I don’t speak English properly.*

*The teacher tells me to speak English. He thinks I’m talking behind his back or something.*

These students asserted that support from both teachers and friends was important to them and it was necessary to know which teachers they could ask for help. One student gave the following advice to new students:

*Pick what you want to do. Don’t be shamed. Just talk. Just ask questions.*

**Perceptions of Structured Workplace Learning (SWL)**

Most students clearly appreciated the opportunity VET for workplace experience, and enjoyed their placements. For some it was a reality check in terms of having to get up early, and reporting to someone with whom they did not necessarily agree with or get along with. Some preferred working in an Indigenous organization, whilst others were happy to ‘go mainstream’. As discussed in more detail in the next chapter, careful selection of work placements was important for students who were low in confidence and needed extra support.

The important role played by workplace mentors and role models was a strong theme. Students often referred to the need for having access to someone in the workplace
they knew, or whom they felt comfortable asking for assistance. Students appreciated work placements where they felt their contribution was valuable. They wanted to be engaged in interesting and meaningful work, and wanted to be kept busy.

These features were clearly present in the following report of a successful work placement in an Indigenous sporting organization by a student interested in pursuing a sporting-related career:

*I liked it because I know the people. It was really good experience… I worked on computers, did quotes, went to meetings, set up meetings, worked on the phones… it was really good, the work, the culture… Good to be there, good to go to work. I think you need that… It was completely different from school.*  (Year 11 VET Dance student)

The following comments illustrate the role of SWL in building students’ self confidence and generic work skills:

*I’ve done two work placements. My first was in the career room at the library, doing photocopying, filing. I’m at the District Office one day a week at the moment and I sort the mail and deliver it, photocopy, and type stuff on the computer… It’s really good experience. You learn people skills. I thought I couldn’t do it because I was too shy. It’s really opened up my doors.*  (Year 12 Business Operations student)

*You get better communication skills, you’re meeting new people and building your confidence up.*  (Year 11 student, Aboriginal School Based Traineeship)

Positive relationships also enhance the workplace experience:

*I had a ball at the RSL last year. I just love working behind a bar, learning all that stuff. I picked it up pretty quick and got on well with all the staff. They loved me. You’d be a bit run off your feet, but it was really good, I loved it.*  (Year 12 Workplace Skills student)

*It’s showed me different approaches and … how to work with and deal with other people not like myself.*  (Year 12 student, Aboriginal School Based Traineeship).

Many students valued the potential of SWL to provide them with useful contacts for future employment. For some, SWL had already translated into a part-time job.

*Work placement gets you out in the industry, and in contact with potential employers. You can get a bit of a name with people already in the industry which is pretty good if you want to get work… I’ve been offered quite a few jobs around the place already through this VET course through local farmers down from where I come from… There’s always work on a farm.*  (Year 11 VET Agriculture student)

*He wants a couple of new rouseabouts so it might turn out to be a job rather than just a work placement. It should be good experience.*  (Year 12 VET Agriculture student).

*On my second work placement I went to the XX hotel and 2 days after I got the job. Still working there 3 nights a week.*  (VET Hospitality student)

Students undertaking SBNAs were pleased to be receiving payment for their work. As well as having money in their pockets, this also gave them a sense of independence.
You get paid to go to work! That’s the best thing probably.
You get your own money for what you’ve done.
You’re not sitting at home on the dole.

(Year 11 students, Aboriginal School Based Traineeships)

On a less positive note, some students reported negative SWL experiences. These arose when students were not given the opportunity to practice relevant skills, or not given enough support. A former VET student (now employed as an Indigenous education Support worker) described such a placement and contrasted it with a later, more successful, placement in a government department with an Indigenous supervisor:

(My) First work placement (was in) fitness. It wasn’t really related to what we had to do. He made us clean the place the whole time but we were in there to learn about how to help people correct their movement when they use the gym equipment. But the second one in the Indigenous Sports Program was really worthwhile, because (my supervisor) took us along to meetings, we took down notes for her, we did admin, it was a good learning experience. She was the only Indigenous person in the whole entire place... I prefer to work in an Indigenous (organization) because I feel more comfortable being with my own people. Most of the workers here I’ve known since I was about 2 years old.

Conclusions

Student interviews revealed rich information about students’ experiences of VET. Students expressed multiple reasons for enrolling in VET, reflecting differences in their interests, academic level and aspirations. What students valued most about VET, and what distinguished it from other school offerings, was its hands-on features and its perceived role in enhancing their post-school choices and employment prospects.

Students were generally satisfied with course content and the expertise of teachers, but there was sufficient criticism of these aspects of VET to indicate serious shortcomings in some settings. Students were generally satisfied with the amount of assistance they received but some, struggling with the literacy and numeracy demands of their courses, did not feel that sufficient support was available.

Students generally reported valuable SWL experiences. Placements in Indigenous organizations, or organisations where an Indigenous mentor was available, were highly regarded.
Chapter 5: 
Good practice in VET for Indigenous students

The review of the literature revealed a complex array of factors that characterised effective VET in Schools practice for Indigenous students. This information has been enriched by the material collected in this study and subsequent analysis has enabled us to identify good practice in the provision of VET to Indigenous students.

This chapter, informed by the case study material, outlines five key principles that contribute to the successful implementation of VET for Indigenous students. Good practice was exemplified in schools that combined a strong VET program with commitment to improving the educational experiences and outcomes of Indigenous students. Although reported separately, the distinguishing feature of good practice was the ability of schools to combine all five aspects.

The key aspects of good practice are summarised below, and elaborated further in the remainder of this chapter.

**Focus on Individual needs**

Positive and supportive relationships with individual students and their families were fundamental to successful provision of VET to Indigenous students. Good practice was exemplified by sensitivity to students’ preferences for special attention and support.

**Supportive school environment**

For VET to succeed with Indigenous students, a supportive school environment was essential, demonstrated by a range of support strategies and underpinned by a commitment at the executive level to affirming and supporting Indigenous cultural values and identity.

**Engaging and relevant curriculum**

Strong commitment to VET underpinned its success for Indigenous students. Good practice was exemplified by a flexible approach to delivery and assessment, with VET delivered in the context of a suite of curriculum programs designed to attract and retain Indigenous students. In some schools, Indigenous-only programs played a key role, whilst in others enclave approaches were avoided.

**Links with other education and training providers**

Schools maximised their ability to deliver VET by cooperating with other training providers or operating in clusters with other schools in their region.
Community links and partnerships

Strong links with agencies within the local community (either Indigenous or non-Indigenous or both) were a feature of good practice. Such links included ongoing relationships with local employers, partnerships with local organizations, and VET programs that were responsive to the needs of local industry and provided a pathway to local employment opportunities. Sometimes these partnerships yielded extra funding for new programs and infrastructure.

Focus on individual needs

Strong and supportive relationships with individual Indigenous students and their families was seen as fundamental to student engagement and success. School staff, aware of the diversity amongst Indigenous students, warned against drawing attention to them as a group in need of special attention. Therefore support and assistance was offered to students in ways that did not draw attention to individuals. Several schools emphasised that Indigenous students may not necessarily want to be treated differently, and some may never require special help.

We have Indigenous students who don’t come to Indigenous support group because they want to be like everybody else. They don’t want to be treated differently. They’ll never require any special help as well. Students don’t want to be stereotyped. They just want to do it themselves.

In the Northern Territory, a focus on individual needs was reiterated. Recognising diversity within Indigenous communities was described as critical, as one teacher notes:

They are all individuals, there are so many different ways to approach them, […] they all have different backgrounds[…] parents with different backgrounds[[… they all have different values that they place on education.

The Principal of a regional secondary school in Victoria echoed these views, and cautioned against treating Indigenous students as a special group, as they may have little in common:

We need to deal with the kids as individuals and manage the variations, not clump them as Koories. The three Koori Kids in year 11 have nothing in common- they are not a group as such.

She believes it is more effective to work with individuals according to need, or as she expressed it, the hard yards of one-on-one with kids. As an example of this approach she cited a recent civic occasion, a flag raising ceremony for reconciliation week, to which she took an Indigenous student. She believes this experience, where the student was able to meet and talk with local identities contributed to her self-confidence and Indigenous pride.

Schools that are tuned into the needs of their students are able to seize opportunities for developing the leadership and organizational skills of individuals, as illustrated by the following example:
I was asked to host Australia’s biggest morning tea. I roped in a classmate and we raised $100 through the school. (The VET Development Officer) just dumped it on me! We made cookies, muffins and served fruit. The teachers paid $3 for it. The school made the cookies and muffins and we got three businesses to donate. (Year 12, Cert I Workplace Skills student)

The focus on individual needs means that Indigenous students, as with non-Indigenous students, are offered the full range of curriculum choices, and care is taken not to channel them into vocational pathways. This was emphasised at many sites:

We start by asking students what they want to do at the end of college and how can we get you there? We do not push them into vocational subjects. (Assistant Principal, Senior College)

As staff elaborated on the strategies they employed to support individual students, they also touched on issues faced by many Indigenous students as a result of differences in family support and cultural expectations:

Other kids wouldn’t think twice about asking for an extension, an Indigenous kid generally won’t ask so they’ll miss the deadline and be penalised and come to me and ask what they can do....It’s very difficult for them to ring someone and say they’re not coming in. They will avoid doing that and simply not go. Indigenous students at that age also have ‘baggage’. In their mind they believe that an Indigenous student won’t get listened to, can’t bargain on an equal footing with a non-Indigenous adult or authority. (Assistant Principal, Senior College)

In this school, the Assistant Principal has special responsibility for Indigenous students and makes herself readily available to offer support when needed, or to advocate or negotiate on behalf of students who may be having difficulties. In this school the transition from high school to senior college is handled on an individual basis, whereby Year 10 students and their families are invited into the college and assisted with their enrolment:

I develop a relationship with the students and their families in Year 10, as individuals. Bring family into the college. I bring the kids in individually to start doing their subject selection in term 3 and 4, encourage family to come along too. I do know that if you do it individually and they already know you, you get a far greater chance than throwing them into the big pool. To me that’s the way you help Indigenous students. The institutional stuff spooks them. (Assistant Principal, Senior College)

The focus on individual needs was also evident in the careful selection of SWL placements, with the amount of support offered to students at the workplace responding to individual students’ needs:

If I know a kid is a bit apprehensive and might not go, we get them out to meet employers, we take them out and have a look at the site beforehand. We place them with employers we know, that they will get on with, that we’ve used before... We use tried and true employers that we know will look after them. And we also have a word with employers if we think it’s necessary, let them know if a student is apprehensive, to watch out for them for the first couple of days. We haven’t had a lot of trouble with kids not turning up. Normally we have contact with employers two or three times over the two week period but if we think the students might have problems we’re on the
phone to them every day for the first few days and we ring the students at night just to make sure that everything’s OK. The ones that have had trouble we bring back here and work through whatever happened and try again the next time around (VET Construction Teacher)

A similar approach was described by the VET Development Officer in another school, who reported that Indigenous students who needed additional support were placed in Indigenous organizations:

They have provided work placements for students at risk that we wouldn’t put into a mainstream work placement. They’ve provided support, which is good. They provide a more sympathetic style of work placement.

This support is complemented by the intensive individual assistance offered by Indigenous support staff for whom knowledge of each student’s individual situation is of key importance:

The big thing is that we can get into the home setting… The home starts the puzzle, and we’ve got access to that puzzle whereas the school and the teachers don’t get to see that puzzle and that’s the key to having success or not having success with a student… School holidays I spent with one of the students who needed that at the time. But that has a flow on effect in that ongoing support is there for that kid the whole time he is here. We have really good communications. I know exactly what’s happening at home for him and I know why so I can act as advocate for him. I can sit in the class with the student, I can negotiate with the teacher so that the student comes to me a certain amount of the time, and chase up the student to make sure they attend class. (Aboriginal Student Liaison Officer).

Numerous forms of informal and timely support based on close relationships with individual students were mentioned in many schools. These included financial assistance with uniform costs for hospitality work placements, and in non-metropolitan locations, chance encounters with former students in the main street that facilitated post-school follow-up and support.

The support structures in the school are very important – the key personnel are not in every school… I see a difference in outcomes for aboriginal students depending on what support there is in the school for those students. It’s very easy for kids to drop off, drop out of courses, drop into unemployment without someone, or a group of people preferably, all taking a little piece and saying, ‘well, look at the subjects that you’re doing, these things need to be done, let’s speak to your teacher. How can we get that back on track. What about after school? Have you filled in the application for this training body’: there’s just a very big welfare role for kids whether it be VET or other programs in the school and some schools don’t have that, in a nutshell. And the ones that do, the students and the programs are better matched and they have some chance of success. So my experience is that, why we’ve been successful is that we’ve been able to spread the load and we’ve had good leadership, support for aboriginal education from the top and then layers of aboriginal people taking their small parts on all the kids that are in the school. And then you can move things forward and I’ve seen it happen. (Indigenous VET construction teacher, small rural school)
As these comments indicate, support structures provide a safety net that is underpinned by a school culture that is supportive of the needs and aspirations of Indigenous students. This is elaborated further in the next section.

**A supportive school environment**

Many schools had a number of support strategies in place for assisting Indigenous students, underpinned by a commitment at the executive level to affirming and supporting Indigenous cultural values and identity. In some instances senior staff were Indigenous. In others, senior staff had responsibility for Indigenous students and made themselves directly available to individual students for assistance and support. Indigenous support staff were present in all schools, and some schools had Indigenous VET teachers on their staff.

The critical need to ensure that Indigenous students were the concern of the whole staff was highlighted by a Northern Territory school, where the percentage of Indigenous students had increased dramatically. Indigenous students and their education had become part of the core business of all staff. This has meant that whole-of-school systems and procedures have been revised to ensure they work effectively for all students including Indigenous students.

A supportive school environment is the outcome of several factors that combine to promote the success of Indigenous students, depending on the unique circumstances of the school. An Assistant Principal (himself Indigenous) noted that some of these are happy accidents that his school has been able to exploit to the benefit of Indigenous students: having an Indigenous staff member in a senior position, Indigenous VET staff, a strategic plan that embraces VET, a VET Coordinator who supports the interests of Indigenous students, and a supportive school staff. He also recognised the importance of having a good team of Indigenous support staff who are supportive of students and have good relationships with them.

**Activities to increase cultural awareness**

Some schools affirm Indigenous culture with a range of curriculum and awareness raising activities. Examples included bringing in Aboriginal elders to present to classes across the curriculum, cultural days that involved engaging students in traditional activities, celebrating Indigenous events (eg. NAIDOC week). Curriculum offerings included Indigenous Studies and Indigenous languages.

In some schools, publicity material (print or electronic) promoted the school as a good place for Indigenous students, for example a senior college that promoted itself as ‘The College for Aboriginal Education Excellence’.

One school in South Australia organised a ‘Reconciliation Ball’, bringing together Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents, students and community elders.

In the Northern Territory, one school had taken advantage of the resources of a local employer and linked into their cultural awareness program. All staff at the school were required to participate in this program as part of their induction.
Tutoring and academic assistance

ATAS tutoring was generally available for Indigenous students, and some schools offered a homework centre one or two nights a week after school.

We try to build up a really close relationship with our students, we try to get them to feel a sense of home and family...There’s also activities where we make it very overt that we value Indigenous culture. We think everyone should have a sense of pride in that. We provide literacy support and extension where required. The teachers work very hard to try and make what they are doing interesting and relevant and hands-on and practical for the students. (Principal, small metropolitan school)

This Principal cited strategies such as homework programs and additional classes and gave as an example classes in the previous year that ran for three weeks after the normal finishing time, so that students could finish their work. She also mentioned staff that would stay after school hours for anyone who wanted to catch up or finish off work: Teachers here go out of their way to support the students to achieve and to catch up.

Intensive literacy support was described as a key element in many successful programs. Teachers therefore need to be able to identify the literacy requirements of VET study and provide ongoing and systematic support for students.

Indigenous support staff

The presence of Indigenous support staff was a key aspect of a supportive school environment. Indigenous support staff view their presence as vital to students’ success, particularly their unique position as a link between the students, teachers and families:

If someone goes off track in the VET program then I jump on them and make sure everything’s going OK if they’ve got problems... I pick them up myself...There was one kid who was constantly late so I bought him an alarm clock. Now he gets up and he hasn’t been late for school once in the last six weeks... My job is to get out there and give them confidence... I had a day last week where I brought in community elders and role models, and I brought the attendance officer in and we sat down and had a sort of mid-year pump-up talk for the students. And they loved it. The Principal got involved and had a bit of a talk about uniforms and the next day every student turned up in school uniform-first time ever! (Koori Liaison Officer, Regional non-government school)

[We] build good relations with the kids. They love having you in their lessons. Like another familiar face they can recognise, support. Some of the kids don’t fully understand what the teacher’s on about sometimes, so once the teacher’s finished talking at the front of the class it’s good for you to be sitting beside them and elaborating in your own words what they really want done. (Aboriginal Education Worker, regional school)

Besides their obvious role in providing direct support for Indigenous students, Indigenous support staff also saw their role as supporting staff and educating the whole school community about Indigenous culture. Strategies included providing
curriculum advice to teaching staff, organising cultural awareness activities and professional development.

Another benefit of having Indigenous staff in the school was the role models they provided to students. In one school, the trainee Indigenous Educator (a former student) was seen by other Indigenous staff as a positive role model for current students:

*Role models are so important. I do see Elaine as a role model. She has come through our school, through our own family life and done most things that adults would crack under pressure with. She is our role model and she’s a really good influence on our students. She kept her family together while doing Year 12. She is a beautiful role model. We don’t have enough of that. We also have (Indigenous Educator) Steve, another deadly role model. He communicates well with the boys.* (Indigenous Educator)

**The Physical environment**

Cultural affirmation was also evidenced by the physical environment, of which examples included the Indigenous flag flying in a prominent position, murals with an Indigenous theme painted on walls, noticeboards displaying photos of Indigenous Cultural events and excursions, an Indigenous garden, and Indigenous students’ artwork displayed in the foyer.

In some schools a room had been designated for the use of Indigenous students for recreation and study. These facilities varied in size, but were decorated with art, craft, maps, books and music that celebrated Indigenous culture. They usually house one or two computers, and provide a comfortable environment for students to meet with Indigenous support staff or tutors. In some schools the room was also used as a meeting place for Indigenous support groups and ASSPA meetings. As one Aboriginal Education Worker explained, *this is a place [Indigenous students] can come and feel comfortable.*

The Principal of a regional secondary school saw this room as a key resource for enhancing attendance and a sense of belonging. She described how the room, and the provision of ATAS support, was crucial for re-engaging a student after an extended absence:

*We had a Year 8 student who had a big break for three to four months who came back to school. I am sure that if it weren’t for the ATAS tutor and working in the Koori room, having that as a backstop (the student would have left). She spends most of her time in mainstream classes and toughs it out, but to know that there is a place that is nice and attractive, there’s a computer and it’s warm and there’s people who (support her)... They need a break, they need withdrawal and comfort time to be validated just as they are now, not the person they are going to become, to be acceptable. That cocoon works for the year 8s to Year 10s. You probably need another version of it for the Year 11 and 12s, for comfort and time out.* (Principal, regional secondary school)

Indeed, a senior college in a metropolitan location boasts a large, comfortable and attractive Aboriginal student room, which was used extensively by individuals and groups:
I think it’s really important that we are operating now as a really strong team, and having our room and being able to bring our kids together to have that sense of connectedness, belonging, all that really important stuff. Even if they’re not getting it anywhere else they know they’re getting it here... They can just drop in and say, ‘someone just said such and such to me’ and we can sit and talk about it. Just that bonding if you like. A lot of kids don’t want to get involved. That’s their choice, but we’re here for the ones that want to be here. (Aboriginal Education Officer)

This school is relatively well resourced in its support for Indigenous students. The Assistant Principal, himself Indigenous, has been a major driving force of these developments. This school employs an Aboriginal Student Liaison Officer three days per week. It has an Elder in Residence who spends one day a week at the college. On the same day the Aboriginal Education Officer from the district office visits the school, and a 45 minute tutor group is conducted with Indigenous students that offers support, information sharing and networking. The support staff believe that these resources have yielded good results:

They know that if they don’t go to school we’ll be tracking them down...so it’s a special relationship that we strike up with all students. We’re getting more successful here at the college because the numbers are increasing and the Aboriginal student participation within the Aboriginal program has quadrupled over the last 3 years. (Aboriginal Education Officer)

Positive student-student relationships

This level of support translates into a supportive culture amongst students themselves, with informal mentoring between older and younger students taking place in a school that affirms Indigenous values:

Some Aboriginal students here have become role models and mentors for younger students. It’s informal, and there are key students we rely on for that. That has helped us out, expanded the team. We did talk about setting up a structured program but we don’t really need it. Having our own room, and similar backgrounds, they take on a natural role of leadership. They’ve picked up the role and they’ve done it naturally. We are showing them values of caring, consideration and respect. (Aboriginal Education Officer)

Moreover, this supportive environment means that the students themselves promote the school to other Indigenous people, and attract enrolments. This student sees herself as an advocate of VET, and is actively encouraging adult students to enrol:

I’m actually encouraging older ones to come back! There’s about 10 parents. We’ve got 4 adults in my class.... Most are in their late 20s early 30s. (Year 13, Community Services student)

In this school, mentoring is also employed as a strategy for Indigenous students to support each other. For example, the VEGAS program employs the student above for a couple of hours a week as a mentor and peer support person with a young mothers’ program. She is also involved in the program with a primary school with students that have been identified as at risk, and is about to start a first aid course with them, as part of a program of activities to develop their social skills. This has benefits for the mentor as well as the students she supports.
On-campus childcare

On-campus childcare is a significant aspect of a school culture that affirms the reality of life for many students, both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous. Provided in at least two sites visited, it was a practical response to the high rate of teenage pregnancy in the regions served by the schools, and the subsequent need for safe, affordable childcare. This service enables many adolescent mothers, a significant proportion of whom are Indigenous, to continue or re-enter education. As one Aboriginal Education Worker noted, [It’s] an important part of keeping students at school – students have returned to school either pregnant or with babies. Children can stay in care at this school until after 5pm, so any mothers undertaking a traineeship or SWL are not disadvantaged.

In one school the childcare centre also provides assistance with parenting issues, SWL opportunities for VET Community Studies students and has been the site of projects for Building and Construction students.

Indigenous teaching staff

Having Indigenous teachers in the VET program also translates into stronger support for Indigenous students:

*I do talk one-on-one with our Indigenous students if they’re having problems. I ask them if they want to talk and usually they will when I relate my situation as being an Indigenous teacher. I always put up examples like that just to try and get them to hang in there. Hasn’t always worked but I think it’s working this year with a couple I thought were in danger of dropping out… It makes a difference that I’m Indigenous that they can identify with me without feeling embarrassed. Once I have a bit of a chat with them, and relate who I am they seem to not have any embarrassment. For example we had some jobs advertised through one of the Indigenous bodies. We put a list of jobs on the board and I said whoever wants to have a go at these come and see us. (After) I told them my situation two of them stood up and said yeah, I’ll go for that, in front of the class, which I’m sure they wouldn’t have done five minutes earlier. (VET Construction Teacher)*

*I think it’s a matter of… the staffing – they’re very good here; we have an Aboriginal teacher and an AEA who do really keep their finger on the pulse and have the same outlook as I have towards Aboriginal students and Aboriginal study and relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kids and so that helps and that is a significant cause of the interaction which occurs between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kids… So it’s the tone of the place that brings about its successes… (Principal, 7-12 school in small town)*

Collectively, these efforts can produce cultural change that has a sustained impact on expectations and outcomes for Indigenous students:

*There is a new tonality with the Aboriginal students here at this college. The fact that we’ve got our Aboriginal elder, the fact that there are quite a lot of social events happening…I don’t know what would happen if we lost the support of (the Assistant Principal and the Aboriginal Student Liaison Officer). I think it’s really vital that that continues for a long enough time for the expectations and the mindset to come up to a level where it’s self-sustaining. It still needs support for another few years at the least.*
It’s becoming a tradition of the college now. And we know that one of the things that traditions have about them is strength and sustainability. (VET Development Officer, Senior College)

A supportive school culture comprises the work of many people, and relationship building both within and beyond the school:

What I noticed [is] that the kids were coming to school, their attendance was really good, their behaviour’s changed, and their attitude just towards life has changed; that through the VET courses, things can happen and it can show you what they can do with support and people helping them. (Parent, small central school in rural town)

We have quite a proactive ASSPA committee, our AEA is fantastic, and if there’s a problem they deal with it, they fix it. The community is reasonably involved and the Aboriginal community are fairly active in the school and most of them are OK coming in to the school if there are issues with their kids, they’ll generally come in and it will be dealt with. We do employ some Aboriginal parents which is really important; it’s important for their kids to see people working within the family and also gives us a bit of a handle on, “your dad’s in the school today, we’ll go and talk to him about this and see if we can solve this problem.”… I think the really important thing that we have is the support staff, we have such good teachers and Aboriginal people working in the school that our aboriginal kids are really well supported, they feel really valued, their morale is really high and while we don’t treat them differently, they know they’re special because there are special things that run for them and that’s particularly important. (VET Coordinator small school in country town)

These quotes indicate that the provision of a supportive school culture extends into the relationship the school develops with the Indigenous community. This feature is explored in more detail in a later section.

Acknowledging achievements

A number of examples were given of the importance accorded celebrating students’ success, but in a culturally appropriate manner:

Recognition; they were really proud of their achievements. They were thrilled about the link between school and community and their family – that came through greatly. There was that real sense of achievement and a real collegial feeling about that group of kids as well, they really thought they were special and achieved something. We generated good publicity for them… they got newspaper coverage. We haven’t made a huge fuss of them at school; we’ve kept it fairly low key here. But that’s all part of the shame factor and you’ve got to be very careful that you don’t build these kids up too much… I think it was done in a fairly low key and accepting way. But what we’re finding is that part of our success is that the kids are much more willing to come up and accept awards now. (Principal, small rural central school)
Engaging and relevant curriculum

Case study schools demonstrated a variety of curriculum programs that successfully attracted, engaged and retained Indigenous students. Strong commitment to VET for all students (whether Indigenous or not) was evident in all schools, underpinned by a belief in VET’s ability to provide a means of engaging students in meaningful learning and genuine pathways to future employment.

Programs targeted towards Indigenous students considered to be successful by the stakeholders interviewed are described in this section. Included are examples of VET programs funded and/or delivered only for Indigenous students, comprehensive curriculum programs designed for Indigenous students that incorporate VET. Also described are curriculum programs designed to improve the retention of Indigenous students to senior secondary schooling.

It is important to mention initiatives that, although not specifically targeted at Indigenous students, are particularly attractive to Indigenous students and serve to attract and retain them. One senior college offers a Talented Sports Program which provides training for entry to competition at a state and national level. This program is open to all students but is particularly attractive to Indigenous students, boosting Indigenous enrolments, and enabling Indigenous students to benefit in multiple ways. Some of these students also study VET Fitness programs to enhance their employability in the sports sector:

A number of Indigenous students at the college are very talented sports people … So for them something like the fitness course gives the opportunity to see a pathway in the industry. I think it’s the hands-on aspect that they like and the feeling that they’re getting employability skills that are of value to them. (Assistant Principal, Senior College)

Engaging and relevant VET programs

As mentioned above, a strong commitment to VET underpinned its success with Indigenous students. The key features of VET that staff repeatedly mentioned as valuable for all students were its hands-on, practical aspects, and its consequent ability to engage students in purposeful learning:

VET plays a very strong role in engaging them in their education. I really believe that for many of them it’s what they love, they see it as being relevant to what they are going to do later on. They love the hands-on side of it, they like the responsibility, they like the fact, some of them, that it has led them into school-based new apprenticeships. They like being able to use industry level facilities. We have an industry standard training restaurant for the hospitality students and they love working in the kitchen and feeling responsible for the success of a function. The technical production in live theatre students love working in the theatre with the biobox, the catwalks and the lights. It’s so much more interesting than sitting behind a desk. I think often the teachers in those areas are quite passionate about their subject. Not that other teachers aren’t, but it ignites the students’ own enthusiasm. (Assistant Principal, Senior College)
This commitment to VET is underlined by a strong belief in the value of VET that is delivered by teachers who know the students well and are committed to educating the ‘whole person’ rather than merely delivering training:

_one of the benefits is that we are delivering VET in the context of our whole student educational program. It’s not just training, and specific modules, it’s a whole student focus. Within that you’re getting the best of both worlds…within the VET program you can deliver VET in a number of ways, as a set of competencies or I’m teaching you as a person…Our teachers are trained to be teachers, teachers of kids. And they are able to incorporate training modules within that._ (Principal, Senior College)

The impact of an engaging and relevant VET curriculum on student skills and confidence is illustrated below:

_(The student) is coordinating a whole program of inter school footy matches, contacted other schools. He would never have done that six months ago. His confidence has lifted because of the VET program. Six months ago he wouldn’t have written a letter to anybody. And now he’s running the whole show. He’s coaching the interschool team, he’s going down the street to get sponsorship…and this is a kid who wouldn’t even walk up to an employer, and now he’s going to get trophies donated. So he’s come a long way._ (Indigenous Liaison officer, regional non-government school)

### Indigenous-only programs

Some schools offered targeted programs for Indigenous students. In some cases, particular VET programs were offered to Indigenous students only, whilst in others an entire curriculum program (incorporating VET) was offered to a specific group of Indigenous students. Programs offered to Indigenous students in the lower years as a retention strategy are also described.

#### Indigenous-only VET programs

Aboriginal Sporting Programs were the most common type of Indigenous-only program.

The Certificate II in Fitness and Training is offered in a number of settings. In one suburban secondary school for instance the program is targeted towards a small number of Koori boys who incorporate pre-AFL football training into their program. The Principal considers this program, which is delivered by a nearby TAFE Institute, an ideal vehicle for improving the school attendance and engagement of a group of ‘at risk’ Year 11 and 12 Indigenous students, and hopes for future expansion to include a broader range of students. The VET coordinator also remarked on the strength of this program in meeting the needs of its target group:

_one of the good things about the Certificate II in Fitness is that they have a bus and pick up the kids and they will take them to a specific place and it’s all community based and the kids are known to the people who are delivering the program and that makes it quite solid for the Koori kids. Across our cluster we have found that if kids do VET at another school, another location, there is that issue of getting there and_
continuing to attend classes on a regular basis. (VET Coordinator, small metropolitan school)

The response of one student to the program indicated that its hands-on nature and relevance to his interests and aspirations were engaging him and helping him overcome attendance problems:

You can stay in the circle, like in the environment of trying to get drafted, so at least they’re looking at us…I’ve always played footy so I’m trying to get somewhere in football… Sometimes I wasn’t turning up to school, so this is helping me, doing something that I like ‘cos it’s got a lot to do with football. This one’s more hands-on, like it’s got PE in it, our training, it’s keeping us physically fit. (Year 12 VET Fitness student)

One site, an adult re-entry school located in a metropolitan region, was in its second year of operating a Certificate II in Sport and Recreation for Indigenous students. While the school offers an extensive curriculum, very few Indigenous students were enrolled in the school prior to the implementation of the program. Consultation with Indigenous communities in the local and regional areas led to the development of this course, which consists of a daily practical component of training in football or basketball as well as theoretical competencies. While the program aims to provide pathways for young people to becoming professional athletes, it also hopes to provide skills for other career pathways in the sporting industry, for example, coaching and umpiring.

The school has faced many challenges in running this program and has had to adapt to the situation at hand. Most of this year’s cohort come from Indigenous communities located hundreds of kilometres away from the school. Relocation to the city for many of these students required a period of readjustment and orientation. Accommodation issues have recently been addressed with the securing of nearby houses with the cooperation of the local housing authority, as students were previously living a fair distance from the school and experiencing difficulties with the lack of public transport services in the area. The school is now considering an orientation program for students moving from the country to address such issues and to impart skills for independent living. It has been proposed that an orientation course will occur in one of the regional areas from which the students originate, before moving away from the area.

Many of the students too face major literacy and numeracy issues, due to time out of the education system. One class teacher acknowledged how difficult it was for some of these students to return to school after poor educational experiences. She attempted to overcome this barrier by introducing activities where the students were able to get to know her and she was able to gain their trust. School staff also acknowledged the need for these students to re-establish classroom skills (as part of the orientation program) before beginning VET competencies.

While the school was experiencing and dealing with many challenges, there were also more overt positive outcomes. The school had established strong networks with Indigenous organizations (health, housing, education) in the local area which did not exist previously.

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The adult re-entry environment of the school was seen by staff as a really positive factor for the engagement of these students in VET.

*Here, you actually get spoken to and you get asked to make the choices about your life yourself. So you get to see, why am I here, what am I doing this for, and how am I going to benefit from it. Coming to class, making a decision to come to class and to listen and to be part of things, you’ve made that decision. …They can make the choice to leave any time. And it’s you just working through those reasons why they’re here and then to empower themselves to be here. And I think that’s what they need. Because they’re finally making decisions about their lives, not other people making them for them. I reckon that’s a good thing.* (VET class teacher)

Staff had also noted increased enrolments of Indigenous in other programs after establishing the targeted Sports and Recreation Certificate, envisaging it as a snowball effect.

*[We aim] to build a community where people want to come; where they feel like this is their place; and that they have people around them that they relate to. And that notion of being a single isolated person in a single subject disappears.* (Deputy Principal)

Look we haven’t been able to retain Indigenous students in this school up until now. And what’s happened for them is they’ve brought their relatives in. So we’ve now got partners of the boys in the program attending the campus. We’ve got cousins… So that extended family grows through. Now the local kids are saying hey, maybe we should go there. Because there is a significant body now of Indigenous people on campus. You’re not only one when people look at you and think, hey you look different to us. They are a force to be reckoned with on campus. You see 15, 20 young Indigenous people on campus. They’re not a small minority any more, well they are in numbers, but they’re visible. *[It makes it easier for students to start] and to stay.* (School Counsellor)

Students participating in this program had just completed successful work placements coaching at local primary schools. Staff members, while acknowledging the hard work required to get there, were extremely pleased with the results of these coaching clinics.

*We were really worried about how it was going to come together. …[But then] it’s really rewarding when what happens happened yesterday. And you go to that school and you see that, and you think wow, I knew they could do it. I just knew.* (VET Class Teacher)

A further example of good practice is exemplified by an Indigenous-only Health Care Course offered to students in Years 9 and 10 in a rural region. This course exposes students to a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous health care settings, and has led to further health care training (eg nursing) for some students. This program is also a key example of a program that links directly with local employment opportunities that are culturally meaningful for Indigenous people, as an Indigenous aged care facility is located in the region. The program therefore provides realistic opportunities for future employment in an otherwise economically depressed region. This is highly valued by Indigenous parents:
There’s not too much work around here, but for nursing homes, aged care anything to do with health, you can get a job there, so this is one of the main areas that I wanted my kids to go into, give them a bit of taste of health while they were at school so they can go on because, in the long run I want them to have jobs not just sitting around. And the VET courses offers them a look at what’s out there, which is good. (Parent, small regional school).

For this parent, the VET program had a significant impact on students’ maturity and identity:

And what they found that with the boys, was that the way it’s totally different walking into work than walking into school. The first week was magnificent because it showed the schoolboy going to work. The second week, it showed a young man going to work… Because they’re finding with the VET courses, our aboriginal students are coming back talking like nurses and… they’re starting to mature in a way that we want, but the ones who are at school who aren’t doing a VET course, are staying still at school level. (Parent, small regional school)

In a small rural community, a targeted program in radio broadcasting is offered to a group of Indigenous Year 9 and 10 students. This program, funded by the DEST Learning Works Initiative, was designed to improve school attendance and increase retention whilst offering training and a possible career pathway for Indigenous students. The coordinator of the course was able to exploit the opportunity provided by locally available facilities and a locally based broadcaster and trainer with strong links with the Indigenous community:

We’ve got a great wealth of talent in our community, we’ve got a community radio-station just down here across the road from the school, we’ve got a tradition of Indigenous radio programs and presenters within the community… So I figured hey, we’ve got all that, we’ve got the expertise, we’ve got the facilities and we’ve got the kids and these guys are providing the money to run these courses. (VET coordinator, small rural central school)

The course was also designed to re-engage disaffected students, develop their communication skills and build their self-confidence. As both their teacher and the VET Coordinator pointed out, the benefits to students extend beyond the technical expertise they attain to increase students’ capacity for self expression and communication:

It means that they’re able to express, they’re able to communicate and so it’s not just a case of basically learning how to play the music or be a DJ or whatever, there’s the fringe benefits. (VET Teacher, small rural central school)

It was a very good program because it did show to a few of the kids who were struggling with their schooling that they could take on something that does require a lot of sustained study, it requires regular attendance and achieving certain levels of expertise and it showed them that they could take on those things and produce the outcomes that are required to get through the course. (They) have their own radio show so that’s good for their self-esteem… I told the kids that they can engage in this course without coming to school; they didn’t have to attend school… So that’s why it was on that Wednesday after school, cause if you’re not coming to school or you’d
been suspended from school you can still come to the course. (VET coordinator, small rural central school)

A key aspect of the course is its responsiveness to students’ learning needs in that the hands-on component (an on-air radio program) was included right from the start:

So I set up an on-air component for them right from the word go, so that they could start to understand what they’re going to be learning about – this will be the end product and eventually you will have your own program… So they were able to view the end product right from the word go. For them, they need some kind of drive, some kind of interest to keep them going through the theory side of it even though getting in there is a little bit hands-on straight away which I think is important. (VET teacher, small rural central school).

That the program had a significant impact on student attendance and engagement is evident from this parent’s comments:

It’s good. As you know X is a small town, there’s not much for them to do; it keeps the kids off the street, keeps them busy and it gives them skills in something that they could use further on in the future… They all loved it; they all got together as a group and they always reminded each other, ‘remember, show up…’ and (they’d) be there together, but they loved it and it was good. And they all followed it through – all of them. (Parent, small rural central school)

This program, which is in the process of being accredited at Certificate I level, sits amongst many strategies employed by the school to support and engage Indigenous students, and reflects a strong commitment to making changes to meet the needs of its students: You don’t just sit down and not do anything new, that’s why we’ve come up with this idea. (VET Coordinator)

Other support strategies include a homework centre, pathways planning activities from Year 7 to Year 10 (eg careers camps), ongoing contact with the Indigenous community, and Indigenous language classes. Indigenous students are also able to access an externally organised work experience program for Year 9 students at risk, and some Indigenous students travel to a school in a nearby town for a VET Indigenous Health course.

As the following comment shows, parents value the high level of support offered by this school:

The school is 100% behind them. They always support the Koori kids here and they encourage them as much as they can. And with the trip when they went away, that was all paid for; (the VET coordinator) fixed all that up and it was good. They got a grant in for that and it was good; the school let the kids go for that week so it worked in well. (Parent, small rural central school)

Indigenous-only programs that incorporate VET curriculum

Some schools have set up programs for Indigenous students consisting of a large VET component integrated with mainstream curriculum. One regional school runs a vertically integrated class for Indigenous students in Years 8 to 12 at risk of leaving school early. Most of the students in the class have missed a lot of schooling and have low literacy levels. Intensive numeracy and literacy classes are combined with a
Land Management VET course run through a consortium of representatives from different community (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) organisations, and education and training providers (school and TAFE). Students who are too young to receive VET accreditation have their achievements recorded in the form of a school based certificate. Those 15 years or older work towards a Certificate I or II auspiced by the local TAFE.

Staff working with these students commented on the advantages of taking students out of the school environment as well as the hands-on aspect of land management combined with life skills programs.

"[It’s] building their confidence, doing it in a less daunting environment, in a casual manner where they’re treated like adults." (Aboriginal Education Worker)

Students have an opportunity to mix with other members of the Indigenous community at the teaching site.

"...they meet other Indigenous people from the community who are out there working on other projects. So they’re out there with them. They also see the way in which their cousins, sisters, brothers, mums, dads, aunties, uncles function in a learning environment. And sometimes that’s been a positive thing." (Senior School Principal)

Since the implementation of the program, the school has seen an increase in student attendance and engagement.

"I think the key thing is the attendance, you can see that. The enthusiasm, especially in the hands-on modules that are delivered out there." (Regional employment education and training officer)

"We’ve had kids actually take some of the vegetables and stuff home, and then we’ve heard via the grapevine... They’ve got together, pooled some resources and some money and cooked up a huge big substantial meal. I mean we were glowing from ear to ear to hear things like this." (Class Teacher)

The combination and impact of the VET and non-VET components was appreciated by the class teachers. Students undertake some classes with their year level, for example Art and Computing, and some enter back into ‘mainstream’ classes entirely.

A progressive initiative at a metropolitan school combined Year 11 and 12 curriculum with an Aboriginal School-Based Traineeship. Indigenous students deemed at risk of non-completion spend three days at school and two in the workplace. This program is complemented by a Year 10 course where students undertake SWL. The program is committed to helping the students graduate from school. The core curriculum has been streamlined, so for example, students do fewer but more involved assessment tasks. Curriculum Council approval is imperative, not only for the students’ academic benefit, but also for their personal confidence.

"The expectations are there, we reinforce to the students that it’s not a watered down program, it’s a legitimate program and we expect them to work towards graduation. And doing this self esteem changes. We see it. We reward the kids when they’ve done the work and you can see the difference, you can just see it. Many of these students have not had positive experiences of school before. We try to use strategy of positive reinforcement." (Curriculum Co-ordinator)
After completing the two year program, students will emerge with a traineeship (AQF Cert II in vocational area) and secondary school certificate.

Students work in a supportive environment with their own classroom and resources such as computers and lunch programs. Outcomes for the program have so far been measured in school attendance:

*I firmly believe that without them, we would not have [these] kids attending school ... or we would get them very erratically.*  (School Principal)

*Definitely increased participation and retention. The statistics which I produced for term 1, showed that we had reduced unexplained absences by 90%. [Also] greater participation in school, doing the work, doing the assignments.*  (Curriculum Coordinator)

Staff noted that support from upper management within the school was vital not only in the initial implementation, but also the day-to-day running of the program.

**Other Indigenous-only programs**

Several sites were currently offering, or had previously offered, innovative programs that support Indigenous students academically and vocationally.

A large metropolitan Year 8-12 school offers a selective Indigenous Sports Education program (ISEP) for students entering Year 8. Although not a VET program, it is a good example of an intervention designed to retain students to Years 11 and 12 where traditionally very small numbers of Indigenous students remain in the system. The program also provides students with the opportunity to explore career options connected with sport, and may lead them into accredited VET programs in the senior years. According to records kept by the Indigenous Education Support Officer, attendance has been good:

*Attendance is great. They are attending, so that's a good turnout. So that's OK. I've notice the change because we get an absentee sheet. I can see the change.*

One senior college had previously offered a special support program for Indigenous students which ceased when funding finished. This program, which involved intensive assistance in the form of mentoring, industrial visits, visiting speakers, assistance with resumes and interview technique, had clearly had a strong impact on the students whilst at school and also on transition outcomes:

*I wish that the funding were around to keep the WADU project going. It was so successful in building up a group spirit. It made them feel as if they were engaged in something that was important to all of them and I think they supported each other. They could really see the college putting energy and resources and effort into doing something for them, more than we can do – we couldn’t afford to do that at the moment. It enabled them to go on excursions to widen their horizons and to bring in members of the community to talk to them…* I anticipated that students would not feel comfortable being singled out but no they didn’t. In fact I saw as a very important measure of success the fact that they felt bold enough to stand around in a group in the front foyer and make themselves quite known as the Indigenous students. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that we were treating them as really special, and we were saying to them we know that you can succeed and we want you to succeed and
we’re trying to help you to this. We were highlighting their talents and I think they felt good about themselves on the whole. (Assistant Principal, Senior College)

A former student for whom the program led to a school-based traineeship attributed her current fulltime employment situation to the program:

WADU doesn’t exist now which is a shame. (It) was excellent because it gave us an opportunity to find out what was out there otherwise we would have had no idea. I wouldn’t be here today if it wasn’t for the WADU program. We were able to talk about our problems with work and college and work them out. We had a room. It was excellent...VET gave me a great opportunity to find out what work life is like, what’s involved in the office area, what different people did, I loved it. I looked forward to my Thursdays and I did a lot of things I never thought I’d get to do... so it was a great opportunity. (Former student, now employed full-time)

The ability to address the changing needs of Indigenous students within a particular school was considered essential by some personnel. At one site, these changing needs meant at first the implementation of an Indigenous-only VET course for at risk students, and then, a few years later, the cancellation of this course and re-integration of the students into ‘mainstream’ classes. The (Leisure and Recreation) VET course had attracted young people who had left the education system, and as such had needs different from other student populations within the school. As school attendance became more consistent, school management felt that there was no longer a need for a targeted course.

*I mean that was absolutely right for that group of students then; that’s not right any more. (School Principal)*

Students were drawn to the fun nature of Leisure and Recreation rather than fulfilling their potential academically or with other VET programs within the school which led to completion of the school certificate.

*The problem with this was that the kids who should have been doing the VET courses that were running then, were tempted into this leisure and rec course because it was attractive. ... But the trick is not to make it attractive so if you are capable of committing yourself and are, you just slip into that because it’s an easy option (Deputy Principal).*

Most of the Aboriginal kids in upper school would go to this separate program. And they just weren’t achieving the things they could achieve if they’d been elsewhere in the school. But it was just a place they felt safe I think. They weren’t achieving anything out of it particularly. (VET Co-ordinator).

Management at this school felt that an important part of this experience was this real ability to have control over resources, being able to change things pretty much immediately according to the needs of their students. The need to respond flexibly to the needs of Indigenous students is explored further in the next section.

**Flexibility in VET delivery and assessment**

Many of the VET programs accessed by Indigenous students have developed a great deal of flexibility in delivery and assessment in order to respond to students’ needs.
We have major problems with non-attendance in all programs, so we’ve got massive learning gaps, lack of continuity, it’s very very difficult to manage those kinds of problems. Strategies to over come that (include) self-paced learning projects that can be picked up at any time that can be done within a confined space of time. Some of the VET teachers have really struggled with it, and I put that down to a lack of expertise in knowing how to accommodate and deliver competency based learning within the context of modules. Putting together a project that might address a range of outcomes. Some of the teachers think that you have to deliver this module then you have to deliver that module and so on. That doesn’t work because students are in and out of classes so frequently. And really what you have to do is develop projects that address a range of competencies which students can do at their own pace. (VET Coordinator, small metropolitan school)

Students also benefit from a flexible approach to delivery, as the following comments indicate:

I was pregnant so it was flexible for me. I could always catch up on things in my own time. You get a qualification out of it. I want to do nursing and Community Services is a way into it. (Year 13 Community Services student)

A flexible approach to delivery and assessment was a key component of the broadcasting course outlined above:

So what I had to do was to re-devise an assessment program (that) had to be delivered purely verbally. So you’re making assessments just verbal or observation, watching the role-play, the interaction…, over a period of time instead of the normal approach (VET teacher, small rural central school).

A similar approach has been used in another rural location:

They’ve got to do a work folio of what they do. These days I take my digital camera and just get photographs of the kids doing all this stuff and then all they need to do is bring up the photos and write ‘filleting shark’ or doing this or doing that, and present that. That helps but it gets pretty time consuming. (VET class teacher)

An approach to assessment based on practical tasks was evident in the comments of a Building and Construction teacher:

I really noticed they liked hands-on, working with other guys. If we can assess them within a project rather than as an individualised assessment of a maths sheet, it works really really well… They can take a piece of timber, measure it and then cut it in half. Give them a sum on a piece of paper and they won’t even pick their pen up… They’re a bit anxious about putting their pen to paper and getting it wrong. They seem to be able to get a physical thing and do it quite easily.

Staff commented that the competency-based nature of VET gives it the flexibility for students to complete partial certificates and so get recognition for the work they have done:

Because it’s competency based, it gives them a bit more flexibility. If they miss a competency, because they’ve missed school… they can then come back without penalty more or less… With the VET program, as long as it’s not something mandatory, as long as they’ve done their OH&S component and they’ve completed a
couple of things that we won’t let them out without doing, they can come and go from that program at many different levels… It does give them that flexibility, which a lot of other things don’t. (VET Coordinator, large regional secondary school)

Some kids that have got problems have what we call ‘access to VET’ and they’ll only do certain (competencies). We have a meeting at the beginning of the year where they identify the competencies they believe they can achieve and they will only choose so many of those competencies… They won’t necessarily have reached the AQF II standard but they will have achieved a certain level of competency or achieved some of the elements of competencies. They can then go on to TAFE and try and continue from there. (Careers teacher, small country school).

A Queensland school that had a high proportion of Torres Strait Islanders amongst its VET students recognised the importance developing the curriculum to meet the needs of the students rather than shaping the students to a particular curriculum as the principal explains:

We’ve gone out of our way to do whatever we can to suit the needs of the kids. I think you can also play that game of you have to maintain whatever we were and kids have to fit that profile … with a little bit of teacher interest we can deviate and go away from what the structured program might have in place. (Principal)

This program successfully achieved higher level competencies in its VET engineering program because it was prepared to adapt and extend course content to accommodate students’ needs:

I teach Engineering. Quite often they'll come to me and say; “Look, we do a lot of this up on the Islands,” An example is welding aluminium for dinghies. Now that’s really above high school level. That’s really TAFE level but we’ve got the equipment so we’re looking to show them how to weld aluminium. Another example is they make these crayfish rings with nets on them. I still don’t know how they use them. They have to be stainless steel. They came up with the design and said, “This is what we use up in the Islands.” To weld stainless is a bit difficult but we’ve made hundreds of them here and they took them back to the Islands… We will change courses to suit their needs. (VET Engineering teacher, small rural school)

Flexibility and relevance of curriculum design was also described as a feature of successful programs in this school, where students interviewed frequently referred to the articles they made and how they could use them at home – anchors, turtle hooks, go-karts. The school has also shown a readiness to be flexible to meet the needs of a particular student, releasing him for eight weeks to do a traineeship with a radio station in a regional centre. The school was rewarded by the student’s decision to pursue a career in management and return to the school to repeat Year 12 to qualify for tertiary entrance.

The view was repeatedly expressed that the success of VET depends on how it is delivered. The Principal quoted below emphasised the importance of having competent teachers who know the subject matter well and can adapt delivery to maintain student engagement:

But it’s also the way you deliver it. Where the teacher doesn’t teach to outcomes but uses a project based approach it’s much more successful. So what you really need is
teachers who are really confident with their course content who can work it so that everything hangs together, is more integrated, more holistic…and so you have to be very careful with that as you can lose kids. Teachers working from modules found that if they pulled different parts together into a package they found that it worked much more effectively. We’ve been very lucky to have good people here who can look at outcomes that can be pulled into a product. (Principal, small metropolitan school)

**School-based New Apprenticeships (SBNAs)**

Several schools had embraced School-based New Apprenticeships (SBNAs) for Indigenous students. School personnel were generally positive about the potential of SBNAs for making vocational training available to a broader range of students:

*Some students with enormous potential do not like the structure of the school systems. But when they get into SBNAs they thrive. So why not encourage them.* (VET Cluster manager, regional location)

This Cluster Manager has recently applied for a grant to employ a coordinator to promote School-Based New Apprenticeships, as the schools believe they are a valuable opportunity but do not have the resources to promote them properly.

SBNAs appear to have been well received by Indigenous students, due to the opportunity to earn an income and obtain work experience, and the possibility of continuing with the same organization after completing. The following student has a SBNA in an Indigenous organization, and clearly values this environment:

*I like working in an Indigenous organisation because I feel more comfortable, knew people there, it makes it easier so you don’t have to walk in to all new people. I work one day a week working in main office. I Enjoy it, it’s fun. I get a taste of what working fulltime is like. Get me used to it for when I leave school. They’re really nice people and if I need help I get it. I have a mentor that I go to if I need help. I’ve got my own desk and computer. Some of the stuff is easy to pick up. I knew what I had to do because we had done it in class. It’s good experience and at least it’s a start… I’ve always wanted to get into a job in office admin. This will give me more experience, confidence. It will be good to have a certificate. When the course finishes there isn’t a guaranteed job but there is a good possibility of staying on if they are happy with my work. (Year 11 Business Administration student)*

A former Student who completed a school-based traineeship emphasised the seamless transition she experienced to post-school employment:

*I find it a bonus that I did VET at school. It was a great opportunity to work in an office and get a Cert II while I was still at school. Transition from school was very smooth. It was just like another day really. I did a Cert III in frontline management with the Indigenous Business Chamber at work using a manual and a trainer who checked my books… It was very smooth I didn’t have any problems at all. The transition is smooth because you know where you’re heading. (Former VET school-based trainee)*

However there was concern that students working part-time outside school at casual pay rates would be financially disadvantaged in a school-based traineeship where the rates of pay are lower and the time taken to complete the Certificate is longer.
Recognising the attraction of paid employment as an incentive for students to stay at school, an Indigenous Liaison Officer at one school is planning to set up a part-time work program. He intends to capitalise on an influx of new industries and employers to the region, and a corresponding increase in the availability of part-time work.

Indigenous school-based traineeships have been introduced as part of a statewide strategy in WA. Students are in work placements two days a week, and school on the other three days. Staff comment that the strategy appears to be working:

“We’ve had issues and we’ve had problems, but we’ve been able to overcome those because there’s two carrots. One is that there is money that comes in, and it’s meaningful… The second thing is that the assessment occurs in the workplace, it doesn’t occur with them having to go to TAFE and write things; it’s not threatening. And I think the fact that they end up with a Certificate II at the end of it is important.” (SWL Coordinator)

The biggest thing is that these kids are attending school. And they’re starting to get schoolwork in. They are beginning to recognise the consequences of their actions a lot more. Being responsible to a teacher who sees them for one period a day is different from being responsible to someone who sees them for eight hours a day. (SWL Coordinator)

We have these kids staying on at school more and more, although it’s a bit of a struggle. I think we had one stay on to Year 12 last year and three this year, and it looks even more promising for next year. We have a number of kids coming through from Year 11…. We’ve found with these kids is they’re getting really engaged, and comments from some of the teachers, such as this kid has just turned around, different person now. The focus on breaking up the school week has really worked for these kids … It’s a more mature environment, working with other adults... And those kids are quite keen now to continue with traineeships; they’re quite happy to be paid. The payment factor is quite an important one. (VET coordinator, medium sized suburban school)

Students in some states are required to undertake SWL before ‘converting’ to a traineeship. While this trial period is essential for both the employers and the trainees, students are not paid for this time. One VET co-ordinator advised:

“It was] decided that the 10 week lead time was too long and a shorter one would be better. I think that’s very very true. You work for 10 weeks, the novelty wears off and you don’t get the payment side coming in early enough. I think it’s important getting that in early.

The students themselves commented on the value of being paid for their time in the workplace. As one Aboriginal Education Worker pointed out, while payment may be a good drawcard to encourage young Indigenous students to participate in traineeships (and is important in its own right for enabling young people to contribute to family income), they soon start to take on other benefits from gaining workplace experience while still going to school.

They need the incentive before they leave school. They find it very hard as an Aboriginal person to get out and look for a job so we’re trying to encourage them to do a traineeship or Structured Workplace Learning, so that they’ve got some kind of
trade or training in an office job or something they may like; and they can graduate with that as well.

Links with other education and training providers

Several schools broadened their VET program by forming clusters with other schools in their region or by making use of staff and facilities at nearby TAFE Institutes and other training providers.

A large Senior college in a regional centre that offers VET to over 260 students has built extensive networks with a large number of outside organizations, including 300 employers, local government, community organizations, and training providers (including TAFE) which share course delivery and facilities. For example, TAFE delivers an automotive studies module in spray painting, and students travel to the capital city for a seafoods module of the Primary Industries Certificate delivered by a private provider. Even the local yacht club provides facilities and instructors in Outdoor Education. Building and Construction students travel to TAFE in a nearby regional centre for some modules, and other providers are invited into the college to deliver modules in Hospitality Studies. Community organisations assist with course delivery and assessment. These arrangements, developed over several years, contribute to a comprehensive and high quality VET program.

In smaller schools where enrolments are not high enough to sustain a viable VET program, operating in a cluster with other schools is a key strategy, which is facilitated by funding to employ a coordinator to organise SWL. An example of clustering in a regional location involves five schools in a district with a population of about 20,000. Across the schools there are 345 VET students engaged in nine VET certificates. Courses are taught by a combination of TAFE, school personnel and private providers. SWL is organised centrally by the Cluster Manager, whose position is funded partly by ECEF and partly by the participating schools.

A similar arrangement operates in another regional location:

"We’re very fortunate to have a workplace coordinator in the school who organises all of that… she organises their work placement; because as you can imagine, (the two towns) only have a population of maybe 8000 people, so it’s very difficult to- we can’t just have everybody out there all at once, so she coordinates it, and as a teacher her role is just an absolute saviour ‘cause we just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t organise work placement, I just don’t have time, I don’t have the contacts, I don’t have the experience, whereas she does it and does a really good job. (VET coordinator, small regional school)"

The Indigenous Construction teacher also highlighted the importance of a SWL coordinator who can relate well with Indigenous people and organisations:

"I think without her, I think a lot of wheels would fall off. She lines up all the placements and she’s been very good and she’s very aware of Aboriginal needs and she’s very aware of Aboriginal organisations in the valley and she’s very aware of racial issues and she’s very aware of prejudices and she’s worked with aboriginal communities out west and she’s very good. So we’re very lucky to have her. And I’d
see big problems if you didn’t have someone like that. I think we’ve been lucky. (Indigenous VET construction teacher, small regional school).

Clustering also allows smaller schools in regional locations to offer targeted VET programs, such as the Health Care Course offered to Indigenous students described previously.

Participating in classes at TAFE enabled many students to flourish in an environment away from school. One Aboriginal Education Worker commented on some of her students undertaking an Engineering VET subject at TAFE:

*Sometimes they learn better if they’ve got that bit of space outside school. Being within the one environment all the time sometimes can be a bit restrictive for them.*

**Community Links and Partnerships**

Good practice was exemplified by strong links with agencies within the local community (either Indigenous or non-Indigenous). Also evident were extensive networks of relationships with employers and community organizations, essential for maximising access to training facilities, SWL opportunities and post-school employment.

**Local community**

Schools regarded VET as an opportunity to forge stronger links between the school and the local community. One Principal noted the positive benefits to the school of having local people on VET committees making contact with local organisations:

*For the community – and the thing I like about VET – is that it creates links with the community. We have people who are on our VET committees who run the VET network within the school and organise contacts for us and they see how the school is going, what the school’s all about and they become involved in it… they’re getting to see our kids work and demystify some of the myths about the school. (Principal, small school in country town)*

Also remarked on was the extent to which the success of VET is dependent on the quality of the relationships between the school and the local community:

*VET will only survive as long as the community is willing to support it. As soon as the community doesn’t support VET, it falls down the drain cause they [provide] work placements, in some places they provide the physical resources that’s needed to operate VET, otherwise you can’t operate VET, your kitchens have got to be up to standard, so on and so forth and we sometimes do those things out in the community. So without community support VET doesn’t continue to exist. (Principal, school in small town).*

**Links with the Indigenous Community**

For VET to succeed with Indigenous students, positive relationships with the Indigenous community are necessary. This begins with the students and their families and extends to local Indigenous communities and organizations.
In one senior college, an Indigenous elder is employed in the school one day a week. She provides an added dimension to the support already available to students at the school. Her presence in the school strengthens students’ Indigenous identity and self esteem through various activities she engages them in, such as events in the Indigenous community, which maintains contact with Indigenous values and traditions.

The Aboriginal Liaison Officer at a senior college also valued VET’s role in engaging Indigenous students with the local Indigenous community via work placements in Indigenous organizations. Some VET hospitality students had worked in a restaurant run by an Indigenous corporation, whilst retail students worked in the shop at the Indigenous museum:

*This gives students encouragement. Some students have requested that they work in an Aboriginal community or organization because they feel comfortable, plus it’s a learning experience for them. They’ve got to get in touch with their roots and most of the people from the community do come to those places. So that’s another good aspect of it.* (Aboriginal Liaison Officer, large regional senior college)

VET programs with direct links with the Indigenous community were popular amongst Indigenous students. The VET coordinator at one school noted that, although Koori students are represented across all courses, those with strong links to the Indigenous Community, such as Multimedia, Dance and Music Industry Skills were the most popular courses:

*Dance has been very reliant on input from the Indigenous community… The multimedia program has had an association with the Indigenous community in terms of placements (and) we’ve had kids go out to Indigenous organizations.* (VET coordinator, small metropolitan school)

In this school, VET is actively promoted to the Indigenous community and free classes for parents (for example in multimedia) also contribute to its profile within the Indigenous community.

In some circumstances schools performed a central role in building positive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents. The Principal of a rural central school, who initiated a major community-building exercise designed to address a long history of violence, drug abuse and juvenile crime, observed a major positive impact of this process on the school itself: Indigenous enrolments have increased, and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous families have improved. This exercise involved a process of community consultation including meetings with different community groups over a period of two years, and a community survey that incorporated the views of all key stakeholders:

*And what we have is all the good things that people like about our town, what their visions are, what their top ten issues are, what every demographic and every group of people thinks about what needs to be done – a really powerful tool.* (Principal, small rural central school).

The school’s Indigenous VET broadcasting program owes its success to strong community relationships and support, as well as advocacy on the part of the teacher to
enable students to access the facilities. Moreover, the course has had a positive impact on the local Indigenous community:

*It’s good to go home, switch on a radio and hear a bunch of local Koori kids on the local radio and they’ve got their own little program during that hour …and they’re doing it, they’re having fun and you can hear them ‘cos it brings the community together a bit too.* (Parent, small rural central school)

Also evident are broader positive outcomes for Indigenous students that extend into their relationship to their community and to other communities:

*So there are a lot of fringe benefits from broadcasting. It gives things like self confidence, communication, becoming more aware of where you are and how you fit within the community itself as a whole, because once you’re a broadcaster you take on the responsibility then of becoming aware of other minority groups too, and not necessarily your own. Once you make that change, that transition into becoming a provider yourself and in a very influential situation… Delivering that information to other minority groups helps develop a relationship within the community in all areas.* (VET Broadcasting teacher, small rural central school)

Moreover, partnerships with Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations are producing positive outcomes for the school community. One example is a partnership with a local Indigenous women’s cooperative that has been funded to develop a range of community development initiatives. One with direct benefit to the school is a TAFE fabric-making and design course which will be available to interested students.

*So in terms of community partnerships, we think we’re a leader in that and certainly we feel what we started has been really important and had tremendous impact… It’s enabled us to tap into networks that didn’t previously exist and get phone calls from people who’ve said, ‘I’ve heard about the alliance and I’ve got something to offer’. A good example is Centrelink who approached us and said, ‘well how can we get involved because we’ve got money to assist Indigenous communities… The local medical centre receive funding under the youth foundation and the initial grant is $25,000 to write a submission for the big money, which is something like $200,000 over a couple of years and the whole focus is what the aboriginal youth decide. So that’s sort of a background of where we’re heading and where we’re at.* (Principal, small rural central school)

**Focus on local employment opportunities**

Schools in regional locations were mindful that VET offerings must reflect local employment opportunities:

*(We) need to keep within focus of town. That’s why VET hospitality is extremely strong here. Information Technology is very strong but it is not a good source of local employment. There is demand for employees in sport and recreation, engineering, and the food industry. We have to offer VET courses that can be sustainable and support local industry and keep our students within the local district. This would help the Koori community also.* (VET coordinator, Secondary College in regional location)

Larger schools in regional and metropolitan locations have developed extensive networks of partnerships with outside organizations that facilitate post-school
employment. Frequent mention was made of employers who would contact the school when a vacancy occurred:

*And sometimes people will come in, or ring me and say, ‘I need a trainee for this particular job, do you have someone you can recommend?’* (VET Coordinator, secondary school in regional location)

**Links with potential employers**

Other arrangements were more formal, such as the agreement one metropolitan school has with the Justice Department which guarantees a job for anyone who does a traineeship with them. Although the principal commented on the reluctance of some Indigenous students to work in this area, this opportunity was very appealing to one of the students interviewed who saw the traineeship as a means of helping her people: *A way to help my family back home, maybe getting into something to help my people, something to do with law.* (Year 11 VET Multimedia student)
Chapter 6:
Constraints on delivering VET to Indigenous students

This chapter discusses key issues that impact on the successful delivery of VETiS to Indigenous students. While many of the sites chosen highlighted elements of ‘good practice’, discussions with staff and students at many sites revealed a number of significant constraints that limited the extent to which school personnel were able to develop, maintain and deliver quality VETiS programs, particularly successful programs for Indigenous students. While some of the barriers described relate to the sustainability of VETiS programs in general, other barriers are specific to the experience of Indigenous students. The constraints can be broadly described in four areas; systemic constraints; school-based barriers; the barriers linked to the experience of being an Indigenous student, and barriers to VET linked to communities. These issues are discussed in more detail in the remainder of this chapter.

Systemic constraints

The intersection of vocational education and training and school regulatory frameworks including the introduction of the AQTF posed a range of challenges and in some cases, barriers in implementing sustainable, accredited VET programs for all students including Indigenous students. Regulatory, resource and financial barriers were noted as key issues in developing responsive and ongoing programs.

Regulatory barriers

Regulations for the accreditation and delivery of VET in schools vary across educational jurisdictions. Several schools noted their inability to continue to offer VET programs following the introduction of the AQTF. Quality audits and other compliance requirements led in some cases to a reduction of accredited VET offerings. Resource and staffing limitations were cited regularly across states as areas of concern. One Queensland school principal describes the situation of trying to meet compliance standards in staffing, noting their frustration with the perceived over-regulation of qualifications for VET providers.

I have teachers with Masters of Arts in all sorts of areas who are spot on teachers but because they don’t meet the checklist […] a man with a PhD in Agriculture […] he’s got to do Certificate 4 in damn TAFE. I do know why he has to and I don’t think it’s a bad thing but for us it’s just another compounding factor. If he leaves you do it all again.

Another school described the barriers to meeting physical resource requirements required for accredited programs. The Queensland boarding school aimed to include hospitality subjects but found it difficult to get past the legal barriers even in their own kitchens with qualified chefs. A further example occurred in a rural setting
where attempts to offer accredited agricultural programs for Indigenous students were stifled. The compliance requirements for work place health and safety in industry placement were viewed as insurmountable in these cases, despite ready access to settings the school deemed appropriate for training. Compliance requirements obliged local farmers to obtain registrable qualifications, and the school was unable to support the farmers in meeting these demands.

Schools that had attempted to overcome their own limitations by forming alliances with other training providers also raised concerns. Some schools linked up with other registered training organizations. In one Western Australian example, this had proved disastrous as the training provider had collapsed after the introduction of the AQTF, and had left a group of Indigenous students halfway through a program with limited options for future training. In a remote Queensland school, the distribution of funds on the open training market meant that local training providers were not always providing the training. Instead, the training contract was awarded to organizations that operated on a ‘fly-in, fly-out’ model. The school expressed concern about the suitability of this mechanism to develop locally relevant training.

Several schools noted that restrictions on offering accredited VET to students below Year 11 limited scope for participation. Some school settings had worked around such restrictions, developing a staged introduction to VET and an emphasis on vocational learning in context in Years 9 and 10. The inability to offer accredited VET to this younger age group, in particular to students at-risk of disengaging, was perceived as disadvantaging Indigenous students:

“We’ve got to start at an earlier stage and engage our Indigenous students… and engage at a younger age than we have traditionally because we’re losing too much expertise. We’re losing kids at an early age and we haven’t got a lot of the courses available for them… The courses that we’ve got available should be available for Indigenous students at a younger age.” (VET Coordinator, small rural central school)

However, increasing access to younger students is not necessarily straightforward. As one VET co-ordinator mentioned, younger students are more restricted in some industry areas than others, due to age constraints on the operation of machinery, as in the following example:

“If you try and send them somewhere and everybody else is driving mowers and tractors and all the kid’s getting to do is sweep the floor, and hand somebody a tool or clean the dirty something or other, all of a sudden the appeal of work just evaporates… they tend to get a little bit disillusioned. If they have their license… it makes everything more meaningful.” (VET teacher, South Australia)

Other teachers expressed concern about the maturity levels of these young people, especially if they are entering into a traineeship at Year 10, and most particularly the lasting impact a negative experience in the workplace may have on their desire to undertake further VET studies. For these students careful matching of student to employer is crucial.
Financial and resource constraints

Dependence on short-term funding was considered to be a serious constraint on the long-term effectiveness and viability of programs. Funding issues were seen as a major impediment to program promotion, expansion, and in some cases program survival. The short duration of VET funding, the cost to establish appropriate infrastructure, and the ongoing maintenance costs limited program expansion. While some school leaders noted that in general VET was funded fairly well, uncertainty in funding limited staff tenure and ultimately acceptance by the broader school community.

A variety of stakeholders in VETiS voiced concerns about funding. One NSW principal was determined in his comment, noting in particular the costs required to establish and maintain a program that supports Indigenous students appropriately.

On the very basic level we need the resources and time because things like that just don’t happen; [...] if they want to VET programs to be successful they’ve got to put the resources into the schools to get people to try and do it properly.

As noted later in this chapter, the high investment required for some VET programs needed delicate negotiation with school communities, to ensure that the resources were seen to support a broad range of students. As another NSW principal described, most school communities had little notion of the funds required to establish appropriate infrastructure, but still tried to find ways to support programs.

[ ...] People would have no conception of how much it costs to set up hospitality, we are looking at hundreds and thousands of dollars. [...] the P&C have in fact said that if it’s a good project, that they would like to make up the shortfall.

Other case studies revealed that much work done in VET programs particularly for Indigenous students required staff to work in quite different and labour intensive ways, and funding was not always responsive to such high intensity support.

Once the infrastructure for VET programs was established, VET programs required high levels of maintenance. As one South Australian Employment, Education and Training Officer described, the recurrent costs limited future expansion or sustainability.

I mean the infrastructure’s been set up. The trouble that we have with the program out there is the recurrent costs. Infrastructure’s no worries, students are no worries, it’s the recurrent costs that’s the killer- power, water, electricity etc.

Staffing issues were also highlighted in a number of case studies. The uncertainty in ongoing funding required school leaders to develop a range of strategies to ensure program continuity. A South Australian principal described the importance of staff continuity and the struggle to attain this.

I kept the people on until we knew we had the next round of funding so we retained the staff who had been working on it.

Similarly, a NSW principal expressed frustration in relation to the lack of coherent and ongoing funding with the following comments:
You apply for funding in December of one year and it’s supposed to be there in January and you don’t see it until July- I mean what do you do between January and July?

A curriculum co-ordinator in South Australia put it this way:

The resources that you need to deliver this are gargantuan. But a lot of these grants are one off things. What you need is a program that you can put into place and continues. And the school itself can’t afford to pay for all that. So financing is a big issue for us.

Accommodating these funding cycles was critical to avoid limiting program development. The time intensive nature of applying and then reconciling grants was also an issue for schools.

Another principal noted the availability of funding for VET in the post-compulsory years needed to be matched for Indigenous students in lower year levels. So all I say to anyone when they want to give me some dollars for the Year 11 Aboriginal kids; fine but we really need the dollars in year 8, and follow through.

The importance of targeted funds for the successful implementation of VET programs for Indigenous students was not underestimated by school staff.

Bear in mind, from where the school was five years ago, to where they are now, the attendance rates are fantastic, but wouldn’t have been able to achieve without input from external funding bodies to actually allow the resources to allow these people to do their work. (Employment, Education and Training Officer, South Australia).

Teachers and students also reported difficulties with the bureaucratic nature of accessing individual funding, like Abstudy, and the requirement to ‘prove’ Aboriginality. One student counsellor in a South Australian School explained:

Proof of Aboriginality: many of them don’t have those sort of legal papers. So that becomes really cumbersome for them. Especially for young people that aren’t confident in speaking to organisations, bureaucracy and administration, and that puts them off straight away.

And what we also didn’t take into consideration I guess was the time which other bureaucracies and organisations take to do paper work. Because we’ve had constant problems with Abstudy. We’ve got still 4 kids who haven’t had their Abstudy forms completed. Now sometimes it’s not just the fault of the bureaucracy, it is the fault of the student as well. They have to provide 100 point ID. A 16 year old kid doesn’t have that.
School-based barriers

While school principals or VET coordinators often noted systemic constraints, a broad range of stakeholders involved in VET programs noted barriers to participation for Indigenous students within schools. Constraints on successful implementation included location of school, attracting staff, developing relevant programs, implementing a distinguishable VET curriculum, and gaining support across the school for VET programs responsive to Indigenous student need.

Making VETiS and Indigenous students a priority- barriers associated with the school culture

Schools varied in their recognition of Indigenous students and the availability of systematic support of students’ needs. This was particularly pertinent when these needs related to financial support to participate in SWL, or to the provision of other VET resources. Some schools with limited successful participation did not distinguish Indigenous student needs from other student needs. Schools in a number of states did not address important social justice requirements of working with Indigenous students, instead speaking of the need to ‘treat all students as equals’. The tension between clearly identifying support needs of Indigenous students and singling them out as a group was described in a number of case studies, indicating a misunderstanding of educational and social disadvantage. The following examples of teachers’ comments from the Northern Territory indicate this tension.

*I think opportunities should be the same for Indigenous students as for anyone else. We just have to watch what direction we are headed in and take into account all Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.*

While school leaders have a responsibility to develop appropriate and responsive programs for Indigenous students, several schools tried to develop support structures that were responsive to community concerns to not single out Indigenous students. One Queensland school indicated their concern about providing special treatment to Indigenous students. In this site however, participation in VET amongst Indigenous students was low.

Many sites described the support structures available to Indigenous students undertaking VET, the need to spread the support across the whole school staff and not isolate support within an ‘Indigenous enclave’. Without whole school ownership and involvement in supporting Indigenous students, the effectiveness of support was reduced. One Northern Territory Indigenous education worker describes the limitation of the ‘enclave’ approach.

*[...]everything Aboriginal just came to us. No one was worried too much. It was mainly just dumped on us.*

Where schools developed appropriate support structures for Indigenous students, such structures were limited in their effectiveness if there was not enough broad-based support for VET across the school. The case study data revealed tensions within some schools associated with the introduction of VET. VET coordinators noted the varying
counselling advice provided in schools in relation to VET programs, citing a lack of awareness of career counsellors in relation to VET programs. One VET coordinator from the Northern Territory outlined the way in which students chose to participate in a VET subject.

The kids look at the subjects they want and they look at the timetable. They’ve gotta have an English, they’ve gotta have a maths. Some of our Indigenous kids aren’t capable of doing a science stream and they don’t want to do Soc Ed or LOTE or whatever. So a lot of our kids are pushed toward the VET stream just to pick up a subject because VET is the only thing left on that line.

Other teachers indicated that the priority of VET programs varied as school leadership changed, with the profile of VET fluctuating with such changes. Schools also varied in their commitment to consult in relation to the VET programs with the wider community. One curriculum coordinator in Western Australia noted tensions surrounding ongoing support for VET in the community and the need to ensure that the VET direction established by the school was fully communicated and accepted.

I think there is a lack of understanding in the mainstream part of the school. What we are about. Even some teachers. They say ‘why should the bad kids get the good resources?’ Resentment builds up around that.

A teacher expressed his frustration in dealing with such attitudes highlighting the need to develop a shared culture and approach to working with Indigenous students.

Just the way you can hear teachers saying these kids don’t deserve these opportunities, why do the Aboriginal kids get these opportunities and other kids aren’t … feel the sense of having to justify things a lot when I don’t feel we should have to do that. I feel we should be told just to get on with things.

Without a systematic and shared culture across the school to support Indigenous students, and support for a VET agenda, barriers to sustained participation will remain.

**Linking to training and industry- barriers related to school location**

School location had an influence on the success of VET programs for Indigenous students. Several rural and remote locations described their limited access to external training providers and suitable employers (both for SWL and paid employment). While some remote locations capitalised on the local industry base and tailored VET programs accordingly, other sites, particularly those without a strong industry base, indicated the limitations they faced in promoting a wide range of programs to Indigenous students and similarly limited access to regular industry placement. As a VET coordinator in NSW notes:

What we are basically saying to a lot of our students is ‘hey you are going to leave your comfort zone and go off and get a job somewhere else’… that’s always a very hard one for students, that’s a big challenge for Indigenous students to take on.

Lack of employers in the locale willing to participate in SWL impacted on different VET offerings. At one rural school, the largest IT centre was the school itself, which
limited the work experience component of the course. As the VET co-ordinator commented, it’s fine for them to sit there and do the work at school, but they should really be out in the real world as well.

For other rural and remote schools, accessing appropriate training in a range of industry areas created further barriers. One South Australian school summed up their concern about their remoteness and their ability to support training, or link to appropriate training providers: *The tyranny of distance is a real killer*. While this site was investigating the possibility of a mobile training unit, concerns remained as to how industry placements might be supported in these settings.

**Recruiting and supporting appropriate staff – the barrier of limited expertise for VET and VETiS for Indigenous students**

A recurring theme across the case studies was the challenge of attracting and retaining appropriately qualified staff in the context of often uncertain funding. School coordinators lamented the shortage of secondary qualified staff that met the requirements of accredited VET. This shortage was described as limiting the range of programs offered in schools in South Australia and Queensland sites, particularly in remote or rural locations. Industry experience was either missing, or in some cases where teachers had limited industry experience, there was a perceived inappropriate over-emphasis on the academic aspects of the VET subject at the cost of relevant skill development. In addition, staff noted the intense workloads of teachers involved in VET who generally had other teaching responsibilities. The VET Coordinator in one NSW school highlighted these tensions:

*If you have a VET teacher teaching Yr 11 and 12 hospitality, their work load is amazing and then we throw in things like work skills, we throw in exams [...] the time allocation for the course does not indicate the time that they spend doing the course.*

VET curriculum offerings too were limited and often directed by the number of staff members at the school and their qualifications. While such concerns are important to the implementation of VET programs generally, the case study data also noted the additional skills required by teachers of VET for Indigenous students. A teacher from NSW summed up the changing nature of teachers’ work in VET and particularly VET for Indigenous students.

*Going out and seeing students in the work place, negotiating with employers who’s doing what; it has a welfare component to it, which is fine for me as an Aboriginal teacher because I do that all the time, but I think teachers probably resent the fact that they’re not actually teaching, they are actually doing something they never ever signed up for and I don’t think they’re quite along the lines of moving with that idea.*

A Victorian school noted the problems associated with outside providers working with secondary students, and ensuring the presentation of material was sufficiently engaging: *They really struggle teaching secondary students.*

The work involved in VET for Indigenous students is seen to require a range of skills that not all secondary teachers display. Traditional school-based notions of the teacher-student relationships needed to be broadened to encompass support for
student work placements and liaison with industry. Schools identified a shortage of staff demonstrating multiple skills of this kind.

Above and beyond these skills, a further issue identified was the critical need to demonstrate empathy with Indigenous students. One Western Australian teacher described concerns in working with training providers who did not display the empathy required to relate effectively to Indigenous students, and the impact of such inflexibility on students’ success.

I’ve had problems with the lecturers at TAFE not being particularly understanding if the kid’s late, or the kid doesn’t have the right uniform because they stayed at Auntie’s the night before and not at their normal home… And TAFE is not like this school here where we say you know, OK, we’ll roll with it. If they’re not there at 8 o’clock, if they come at 10 minutes past 8 they don’t let them in. So if they don’t complete those competencies at TAFE, they’re going to have a problem with the traineeship.

Inexperience and limited cross-cultural awareness, coupled with a shortage and rapid turnover of appropriately trained staff to deliver accredited programs, indicated that staffing issues are a major barrier to the effective delivery of VETiS for Indigenous students.

**Invigorating the curriculum with VET in schools- the barriers of traditional school based pedagogies**

Students outlined a range of concerns about their experiences in VET programs, based on both course content and pedagogy. The clearest expression of this frustration existed when students were unable to distinguish between VET and other subjects. In some cases students were unaware they were enrolled in a VET subject at all. A student in Queensland summarised his own lack of awareness, explaining that although he had started doing some VET from the beginning of the previous year, he had only realised it was VET half way through the year. Many students in the same setting, in both Years 11 and 12, reported that they had not been aware they were doing a VET related subject until the Indigenous Community Education Counsellor had alerted them to this research project.

VET feels just like a normal class. I thought it would be different because they said that OP subjects get you into uni. I was thinking that those subjects[OP] would be tougher but they’re exactly the same.

Teachers offered a range of explanations for the perceived similarity between VET and academic subjects. In some settings, lack of appropriate resources or limited support were given as explanations. Other teachers felt that the very notion of VET within a school environment was problematic and that the education department also played a role in reinforcing inappropriate pedagogy and curriculum for VET. One South Australian teacher explains.

 [...] then every time the education department gets hold of it, and all of a sudden you’ve got SACE and the kids have to write that or they have to give a verbal
something or other, and the same old problems arise, the kids that have reading problems and that are behind the eight ball [remain that way].

While teachers in schools linked some of the problems in differentiating VET from other subjects to the delivery location within schools, and the broader education system, other case studies revealed that often the teaching approach used by training providers was problematic, particularly the strategies used by TAFE lecturers, linked to a more traditional teaching approach familiar within academic contexts and concurrent high literacy demands. School VET coordinators described the difficulty encountered by some students with the expectations from some of the lecturers who are accustomed to teaching adults that are more self-motivated than school aged adolescents. Self- motivation and a clear sense of purpose are not always present in young people, which means that different strategies are required to engage the student in the subject.

Staff encountered other issues with VET delivery in schools. Teachers spoke of the lack of flexibility in the VET curriculum, of it being too rigid and unable to adapt to the needs of individual Indigenous students. Timetabling issues within schools were also a concern. This was particularly important when students were undertaking a SBNA and in the workplace one or two days per week. Catching up on work that was missed was cited as an ongoing problem.

**Experience as an Indigenous student**

Indigenous students and their families have historically had poor experiences with school, and the experience of VET was described as unlikely to quickly transform historically entrenched patterns of disengagement. The case study data revealed ongoing dis-ease with the school environment, and a general lack of interest in school-based learning in some schools. While some parents spoke positively about the transformation of their child within a VET learning environment, teachers were generally more circumspect about the possibilities for VETiS immediately improving the education experience of Indigenous students. Barriers to successful participation in education and VET were continually described in the case studies. These barriers link to the experience of education as an Indigenous person, and the barriers that link to being an Indigenous student undertaking VET.

**The experience of relative disadvantage- the barrier of poverty**

Generational unemployment, low levels of financial resources, lack of transport, housing problems, involvement in carer positions for ailing relatives are all described as barriers to sustained involvement in education and VET. While many schools developed support programs to address these issues, in the case studies completed, poverty continued to frame the experience of Indigenous students. Involvement in VET in some instances required specialist clothing, costs in getting to workplaces, and consistent attendance.

Teachers needed to be cognisant that students may not have a permanent home, and with low levels of financial resources for transport, materials or clothing required for SWL, participation in VET was difficult. While some schools had developed clothing banks and other mechanisms to distribute required resources, these were not always utilised. Other schools established a range of ways to support students’ transport
requirements, particularly in more remote settings. Such solutions were dependent on support from school leadership, as a VET coordinator from NSW asserts.

[...] getting out of bed sometimes, getting dressed in appropriate clothing to go to work, can be a really big issue for some of them, it can be as simple as that; you have to be there at nine o’clock - how can I do that; we don’t have a train, the bus doesn’t run there, what do I do it’s a big task and our kids are very good and we have lots of support. There are people around, throw them in a car and drive them there...we ring up, get parental permission, and throw them in the car and take them, but you have to do that flexibly. I’m lucky; my boss is very considerate and he realises the different and never-ending demands on my job.

In addition to the barrier of transport, schools also described the need to provide breakfast and lunch programs. Schools described a range of ways to support such student needs, including in one instance, preparing lunches for students to take during work placements.

One South Australian VET teacher explained her personal response to this issue:

There was one point at the beginning of the term, where I wasn’t aware of it, but they hadn’t been eating, some of them, because they had no money. So you know how you’re going to be in the class, really listless. Well then we found out that, and we established a breakfast room, a lunch room over in the gym which has been really successful for them. And we’re well aware now about the food issue. But when I’ve thought about it, I’ve thought here they’ve been coming to my class all this time and they’re so hungry. And I’ve though, oh gosh, I didn’t even notice. I knew they were listless, but they didn’t say that they hadn’t been eating.

The requirement for punctuality and attendance in VET programs, particularly work placements, was also described as problematic when students were often undertaking significant carer responsibilities. As a Western Australian curriculum coordinator described, the carer role inevitably interfered with a work placement and presented a barrier to successful participation:

A couple of students have not been able to attend the workplace because their parents are unwell. Given the health issues in the Aboriginal community, you need an employer to be understanding of this.

Many other examples of socio-economic issues impacting on students’ ability to participate in VET were cited by staff members.

The Year 11 girls ...One is very clued up and will try really hard to attend. She still has problems because she’ll still be sleeping somewhere else and not have the right gear or not be properly dressed or whatever. (VET co-ordinator, Western Australia)

In Year 12, I’ve got 2 [Indigenous] trainees at the moment, one who is doing fantastically and one who is struggling, because he lives miles away, he doesn’t live with his parents. He lives with some relatives and he doesn’t actually have the sense of timing, he’s always late, even if he tries hard not to be he’s late. He has problems that way. That’s been the biggest thing. (VET co-ordinator, Western Australia)

Some teachers focussed on the impact of family duties and other issues such as law and order that impact on students’ engagement with VET:
And 9 out of 10 times the older students have got younger siblings to look after so they’re actually a care giver as well. So they don’t have the time to do a lot of the things that the other kids do. (School Counsellor, South Australia)

This group of kids … are identified as having these extreme problems. Some are under compulsion to attend school by the courts. Some have curfews, so they actually have to be picked up and taken home, they’re not allowed down the street. All in all they’re quite a tough bunch of kids. (Class Teacher, South Australia)

The case study data highlights the ongoing disadvantages of being an Indigenous student as a considerable barrier to effective participation in VETiS.

The experience of conflicting worldviews- the barrier of engagement with VET

School data revealed a range of factors working against Indigenous students’ participation in VET. Work placements and training within VET embody the importance of work, income and a vocation. At times this framework was seen to conflict with priorities held by Indigenous students and their families. One teacher from a Northern Territory setting describes this different worldview.

They just don’t have the same hunger for a job as other kids. They’re just not hungry for it. So they don’t succeed. It’s a matter of seeing value in what they do.

Another Queensland teacher summarized these tensions, indicating the need to involve the parents and family members in decisions related to subject choices and VET in particular.

There’s a mismatch between where we [the teachers] would like the students to be and where they would like to be. We need to talk more with the kids and their parents and find out more about what the Indigenous students really want to be and what’s driving them before they sign up for these courses.

School personnel described the need to understand the conflicting worldviews offered by VET and some Indigenous students’ own environment. Without this understanding, conflict surrounding the place of VET, work, family and community needs was seen to present a barrier to successful participation. One Queensland school attempted to promote a wide range of career options, but many of these involved leaving behind students’ community links and family. Other teachers would have liked their school to provide PD in this area before the start of the school year, as expressed by this non-Indigenous South Australian VET class teacher:

I probably would have like to have had a bit more training. Because the way I perceive the world is different to the way they do. … And then I could have understood where they were coming from.

Some teachers outlined what they regarded as a desirable pathway away from a community, and were puzzled that this was such a problematic issue for students. This conflict of worldview appeared particularly pertinent to Indigenous students in rural settings:
[The Indigenous students need to] see a clear future and not to compromise. It’s one we try to work hard on but I don’t think it’s done from every quarter... To say you want to be a carpenter is what you fall back on.

They don’t want to go beyond their communities. They want to go back and be what their fathers were... because that’s what they know whereas in a mainstream school the guys would know beyond that. These are not just Indigenous kids, these are rural Indigenous kids...They need to know there’s a bigger world out there... xxx has put in for a scholarship with Main Roads......but I had to flog him to death to get him to fill in the form. It seemed so daunting to fill in an application and send it off to Brisbane.

In addition to potentially holding different priorities, the limited experience with workplaces also impacted on Indigenous students’ success within VET programs. Students were less likely to participate in casual or part-time work, and often, as described by a teacher from Western Australia, there’s probably no one in their family ever been employed. Consequently, schools described the experience of ‘culture shock’ for students entering the work environment. School personnel from the Northern Territory described the impact of this culture shock, linking the isolation many students experience with the fact that less than half of the Indigenous students complete their work placements successfully.

If they feel isolated, then it’s lost from the start. People may feel comfortable talking to them...One of the most valuable things is for them to have a sort of mentor-someone to talk to and keep them on track in their work placement.

In NSW, similar issues were noted, where students were anxious and fearful of the work experience component within their VET program. This barrier to successful participation was alleviated in some instances by work placements where there were Indigenous staff, but this limited the range of work settings suitable for students. A career advisor from NSW described students’ anxiety about SWL:

[there is] Fear; fear of being accepted, fear of going into the unknown [...] A lot of work experience that’s organised for Koori kids is usually within the Koori environment [...] they are a little bit reluctant to just go out ‘cold turkey’ more or less go into the community and work somewhere else.

One teacher at a Western Australian school felt that group training organisations needed to be more aware of and take more responsibility for these issues.

The employer is the group training company and they need to be more active and realise that these are kids at risk. And they don’t necessarily have the same background as other kids. So there’s a whole different range of things that they’ve got to look after in the workplace. [For example] what actually happens to the kids when they’re in the workplace, how do you get them to integrate.

The repeated references in the case study data to these differing worldviews and aspirations provides substantial evidence of a barrier to participation.
The experience of English language and literacy demands within VET: the barrier of inadequate language and literacy skills

Consistent comments from schools highlighted the barriers for successful participation in VET for students with poor English language and literacy skills, with some schools defining the lack of skills in this area as the major barrier for Indigenous students. VET teachers noted that generally the literacy skill level required for VET was grossly underestimated. This problem was exacerbated by the reality in many settings of Indigenous students speaking English as a second, third or fourth language. In one Northern Territory school, the percentage of students for whom English was not the first language was between 80-90%.

Within school settings, there appeared to be a range of support mechanisms for students with language and literacy skill needs. In the junior secondary area, schools described a range of programs, but these programs appeared to dwindle in the upper secondary years. In one Northern Territory setting the needs were described as so great that it was not possible to provide more than basic levels of support and large numbers of students could not be effectively supported. This was despite flexibility embedded in VET programs to support assessment of competencies using a range of means.

Again in the Northern Territory, language and literacy skills were a barrier to entry to some VET programs. Students were required to complete aptitude tests and Indigenous students regularly failed to meet the entry requirements, or if successful on entry, had very poor completion rates due, at least in part, to limited language support. Language and literacy skills were also not adequate for many delivery methods, including on-line and workplace learning. Teachers expressed concern about potential workplace health and safety as a result of limited language and literacy skills, raising concerns about the ability of many students to safely participate in workplaces.

The mismatch between students’ ability to perform VET skills and ability to write about what they did, as required for assessment, was noted in several schools. One VET teacher in a South Australian school expressed his frustration that several of his Indigenous students would not receive the credit he felt they deserved because of their low literacy skills.

I’ve got one lad that can go out to the fish factory and he can fillet sharks and that with the best of them, and you ask him to try and do a little bit of reading or something like that and he just can’t. And yet to employ him as a person that’s going to work with seafood and prepare it and everything like that, he’s as good as you’ll get. And yet he probably won’t pass … a writing based [task] that the kids have to put in 250 words. He’s going to have trouble stringing them together, but if he could put 250 fillets of shark on the table he’d do it with no trouble at all.

The experience of limited school attendance

Consistent with the educational research on Indigenous school achievement, irregular attendance was seen to be a major barrier to completing VETiS programs. Staff at most sites, including those who had a good understanding of the family and cultural
obligations impacting on school attendance, and strategies in place to minimize irregular attendance, recognised irregular attendance as a major issue.

While several schools noted that attendance appears to improve when the learning context is outside of school, VET programs, particularly those involving workplace learning, mandate regular attendance. The required interaction between employers and outside training providers meant that attendance was a critical issue for successful participation.

On many occasions, students were absent due to circumstances beyond their control. One Western Australian VET co-ordinator explained the difficulties in making up for lost time in a VET Hospitality course, even when a student, motivated and doing well, was absent through no fault of her own.

*Because the VET course is skill-based and I find that what we have to cover is very tight. Therefore, say I do a lesson on sauce making, I won’t repeat that lesson. So if those kids aren’t there, they’ve missed it. … One of the kids, she was doing really well and then had to go up north to a funeral and she was away for three weeks, and so when she came back she’s way behind, she’s missed an assessment task, she’s finding it really hard.*

While looking for innovative solutions to these issues (one school took students on week-long camps to complete competencies), other schools reported similar experiences with absenteeism.

*We've got a couple of kids, … doing … a VET course, but then that fell through because he decided that he'd had a brush with the law, and he thought to get rid of the heat he'd go and live with his father in Queensland. I mean, these things happen all the time. They just up and leave and disappear for a whole term, and we don’t know where they are. They've gone off to visit rellies and that, or we'll get a message that they've left town and gone to Western Australia, and then they come back in two or three months and just straight in the room as if nothing’s happened, and continuing where they left off. It's like a holding pen sometimes.* (Class teacher, South Australia)

Habits formed in the lower levels of secondary school, such as regular absenteeism can have serious implications for SWL. As one Western Australian teacher explains:

*They've come from a situation some of them that they didn’t attend school very often in Year 10, Year 9 and suddenly we’re expecting them to go into a workplace where we expect them to turn up on time regardless.*

Issues which kept students from school also kept them from the workplace, according to one Western Australian teacher:

*The issues in the community that would cause a student not to come to school would be the same issues that would cause them not to go into the workplace. For example trouble at home, aggravation, trouble with the police, criminal justice system, things like that.*

The case study data indicates that attendance, although a pivotal success factor, should not be used to generalise about Indigenous student experiences in VET. Some students attended 100% of the time, others far less.
The experience of varying support – the barrier of racism

Involvement in VETiS links students to a range of personnel both within and outside the school. Given the range of difficulties described above, supportive and nurturing relationship with all contacts maximised the possibility of success for Indigenous students. While in some school sites school leaders noted that supportive relationships were common, many sites described relationships with various stakeholders, particularly employers, as defined by racism.

Key school staff, such as the VET coordinator in one Queensland setting, suggested that many teachers did not hold the same expectations for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students’ success. There was a need to encourage Indigenous student success, and such encouragement was not always forthcoming. School staff needed to believe that Indigenous students could achieve. The coordinator noted these issues.

The racism’s not overt……but I believe there are beliefs people hold dear and deep and they’re bloody hard to shake. ……I think at the core of a lot of this is what are people’s core beliefs, what’s their core understanding. If it’s that Indigenous people are somehow lazy or they’re not going to get jobs, I think that comes across - not in words, not in actions but in attitude, the way you teach that class, the way you present material. I think the kids are very much aware. They’re very attuned. ……If they’ve got low expectations of kids, kids will meet those low expectations.

The issue of teacher expectations for Indigenous students is raised by a Victorian Principal. Such lowered expectations are seen as creating a sense of “learned pessimism”. These attitudes stem, according to the Principal, from a lack of empathy or engagement with the reality of Indigenous students’ lives.

I don’t think that teachers have a deep empathy of the day to day encounters in an ordinary community through virtue of being Koori separate from learning requirements and broken encounters with learning.

While school staff could implicitly give students negative messages, clear problems were identified relating to the beliefs and attitudes of many employers. Numerous accounts of negative perceptions, lack of support and explicitly racist attitudes of employers towards Indigenous students were noted as major barriers to Indigenous students’ participation in VET programs. A Victorian Indigenous support worker suggested that Indigenous boys are more likely to bear the brunt of racism. Consistently locating work placements for Indigenous students proved in some sites to be an almost insurmountable barrier.

I mean we’ve still got our –what can you say- our racist people in town. You ring up and book a kid in for work experience and some just book them in no worries, others say is that an Aboriginal student, you say yes- “Oh no sorry”. That sort of stuff. So we still come across a lot of that.

It’s a matter of proving a lot of people wrong. Showing that these kids will attend school, they will work, they will graduate. It’s like the indirect nature of a lot of
racism. It's indirect obstacles, lack of cooperation. (Western Australian VET coordinator)

I don’t like to use labels like racism- but preconceived ideas say employers have. […]
Let’s say I ring up an employer and I don’t let them know that they’re Indigenous on a lot of occasions. That can cause problems (Western Australian teacher)

There are huge problems I would say. Often I’ve had employers that I’ll send a kid along for an interview- because they always go for an interview before they start their work placement- and they’ll come back and say oh no they can’t take anybody. And it’s often because the kids are Aboriginal, I’m sure of it, but you can’t ever prove this fact. It’s really hard to get employers to take them on. (Western Australian VET teacher)

Although as one Principal suggested, […]I think there is a climate and an appetite in various sectors out there to help Indigenous students, the barriers to participating in work placement present a major challenge to successful participation in VET in schools for Indigenous students.

Community and locational barriers to VET for Indigenous students

The location of schools and their links to community stakeholders in the VET area varied across the case study data. In some more remote locations, schools were engaged in a range of negotiations with Indigenous groups, training providers, employers and funding bodies to ensure the development of appropriate and sustainable VET. Often these multiple stakeholders had competing agendas that schools needed to carefully negotiate, at times causing short or long-term barriers to program offerings which in turn affected student participation. The need for schools to liaise and make alliances with VET stakeholders at all levels was a repeated theme in the case studies, but at times aligning the various stakeholders proved difficult and created potential barriers. These difficulties are described below.

Limited access to and support for work placements

Schools in remote and rural settings in particular noted their concern about linking to viable and relevant employment options for Indigenous students. Tapping into employment opportunities in local communities proved problematic. One VET coordinator described these limitations, recognising that offering a wide range of VET did not resolve the lack of employment options in many communities.

There are such limited jobs on the islands that everybody stays with that job until they have one foot in the grave – and they only pick their subjects to go back home.

In most cases, schools in communities where there was one major employer or industry described the relative ease by which they were able to negotiate supportive work placements. This contrasted with the barriers described in more urban settings, where a broader range of VET programs requiring work placements often led to more fragmented and less supportive VET experiences.
Identifying supportive work placements was described consistently as a major issue for Indigenous students, and schools rated employer support variably. As one Western Australian VET coordinator summarised:

*It’s not an easy task to place students. You just can’t put students with any employer. It’s got to be an employer who is sensitive to cultural needs of students. And prepared to work with the students on this basis.*

Many Indigenous students gravitated towards placements with Indigenous employers or staff, as confirmed by this parent from NSW:

*Often they want to do work placement, they want to go to a Koori organisation, ‘cos they want to feel comfortable.*

While supportive conditions for work placement are desirable, in settings without such options, barriers are created. Some schools had looked to a range of government organizations with identifiable Indigenous staff, but such placements were often problematic in other ways. Instances were described, for example, when work placements with the Department of Housing or Centrelink were compromised because a family member recently had a recent negative experience with that department. Disassociating such experiences in a tight knit community was unlikely, creating a further barrier to a successful experience.

Some schools acknowledged that they needed to expand their employer base to include more Indigenous employers.

*I think if we had some more Indigenous employers would be fantastic. We’ve got a very limited amount of employers who are Indigenous, and I think the kids would actually feel a lot more comfortable going out to places like that.* (VET Co-ordinator, South Australia)

Schools described the experience with centralised work placement agencies. These agencies were perceived as useful in providing broad work experience options for students. The lack of negotiation between the school and the placement agency in relation to student needs however, meant that on occasions, student experiences were quite negative. Although teachers must determine that a student is ready for a work placement, on many occasions, placement agencies made pragmatic rather than supported choices in relation to employers. In one Queensland case study, the school had attempted to initiate trial periods with employers, before commencement of formal training, but such an approach had been criticised by the local training provider, who was insistent that students be signed up for an SBNA straightaway to facilitate funding flow.

**Limited community understanding to support VET**

Success in VET hinged on support from family, the local Indigenous community, the school, and employers. Harnessing this range of communities was deemed essential to ensure successful participation.

The importance of key family members to support Indigenous students’ endeavours in VET programs was highlighted in a number of case studies. Schools worked in a range of ways to promote engagement with relevant family and Indigenous community members but were not always successful. Some parents spoke of their
lack of engagement in the VET programs and the seemingly arbitrary nature of VET subject choices. One parent in the Northern Territory summarised her daughter’s VET subject choice with the following negative comment: *They are just shoved there.*

The sometimes limited understanding of VET programs in schools across Indigenous community members, coupled with poor guidance, promoted what one VET coordinator described as inappropriate subject selections:

*All the Koori kids jump on the same one it’s a bit disappointing, because they limit their options that way and they like to go where their friends go and that’s good…[but]*

Several schools mentioned the barriers to engaging parent support for and increasing understanding of VET programs. Schools spoke of the historical difficulties in engaging Indigenous parents, the lack of familiarity with VET and their limited contact with parents. As one Indigenous worker from NSW commented:

*I am not sure that many of them know the difference. […] I don’t think they fully know or understand the fact that it’s separate to other courses and it’s run from different places or anything like that- I don’t think they’re aware of that.*

From a Northern Territory school, the challenge of engaging parents is noted as critical for the success of students, yet as a VET teacher commented, *You can have a student for two years and you don’t see the parents once.*

This was an experience common to other schools:

*A lot of parents don’t come to the school. I don’t think they feel comfortable coming here. The only time we see [them] is when students are in trouble, the parents are here.* (Aboriginal Education Worker, Western Australia)

Schools in remote settings made attempts to broaden the aspirations of students, but unless the broader community, including the Indigenous community, supported such attempts, employment options within communities continued to frame student subject choices and aspirations. One Queensland coordinator summarized these tensions, and the need for the community to be supportive of expanding employment options.

*We were very happy about how kids were getting in to employment but I’d like to see a shift more into TAFE and uni and less directly into those easier employment chances on Council or whatever. They’re health workers and all the rest employed by the Council and they’re being trained but wouldn’t it be nice to have got them to go to university to do biomedical or nursing?*

School personnel offered explanations for the limited parent engagement and unease in relation to VET, outlining issues with transport, negative experiences in schools and at times the unfathomable complexity of VET requirements. In addition, it was not uncommon for some Indigenous students to live in houses with a variety of relatives, not necessarily parents. Other schools commented on the need to broaden the notion of support for students to other significant Indigenous community members. Teachers in a range of settings, other students, elders, and employers all were seen to play a role in supporting students in VET. Without such support successful participation was seen to be less likely.
Chapter 7:
Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

This project investigated the role of VETiS for Indigenous students. It examined the features of existing programs, and assessed the role of VET in improving retention rates and outcomes for Indigenous students. Several data sources informed the results of this project, including previous literature on VET in schools and Indigenous education, a national survey of students’ experiences of post-secondary education and VET conducted in 2002, and case study material from 21 schools from diverse settings in all States and Territories of Australia.

The literature on Indigenous education noted several barriers to successful participation of students, such as irregular attendance, poor literacy skills, the student home situation and racism, and identified key factors that facilitate positive educational outcomes. These include the teacher – student relationship, the links between the school and community, teacher expertise and the development of relevant learning experiences. Highlighted within the VETiS literature was the potential role of VET in enhancing student engagement, improving school retention, and facilitating the post-school transition.

The study also examined data from Young Visions, a recent national survey that investigated students’ experiences of school and VET and made comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. This study, consistent with other published data, found that Indigenous students in post-compulsory education were more likely to enrol in VETiS programs than their non-Indigenous peers. Their reasons for enrolling in VET were much the same as those of non-Indigenous students, except that Indigenous students were more likely than non-Indigenous students to enrol because of the ‘hands-on’ aspect of VET (especially boys), reflecting the priority for VET curriculum to properly address the learning needs of low achieving or disaffected students. Indigenous students were also more likely than their non-Indigenous counterparts to view VET as a pathway to employment, reflecting VET’s importance to them as a ‘ticket’ to employment opportunities.

A key purpose of this study was to identify ‘good practice’ in the provision of VETiS to Indigenous students. The case studies provided a unique opportunity to examine the role of VET for Indigenous students in a diverse range of settings, and identify the factors that facilitated (and constrained) the success of VET programs.

The schools in the study were selected to represent a diversity of locations, school type, size, and Indigenous participation. This enabled us to capture the diversity of circumstances in which VETiS is available to Indigenous students, and assess a broad range of VETiS programs.
Interviews with over 280 individuals — staff, parents, students and other stakeholders—produced a rich data set which revealed a number of key characteristics that contributed to good practice in the delivery of VETiS to Indigenous students, in the context of significant systemic and school-based challenges and constraints.

All the schools in the study demonstrated a long-term commitment to VET; many had been involved with VET since its inception. They recognised the value of VET in providing a more engaging curriculum, marketable work skills and enhanced opportunities to link into post-school employment. Schools also saw VET as a key strategy for retaining students at risk of leaving school, and for re-engaging disaffected students.

Students interviewed generally assessed VET in a positive light. What students valued most about VET, and what distinguished it from other school offerings, were its hands-on features and its perceived role in enhancing their post-school choices and employment prospects. Students were generally satisfied with course content and the expertise of teachers, but there was sufficient criticism of these aspects of VET to indicate serious shortcomings in some settings. Students were generally satisfied with the amount of assistance they received but some, struggling with the literacy and numeracy demands, or the work placement expectations of their courses, did not feel that sufficient support was available.

Consistent with previous studies, students generally reported valuable SWL experiences. Placements in Indigenous organizations, or organizations where an Indigenous mentor was available, were highly regarded.

Good practice was exemplified by schools that combined a strong VET program with commitment to improving the educational experiences and outcomes of Indigenous students. These schools had successfully created an environment supportive of the educational and cultural needs of Indigenous students underpinned by a commitment at the executive level to affirming Indigenous cultural values and identity. Strategies included Indigenous staff (in positions of leadership, teaching and support), educational support (e.g. ATAS tutoring, language, literacy and numeracy support), a welcoming physical environment (e.g. designated facilities), professional development for teachers in Indigenous issues and culture, and other support services (e.g. childcare, breakfast program, assistance with transport and clothing for SWL placements).

Various other programs (e.g. talented sports programs) designed to attract and retain Indigenous students, strengthened the ability of schools to address the needs and aspirations of Indigenous students. Indigenous-only programs were seen as an appropriate response in some settings, but many schools avoided enclave approaches. Indigenous-only programs have however been shown to successfully address specific needs, if initiated in the context of a very supportive school culture with a good relationship with the local Indigenous community and the ability to effectively tap into existing community resources and networks. A responsive and flexible approach to such ‘flagship’ programs can reap significant benefits in terms of Indigenous enrolments, retention and outcomes.

School Based New Apprenticeships (SBNAs) are starting to play an important role for Indigenous students, with paid employment offering a significant incentive for them to complete their secondary education. State government programs to increase
participation and take the administrative burden away from schools (such as exists in WA) are well regarded by participating schools.

VETiS appears to be more successful when it sits within the context of a suite of programs designed to attract and engage Indigenous students at all levels. Schools that had put in place programs at the junior end of the school, including the development of vocational learning contexts well linked to VET to address retention or articulate into accredited VET were starting to reap the benefits in terms of increased enrolments in Years 11 and 12.

Nurturing relationships with individual Indigenous students and their families were fundamental to successful provision of services and programs. Indigenous support staff provided links between schools, students and their families, as well as enhanced understanding of cultural issues. Indigenous teaching staff were a significant factor in creating a supportive learning environment, and serving as much-needed role models.

Another important aspect of good practice was the ability to develop and enhance VET programs through extensive networks of partnerships and relationships, based on locally available opportunities. Many schools were remarkably innovative in adapting programs to meet locally relevant needs. They were able to adjust directions and priorities as needs shifted (e.g. by discontinuing programs that were no longer effective). Flexible and innovative approaches to course delivery and assessment were used to enhance student engagement and outcomes.

Good practice schools tended to be larger (although this was not a universal finding). Larger schools were in a better position to provide a broad range of programs and facilities that met a diversity of needs. Schools with smaller (or shrinking) enrolments were often able to well support a small range of VET, but logically found it difficult to maintain broad VET options, with consequent restrictions on student choices.

It was found that Indigenous students, many of whom are alienated by the rules and structures of school, generally responded well to the more adult atmosphere of senior campuses, due to greater flexibility in dress and attendance requirements, and more equitable staff-student relationships. However it was also noted that some Indigenous students needed assistance to manage the lack of structure in these settings. Senior campuses were also able to offer a broad range of VET programs because of larger enrolments in Years 11 and 12.

Whilst many sites highlighted elements of good practice, discussions with staff, parents and students revealed a number of significant factors that constrained the effective delivery of VET to Indigenous students. Some of these factors were related to the provision of VET more generally, whilst others were specifically associated with the experience of being an Indigenous student.

Constraints to the successful delivery of VET to Indigenous students were identified as: systemic constraints, school-based barriers, barriers associated with the experience of being an Indigenous student and community barriers.

These constraints were experienced and managed differently across the case studies according to a range of contextual factors, such as location and educational jurisdiction (e.g. different regulations governing VET provision in different States and Territories). Location impacted significantly on access to other training providers and
employers. Schools in remote locations were particularly disadvantaged in this regard, as well as in their ability to attract and retain suitably qualified and experienced staff. A range of factors associated with the characteristics of individual schools and their communities also affected the quality of VET.

From a systemic point of view, difficulties in complying with regulations were cited in several sites. There was a view that regulations, such as those governing staff qualifications and facilities, and delivery of accredited VET below Year 11 were perceived as limiting access to Indigenous students. Dependence on short-term funding was considered to be a serious constraint on the long-term effectiveness and viability of programs.

The development of VET is also hindered by significant infrastructure costs, as well as ongoing costs associated with staffing and resourcing programs, particularly for schools in remote locations. School enrolments emerged as a significant factor in the ability of a school to provide a broad range of VET subjects.

Reported barriers associated with the experience of being an Indigenous VET student concurred with well-documented barriers to engagement with education generally. These included poverty, lack of transport, generational unemployment, housing problems, and inadequate language and literacy skills. The language, literacy and numeracy demands of VET placed additional burdens on some students, and schools varied in the success with which they addressed these needs.

Broader cultural issues also impact on engagement with VET, particularly tensions associated with conflicting worldviews of the importance of work, income and vocation. Participation in VET presents additional challenges related to the selection of suitable SWL placements and appropriate support whilst on-site. Family and cultural obligations can affect attendance, and these issues must be sensitively negotiated.

Despite comments by many school staff about diminishing racism in schools and the wider community, numerous accounts of negative perceptions on the part of employers were noted as major barriers to Indigenous students’ participation in SWL. The case study data repeatedly stated the limited availability of supported work placements. Family support was identified as a key to Indigenous students’ successful engagement in VET. Schools worked in many ways to promote engagement with relevant family and community members but this was not always successful.

Many schools commented on increased retention to senior schooling in recent years, and attributed this to various aspects of good practice discussed above, as well as intervention programs at the junior levels. Consistent data on student outcomes from VET was not readily available from the sources consulted, although anecdotal reports in a number of schools supported the view that outcomes for Indigenous students were improving.

As the discussion above indicates, barriers to successful engagement in VET for Indigenous students were significant. However, many schools in this study have proved to be remarkably innovative and adaptable in addressing these issues to maximize the success of their VET delivery. Strong and supportive leadership, a commitment to sustainable VET provision, alongside strategies designed to enhance
the engagement and educational outcomes of Indigenous students at all levels of secondary schooling, have produced some fine examples of successful Indigenous engagement in VETiS.

Recommendations

**Recommendation 1: Improving teacher training and professional development**

- That the training of VET teachers in schools and other settings include a focus on the delivery and assessment of VET units of competency being more responsive to the needs, strengths and circumstances of Indigenous students, and incorporate cultural awareness, cross-cultural communication and the teaching of students for whom English is a second language.

- That strategies for increasing the number of Indigenous VET teachers be explored.

**Recommendation 2: Improving VET in Schools teaching, learning and assessment strategies**

- That VET teaching, learning and assessment strategies recognise and reflect the preference by Indigenous students for experiential learning, and are refined to ensure there is a balance between the theoretical and practical components of VET.

- That appropriate language, literacy and numeracy support be provided to Indigenous students as required to assist them with their VET in Schools programs.

**Recommendation 3: Improving quality of Structured Workplace Learning**

- That education systems adopt measures to ensure that supportive work placements are provided for Indigenous students, and that this include mandatory preparation for work, careful and focused selection of employers and ongoing support for students on placement.

**Recommendation 4: Maximising resources for VET in Schools**

- That as current funding arrangements for VET in Schools programs are reviewed, more integrated and coordinated approaches are developed that reduce the dependency of programs in which Indigenous students participate on short-term special grants.

- That consideration be given to the introduction and funding of innovative programs that aim to increase the retention of Indigenous students. Mentoring
and “elder in residence” programs are two examples from this study that warrant further attention and development.

- That schools providing VET in Schools programs in which Indigenous students participate be facilitated to form cooperative relationships with other schools, with TAFE or other providers in order to offer breadth of VET courses, particularly where school size constrains that ability.

**Recommendation 5: Increasing access for younger students**

- That education and training systems explore the educational and resource implications of developing additional vocational programs (including accredited VET) for students in Year 10 and below as a strategy to retain Indigenous students in schooling.

**Recommendation 6: A coordinated approach to informing Indigenous communities about VET in Schools**

- That a coordinated promotional campaign be developed and supported by resources for schools to inform local Indigenous communities about VET in Schools programs.

**Recommendation 7: Better outcomes data collection and ongoing support**

- That data collection processes for measuring outcomes of Indigenous students for VET in Schools and School-based New Apprenticeships be progressed as a matter of urgency, and that longitudinal studies be undertaken to assess the long-term outcomes for Indigenous students in these programs.
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