

26 July 2019

Hon John Gardner MP
Minister for Education
[GPO Box]
Adelaide SA [Post Code]

cc:
Further Education and Pathways
Department for Education
Via email: Education.VETPathways@sa.gov.au

Dear Hon John Gardner,

A Review of VET for School students

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* (the Act) I am mandated to promote and protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of all South Australian children and young people (birth to 18 years). It is also my role to ensure that the government satisfies its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This extends to the State at all levels of government.

Since commencing in this role I have spoken with thousands of children and young people across South Australia who have told me about things important to them. In many of these conversations I have heard about work and career aspirations and the barriers young people feel they are facing. This led me to commence a project on how we are preparing our State's young people for the transition from education to the world of work. I have looked at this transition with a view to empower young people and improve their outcomes. A report from this project will be released shortly and is relevant to this review.

VET in schools plays an important role in preparing young people for the world of work. It enables them to develop skills and qualifications necessary for a rewarding career and exposes them to the world beyond the classroom. Whilst VET works for many young people, there are gaps in the system that hamper both efforts and outcomes. Ultimately addressing these requires us to consider the whole journey beyond pathways and to approach the system collaboratively to find solutions for young people that work for all stakeholders.

It is on the basis of my engagement with children and young people and a contemporary perspective on their rights and best practice that I provide the following feedback.

Yours Sincerely,

[Insert Signature Here]

Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children and young people

Under **Article 13** of the UNCRC children and young people have the right to receive and share information.

Awareness and perceptions of VET and vocational careers

Public recognition of VET qualifications needs to be improved. Currently students who complete VET studies in school often do not obtain the same public and community recognition that their study and effort warrants. High achievement in VET subjects for example is not recognised at the same standard as academic achievement. Without similar recognition, we are not encouraging, rewarding or driving the aspiration that is needed to shift perceptions and risk reinforcing an ongoing view that VET is a secondary option to university education.¹

The need to raise the profile of VET is reinforced by a focus in schools on ATAR that has impacted both the perception and awareness of vocational careers. In research conducted by the Commissioner's office, a significant number of VET Co-ordinators and Career Advisors spoke of an increased focus on ATAR scores which they reported had impacted their ability to help students explore other career options. With a rise in university enrolment rates and a community focus on ATAR, this increased attention in schools is unsurprising. However the effect of this is that more schools and students are becoming set in a university centric thinking that prioritises academic outcomes² over supporting the skills and options that best align with the interests of the student and future workforce and skill demands.

Efforts to improve perceptions and awareness of vocational careers needs to educate parents as well as students. Young people most often report turning to their parents for career advice, ahead of both peers and career advisors respectively.³ Despite this however parents have identified a desire to be better informed about career choices.⁴ This could be delivered through independent web based resources and events such as information nights or career fairs that allow both parents and students to directly engage with industry reps, unions and business associations as well as other key stakeholders.

Presentation of vocational careers

The presentation of vocational pathways as a credible option requires early and continual discussion of careers for children and young people throughout their education. On the Commissioner's recent Hopes and Dreams tour of regional South Australia,⁵ young people were polled about their future career aspirations. Whilst there was a variety of responses, a positive correlation emerged between job aspirations and the types of jobs available in the local community. These results affirm findings from international research that children and young people's career aspirations are shaped early by the reality they experience in the

¹ For example: Alloway, N. et al, 'School Students Making Education and Career Decisions: Aspirations, Attitudes and Influences: Final Report', Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004.

² Note discussion in: Government of South Australia, 'SACE Stage 2 Review', September 2018, pp. 15-16.

³ Skillsroad, 2017 Skillsroad Youth Census Survey Report

⁴ McGregor Tan, 'Parents of Children Study', Commissioner for Children and Young People, December 2018.

⁵ Connolly, H. Hopes and Dreams Report (2019), SA Commissioner for Children and Young People, Adelaide, South Australia.

world around them.⁶ This means if a job is absent or presented too late in a child or young person's life they are less likely to think of that as a possible career.

In ensuring that vocational careers are seen as credible option when they are presented to children and young people, they need to match the lived experience and everyday understanding of the young person or find ways to build on it. Investing in information and resources around VET that highlight the options for a career in and around young people's communities as well as the types of industries that they can access would provide a positive start.

Barriers to Access

"We don't do work experience, [just a] 1,000 word essay on what job we want, when we don't know that yet..." – Young Person, Listening Tour 2017

An important part of establishing vocational careers as an option is allowing young people to see what it looks like before they commit to it. Sometimes access to opportunities to explore vocational careers can be limited. We need to find ways to provide more access to engaging experiences of these careers prior to young people enrolling in VET. This is important as research has found experiences of work are beneficial in eventual pursuit of a career path.⁷ In communities and industries where distance, safety or resources prevent this from occurring, virtual augmentation and virtual reality offer exciting alternatives.

A survey of schools conducted by the Commissioner revealed a strong reliance on career counsellors and consequently the views they personally held. Whilst career counsellors are crucial in offering guidance to children and young people on their future aspirations they are limited in the support they can provide and are not always considered as the best source by students. Research has found young people rank careers counsellors behind friends and parents, whilst in previous research undertaken for the office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, parents ranked career counsellors as the lowest source of information and guidance.

This reveals a tension between parents and careers counsellors that can confuse and provide conflicting information to young people. Education for parents that assists parents to become informed of options and the work of the school careers counsellor is important in bridging gaps.

Early and ongoing career discussions and demonstrated trainings are also important for young people to get a feel for a particular industries. There is a need for this continued contact, as one bad experience even outside of training and education can impact the perception of a whole industry and prevent young people (that would otherwise be interested and suited in a career in that field) from pursuing it.

⁶ Chambers, N. et al., 'Drawing the Future', Education and Employers, January 2018. <
<https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DrawingTheFuture.pdf>>
accessed 10th July 2019.

⁷ Waller, R et al., 'Undergraduates' memories of school-based work experience and the role of social class in placement choices in the UK', *Journal of Education and Work*, 27:3, 2014.

Promoting access and equity

More assistance is required to enable children and young people from less advantageous backgrounds to overcome unique barriers that can prevent them from pursuing VET. Access and participation can be prohibited particularly by cost and location. For example if training occurs at a location outside of their school, transport and the extra time taken to travel to the training can act as a barrier particularly where complex family situations make their lives more difficult.

The cost of this additional travel or on occasions where young people are required to obtain protective equipment or other required items to participate, may also impact the ability of the young person to engage in training or opportunities to explore vocational careers. Effectively responding to conditions such as these, requires improved government cooperation across to align to the needs and requirements of key stakeholders.

Under **Article 12** of the UNCRC children and young people have the right to say what think on decisions that affect them.

Ensuring quality

VET needs to develop a reputation of leading quality standards that are reflective of industry requirements and the ambition of young people. A high quality VET system must address the needs of all stakeholders, and produce outcomes that give young people the confidence that they are developing the required skills. This is important in giving young people the capacity to use their skills in valued and meaningful ways that inspire other young people to pursue vocational careers. In support of this maintaining high quality across training providers should be seen as a priority, as negative reports in one can impact perceptions of VET overall.

Trust with industry

Building trust with industry and business requires the worlds of education and work to collaborate more effectively. This is necessary to ensure that stakeholders have confidence in the training and the preparedness of young people to meet future challenges. Flexible approaches need to be built into training to allow responsiveness to industry changes and to ensure that changes do not result in young people being inadequately prepared for current and future demands of industry.⁸

Given the significant number of workers that are expected to have a mismatch in skills with the coming *Industry 4.0*,⁹ there is a key role for industry and employer to identify essential skills that are needed in vocational education and training. This is important in ensuring that young people are given a basis to respond to workforce changes later in life. The

⁸ Shook, E and Knickrehm, M., 'Harnessing revolution: creating the future workforce', Accenture strategy, 2017. < <https://www.accenture.com/us-en/acnmedia/A2F06B52B774493BBBA35EA27BCDFCE7.pdf> > accessed 11th July 2019.

⁹ World Economic Forum, 'The Future of Jobs Report: 2018', The World Economic Forum centre for the New Economy and Society, 2018. <http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2018.pdf> accessed 1st July 2019.

establishment of micro-credentials for example may allow young people more flexibility in navigating their way through fields that change and allow them to take more control of their current and future learning.

Employer and industry contributions

There are significant roles for employers and industry to play in the development of vocational training and the support of children and young people. Whilst some employers that the Commissioner's office have spoken to reported issues with capacity, many expressed an interest in better supporting young people. Contributions from employers don't need to be burdensome. Supported responses for example may be as simple as recognising and promoting the efforts of young people in their organisation with vocational skills or partaking in mentoring.

Part of industry efforts should be focused on redefining how vocational training is presented to young people. Currently materials are often focused on the training itself, with few highlighting the opportunities for building interesting and meaningful careers. Collaborations with training providers should be pursued to highlight stories of the various opportunities and assist in reframing vocational careers around the possibilities and outcomes as has been successful for the university sector.

Work Readiness

Preparing young people for work needs to look beyond hard skills and consider how young people can be better equipped with a range of soft and enterprise skills. In June 2019 the Commissioner for Children and Young People undertook a random sampled survey of small businesses throughout metropolitan Adelaide to investigate perceptions of the work readiness of young people. The survey sample was weighted for industries and sectors that commonly employ young people, including those with VET qualifications and those undertaking apprenticeships.

The survey found that a vast majority of the businesses do consider employing young people, however just over half felt that young people were "ready" or "sometimes ready" for work. This was rarely attributed to technical skills such as those developed in vocational training, but rather it was most often discussed in terms of soft skills. Although limited in its generalisability the survey reinforced the importance of preparing young people for the world of work with a range of additional skills. These include things such as financial literacy, communication and confidence in tackling problems.¹⁰

For young people that are pursuing more direct transitions to work, ensuring that these core soft and enterprise skills are being better covered is essential to preparing them. This is necessary to ensure they are able to thrive in the workplace and adapt to the shifting demands of the workforce and different workplaces.

¹⁰ The Foundation for Young Australians. 'The new basics: Big data reveals the skills young people need for the New Work Order', 2016. <https://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/The-New-Basics_Update_Web.pdf> accessed 1st July 2019.