

School Improvement Episode 20: Vocational training and career pathways

Rebecca Vukovic

Hello and thank you for downloading this podcast from Teacher. I'm Rebecca Vukovic.

In today's episode of our School Improvement series I'm joined by Tasmanian educator Steve Harrison. Steve is Assistant Principal in Senior Secondary at Huonville High School, and he also coordinates the nationally accredited Aquaculture course at the Huon Valley Trade Training Centre – a vocational training centre which was established in 2012 for both student and adult learners. He joins me today to chat about the establishment of the centre, who was involved in the process and the courses available to students. Steve also shares more about the hands-on skills that students are learning in particular industries like Aquaculture, as well as the broader 'soft skills' that they could apply to any future employment opportunities. And importantly, Steve also shares more about the success of the program and how students are choosing to move into the Tasmanian Aquaculture industry once they leave school. We cover a lot in today's episode, but to kick things off, I ask Steve to explain why there was a need in the community for the trade training centre in the first place.

Steve Harrison: In the Huon Valley we've got a number of developing industries and a number of pre-existing industries and part of the process to establish the centre was we needed to identify which industries needed employment pathways and which industries needed training pathways towards those employment pathways. So that's how we were able to identify the industries that we need, particularly my industry of Aquaculture obviously. And then those needs were then submitted to the Federal Government which was the previous Labor Government, under the [Trade Training Centres in Schools program](#) and the process sort of started from there.

Rebecca Vukovic: And I believe the centre was opened in 2012, could you tell me how it was established and who was involved in the process?

SH: Okay so the centre was funded as I said by the previous Labor Government, I think it was Julia Gillard's government, under the Trade Training Centres in Schools program and that was criticised by an Opposition politician for tacking on workshops on the back of high schools. And Tasmania looked at it a little more strategically at that, so instead of taking the funding and applying it to individual schools, we took a regional approach. So the Huon Valley Trade Training Centre was a consortium between four schools in the Huon Valley, pooling the resources under that program to develop a much larger centre which could actually serve the entire region. So there was a steering committee made up of the schools, representatives from industry, re presentatives from training providers such as TasTAFE and Seafood Training Tasmania. And together the project came to fruition through that process.

RV: Fantastic. And I understand you developed the Aquaculture course offered at the school, so for listeners who perhaps aren't familiar with what Aquaculture is, could you give them a brief run down?

SH: Okay so Aquaculture is essentially the culturing or the farming of marine plants and animals, basically its fish farming – farming fish in the sea. And in Tasmania our largest Aquaculture industry is the Atlantic salmon industry. So every time you go into Coles or Woolies or wherever and you see Tasmanian salmon, most of that is actually grown here in the Huon Valley. And so that industry employs in our region, which we've got about 12 000 people in the last Census in our region, that industry in itself employs close to 2000 people in our region so it's a huge demand. It's a highly technical industry – so we're growing fish from eggs, we raise them in fresh water, then the salmon go through a metamorphic process where they want to transfer to salt water, so the fish are then transferred to sea cages where they're grown out to about five to six kilos and then harvested. So that's where our focus is with our

Aquaculture program, mainly around the salmon industry, although we're starting to dabble in others as well. We're starting to get involved in sea urchins for example, which is one of the projects that I've been funded to help develop. So I've just returned from Japan and other places around the world, investigating that industry as well.

RV: Wow, and I want you to tell me now a little bit about the course itself and what students are learning exactly as part of the course.

SH: So we run two courses. We run a Year 9/10 course which is Certificate 1 in Aquaculture, so it's a nationally accredited program under the Seafood Industry Training Package. So that course is an introductory program for younger students, to get them interested in the industry. And then our main bread and butter program is our Certificate 2 program which is for our Year 11 and 12 students and also adult members of the community. And that's a direct employment pathway where we work in partnerships with the salmon companies and it transitions towards employment there and we also value-add it with a Certificate 2 in Maritime Operations course which allows the students to get a commercial boat operating license which is required to work on the fish farms.

RV: Interesting, and I do want to talk about pathways a little bit later in the conversation. But is this course unique or do you have the opportunity to collaborate with other schools who run similar programs in their own settings?

SH: There are similar programs in Tasmania. We have a network of four trade training centres that are involved in Aquaculture in some ways. It's quite unique because it's a partnership between us as a state school and another state school up in St Helens on the east coast. But then with a Catholic school in Launceston and with an Independent Christian school up on the northwest coast. So some of them are mainly focused on shellfish Aquaculture – so that's growing oysters. And some also focus on finfish which is salmon.

We worked collaboratively with Seafood Training Tasmania which is our training provider to develop the course materials, make sure that they're all quality assured and make sure that what we've got is actually really engaging and purposeful for our students to undertake. So training in a school environment is a little bit different to training in an adult or a TAFE environment. We need to make sure that there's enough practical and hands-on and day-to-day activities to give the students purpose in their learning. Otherwise if we just do a fairly dry sort of TAFE sort of model, it doesn't actually click necessarily with younger students as to why they're doing it. They're learning all this content, they're doing some work placements but unless we actually operate our own hatchery which we do here, the students sometimes can lack purpose ... well see a lack of purpose.

Our students, you mentioned before about what do they do in their daily lessons and I didn't actually address that, so I'm just looking out the window today at some of my younger students who are here doing what we call our daily routine. So they're doing a fish transfer, they're transferring 100, 500 gram fish from one tank into another so they can repair a tank. They're doing that completely unsupervised, they've already learned the technical skills of needing to keep the fish stress free and make sure the equipment is maintained. So those are the sorts of things they do on a day-to-day basis.

RV: And I've read also that you set up the centre to be much like a workplace. So I was wondering then, how does that work? And what responsibilities do the students have in this environment?

SH: Okay so the wider trade training centre yeah, we did, we set it up to operate like a workplace so when we established it we actually had the luxury of being able to develop a whole new school culture. Even though we're part of Huonville High School, we're sufficiently separate. That we're able to look at where the students were coming from and where they were going to and establish a culture which would help them on that pathway. So we knew that if we continued a program of students being dependent, not being given responsibility, being treated more like children, then that wasn't in their best interests to develop pathways towards the workforce. So we decided that we would model some adult learning behaviour and we were actually helped by the fact that we had adult courses operating in the building. So we came up with a phrase called: 'Step in, step up, step out'.

We knew that the students, the adult students, we couldn't expect them to act like school students. So we had to expect the school students to step up to an adult level of learning and an adult level of expectation. So we treat them more as employees than students. We give them responsibilities. We have things like time clocks where they clock in and they clock out. We don't have normal behaviour management processes, we have a performance improvement process.

We don't have suspensions, we don't have detentions, we don't have relocations. We have performance improvement so if a student is not performing in some way, the first step is an informal chat with their supervisor. Then again if they don't continue to improve then they get a formal, written warning – which is like what would happen in the workplace. And again up to formal written warning two, and if they still don't continue, most of our students are 17 or 18 and we then say, 'well you're not actually showing that you are contributing to this program, you're not committed to it, so if you were an employee, you would be sacked'. So those sort of level of expectation on the students really changes their mindset to why they are here. I know they're here because of a definite outcome, they're not here just because they have to be at school. So it changes the mindset, it improves the performance and the results are on the board.

RV: And given all of that, do you find that student typically find employment within the Aquaculture industry once they leave school?

SH: Absolutely. So I've actually lost count now, it's over 40, perhaps closer to 50 students out of our program since 2014 have got employment with the two salmon companies. Their employment levels have been growing hugely. They actually invest in our operation because they can see that they're developing their employees of the future. So both the companies engage with us really directly to shape our program and to engage with our students and put them on those employment pathways because they can see that our young people are the leaders of their industry of the future, they're not just the grunts. They've got the capacity to develop the technical knowledge and operate the highly technical equipment. So as I said, I've lost count of the exact number. But it's approximately 75 per cent employment outcome directly out of our course.

RV: And Steve I was wondering if you could touch on some of the other skills that students are learning that would be transferable to any industry I guess, other than Aquaculture, any industry that they choose to work in?

SH: Sure. So when we established the centre back, ready for our first cohort in 2013, we originally thought that students would be attending our vocational training programs here, which run two days a week. And we expected that they would continue their education at one of our secondary colleges in Hobart for the remaining time. And we soon found out that students wanted a full-time program here at Huonville.

So we then had to look seriously around what that program would look like. At the time, most of our students were on that vocational pathway, they wanted to gain their qualification, then gain apprenticeships or further training and employment in industry. So we decided we could complement the vocational training courses with what we call the WRAP around program. WRAP around stands for Work Readiness Achievement Program. And that is a program which focuses on employability skills. So we run a course called Certificate 2 in Skills for Work in Vocational [Pathways], which focuses on a large amount of those what would commonly be called soft skills. So it's attitude, it's initiative, it's punctuality, it's all of those things that employers are looking for in addition to the actual qualification. And then we package into that some essential literacy and numeracy and ICT support as well, together with some project management programs because we knew that employees of the 21st Century are not just going in day-in, day-out and doing jobs that they're told to do.

They're actually expected to have initiative and to manage projects and work together in teams. So that WRAP around program has really been the key to the success of our students in gaining not just their employment, but also gaining their TCE, which is Tasmanian Certificate of Education. Because it guarantees them all the literacy, numeracy and ICT and pathway planning ticks, as well as points – it's a bit hard to explain how our system works. So it has that added benefit. We didn't actually plan for it to be the pathway towards the TCE, we

planned for it to be the employment pathway, but we've actually found that our TCE results are much better because of the students going through that program in Year 11 particularly.

RV: Fantastic. And then just finally then Steve, what impact has this program had on the local community?

SH: The community has really embraced it. As I said, one of the things about the trade training centre in particular is that it hosts adult and community training as well so it's really become an education hub for the region. Huon Valley is an interesting place. I'd previously worked, I did a bit of work with an adult learning organisation within our education department and we found that the Huon Valley had the highest uptake of adult learning in any area of the state. And that sort of has supported us with the trade training centre as well. So a lot of buy in from community. Even more importantly, a lot of buy in from industry. So industry see this place as a place where they know that they can get quality in potential employees. We had one of the major auto dealers from Hobart, which is our capital city about 45 minutes away, actually come down here last year and targeted four of our students that they wanted to employ and put through apprenticeships in motor mechanics. And I think it's quite unique that instead of schools going out and trying to contact employers and trying to find opportunities for their students, employers are actually coming to us and they're using us as a recruitment place for their industries. So it's been really beneficial.

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