



Pathway to a positive future

VCOSS Submission to the Education Council's Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training

December 2019

The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria.

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

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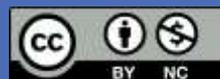
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VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays respect to past, present and emerging Elders.

This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.



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Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body for social and community services in Victoria. VCOSS members reflect the diverse community services industry and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy. VCOSS supports the industry, represents the interests of Victorians facing disadvantage and vulnerability in policy debates, and advocates to develop a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Education Council's Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training.

This Review seeks to understand how to better support senior secondary students in their transition post-school.

Preparing young people for life, including working life beyond school, is an implicit goal of schooling¹. Getting the post-school transition right for young people is crucial. Young people's unemployment experiences, for example, are often complicated by transitions into and out of education². Those who exit secondary school without an education, training or employment pathway are at risk of long-term socio-economic exclusion.³ To support all young people to successfully transition into post-school pathways will require a range of policy responses. These include helping the most disadvantaged students to remain engaged in school, breaking down systemic barriers to school participation, ensuring all students have equitable access to career and educational pathways and opportunities, and providing students with the support they need to build the skills for their future.

Interventions at the tail end of high school may be too late for those who need support the most – that is, those who experience structural disadvantage⁴, such as young people from low socio-economic households or schools, are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, have a disability, are from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, or live in regional and rural areas. These students may not have sufficient access to resources, networks and supports to draw upon to successfully navigate pathways into and through school and post-school.

The way in which schooling systems operate for those who are the most disadvantaged needs to change to ensure these young people have support throughout their educational journey. This means starting earlier, with more support, and greater flexibility for students who need it.

¹ S Billett, *Informing post-school pathways: Investigating school students' authentic work experiences*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), 2006, p.5.

² P Vandenbroek, *Youth unemployment statistics: a quick guide*, Parliament of Australia, 31 May 2018, accessed 4 December 2019, <https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1718/Quick_Guides/YthUnemployment>.

³ Other impacts include – but are not limited to – increased risk of poor physical health and mental health, and justice system involvement.

⁴ Structural disadvantage refers to “the **disadvantage** experienced by some individuals or families or groups or communities as a result of the way society functions (how resources are distributed, how people relate to each other, who has power, how institutions are organised)” – see https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/17935/1/Babacan_Achieving_structural_change.pdf

The submission examines work that is currently underway in Victoria to transform careers education, following the 2018 Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Career Advice Activities in Victorian Schools.⁵

These reforms include starting career education earlier from Year 7, building a better connection to the world of work with relevant exploration and experiences, and making career education a priority⁶. While it is still too early to see the effects of these changes, the reforms are relevant to this review being undertaken by the Education Council. There is an opportunity to apply a national lens to the Victorian reforms, and the potential to build on these foundations, alongside other Victoria programs that support young people to remain engaged in education and make a positive post-school transition.

Education provides protective factors that can prevent or moderate the impact of social disadvantage. This submission makes clear that governments and schools can be doing more to support students and leverage the life-changing potential of the universal platform.

However, VCOSS also wishes to highlight that there are a range of other structural issues that narrow young Australians' post-school pathways.

The availability of work is a key factor – there is only one job available for every five people looking for paid work in Australia.⁷ VOSS also notes that Newstart and other allowances – such as the Youth Allowance – fail to provide jobseekers with the minimum income required to achieve a basic standard of living while they look for work and there is an urgent need to raise the rate by \$75 a week. While not in scope for the Education Council, these factors nonetheless provide important context to the Council's deliberations and policy prescriptions.

⁵ Parliament of Victoria, Economic, Education, Job and Skills Committee, *Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools*, August 2018.

⁶ Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Transforming Career Education in Victorian Government Schools: Connecting today's learning with tomorrow's jobs*, The Education State, 2018; see also Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Transforming career education*, August 2019.

⁷ Anglicare Australia, *Jobs Availability Snapshot 2019*, 2019.

Recommendations

Stronger, more inclusive schools

- Hold high expectations for every student and actively build the aspirations of students facing disadvantage
- Invest in mentoring to support students facing disadvantage
- Expand existing programs to support young people stay engaged in school
- Expand access to targeted supplementary funding programs for students with disabilities, using a new strengths-based functional needs assessment funding model
- Expand mental health support in schools
- Equip schools to tackle bullying
- Strengthen funding for early childhood learning
- Extend the out-of-home care age to 21

Flexible, tailored careers curriculum

- Provide young people with practical skills to help them navigate further education and training opportunities and employment
- Provide dedicated funding to embed career activities combining vocational guidance, real world opportunities, and skills and capabilities building in schools
- Resource growing, employment-intensive industries, such as the community service industry, to support work experience placements
- Provide high quality, contemporary career advice, including information about job prospects
- Provide tailored career advice and support to students experiencing disadvantage

Strong partnerships

- Invest in place-based initiatives (including the existing Victorian Local Learning and Employment Networks) to continue to develop education-industry partnerships, support successful transitions, and create opportunities for students facing disadvantage
- Promote and expand vocational options as an equally valued pathway and encourage schools to increase their flexibility for students to engage in a mix of academic and vocational subjects
- Actively engage parents and carers in the transition process

Stronger, more inclusive schools

Positive post-school pathways are built on a strong foundation of high-quality, inclusive early childhood education, primary and secondary schooling.

Barriers to participation and engagement include cultures of low expectations of students experiencing disadvantage, a disconnect between the lived experience of young people and what they are taught, and lack of time, resources and staff to support students with complex needs.

Educational settings need to be adaptable and inclusive to meet the varying needs of disadvantaged students, and provide them with supports that enable them to excel, from mentoring through to the provision of mental health supports in schools. Funding needs to be adequate so that students some don't miss out on support or receive support too late.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Hold high expectations for every student and actively build the aspirations of students facing disadvantage
- Invest in mentoring to support students facing disadvantage

Set high aspirations for all students

Education provides protective factors that can prevent or moderate the impacts of social disadvantage. Education settings – from early childhood and beyond – have a role to play in fostering a growth mindset and creating a culture of high aspiration.

This benefits all students, but particularly those who experience disadvantage.

Too often, students who experience social disadvantage are characterised as “problems to be solved or victims in need of charity”⁸.

A culture of low expectation can further entrench disadvantage and significantly impact school engagement and post-school pathways. This includes career advice and related activities.

Aspiration helps to create the conditions in which young people feel safe, motivated and supported to explore their interests and strengths, stay engaged in school, and to transition successfully from primary school to secondary school, and secondary school to post-school pathways. When this aspiration is missing and students instead experience low expectations from school staff, young people may miss out on reaching their full potential.

For young people without exposure to role models or support networks outside of school to encourage high aspirations, being in a school environment that has low expectations of them can exacerbate, rather than challenge, entrenched disadvantage.

⁸ Foyer Foundation, *Introduction: The Foyer Foundation Transforming lives for young people*, 2018.

“Achieving a good education can change the life trajectory of a young person and build their confidence and self-esteem”⁹

VCOSS is particularly concerned about the experiences of students with disabilities who are at heightened risk of experiencing low expectations, discriminatory and negative attitudes – factors that have been “identified as the key barrier to effective post school transition” for students with a disability¹⁰. In Children and Young People with Disability Australia’s 2015 *Post School Transition* report, they found,

“Discrimination and a culture of low expectations are the mainstay of the post school transition experiences of students with disability. This culture does not recognise individual interests, strengths and capabilities and is present within the community, schools and businesses. It affects students’ transition planning and the provision of essential opportunities such as work experience.”¹¹

Give students a greater voice in shaping their own pathway

VCOSS members report some students are being channelled into specific pathways that reflect what school staff (and sometimes families) think students can achieve rather than pathways that reflect students’ interests and talents.

In some cases, students are pushed to select options that narrow their pathways without fully understanding the implications of their forced ‘choice’ – for example, being pressured to undertake the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)¹² when the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) may be the more suitable stepping stone on their preferred pathway.

Other students – for example, students with disabilities – may be pushed into segregated learning environments that don’t reflect their choices or aspirations and narrow their post-school options. They may be subsequently channelled into day programs or Australian

⁹ Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Education Guide For Carers of Children Living In Out-Of-Home Care*, June 2019, p.2.

¹⁰ Child and Young People with Disability Australia, *Post School Transition: The Experiences of Students with Disability*, 2015, p.33.

¹¹ Child and Young People with Disability Australia, *Post School Transition: The Experiences of Students with Disability*, 2015, p.41.

¹² VCAL often referred to as the alternate and less academic pathway to the VCE. “VCAL is a pathway to Technical and Further Education (TAFE), university, apprenticeships/traineeships or employment”. See Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, VCAL, <<https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/vcal/Pages/index.aspx>>, accessed 29 November 2019.

Disability Enterprises and effectively locked out of opportunities to pursue other vocational pathways (for example, traineeships) or TAFE, university or open employment.

For students with an out-of-home care background, Victorian initiatives such LOOKOUT and Raising Expectations highlight that it is possible to create a culture of high aspiration and break the link between disadvantage and low attainment with the right support, and to set students up for success in their post-school pathway. The right support includes creating the conditions for student voice to be elevated (as well as providing schools with more time, resources and staff to support students with complex needs, and governments delivering increased needs-based funding and targeted intervention programs).

Victoria has taken meaningful action to embed the voices of senior secondary students in system governance – for example, by making it mandatory for every secondary school council to elect students, who have full voting rights, and through the creation of a dedicated position on the board of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. These changes are driving welcome change at the individual school level – for example, some schools are involving student representatives in teacher recruitment.

However, more can be done to increase the level of autonomy and power that students have in relation to their individual pathway.

Where school systems incorporate inquiry-based approaches to learning and teaching – providing learners with ‘choice and voice’ in their educational experiences – students develop the skills and confidence to step into their power as learners, and can move towards full ownership of their in-school and post-school pathway.

There is also an important role for mentoring programs.

Support students with mentors

Mentoring programs can make a significant contribution to building aspiration in students and helping shape post-school pathways.

They particularly benefit students who may not have social networks and access to opportunities and support through their family.

For example a National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) study found a university mentoring program delivered to rural and low socioeconomic status secondary students effectively raised student aspirations to attend university¹³. The study also suggests similar mentoring projects in both sectors could work together to provide further education pathways for all young people, in both vocation and academic career paths.

VCOSS members report students with disability want to have a mentor from a person with a disability. This could also support motivation and engagement in school.

There is also strong evidence to support the allocation of a learning mentor to young people in out-of-home care, for support in their learning environment¹⁴. VCOSS members report the role of a learning mentor in relationship building and knowing ‘someone is in your corner’ is extremely valuable for young people in out-of-home care who may not have access to family support networks and face significant upheaval and instability. However, VCOSS members also report some schools have insufficient resources and struggle to provide learning

¹³ Curtis D, et al., Op. Cit., p. 25.

¹⁴ Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Learning mentors*, <<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/Pages/Learningmentors.aspx>>, accessed 4 December 2019.

mentors to young people in out-of-home care. This is especially the case for smaller schools with high numbers of out-of-home care students.

Schools should be additionally resourced to ensure all young people in out-of-home care have access to this important relationship.

Mentors, whether volunteers or paid, can help build students' aspirations and link them to the world of work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand existing programs to support young people stay engaged in school
- Expand access to targeted supplementary funding programs for students with disabilities, using a new strengths-based functional needs assessment funding model
- Expand mental health support in schools
- Equip schools to tackle bullying
- Strengthen funding for early childhood learning
- Extend the out-of-home care age to 21

Support young people to remain engaged in school

Approximately 10,000 students disengage from education each year in Victoria alone, including a disproportionate number of students from disadvantaged areas¹⁵. Nationally, a recent report has shown approximately 50,000 young people across the country under the legal age required to be in education are not engaged or enrolled in school at any given time¹⁶.

Leaving school early is often a precursor to poor life outcomes and long-term unemployment¹⁷. There is also a disproportionate representation of young people who were suspended or expelled from school in the juvenile justice system, and the majority of people in the criminal justice system have not finished school¹⁸.

More needs to be done to support students to remain engaged in education.

Young Victorians who face additional barriers and who do not receive appropriate support are more likely to disengage from school. There are many reasons students may disengage from school, from not being provided with sufficient support to overcome barriers to participation, learning and attainment, to being encouraged to leave school due to low

¹⁵ Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Greater Returns on Investment in Education: Government Schools Funding Review*, December 2015.

¹⁶ J Watterson & M O'Connell, *Those who disappear: The Australian education problem nobody wants to talk about*, University of Melbourne, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Report No.1, 2019.

¹⁷ KJ Hancock and SR Zubrick, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*, University of Western Australia, June 2015 (Updated October 2015), p. 5.

¹⁸ J Watterson & M O'Connell, *Those who disappear: The Australian education problem nobody wants to talk about*, University of Melbourne, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Report No.1, 2019.

academic achievement or behavioural issues. Low expectations, poor experiences and bullying are also factors.

Students with disability are at particularly high risk of being excluded from mainstream school due to behavioural issues¹⁹ that often relate to insufficient support.

Currently in Victoria, about 15 per cent of students require reasonable adjustment at school to participate on the same basis as their peers²⁰. However, under the current guidelines for Victoria's targeted supplementary program – the Program for Students with Disability (PSD) – only four per cent of students qualify for specialist funding support²¹. This means about 60,000 Victorian students are missing out on targeted funding that could maximise their learning.

Targeted supplementary programs for students with disabilities should be expanded and rolled out to every school using a funding model based on a strengths-based functional needs assessment²².

The Victorian Department of Education and Training has established two flagship initiatives that target support to young people who have disengaged or who are at risk of disengaging from school, including young people in out-of-home care or who have come into contact with the justice system²³.

LOOKOUT education support centres “provide advice, support and training to prioritise the educational needs of students in out-of-home care, ensuring schools are inclusive” for these students²⁴. LOOKOUT drives system accountability by monitoring each child and young person's attendance at, engagement in, and performance at school.

Navigator is another Victorian initiative that is relevant to the national conversation. Navigator is a case management and intensive outreach program that was developed by the Victorian Government to assist to fill the gap for young people, families and schools when the Commonwealth Government de-funded the highly valued Youth Connections program in 2014. The program supports disengaged learners to re-engage with an education or training pathway. While schools and community agencies are reporting the program is making a significant impact, access to the program is constrained with demand for support outstripping supply. Additionally, schools and community agencies are identifying the need to broaden the eligibility criteria, to bring forward the window for early intervention.

Currently the Navigator program only supports young people aged between 12 and 17 who are missing more than 70 per cent of their classes. The Victorian sector is advocating for eligibility criteria to be loosened and funding boosted to include children as young as 10 who have missed more than 50 per cent of their classes, so that intervention starts earlier.

The Education Council's inquiry provides an opportunity to examine and learn from new models that different state and territory governments are implementing, and where best practice approaches might be scaled nationally to set young people up for success.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Victorian Government, Education State, Review of the program for students with disabilities, p. 30

²¹ Ibid., p. 61

²² Ibid.

²³ See Victorian Government: LOOKOUT Education Support Centres; Navigator; Springboard; Local Learning and Employment Networks; School Focused Youth Service; Education Justice Initiative and; Hands on Learning.

²⁴ Premier of Victoria, *New Service To Help At-Risk Kids Excel In School*, Media Release, 14 June 2016, <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/new-service-to-help-at-risk-kids-excel-in-school/>>, accessed 6 December 2019.

Tackle bullying and poor mental health in schools

In Mission Australia's annual Youth Survey, mental health was identified as the top national issue for the third year running. The Victorian data identified coping with stress, mental health and school or study problems were identified as the top three issue of personal concern. The survey also demonstrated the importance of strong support networks in family or friends²⁵.

Bullying is also a contributing factor to poor experiences at school and can lead to disengagement.

Schools play a vital role in promoting and encouraging good mental health, in identifying children and young people at risk of illness, and acting early to prevent them becoming more unwell. Early intervention can not only prevent or reduce the progress of mental illness, but will also help improved a person's health, community participation and socioeconomic outcomes over the long term²⁶.

Mission Australia found almost one in five young people in Victoria had been bullied in the past 12 months which overwhelmingly took place at school/TAFE/university²⁷. Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experienced bullying at higher rates than non-Indigenous young people, and were "more likely... to report feeling sad or very sad about their life as a whole"²⁸.

Young people with disability have also been reported to experience bullying at significantly higher rates²⁹. VCOSS members also report young people with disability may disengage from education based on poor experiences such as discrimination, bullying and low expectations that began from as early as pre-school.

Strong networks of family and friends play a significant role for the many young people in coping with bullying or the stress of school, and strong relationships with parents can be a protective factor³⁰. However, for young people who do not have strong family support networks including young people in out-of-home care and those who have experienced family breakdown, instability and conflict can impact a young person's ability to develop resilience³¹. Schools can play an important role in building protective factors, as well as providing or facilitating supports when students develop the signs of ill-health.

In Victoria, the Mental Health in Schools program provides for qualified mental health professionals, including counsellors, youth workers and psychologists in every Victorian state secondary school campus by 2022³². Under the current proposed rollout, allocation will be based on enrolments with each campus receiving 0.5 FTE on average.

²⁵ E Carlisle, J Fildes, S Hall, B Perrens, A Perdriau & J Plummer, *Youth Survey Report 2019*, Mission Australia, 2019.

²⁶ 7 Victorian Government, Health.vic, *Early intervention in mental illness*, <<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health/prevention-and-promotion/early-intervention-in-mental-health>>, accessed 3 December 2019.

²⁷ E Carlisle, J Fildes, S Hall, B Perrens, A Perdriau & J Plummer, *Youth Survey Report 2019*, Mission Australia, 2019.

²⁸ Ibid., p.9.

²⁹ Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission, *Held Back; the experience of students with disabilities in Victorian schools: Main findings*, 2012.

³⁰ Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Adolescents' resilience*, LSAC Annual Statistical Report 2018 Chapter 10, November 2019.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Mental health practitioners in secondary schools*, <<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/mentalhealth/Pages/mental-health-practitioners-secondary.aspx>>, accessed 3 December 2019.

The Victorian Government has also recently announced a pilot program to introduce Mental Health Support in primary schools³³. Subject to the evaluation of the pilot, this should be expanded to help more children get support when they need it, reduce the likelihood of school disengagement and provide children with tools and interventions to help manage and maintain good health.

The Victorian Royal Commission into Mental Health will drive further innovation and investment in this space.

Ensure disadvantaged children participate in early learning

The research is unequivocal about the positive, lifelong impacts of children's participation in quality early childhood education for children. Up to 90 per cent of children's brain development occurs in their first five years. Participating in high quality early childhood education strengthens children's cognitive, social and emotional development, laying foundations for success in education, work and life. Children who attend at least two years of preschool perform better than their peers at age 15.

Those who miss out, start school behind and are at higher risk of disengagement from school, which can lead to higher risk of long-term unemployment, poor mental health outcomes, and higher likelihood of contact with the justice system³⁴.

Disadvantaged children, including those from low socio-economic households, those who live with disability, are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, are in out-of-home care, or are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, have the most to gain from engaging in two years of high quality early learning before starting primary school.

More investment should be made in engaging disadvantaged and vulnerable young people to ensure they access two years of high-quality early childhood education so they can have the best start to life. Victorian children and families will benefit from the Victorian Government's rollout of universal, subsidised three-year-old kindergarten – a transformational reform that will help all Victorian children to have the best possible start in life. All Australian children should have this opportunity³⁵.

The Federal Government should provide enduring funding for 600 hours (15 hours a week) of universal access to four-year-old kindergarten for all Australian children in the year before school, sustaining the investment beyond the life of the current National Partnership Agreement. Additional programs such as the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) could be expanded to ensure vulnerable families have access to this vital service³⁶.

Extend the out-of-home care age to 21

Young people in out of home care are dealing with urgent issues such as how to find accommodation and pay for basic necessities in parts of the country where the age of care ends at age 18. For many students, this can happen in the middle of Year 12.

³³ Victorian Minister for Education, *More Mental Health Support in Primary Schools*, Media Release, 27 November 2019, <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/more-mental-health-support-in-primary-schools/>>, accessed 3 December 2019.

³⁴ M O'Connell, S Fox, B Hinz, H Cole, 'Quality Early Education for All: Fostering creative, entrepreneurial, resilient and capable learners', Mitchell Institute policy paper No.01/2016, Mitchell Institute, April 2016.

³⁵ Victorian Government, *Three-Year-Old-Kindergarten*, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/kinder>>, accessed 5 December 2019.

³⁶ Brotherhood of St Laurence, Hippy Australia.

VCOSS acknowledges out-of-home care provisions are managed at a state and territory level, however, there is a need for a nationally consistent approach.

The out-of-home care age needs to be raised to 21 to ensure young people in out-of-home care can focus on their education and successfully transition into work, further education and training.

Flexible, tailored careers curriculum

Schools are not consistently equipping young people with the essential skills and knowledge they need for the future. Some schools provide excellent career advice and activities so that young people can explore their interests and develop their capabilities, while other students miss out when their schools deliver careers curriculum poorly.

Schools are a foundational environment in which students can learn the skills and gain the experience they need to understand post-school pathways and excel in work, further education, and as an active member of the community.

When disadvantaged young people miss out on the opportunity to learn 'soft skills' at school, engage in meaningful work experience, and explore the full range educational and employment pathways, they may not have the same opportunity outside of school to explore, learn and develop these essential skills.

School curriculums should be restructured to remain relevant for young people so they leave school with practical knowledge that will hold them in good stead during the next stages of their life.

Schools can embed work experience and related activities that are tailored to the specific needs of disadvantaged or vulnerable young people to make sure they don't miss out because they don't have the same family or support networks. Schools can also ensure career advice is up to date and reflective of job growth and cover a broad range of industries so that students better understand their options.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide young people with practical skills to help them navigate further education and training opportunities and employment
- Provide dedicated funding to embed career activities combining vocational guidance, real world opportunities, and skills and capabilities building in schools
- Resource growing, employment-intensive industries, such as the community service industry, to support work experience placements
- Provide high quality, contemporary career advice, including information about job prospects
- Provide tailored career advice and support to students experiencing disadvantage

Embed practical skill development and resilience building in school curriculum

School environments can have a significant influence on young people as an important social environment where young people spend a significant amount of time³⁷. For this reason, schools are well placed to teach and support young people to learn the skills they need beyond numeracy and literacy, such as resilience, adaptability, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration.

The future of work is changing, along with the skill sets young people need to succeed. There is growing agreement that schools need to shift their focus beyond academic outcomes and look towards new capabilities such as the ability to respond to opportunities and problems creatively and experimentally³⁸. Young people are also identifying the need for more practical knowledge and life skills so they are well-placed to navigate the world of work, further education and training.

As one VCROSS member stated,

“The real world doesn’t start after school; it’s happening now.”

VCROSS members report disadvantaged young people can miss out on information sharing or ‘know how’ from family networks to help understand and navigate some more practical sides of becoming a young adult. This can include how to behave in a professional environment, working and employment rights, and developing ‘soft skills’, sometimes now referred to as ‘entrepreneurial’ or ‘21st century’ skills.

VCROSS members report employers identify some young people have gaps in skills including the ability to be adaptable, innovative and creative, analytical, and work in teams. These capabilities should be embedded in the school curriculum to ensure disadvantaged young people do not miss out on obtaining the tools they need to succeed now and into the future.

The school curriculum should be broadened to include a range of activities that move beyond traditional academic outcomes and test-taking, which would also support building soft skills and life skills. Adapting the curriculum for literacy and numeracy that is reflective of applied practice would also be beneficial. For example, when students see the direct connection between their aspirational future career and literacy and numeracy, it adds motivation and engagement to learning these skills.

Australia’s results in the OECD’s recent ‘Programme for International Student Assessment’ (PISA) tests underscore the challenges and the opportunities.

The PISA assesses students’ ability to transfer and apply learning to new situations and unseen problems – skills that that will become increasingly important in the future as repetitive automated jobs disappear. The education system can better prepare young people for the future of work through more inquiry-based learning.

³⁷ Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Adolescents’ resilience*, LSAC Annual Statistical Report 2018 Chapter 10, November 2019.

³⁸ M Anderson, B Hinz, H Matus, *The Paradigm Shifters: Entrepreneurial Learning in Schools*, Research Report, Mitchell Institute Report No. 04/2017, 2017.

Embed work experience into the school experience

The Victorian Government's changes to career education include exposing Year 7 and 8 students to Career Self-Exploration Workshops, providing students in Year 9 with a Careers e-Portfolio and access to a diagnostic career assessment with one-on-one guidance, and for Year 10 to 12 students to have a comprehensive Career Action Plan with careers counselling³⁹.

The Victorian Government is also investing more in apprenticeships and traineeships, improving student's access to Vocational Education and Training in School (VETiS), and has introduced Free TAFE for a range of priority courses that reflect job growth and demand⁴⁰.

Exposure to a range of industries and career options, as well as engagement in meaningful work experience is vital for young people to explore their interests and plan for their post-school pathways. Early exposure to practical career activities may also help improve student's school engagement and motivation if they can see the connection between school work and career.

Young people identify 'hands on' experience as extremely valuable in learning about their interests and career pathways and evidence shows "the fewer career development activities young people participate in, the more likely they are to be uncertain about their careers, disengaged from education or training, and unemployed."⁴¹

Employment-intensive growth industries like the community services industry should be resourced to support work experience placements. Many community services organisations do not have the resources to support work experience students, but as one of the fastest growing industries, student exposure to these fields would greatly benefit the awareness of these career pathways and help to address the twin challenges of youth unemployment in local communities and workforce shortages in disability services, aged care, family violence response and other parts of the community services industry.

Students in rural and regional areas may face additional barriers in accessing career activities including work experience due to the costs of travel when these activities may be some distance away. These students need financial support to ensure they have equal access to these important opportunities⁴².

More students are choosing to sit a non-scored VCE, while a significant portion of students are choosing to undertake VCAL. This is not only reflective of a growing need for flexible learning options that suit the needs of students, including managing the high stress and pressure from sitting tests for the ATAR, but also in line with a number of institutions expanding the entry requirements into courses beyond ATAR scores.

As institutions shift their entrance criteria, the activities and skills used to replace test-based results need to be embedded in the curriculum to ensure disadvantaged students do not miss out. For example, the Australian National University has introduced a list of co-curricular activities that support entrance applications which include extra-curricular activities

³⁹ Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Transforming Career Education in Victorian Government Schools: Connecting today's learning with tomorrow's jobs*, The Education State, 2018.

⁴⁰ Victorian Government, *Free TAFE for lots of jobs*, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/free-tafe>> accessed 30 November 2019.

⁴¹ Parliament of Victoria Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee, *Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools*, August 2018.

⁴² Ibid.

that demonstrate leadership, involvement in community based areas and evidence of paid or unpaid work⁴³.

Disadvantaged young people are less likely to engage in extra-curricular activities such as sport and music⁴⁴ which have demonstrated effects on improving mental health and social skills, as well as fostering inclusion, improving school attendance and academic achievement⁴⁵. If school curriculums are not changed to reflect the changing skills and requirements young people need to excel post-school by embedding activities currently viewed as extra-curricular, disadvantaged students are likely to miss out on accessing the skills and experience they need.

Case study – Structured Workplace Learning, Hume Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network

Jye, a student supported by Hume Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network (HWLLEN) in undertaking Structured Workplace Learning last year was studying VCAL at his local secondary college while also studying a VET course at an external training centre.

Studying VCAL means that “at school we are learning real world stuff”.

Doing the Structured Workplace Learning has provided Jye an opportunity compliment what he’s being taught at school.

“It has been definitely good, because the placement has given me a good understanding of the industry and after nearly two years the company has offered me an apprenticeship to commence next year. I am really excited and looking forward to it because I think it will be worth it, as I would become a fully qualified electrician.”

⁴³ Australian National University, *Co-curricular or service requirement*, <<https://www.anu.edu.au/study/apply/domestic-applications-anu-undergraduate/applying-to-anu-application-details/co>>, accessed 25 November 2019.

⁴⁴ Australian Government, Australian Sports Commission, *AusPlay Focus – Children’s Participation in Organised Physical Activity Outside of School Hours*, April 2018; Parliament of Victoria, Education and Training Committee, *Inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education in Victorian schools*, November 2013, p. 67.

⁴⁵ RM Eime, JA Young, JT Harvey, MJ Charity and WR Payne, ‘A systematic review of the psychological and social benefits of participation in sport for children and adolescents: informing development of a conceptual model of health through sport’, *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, Vol. 10, 2013, p. 98; The Song Room, *Bridging the gap in school achievement through the arts: summary report*, 2011; ABC, *Don’t Stop the Music*, 2018.

“Placements are a good opportunity to learn from others and from your own mistakes. There is more good than bad. The fact that I am getting an apprenticeship, speaks for itself. I will finish high school knowing where I am going. This is a mighty achievement, and I am really happy about it.”⁴⁶

Make sure career advice reflects current industry trends

The Victorian community services industry is one of the fastest growing sectors in Victoria, however, young people are not being provided with relevant information to be informed about these career options. There is a mismatch between the post-school pathways young people are taking and job growth⁴⁷.

Career advisors need to hold up-to-date knowledge about growing workforces, pathways to achieving these careers, and the skills they will require. VCOSS members report students are not receiving the information they need to understand post-school pathways are not linear and that there was many entry points and ways to reach a career goal.

The Victorian Government has invested in upskilling career advisors to obtain a Graduate Certificate in Career Education and Development⁴⁸. The investment will mean more than 400 teachers between 2019 to 2022 will be funded to get this qualification, ensuring more schools will have better access to professionals with the appropriate skills. There is still an identified need for more career advisor positions in school to ensure all students have the support they need.

It will take time for the impact of this investment to be seen throughout schools. In the interim, VCOSS members continue to report inconsistencies in quality of career advice across the state, and information about university pathways being the focus of advice, rather than a holistic approach that is inclusive of a wide range of pathway options.

Adequate knowledge and information about job prospects and the skills required will support young people in finding work sooner, while meeting the needs of Victorian employers.

Tailor career advice for children and young people experiencing disadvantage

Current arrangements at school could work better to support young people to transition into post-school pathways that align with their interests and strengths.

Career advisors having high expectations and aspirations of disadvantaged students also has a role to play in receiving quality career advice. VCOSS members report when students with disability do have meetings with career advisors, students feel the meetings happen too late (for example in Year 11), do not lead anywhere, and are more like ticking the box for inclusion rather than meaningful conversations and support. Similarly, students in out-of-home care are not being supported to explore their potential and full array of options, including non-linear pathways to reaching their goals.

⁴⁶ Jye is a student highlighted in the HWLLEN newsletter.

⁴⁷ Parliament of Victoria Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee, *Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools*, August 2018.

⁴⁸ Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Transforming career education*, August 2019.

VCOSS members highlight an ongoing gap in career education that specifically supports young people with disability. One concern is that teaching staff are not trained in disability and therefore do not know how to promote or tailor programs for these students' needs. Concerningly, a survey undertaken by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) found many students with disability and their parents were receiving employment and career information from the NDIS and NDIS providers. This can severely restrict the information about pathways available to young people with disability given it is not the role of the NDIS or NDIS providers to promote university, apprenticeships or TAFE. Employment rates for people with disability are still significantly lower than for people without disability and Year 12 attainment or equivalent is still much too low⁴⁹.

Career advisors also need sufficient time to build trust with students and have an understanding of the barriers and challenges disadvantaged young people face. This means making sure students have access to all available supports to assist them to go on to post-school education. Career advice needs to be tailored and accessible to ensure students have choice and control over their future prospects.

LOOKOUT centres work with schools to support young people in out-of-home care through working with a designated teacher within the school⁵⁰. There should be clear pathways for designated teachers to work alongside career advisors to understand the needs of young people in out-of-home care, and to build on the aspirational thinking and future career pathways. Career advisors and designated teachers should also work together to engage with any prospective work placement employer to provide context and tools for supporting young people in out-of-home care to successfully engage in meaningful work experience.

Marrung, the strategic education plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Victoria, provides a framework for action to improve senior secondary transitions. This includes “developing and promoting strategies (including mentoring, targeted careers advice for students and families and access to support services) to strengthen pathways into post-compulsory education (including university)...” and supporting the transition from education “including through the provision of case management and career services assistance to Koorie students who complete Year 12.”⁵¹

In other areas, initiatives exist to support vulnerable cohorts of young people such as Raising Expectations⁵² and Skills First Youth Access Initiative⁵³. VCOSS members advise many young people are not being told of these initiatives as career advisors have insufficient knowledge of their existence.

Strong partnerships

Victoria has an excellent framework in building strong partnerships and offering students flexible learning options through Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) and through the provision of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

These types of place-based initiatives should be promoted and better supported so that all young people can access the support and educational pathway that works for them.

⁴⁹ ABS, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings*, Cat No 4430.0, October 2019.

⁵⁰ Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Support for out-of-home care providers*, October 2019, <<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/Pages/oohcsupport.aspx>>, accessed 4 December 2019.

⁵¹ Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Marrung; Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*, July 2016.

⁵² Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Raising Expectations – getting more care leavers to TAFE and uni*, <<https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/raisingexpectations/>>, accessed 29 November 2019.

⁵³ Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Skills First Youth Access Initiative*, October 2019, <<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/Pages/Skills-First-Youth-Access-Initiative.aspx>>, accessed 1 December 2019.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Invest in place-based initiatives (including the existing Victorian Local Learning and Employment Networks) to continue to develop education-industry partnerships, support successful transitions, and create opportunities for students facing disadvantage
- Promote and expand vocational options as an equally valued pathway and encourage schools to increase their flexibility for students to engage in a mix of academic and vocational subjects
- Actively engage parents and carers in the transition process

Build partnerships between schools and industry

VCOSS members report young people need connections with their community beyond the school grounds. This is especially the case for disadvantaged young people without strong family networks.

In Victoria, Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) excel in brokering relationships and partnerships between schools, industry and employers, with a proven track record of almost 20 years. LLENs are embedded in communities and their success lies in understanding their communities to formulate place-based responses. This is particularly important for rural and regional communities.

In recognition of the important work LLENs do in this space, the Victorian Government funds LLENs to provide career support and structured work place learning for young people. This is an example of the excellent 'universal' work that LLENs undertake. Historically, LLENs have also undertaken targeted work, providing place-based solutions in their community for young people who experience disadvantage and vulnerability. VCOSS considers LLENs still have an important role in this space going forward.

Case study – Whittlesea Youth Commitment

A place-based response, the Whittlesea Youth Commitment (WYC) was formulated after identifying low Year 12 or equivalent completion rates and is underpinned by relevant, localised principles that address the need within the Whittlesea community.

This partnership is demonstrative of the long-standing trust and deep relationships HWLLEN have built over many years, enabling them to come together to broker relationships with relevant stakeholders.

Substantial policy work and practice guidance is derived from the WYC and works towards building the strong connection between young people and their local community⁵⁴.

The work of LLENs is highly valued by industry and employers, who understand the importance of providing opportunities to young people in work experience and industry exposure. Evidence indicates there may be a growing understanding of this importance, with industry and trade employers indicating a desire for more opportunities to engage with schools and young people to expose them to training and employment opportunities⁵⁵.

Expand flexible learning options and VCAL

All students should be able to access support to succeed in a mainstream school setting, however, there are students who enjoy studying in a flexible learning environment and/or who wish to pursue an alternate senior secondary certificate, such as the VCAL, rather than VCE, either in a mainstream school or flexible setting. Student choice is key.

Flexible learning options and environments can provide more tailored education and ‘wrap around’ support and assist young people with complex needs who require more intensive assistance to remain engaged.

For example, Melbourne City Mission runs an independent school, The Hester Hornbrook Academy (the Academy), that provides flexible learning to students who have disengaged from mainstream school environments and “present with a mix of mental health issues, homelessness, drug and alcohol use, juvenile justice exposure, family breakdown and/or very low personal agency and social capital.”⁵⁶ At the Academy, each classroom has a teacher working alongside a youth worker, with capped class sizes to provide disadvantaged students the support they need to continue with their educational re-engagement.

Not matter the student or the setting, there must be a level of parity in government investment between students who are in school and those who are re-engaging back into school and flexible learning options.

It is important that students in flexible learning options be afforded the same opportunities as students in mainstream schools. Currently there are a number of systemic barriers that need to be dismantled. An example related to pathway development is that in Victoria, Local Learning and Employment Networks are only funded to deliver structured workplace learning to students in mainstream schools.

⁵⁴ Hume Whittlesea LLEN, *Whittlesea Youth Commitment*, <<https://www.hwllen.com.au/wyc>>, accessed 3 December 2019.

⁵⁵ Parliament of Victoria Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee, *Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools*, August 2018.

⁵⁶ R Broadbent, K Hart, T Paapadopoulos, *The Hester Hornbrook Academy Classroom Youth Worker Research Project*, Final Report, Victoria University, July 2019.

Include parents and carers in career planning and advice

More than 75 per cent of young people go to their parent or guardian for advice on important issues in their lives⁵⁷, and young people are more likely to seek advice regarding post-school pathways from parents than career advisors⁵⁸.

Despite the important role of parents and carers, some parents and carers do not feel they have the knowledge and skills to help their children navigate education and training pathways and the range of potential career options⁵⁹.

Parents and carers need to be meaningfully engaged regarding post-school pathways and the changing nature of the future of work, and be supported by schools to build their skills, knowledge and confidence to support their children through transition planning and pathway development.

⁵⁷ E Carlisle, J Fildes, S Hall, B Perrens, A Perdriau & J Plummer, *Youth Survey Report 2019*, Mission Australia, 2019.

⁵⁸ Parliament of Victoria Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee, *Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools*, August 2018; Career Industry Council of Australia, What's happening in our schools: insights into our school based career practitioners, infographic.

⁵⁹ R-A Polvere and P Lim, Career development supporting young Australians A literature review, NCVET in collaboration with the Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2015, p.35



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