Introduction

Over the past decade industry and education have restructured in a timely collaboration between industry, the unions and government to improve national educational and economic objectives. One objective was an increase in retention rates for senior secondary education with young people encouraged to “stay on” (or return) to complete senior school and/or further education and training. However, our concern is that in this expanded access to cross-sectoral learning, some groups are still missing out because vocational education and training [VET] remains on the margins.

Community understanding about the relationship between education and work has expanded in the 1990s as the nature of work changes and employment options disappear and/or evolve. Education systems worldwide have responded, not always successfully, to these changing circumstances by developing more integrated approaches to providing employment-related courses in schools and by seeking cross-sectoral cooperation where, previously, there had been protectionism and distrust. These responses are important given recent research which shows that, for increased job chances, the most significant stage of education is upper secondary school, its graduates a third less likely to be unemployed in their early 20s than non-completers (OECD, 1998, p.8).

In the United Kingdom, Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1997) have shown how general education options are taken by more privileged students, and VET courses more by disadvantaged students; historically segmented on class and gender lines. Ball, Macrae and Maguire (1999), in researching choices for youth in the education and training market, have shown how young people enter the 16+ arena with very different baggage and expectations which are reproductive of social class divisions and experience - in one way or another - new sub-structures of inequality. In other research in the UK [on exclusion and the common good] it appears that the middle class squeezes poorly skilled people out of even low-skill positions; for example, as employers select graduates over others, even when that level of skill is not required (Tomlinson, 1999). Tomlinson sees credentialism as a form of closure, with credential inflation now a problem for the developed, as well as developing, world.
For Australia, Anderson, Clemens and Seddon (1997) have shown that students in VET have different learning styles to those in higher education, a difference that may well exist earlier between senior high school students. Of direct significance for our argument, Lamb (1996a) demonstrates how the source of the recent downturn in school retention in Australia has been in government schools. Therefore we want to ask “To what extent is the post-compulsory curriculum serving flexibility in relation to students and family ambitions for careers and employment in a way that is equitable and inclusive, and supportive of a full range of equally valued senior school curriculum options?”.

**VET and Equity**

The role of VET in providing equity outcomes over the past decade has been located between well-intentioned (though often vague) public policy documents and hard social, educational and economic realities. For example, in the early 1990s the NSW conservative Liberal/National Party Coalition government published *Achievement for Everyone: a strategy for equity in education and training in NSW*. It stated “Equity in education and training means that there is equitable access to education and training opportunities and that people are able to participate and gain successful outcomes” (Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs, p. 6).

This type of policy intention and document begged weak contextual application as policy-in-use, given the strength of community perceptions of status between general and vocational education (even if these traditional divisions were breaking down in many educational locations) and, therefore, the maintenance of academic curriculum in the majority of schools, for the majority of students. VET remained on the margins, for those not bound for higher education, or as one-off interest subjects elected by academic students as a break in their otherwise generalist program. None-the-less, this policy did propose a set of principles based on

> Everyone, irrespective of their social, economic or cultural background, is entitled to the education and training necessary for a full and satisfying life. Priority assistance should be given to those most in need. (p. 3)
In 1998 the social democrat Australian Labor Party government in NSW published *Achieving Equity in Apprenticeships and Traineeships* in which a set of equity principles were outlined (Board of Vocational Education and Training, 1998, p. 12). One advantage over earlier documents was that the policy put forward a six point framework for action which, if effected, would assist the generation of some fidelity of implementation, especially as matters of resourcing were included. In the subsequent *Charter for Equity in Education and Training* (1998), the ALP government proposed that priority be given to narrowing those gaps in education and training outcomes that reflect need and prevailing social inequalities based on the following:

Everyone is entitled to high quality education and training programs that provide recognised credentials and clear pathways to employment and lifelong learning. The outcomes of education and training should not depend on factors beyond the learners control or influence.

This statement is a rewrite of the LNP one above and does not make a policy advance. While structural and attitudinal barriers were identified, in 1999 they remain major obstacles to creating a new learning environment around VET that asserts equity without prejudice or further labeling.

**Bringing VET in from the margins?**

Effective long-term solutions to the relevance of the senior years requires widespread and fairly distributed access to employment options, and the educational resources to be able to have a choice in the first place. If not, this will impose a poor social return on public investment in education. International research and theory about class, poverty and education has recognised how the institutional functioning of schools, the cultural content of curricula, and the pattern of relations between families and schools, are important sources of educational inequality (Connell, 1994, Connell et al., 1982). What is needed, we perceive, is a reverse articulation, new flows of students between sectors building on secondary education to serve lifelong learning. The NEXUS group, reporting to the New Labour government in the UK, argued that more of the same in VET was reproductive or even regressive:
The current crisis is the disappearance of work for the uneducated, unskilled and unqualified. Policies should now provide for the proper education of working-class boys [and girls]. Continuing to offer vocational and practical courses, on the assumption that this will prevent drop-out and disaffection, is not the way forward. (1997, p.2)

This observation recognised that the shape of schooling is changing, very rapidly in some instances, away from classroom teaching to technologically-enhanced and individualised instruction. While many educators hold serious concerns about the assumed benefits of this shift, there is little chance of undoing the way education is becoming a time, not a space (Crump, 1999, p. 6). The notion of teachers, and education and training institutions as the repository of knowledge (and values etc.) is fast disappearing. The NEXUS group is correct in arguing that government policy is dealing in nineteenth century technology if it assumes more of the same will solve this dilemma, even if current resources are pooled into multi-campuses.

There is not enough evidence to suggest that the shape of current policy objectives in VET will undo the narrowing of curriculum offerings that is the hallmark of students seeking this pathway to employment. One suspicion is that working class children still miss out the most and have yet to be induced not to drop-out of the senior school, even though this is a key policy objective at state and national levels. Stevenson (1998) argues that contemporary vocational education is out of kilter both with changes in the nature of economic productivity, as noted earlier, but also with the possible nature of the knowledge needed for future economic productivity and personal growth. Uncertain futures, he argues in the best Deweyan tradition, require a renewed focus on individual transformation and a community focus on social needs. Vocation is not something allocated to each individual but something of which all can be intelligently effective, in a variety of “callings”.

**VET in NSW**

Since the mid-1980s schools have been looking to provide alternative curriculum for senior school students. In many cases this meant creating electives to act as alternatives to mainstream academic subjects, in other cases in meant linking up with other schools or with colleges of technical and further
education (TAFE) to develop courses considered more relevant to the needs of students staying on for the senior school but not intending to seek entry into higher education.

This undertaking became increasingly urgent as work in a post-industrial, post-agricultural nation like Australia created new and increasing demands for further and higher education as a consequence of the disappearance of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs and the rise of ‘knowledge workers’. During the 1970s the labour market for young people in Australia collapsed with job losses concentrated in unskilled labour in the manufacturing industry and clerical work. Full time job opportunities have continued to dwindle, and the increasing number of part time and casual jobs are mostly taken by school students rather than school leavers (Irving, et al., 1995; Marginson, 1992a; Watson, 1994). For 15-19 year olds unemployment hovered around 24% for most of the decade (Dorrance & Hughes, 1996).

The 1999 Dusseldorf Skills Forum Report, *Australia’s Young Adults: the deepening divide*, observed that some 500,000 young people, about 19% of the total youth cohort, could be viewed as existing in a precarious labour market in contemporary Australia. This report argued that young people, more than any other age group, were exposed to falling earnings, casual work, part-time or temporary employment, and low-skilled job offers. Staying on (or returning to) the senior school thus became ‘the lesser of two evils’ for young people and their families.

Education has become even more so the most crucial of human enterprises and governments formed by both major political parties in NSW have responded with VET policy statements. In 1992 the conservative LNP government released *Shaping Tomorrow, Today: the future of education training and employment in NSW*. This policy document was a catalyst for more official moves to develop cooperative ventures between and within the different government and non-government providers of education and training, as well as with industry and local employers. Credit transfers between school, TAFE and university started and dual accredited courses emerged, making links between school and work in areas such as retail, hospitality, rural, construction and financial industries. Articulations
between education sectors and providers are commonplace in 1999, but their origins are quite recent. This poses policy dilemmas for making wise decisions about ‘where to next?’.

The *Directions* policy statement formalised four pathways to education, training and employment and introduced the notion of reporting on core competencies and skills in the school curriculum. Its final recommendation foreshadowed the 1997 white paper (by the alternative government) by recognising that the HSC should report “the full achievements of all students, not only those seeking to enter university” (Chadwick, 1992, p.2) [see next section]. The Academic Reference Group report on trialling this model noted, in 1997, that “there was widespread support for the notion of increasing the credibility and value of vocational education (especially counting VE courses for the tertiary entrance rank which means that their selection should not predetermine a student’s career options as much as at present) given the upward trend in their popularity.” (Crump et al., 1997c, p.13).

Enrollments for VET in schools for 1998 in NSW are impressive: 396 government schools, 150 Catholic schools and 38 Independent schools make-up 21,868 students in school-delivered Stage 6 courses and 24,500 in TAFE delivered courses. In addition, there are 2,476 students in Board-developed industry studies [+ 4,236 students in the Preliminary Year (11)] and 187 students in part-time traineeships. (BOS Annual Report 1998 p. 28). Allowing for some overlap in enrollment, students undertaking some VET in the HSC represent about half total candidature in any year.

Not only do these students represent a national shift towards vocational education and training, they mirror a trend in the internationalisation of VET that is introducing different products and services, and placing colleges of TAFE and universities into competition for local and international students seeking further qualifications. The reforms to senior school matriculation, set in train by the ALP government’s white paper *Securing Their Future: the NSW government’s reforms for the Higher School Certificate* (1997) recognised these trends and aimed to provide a new format and purpose for VET in the HSC in NSW.
A key component of the HSC reforms is the extending and strengthening of VET studies. In 1998 the Minister for Education and Training, John Aquilina, argued for enhancing the status of vocational education courses and the recognition afforded them by industry, VET authorities and the universities. He argued that vocational education in the new HSC would “respond to industry needs and become relevant to broad industry areas (with) clear links to post-school destinations (and) importantly, result in a qualification under the Australian Qualifications Framework” (Aquilina, 1998. p. 6).

In 1999, VET remained a priority area for the Minister, in a recently re-elected ALP government, adding that he wanted to “build stronger links between schools and TAFE for students through courses, shared expertise and access to industry-standard TAFE facilities”. In the previous four years the ALP had provided 36,000 new TAFE places and increased joint secondary school TAFE positions by 8,000 supported by a range of equity measures for ESL provision, women’s, Aboriginal and multi-cultural resources and fee exemptions for disadvantaged students (see, Meeting Our Commitments, 1999, pp. 75-77).

The New Higher School Certificate and VET

While VET is often considered solely within the context of Year 11/12 courses, our project suggests VET school curriculum needs to be considered in a broader context. This is necessary so that what is provided in senior schools can be effective in meeting the needs of young people, be relevant to state and national goals, and provide assessment and accreditation that is clear to students, the community and employers. However, we hypothesise that a number of existing and potential processes may inhibit the ability of the HSC reforms to deliver expected outcomes.

When the HSC was introduced in 1967, about 18,000 students sat for this end of secondary school examination, and they selected from a total of 28 subjects. By 1998, more than 65,000 students - a retention rate of 70% - sat the HSC selecting from over 70 subjects. The President of the Board of
Studies, Professor Gordon Stanley, argued in February 1999 that “overwhelmingly, the community has said that it is time for change. While the (Higher School Certificate) is still doing its job, over the past 30 years the job has changed dramatically” (Board Bulletin, 8(1), p. 1, p.7).

The changes to the HSC were justified by the need to increase the rigour and quality of the senior school curriculum, in order to ensure that HSC marks fairly reflected the standards achieved by all students, not just those taking prestigious subjects (commonly in privileged government and non-government schools). There were also good reasons for improving the reporting of HSC results so that employers and the community could understand them. In particular, the government argued vocational studies in the HSC were insufficiently rigorous to earn industry and university respect and had not led to clear pathways for further training or employment. (STF, 1997, p. 1, 2)

The HSC reforms to senior school education in NSW paid attention especially to course structure, assessment and matriculation requirements and will be introduced for the first year of the post-compulsory senior school [Year 11/Preliminary HSC] in 2000. Securing Their Future does have the intention of making secondary curriculum in NSW more socially inclusive by reducing the distinctions between programs of study which tended to separate elite groups of students from others, mainly through matriculation status (Crump et al., 1997c).

This reflects the broad sentiments stated in the NSW Charter for Equity that “priority is given to narrowing those gaps in education and training outcomes that reflect need and prevailing social inequalities” (NSW Government, 1998). In a new spirit of cooperation, partly assisted by a bureaucratic restructure, The NSW Board of Studies, The Board of Vocational Education and Training (BVET), the Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board (VETAB) and the Department of Education and Training are assisting schools implement VET syllabuses to begin next year. The NSW Board of Studies Annual Report for 1998 asserts:
The new HSC will measure and indicate what students know, understand and can do. At the same time it will enhance intellectual challenge and provide opportunities for all students. It will be founded on a curriculum that meets clearly-defined standards or rigour and subject integrity. (p.20).

In particular, our interest is in building new information on post-compulsory education regarding the function of vocational education courses in New South Wales for the Higher School Certificate years. HSC “Pathways” for continuing and re-entry students include:

1. Accumulation (over five years)
2. Repeating courses (must be within 5 year period, most recent mark used for UAI)
3. Recognition of prior learning (credit transfer and/or advanced standing)
4. Acceleration (within subject, highest HSC level, university or TAFE)
5. Part-time traineeships (job that combines paid work and training that leads to a recognised Australian qualification) (BoS, 1999, p.6)

Industry-recognised subjects in the new HSC include Tourism and Hospitality; Business Services and Administration, Metal Engineering; Primary Industries; Information Technology and Construction. For vocational education the NSW Board of Studies reports that:

The HSC White Paper *Securing Their Future* includes a commitment to extend and develop vocational training in schools as part of the HSC. The Office of the Board of Studies worked (...) to reassess (current) programs, assure their coherence and relevance, and extend recognition by employers, the vocational training sector, and universities. The first step involved the development of industry-specific curriculum frameworks (1998, p. 28).

The status and credibility of VET in the HSC resided with the universities as they control how each HSC course is considered in calculating a student’s University Admission Index [UAI]. The BoS argued that within each VET industry framework there should be the opportunity for students to undertake a least one course in which their performance may contribute directly to the UAI.

However, in July 1999 the universities, through a committee representing academic boards and senates, decided that the seven new vocational courses would not automatically be counted towards students’ university entrance scores but remain Category B subjects. This decision means students can count only two units (out of their 10 best units) from these courses towards their UAI. As this decision will not be
reviewed until the end of 2001, there is little doubt that, for higher education, VET is not to be brought in from the margins; not yet anyway.

**Alienation and Young People**

While the purposes of VET suit different groups, our special interest is those students alienated from, reluctant to complete, or attempting re-entry into senior secondary education. Our objective is to understand policy reforms in this context, in order to provide input into policies that might counter the spiral of disadvantage in which many of these young people are caught. In our view, there are three groups of alienated students caught in this spiral: reluctant stayers, early leavers and re-entry students. As noted earlier, ongoing credentialism means that even senior school credentials are now seen as inadequate for secure employment and further training.

*Reluctant stayers*

School has become a shelter from unemployment to certain young people. This phenomenon goes some way to explaining the increase in retention rates in Australian schools: up from 35% in 1980 to 72% in 1995 (Lamb, 1998). Students who use school in this way are sometimes referred to as "reluctant stayers". One study of 17 schools identified 25% of year 11 students as reluctant stayers (Dwyer, 1996: 6). Little is known about the background of reluctant stayers, although there is some indication that they may include a relatively large proportion of working class girls (Lamb, 1994, p. 210).

*Early leavers*

Another group are those young people who continue to drop out of education despite initiatives to encourage them to stay. In Australia, early leavers are commonly understood as those young people who do not complete senior high school. About one quarter of young people belong to this group. The prospects for early leavers are not very good, especially in terms of employment, and actually have deteriorated during the past 15 years, "despite smaller numbers of early leavers competing for jobs" (Lamb, 1996b, p. 9).
At the beginning of the 1980s, 19% of early school leavers were unemployed in their first year out of school, as opposed to 12% of year 12 completers. The figures for the early 1990s were: 33% unemployment of early school leavers versus 14% of year 12 completers (Lamb, 1996b). In addition, jobs taken by early leavers tend to be less skilled, for shorter periods of time and providing less job training, making it hard to develop a career (DEETYA, 1993; Wyn & White, 1997). Finally, early school leavers are drawn in unrepresentatively large numbers from low socioeconomic backgrounds: young people from government schools, rural areas, Aboriginal backgrounds, boys, and English speaking backgrounds (Ainley & Sheret, 1992; DEET, 1987; Lamb, 1996b).

Re-entry students
Some early school leavers decide to return to education, usually after a break of 3-5 years. They constitute our third group, re-entry students. Very little is known about the reasons for returning or the background of these students but we do know that re-entry into ordinary schools can be difficult. A Melbourne study (Holden, 1992) showed that some schools refused re-entry and that the majority of students who attempted re-entry left again without completing their secondary education.

The problems these students encountered included negative reactions from teachers, lack of support in the school, a school environment that allowed very little autonomy and responsibility, and an irrelevant curriculum. These problems can be overcome to a large extent through innovative structural arrangements such as those found at the Coffs Harbour Education Complex, a single-site campus of Southern Cross University, TAFE and secondary public education. However, while some senior colleges and some specific re-entry schools exist, we suggest that there is much ordinary high schools can do to cater for re-entry students, if supported by appropriate policy.

An examination of federal government policy provides a context for understanding the potential impact of the reforms to the Higher School Certificate at the state level discussed earlier. An important early
The federal policy document is *Young People’s Participation in Post-compulsory Education and Training*, also known as the Finn Report (Australian Education Council Review Committee, 1991). The Finn Committee was established to report on:

> the future development of postcompulsory education and training in Australia, with particular reference to those young people who have left school and are not participating in a formal education or training program". (Australian Education Council Review Committee, 1991, p. 2).

The Finn Committee considered all early school leavers who do not proceed to another form of education or training as “disadvantaged”. However the Finn Review implied few special measures were needed for this group as the general recommendations were intended to benefit early leavers and reluctant stayers as well as everyone else. A central measure to cater for the broader and more diverse senior high school population recognised by Finn focused on vocational education. An integration of general and vocational elements of the curriculum was expected to make the school experience more meaningful and relevant in that:

> a broader school curriculum offering more effective linkages with vocational qualifications and employment as well as higher education is important for those remaining in school as well as in influencing potential early leavers to remain. (Australian Education Council Review Committee, 1991: 11).

Successive governments have continued to recognise that senior high school now serves more functions than preparation for university and, therefore, expanded and more effective vocational education in schools is needed. A former Federal Minister of Education, Amanda Vanstone, explained clearly, if somewhat bluntly, that:

> The introduction of more vocational education into the school system means that students who want a job when they leave school can get some work related skills. Schools should not just be TER factories (1). Students should not be presented with the choice between participating in subjects they consider to be irrelevant or dropping out. (Vanstone, 1997)

Specific national policy measures include the introduction of the New Apprenticeships scheme and encouragement of VET in all schools. According to a recent MCEETYA report an important purpose of these measures is to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged students. (1999, item 8)
The underlying belief of the national government seems to be that if young people are more educated and particularly have more vocational skills then a whole range of economic and social problems, especially youth unemployment, will be solved (Te Riele, 1997). Of course, increased education without job creation may not be able to fulfill these expectations.

The Needs of Alienated Young People

What are the needs of students alienated from, reluctant to complete, or attempting re-entry into senior secondary education, and how and to what extent can education and especially vocational education help to meet those needs? The most important to thing to understand in policy development, especially for VET, is that disadvantaged students do not form a homogeneous group, and that educational needs vary. This becomes obvious when one considers the various groups who are least likely to complete senior high school (Dwyer, 1996: 16):

• Children from low income families  • Aboriginal students;
• Country region students  • Homeless youth.

Common to most of these groups is that their experience of schooling is negative: they do not get on with teachers, they find the curriculum irrelevant or too hard, and they find the school environment unsupportive (Holden & Dwyer, 1992; Schools Council, 1995). A mixture of approaches to suit the increasing variety of students in the senior school cohort is needed to improve the nature and result of those experiences. Few of the students belonging to the groups listed above are high achievers, but that in itself need not lead to alienation from schooling. As Ainley and Sheret point out:

Students who achieve at a lower level can find school equally satisfying in terms of teacher-student relations, status, social integration, the relevance of the work which they undertake, and general satisfaction with school. (1992, p. 72)

A sense of autonomy and mutual respect between students and teachers is of great importance to young people at this age, as they are moving towards adulthood (Dwyer, 1996). Schooling needs to be organised in a way that encourages self confidence, enjoyment in learning and the capacity to think and
act independently (Blakers & Nicholson, 1988, p. 34). Finally, students need to feel that what they do at school is relevant to their own needs and interests. Underlying this is a fundamentally different approach to students. Blakers & Nicholson (1988, p. 46) contend that:

the school [is required to] ask a different question about each student: not, as at present, Where does this student fit into our categories and processes?, but rather, How can we help this student to build on the interests, capacities and experiences which make her or him a unique individual?

Before we continue to look at the kind of approaches that would be useful in making these differences, we want to stress that schools can not fix everything. It has been easy for governments of both political persuasions to adopt a mixture of human capital and deficit ideas and blame young people for economic problems and especially for youth unemployment because they are lacking in qualifications, and then to blame education for not managing to keep young people in school for longer and provide them with these lacking qualifications (Te Riele, 1997). But this picture is far too simplistic.

First of all, higher qualifications by themselves cannot create jobs or increase productivity. Unemployment will simply be waiting for young people. As Marginson (1992b, p. 18) points out: "It is not enough to shovel everyone into education and training and say ‘problem solved’. All this achieves is ‘problem postponed’". Secondly, the problem is not actually of an educational nature. Youth unemployment is caused mostly by structural changes in the economy and demand levels for employees (Watson, 1994). Addressing labour market and structural economic problems through educational measures alone is more likely to be counterproductive.

Thirdly, despite government claims that requirements of the work force have increased, the jobs that early leavers aim for frequently do not require the higher qualifications. As noted above for the United Kingdom, employers in Australia similarly use qualifications to ‘screen’ job applicants and faced with more people who are more highly qualified they increase their recruitment criteria, regardless of the irrelevance of these qualifications to the job (Marginson, 1993; Watson, 1994).
We recognise that the use of schooling to sort and rank students means that there will always be a hierarchy under present socioeconomic conditions and the prevalent relations of schooling. What has happened in the past decade is that a new ‘minimum’ has been established in this hierarchy, namely completion of Year 12, or equivalent. The associated credential also needs to be of a sufficient standard to have worth. Young people who do not achieve these outcomes have been in effect ‘disqualified’ from most employment opportunities.

While staying on or returning to education cannot guarantee young people a job or a satisfying future, it means they will be back in the labour market pool. The limited number of jobs available to young people does mean playing a game of musical chairs. We none-the-less argue it is better to be skilled than not, and that a closer match between training, skills and work could see unemployment decrease, and see young people better prepared for lifelong opportunities for learning and work.

**What Schools Can Do**

How can schools try to make education more attractive to marginalised and alienated young people, so that they do stay or return? Research (see Dwyer, 1996 for an overview) has shown that the following practices help to re-engage these students:

- academic and personal support from teachers, so students don't feel overwhelmed by their studies;
- mutual respect between teachers & students;
- a wider range of subject choice and flexibility in time tabling;
- demonstrating the academic, social, employment and other benefits of staying on;
- more engaging learning processes, such as cooperative learning;
- opportunities for student input & participation;
- more practical studies and work experience.

This last practice is strongly related to the issue of a relevant curriculum, raised earlier on, and we see this as an issue for all students, with the practices listed above appropriate across the curriculum, not just for a (by implication lower standard) VET stream. As Dwyer points out:
Part of the repeated requests, made in student interviews, for "more practical studies" is related to a feeling that a lot of the work covered in the standard curriculum is foreign to what they know and experience in their local and family lives. (1996, p. 24)

The standard curriculum is still largely an academic curriculum, preparing for entry into higher education. But, as we have shown, the government is aware that this is no longer relevant to the majority of senior high school students and now emphasises the importance of work experience programs, links with TAFE and VET in schools. There has been some criticism that current reforms have narrowed the post compulsory curriculum too much. Further, there is concern about what is seen as an emphasis on the instrumental relationship between education and employment and a neglect of the broader roles of education (see Wyn & White, 1997).

We acknowledge that there is a need to guard against the internal marketisation of schools, with subject choice for some students driving them onto the margins, explicitly or implicitly, through predetermined school pathways. While acknowledging these concerns, it seems to us that VET in schools can play a vital role in re-engaging students with education, linking in with their own interests, and offering a potential way out of the spiral of disadvantage in which many of these young people find themselves. Senior school curriculum needs to be a coherent and integrated pattern of studies, all of which are valued equally, for all students.

Students who have difficulties with the academic curriculum of the dominant senior school curriculum, still primarily designed around university entrance, should not be labeled ‘dumb'. Many simply cannot see the point of learning the available options. Dwyer (1996, 45) refers to a ‘reality test' which school knowledge has to pass before these students engage with it. Students want to see how the knowledge is useful, or is linked with real life or with their own personal interests, needs, expectations and abilities.

Finally, we strongly believe that VET need not be narrowly instrumental and VET can contribute to social and cultural goals in exactly the same way that traditional academic curriculum is seen to
contribute. In referring to the introduction of Key Competencies in Australian schools in the mid-1990s, Crump (1997a, p. 4) noted that:

This development [...] has - I believe - the potential to provide a mechanism through curriculum reform to release disenfranchised young people from inappropriate and irrelevant schooling and to motivate them through holding out the prospect of routes of progression through a variety of learning settings (of equal status and access) with interchangeability of course elements across the tertiary education spectrum.

As we have argued throughout this paper, VET in schools will be especially effective if there are authentic learning environments in partnership between schools and local communities (Stokes & Holdsworth, 1998) and different teaching strategies (Achtenhagen and Grubb, 1999) to cater for different learning styles (Anderson et al., 1997). We are convinced that VET has the potential to re-engage young people with education, whether they are still reluctantly at school, thinking of leaving early or re-entering the senior years.

With the labour market becoming more knowledge-based, such re-engagement becomes increasingly important. Before any more plans are drawn up for VET in the senior years of schooling, whether in NSW or nationally, good (and socially just) public policy in education needs to answer to what extent is the post-compulsory curriculum serving student and family ambitions for employment in a way that is diverse, equitable and inclusive? Only then will education and hope be synonymous with each other and with the complex and exciting experiences of young lives.

**Education and Hope**

At the end of the 1990s VET encompasses a diverse range of programs and providers which, combined, offer the potential for more flexible and long term career advances for young people, but the practical and theoretical nature of these recent changes has not been well understood. Governments around the world have sought to develop more comprehensive and integrated approaches to linking education and work - in nearly all cases around the notion of ‘key competencies’ - but the policies and mechanisms to
drive these initiatives have not always been compatible with existing practices in schools and workplaces (Crump, 1997b).

Evolving conceptions of vocational education have impacted on what used to be called ‘general education’, and the status of higher education courses and institutions is changing under these pressures. Investing in the education and skills-base of Australia’s youth is one of the key strategies being employed to achieve the objective of Australia becoming an advanced knowledge-based economy capable of competing in the global market. Achieving this will require all members of society to have clear, accessible, equitable and valued education and training that builds on secondary education and provides scope for life-long learning (Crump & Anderson, 1998). If not, projected productivity levels and social justice objectives will fail.

The harnessing of the talent and skills of young people in a way that advantages themselves, their community and the nation is a complex and difficult task (Sloan, 1998). Failure at it has enormous costs in terms of unused capacity for expanding the culturally rich and ethnically diverse democratic foundations of government and community; and for the hope a relevant and rewarding education can give the young people involved. Better educated, more fruitfully employed and more highly skilled young people will add significant economic benefits to Australia as well as providing a future based on social harmony.

One strategy is to provide assessment and reporting of student achievement in a way that more directly and appropriately reflects each student’s standard of performance. This is one of the most significant elements of the HSC reforms shifting “results” from artificially constructed statistical procedures which allocate student results in comparison to the performance of others in a predetermined distribution. This distribution limits the number of students scoring at high levels, even though more students may have demonstrated ability at these levels. This measure alone can restore some hope to education through taking into account curricular complexity, multiple literacies, disparate contexts and emerging
pedagogical demands that tend to be specific and situated. Only then will the marginalisation of young people through VET pathways in the senior school, too frequently associated with class, gender, race and ethnicity, be challenged sufficiently to not count against them nor against our chances for a better society.

**Notes**

(1) TER stands for Tertiary Entrance Rank, a single achievement indicator used to determine which courses at which universities a high school graduate could gain entry to.

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Appendices