The Employer Perspective – A report on employer views of the VET in Schools Program, is the eleventh in a series of reports from the Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VET in Schools) Employer Perspective Report. The report is prepared for the Department of Education, Employment and Training, Victoria by The Educational Outcomes Research Unit, University of Melbourne. The report provides an overview of employer perspectives on the VET in Schools Program and highlights the key findings and recommendations for future improvements.
The Employer Perspective

A report on employer views of the VET in Schools Program

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The VET in Schools Programs Survey
prepared for the Department of Education, Employment and Training, Victoria
by The Educational Outcomes Research Unit,
University of Melbourne.

March, 2001
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We also extend our thanks to the employers themselves for giving their time to complete the surveys.

All responsibility for the management of the data and for the interpretations and conclusions set out in this report rests with the authors.

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As of 1 March 2001, the Board of Studies state responsibilities were subsumed by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA).

PREFACE

This is the eleventh in a series of reports from the Vocational Education and Training in Schools Programs project.

This study reports on employer views and knowledge of the VET in Schools program and its graduates. It uses data gathered by surveys administered by VET in Schools cluster coordinators, with the cooperation and assistance of the VECCI SILO project.

This report is part of an ongoing study into the implementation of the VET in Schools program. It includes the yearly tracking of Year 12 students who are enrolled in VET in Schools subjects into their post-schooling destinations.
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Employers’ Views of VET in Schools Graduates

- Employers’ views of their VET in Schools recruits are overwhelmingly positive —
  - All (or nearly all) employers believe their VET in Schools recruits perform routine tasks well, get on well with other staff and are interested in their work.
  - More than nine in ten feel these recruits have the practical skills needed in their job, are punctual and reliable and are able to communicate well.
  - Just under nine in ten believe these recruits use their initiative when required, have confidence in dealing with work colleagues and are good at thinking for themselves.
- 92 per cent of employers believe the VET in Schools program makes school leavers more employable, compared with the traditional VCE.

What Aspects of VET in Schools Are Important?

- Employers value the links which VET in Schools creates between school and the world of work. They see its major strengths as:
  - The inclusion of work placements
  - Visits from teachers/trainers
  - Industry-endorsed modules

Areas of Improvement

- Despite these generally positive views, employers nominated some areas of training which could have been improved —
  - The two most commonly cited were confidence in dealing with work colleagues (47 per cent) and the ability to think for themselves (49 per cent).
  - Day-to-day work readiness, communication skills and practical job skills were nominated by between three and four in ten employers.
  - Punctuality, routine task readiness and getting on with other staff were nominated by between two and three in ten employers.
Background

At the interface of post-compulsory provision and the labour market, where general and vocational education confront both the needs of young job-seekers and the demands of industry, the structure and certification of the senior secondary curriculum have been of major concern to educational policy makers in Australia.

In particular, the provision of appropriate VET content within the senior secondary curriculum has provoked considerable debate and a range of policy responses. The challenge of providing breadth and depth of curriculum choices to the new and diverse clienteles brought into secondary schooling since the recent and rapid expansion of educational participation, has been a central issue in this debate.

Initial responses to the challenge of diversity have, inevitably, turned to the provision of VET subjects alongside the traditional senior secondary menu of university-oriented studies. However, until recently, much of the VET content delivered in Australian schools has been non-accredited. While providing much needed options for students unsuited to the demands of the university-focused curriculum, much of what has been offered under the label of VET in the senior secondary years contributed neither to a recognised AQF qualification nor to a university-recognised senior school certificate.

In Victoria, initial attempts to integrate vocational studies into the Year 12 certificate in the early 1990s took the form of dual accreditation and credit transfer programs, by which means some VCE subjects would count towards a VET certificate or which allowed students to take a combination of VET units and VCE subjects.

It is now evident that the low take-up of VET under these circumstances was due to the continued separation of vocational and academic content, both in terms of status and accreditation. As long as the vocational content did not contribute to the requirements of the VCE, it carried little status in the eyes of the user. Nor did it provide a realistic curriculum alternative, since it was required to be additional to the normal load of studies required to achieve the VCE.

The VET in Schools program, established in 1994, sought to address these limitations by locating VET modules in accredited VCE units, thus producing hybrid studies which satisfied both the requirements of the Victorian Board of Studies for a VCE unit and those of the AQF for a VET unit. Students were thus able to graduate from school having fulfilled the requirements of the VCE and those of a nationally recognised vocational qualification (usually Certificate I or II).

Any judgment of the program’s success some six years after its implementation need go no further than assessing the rate and extent of its growth. From the 461 pioneering students in 1994, the program grew to enrol well over 18,000 in the 2000 year. But the program’s success can be measured in other ways too. Yearly tracking of the Year 12 VET in Schools graduates has shown a consistent pattern of successful outcomes.
Consistently, more than half of the cohort moves into university or TAFE, with most of the remaining graduates making a successful transition to the labour market — either to full-time work or to an apprenticeship or traineeship (see Polesel et al. 1999, Polesel et al. 2000). Rates of transition to part-time work or unemployment have been consistently low; combined, these two destinations usually claim no more than about 10–13 per cent of the graduating cohort.

Moreover, this pattern has remained consistent and stable over time, with the high rate of growth neither diluting these positive outcomes over time nor compromising the program’s capacity to access diverse exit points.

Recent data from a survey of the 1999 Year 12 cohort confirm this stability. VET school leavers continued to make a successful entry to a range of study and labour force destinations in the year 2000 (see Figure A).

The results presented in this report point to a strong relationship between employers and the schools which offer the VET in Schools program. They indicate the importance which employers place on workplace-ready recruits and school leavers who bring with them industry-recognised qualifications. They also underline the continued reliance of employers on schools to provide some of their labour force needs, especially in non-metropolitan Victoria.

It is to be hoped that the employer–school relationship will continue to be nurtured and strengthened, both through the operation of the clusters and through the expansion of the VET in Schools program. It is certainly no coincidence that the history of successful transitions from the VET in Schools program is matched by strong employer endorsement. In this context, the importance of maintaining and expanding the VET in Schools program cannot be stressed strongly enough.

**Methodology**

In 1999, the University of Melbourne, supported by VECCI, approached the twenty-six VET in Schools cluster coordinators in Victoria (ten metropolitan and sixteen non-metropolitan) to become involved in this study of Victorian employers. Each cluster coordinator was requested to select 15–20 employers in his or her region to be interviewed using an interview schedule developed by the University of Melbourne research team. Cluster coordinators were instructed to select a range of small and large employers, with a bias towards smaller ones, given that these form the majority of enterprises.

The achieved sample was not a random one, as cluster coordinators reported that they tended to select employers with whom they had some contact in the past, although this did not imply that the employers had actually hired VET in Schools graduates. This was necessary to ensure robust numbers of employers who had employed VET in Schools graduates.

The data collection procedure included twenty-one cluster coordinators agreeing to participate and eighteen actually returning survey forms (265 useable responses). Some baseline data on the employers are reported in Tables 1 and 2.

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**Table 1 | All Employers — Number of Staff**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER OF STAFF</th>
<th>PROPORTION OF EMPLOYERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–10</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–20</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–50</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–100</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101–500</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 500</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, given these positive indicators (both in terms of growth and outcomes), it is also important to ask whether the labour market itself is benefiting from the program. The employer perspective provided in this report presents another view of the VET in Schools program, one which assesses the program in terms of employer needs, the relationship between schools and employers and the views of employers regarding school leavers.

To obtain this view, the researchers turned to the VET in Schools clusters — regional bodies established by the Department of Education, Employment and Training in Victoria to create and maintain links between employers and schools for the purposes of facilitating work placement and the transition from school to the labour market. The strong relationship between the cluster coordinators and employers presented an opportunity for the researchers to approach employers who had experience and knowledge of the VET in Schools program and its students.

For this reason, cluster coordinators were asked to play a key role in the data collection for this study. The coordinators were asked to approach and interview employers by telephone using a structured interview schedule developed by the University of Melbourne researchers in consultation with the Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VECCI) and with the Department of Education, Employment and Training in Victoria. Twenty-one of the twenty-six clusters agreed to participate and this generated 265 completed interviews with employers across metropolitan and non-metropolitan Victoria.
It should be noted that, in all, 135 employers had heard of the VET in Schools program but had not employed any of its graduates. Of these, however, approximately six in ten stated that they did not recruit 15–18 year-olds or did not recruit directly from school. Of the employers who knew about the program, then, some 23 per cent were in the position of recruiting school leavers but had not yet recruited VET in Schools graduates.

Some of these indicated that they had not hired VET in Schools graduates because the opportunity had not arisen but were favourably disposed to doing so in the future. Nevertheless, there may be potential for greater employment opportunities among this group. This is also an area for possible future communication or promotion activities which target this group and increase employers’ awareness of the VET in Schools program and of the industry areas it covers.

The over-representation of non-metropolitan employers reflects the higher number of non-metropolitan VET clusters. However, the data have not been adjusted in a post-administration weighting, since there are no statistically significant differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan responses for most items. In the rare cases where these occur, they are reported in the text.

Table 2 | All Employers — Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>PROPORTION OF EMPLOYERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-metropolitan</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, some differences were found between the two groups in the employment status of the VET graduates they employed. These are duly noted in the text. However, with respect to their views of the VET program and its graduates, no statistically significant differences were found in the great majority of items. The one or two minor exceptions are, once again, noted in the text.

Moreover, the basis on which such a weighting should occur presented its own difficulties. Should the weighting, for example, be based on the proportion of metropolitan and non-metropolitan employers across the state? More justifiably, perhaps, it should be based on the proportion of metropolitan and non-metropolitan employers who hire students from the program, but this proportion is an unknown quantity.

On consideration, it was felt that the best solution was to employ the data without modification and to note metropolitan/non-metropolitan differences where they occur.

Employers and the VET in Schools Program

Among the other objectives of the study was the need to determine the level of knowledge of the VET in Schools program among employers. When asked if they had heard about the VET in Schools program, approximately nine in ten answered in the affirmative, indicating a high level of awareness in the employer community. The nature of the sample may have influenced this rate of awareness, since the predominant need to deal with employers who had actually employed VET in Schools graduates meant that such employers were more likely to be contacted. Nevertheless, it shows that considerable knowledge of this school-based program exists.

To fulfill a related objective of the research project, which was to disseminate knowledge of the VET in Schools program, the cluster coordinators conducting the survey were required to read out a short description of the program, along with its aims and objectives, to any employers who had not heard of it.

Employers were then asked if they had ever employed any VET in Schools students directly from school. Just under four in ten (38.4 per cent) replied in the affirmative, and this group of 101 employers was then selected for a series of further questions focussing on their perceptions of VET in Schools graduates as employees.

Table 3 | VET in Schools Employers (N=101)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER OF STAFF</th>
<th>PROPORTION OF EMPLOYERS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–10</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–20</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–30</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–50</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–100</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101–500</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 500</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 | VET in Schools Employers (N=101)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>PROPORTION OF EMPLOYERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-metropolitan</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The group of 101 employers who had employed VET in Schools graduates was similar to the broader sample of employers in terms of location and size of enterprise (see Tables 3 and 4).
How Were VET in Schools Graduates Recruited?

This section presents data on those employers who reported having employed VET in Schools graduates directly from school (N=101). Overwhelmingly, employers in this group reported that they had recruited their VET in Schools employee through some kind of contact with the school (see Figure 1).

More than eight in ten of these employers reported that recruitments occurred following a work placement, while 38 per cent said they occurred through contacts which existed with the school. Relatively low proportions of employers reported using advertising (6 per cent) or an employment agency (8 per cent) to recruit these graduates.

These data indicate that an important link exists between the VET in Schools program, work placement and subsequent employment. Previous research carried out by the University of Melbourne team indicates that students see one of the program’s strengths as being its work placement component. The role of work placement in building skills through experience has long been acknowledged, but these data provided from the employers’ perspective would suggest that the students’ strong endorsement of work placements may also reflect the role of these placements in facilitating future employment.
Factors Influencing the Decision To Employ School Leavers

Nor surprisingly, nearly nine in ten employers reported that a student’s having done a VET in Schools program influenced their decision to employ that student (see Figure 2). The highest ranking factor, however, was that the programs are part of an industry recognised qualification (93.9 per cent). Also important were the factors that the programs are developed by industry (86.6 per cent) and that the student has had experience in the workplace (83.7 per cent).

Figure 2 | Factors in Employing School Leavers (percentage)

Once again, the evidence suggests a link in the employer’s mind between school, workplace training, relevant content and employment. School graduates who have been exposed to industry-endorsed content, who have some workplace experience and who are workplace ready present a strong argument for being employed.

Of least importance to the employers was the fact that the student will attract a Commonwealth commencement initiative, a factor nominated by just over one-quarter of the employers surveyed. This would indicate that the ability of the prospective employee to contribute to the employer’s business productivity far outweighs any financial incentives which might be offered.

One difference between metropolitan and non-metropolitan employers was detected in this area. Employers in the country were much more likely than their Melbourne counterparts to nominate workplace experience as a factor in influencing their decision to employ a VET school leaver. This may be a further indication of the greater reliance of country employers on the school to turn out trained employees.

What Is the Employment Status of VET in Schools Employees?

The strong link between the VET in Schools program and apprenticeships/traineeships which emerges from the data on post-schooling destinations (more than 17 per cent of graduating Year 12 VET students from the 1999 cohort became apprentices or trainees) is also evident in the employers’ perspective.

More than six in ten of the employers surveyed reported having employed VET recruits in a full-time capacity (61.3 per cent) — mostly as apprentices or trainees. This was the largest category (see Figure 3). Just over two in ten employed VET school leavers as casuals or holiday employees (22.4 per cent), and 16.3 per cent employed them as part-time workers.

For this item, strong differences could be discerned between metropolitan and non-metropolitan employers. Those in the non-metropolitan group were more than twice as likely as their Melbourne counterparts to be employing apprentices, trainees or other full-time workers (72.5 per cent, as opposed to 34.5 per cent), and were much less likely to employ part-time or casual and holiday workers (27.5 per cent, as opposed to 65.5 per cent).

This suggests a strong reliance on schools to provide full-time labour (as opposed to casual or part-time workers) in the non-metropolitan area. If this is the case, the data which follow (and which indicate the high value placed by employers on graduates from this program) may reflect the employers’ dependence on schools to provide training which is not available elsewhere in the community, particularly in the more isolated areas which have more difficulty accessing TAFE institutes.

If such a dependence exists, the nature of recruitment practices which involve schools, as well as the schools’ role in providing training, may need to be more fully explored, especially in the country.

Overall, however, these data suggest the mutual usefulness of the link between employers and schools, with this link contributing to the fostering of a range of employment outcomes for VET in Schools graduates. Nearly half of the employers surveyed nominated more than one category of employment, indicating that they had employed the same graduate or graduates in different ways (perhaps holiday work at first followed by full-time or part-time work or as an apprentice or trainee) or had employed different graduates in different ways (e.g. some as holiday workers, some as apprentices).

More particularly, they suggest that non-metropolitan employers rely heavily on school-based programs to provide training to young people who will join the workforce as apprentices, trainees and full-time workers.
What Do Employers Think of VET in Schools Graduates?

Employers’ views of their VET in Schools recruits are overwhelmingly and almost uniformly positive. A range of items describing the behaviours, competencies and basic skills of recruits attracted positive responses from a very strong majority of employers, mostly nine in ten or higher, with no single behaviour attracting a positive response from fewer than eight in ten employer respondents (see Figure 4). Furthermore, of the employers who answered in the negative, some noted that they would not have expected the graduates to have particular behaviours or skills without further experience in the job.

Nevertheless, all or virtually all employers surveyed felt that their recruits performed routine tasks well, got on well with other staff and were interested in their work. More than nine in ten felt these recruits had the practical skills they needed in their job, were punctual and reliable and were able to communicate well.

Just under nine in ten felt that these recruits used their initiative when required, had confidence in dealing with work colleagues and were good at thinking for themselves. Just over eight in ten felt they could work with little supervision.
Areas of Improvement

Despite these very positive views, employers are prepared to nominate areas of their employees’ training which could have been improved, even though the proportion of respondents asking for improvements tends not to be higher than about one-third for any one skill or competency (see Figure 6).

The two exceptions to this are confidence in dealing with work colleagues and thinking for themselves. Approximately 47 per cent and 49 per cent of employers nominated each of these areas respectively as needing some improvement, even though they are perhaps less susceptible to being influenced by better training than are the other items.

Even where it was felt that improvement was needed, a number of employers tempered their criticism by noting that the training was acceptable in terms of its impact at entry level and that further development of skills would occur with experience on the job or would take place when initial nerves had disappeared.

Figure 6 | Areas of Training Which Could Have Been Improved (percentage)
Employer awareness of the VET in Schools program in the sample was high and a significant proportion of the respondents (four in ten) had employed a school leaver from the program. Employers indicated that they made strong use of their school links (work placement and other contacts) to find these employees and that they employed them in a range of capacities (full time, part time, casual, holiday work and apprentices and trainees).

Non-metropolitan employers, in particular, seemed to be using the program to recruit permanent and full-time workers, a factor which suggests a greater reliance on schools to provide basic training.

Employers also expressed a great deal of confidence in their recruits’ skills and competencies, rating these very highly, and explicitly made the link between their VET in Schools studies and their work readiness. In fact, the vast majority of employers in the sample felt able to endorse the greater employability of these graduates over traditional VCE school leavers. Although many noted that skills would develop as part of a continuing process of learning, they believed that the VET in Schools training which their recruits had received had been very effective at the entry level.

In assessing the program’s strengths, employers were particularly attracted by the industry-endorsed nature of the studies, by the communication which occurred with the school through school visits and by the experience which students gained through work placement.

Work placement and the industry-endorsed nature of the studies also rated highly when employers were asked to nominate the most important factors influencing their decision to employ VET in Schools graduates. One employer noted that another useful aspect of hiring VET in Schools students was the fact that they came with an extra reference (from their work placement) and that this reference gave a more realistic view of the students as workers than one might expect from other referees.

In summary, employer perceptions of the program are very positive, with its greatest strength identified as its strong orientation to the world of work. In this respect, employer attitudes match those of the students themselves and support the evidence that the VET in Schools program has provided a potent vocational option in Victoria’s senior secondary curriculum.

While previous destination studies have noted in broad terms that the transitions from school to tertiary study and to the labour market itself have been largely effective for this group of students, this research study indicates that employers themselves regard the school leavers’ transition to the world of work as having benefited from the effective combination of work placements and relevant curriculum which make up the VET in Schools program.
REFERENCES


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