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Some reforms to better equip young people for tomorrow's world



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Christopher Robinson is the Chief Executive of the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) in South Australia. DECS provides public school education, preschool education and children's services in South Australia.

Mr Robinson has worked in a range of national leadership and reform roles in education and training for nearly 30 years.

Mr Robinson was previously the Deputy Director-General of the Department of Employment and Training (DET) in Queensland where he was responsible for Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Queensland, and for overseeing the development of a major new \$1.1 billion Skills Strategy in Queensland.

Prior to this, Mr Robinson was the Chief Executive of Australia's National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). The NCVER compiles and publishes vocational education research and the national vocational education statistics. Mr Robinson also worked in two other national research agencies, and has authored or co-authored over 100 books, journal articles and monographs.

He has held a number of senior positions within the Australian Government in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the education and training portfolio.

Mr Robinson has also worked internationally within the education and training sector.

Mr Robinson is a member of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Productivity Agenda Working Group on Education, Skills, Training and Early Childhood Development (chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister) that is advising on new national early childhood, education and training arrangements.

He has a Bachelor of Agricultural Economics degree and a Graduate Diploma of Social Sciences.

Abstract

The changing context of schooling is examined in this paper in terms of global changes and what impact these are having on the skills young people need to have. In particular, the way work is changing, and the skills and education young people need to have to maximise their economic opportunities is explored.

The key issues are that high skill jobs requiring university or high level vocational qualifications now make up the majority of jobs and they are growing at twice the rate of other jobs in Australia. Young people with university or Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications (at least Certificate III level) have excellent prospects, whereas those who drop out of school early face much more poor and declining prospects.

New approaches to schooling to ensure that most, if not all, young people not only complete a full secondary education, but also go on to attain a tertiary qualification at university or VET are explored in this paper.

Research suggests that 'in school' factors such as improving teacher quality only account for around one-third of the variation in student performances, so these strategies need to encompass wider and more comprehensive approaches to supporting students to remain engaged and to make the right choices.

Introduction

The world is changing faster now than at any time in human history. Climate change and the finite nature of the planet's carbon-based fuel reserves means we are going to need to virtually eliminate our dependence on our carbon-based fuels and energy sources over the next 50 years. This has major implications for schooling. Young people need to have a more scientific

literacy and a more sophisticated understanding of the impact of global events to be able to better adapt to events requiring unprecedented economic and social change such as global warming.

Globalisation is also changing cultures, human relationships and societies. With the advent of the international media and the Internet, a global youth culture has emerged. Together these factors mean we need a population that is more sophisticated, resilient and able to cope with rapid change, as well as being able to take advantage of the possibilities arising from these rapid developments. In this context schools are becoming an even more important contributor to the spiritual, moral, cultural and physical development of young people.

The Australian economy is also undergoing massive long-term and structural change arising from globalisation, technological change and digitalisation, and the rapid aging of our population. This is changing the nature of work itself and the skills and education that people need to maximise their economic opportunities.

Employment in high-skill jobs that generally require university or high-level Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications has been growing strongly at twice the rate of jobs growth in low-skilled jobs over the past two decades in Australia. This has resulted in an unemployment level of around 4%, the lowest in over 30 years. Despite this, employment in low-skilled occupations such as labourers and in many clerical occupations is actually declining. It is estimated that half the jobs that will exist in just 20 years time do not currently exist today. Unprecedented structural change is underway.

The impact of these trends on skills is becoming very clear. The main factors are that:

- High-skills jobs requiring university or high level VET qualifications now make up over half of all jobs.
- For some four out of five jobs now in Australia some kind of VET or university qualification is desirable or required.
- The employment prospects for all Australians with at least a Certificate III level VET qualification are excellent (some 80–85%) with no difference between those with a degree or a high level VET qualification of at least Certificate III level.
- In contrast, the employment prospects of early school leavers are dismal with only 55% of Australians who are early leavers being employed, this rate being down 20% since the 1970s.

Dropping out of school early and not going on to gain some kind of tertiary qualification is now a pathway to very poor and intermittent employment, marginal attachment to the labour market and long-term dependency on welfare for most young Australians opting for this precarious pathway.

This is a very different situation to the one faced by previous generations of Australians. Up until the very recent past, young people could leave school before completing Year 12 and not undertake further formal education or training, and they could secure reasonable and secure employment. However, this is no longer the case.

Only just over three-quarters of young Australians complete secondary school and only half of the Australian workforce has a tertiary qualification from VET or university. This is not a sustainable position for Australia's future.

This situation will not change quickly without a major new national effort as only 55% of Australian school leavers

each year directly enrol in further education or training courses.

The upshot of this is that most, if not all, young Australians will need to attain a university or VET qualification if they are to maximise their contribution to Australia's economic, social, cultural and civic life, and if they are to maximise their personal economic prospects in a rapidly changing global environment.

We can no longer afford to have a significant cohort of young Australians dropping out of school early and not going on to gain some kind of tertiary qualification from VET or university.

Policy positions and substantial national effort over the past 20 years or so have been focused on:

- raising school retention rates to maximise the number of young people completing secondary education
- promoting choice and diversity in school education through the expansion of private schooling options
- developing new pathways to promote greater participation in further education and training
- increasing the university end of tertiary education that, for the most part, has not been matched by sufficient increases in VET effort, particularly high-level VET.

These policies have not been sufficient to ensure enough young Australians are completing secondary education and attaining tertiary qualifications.

School retention rates have been rising over the last decade, but have really only been recapturing the ground lost during the 1980s and early 1990s.

The expansion of private schooling has had the effect of largely redistributing provision to middle and higher socio-economic groups who were succeeding better academically in any case.

Rising youth participation in university or VET is not happening at a fast enough rate, to keep up with the very rapidly changing skill demands of the labour market, nor are enough young people who commence university or VET study going on to complete the full qualifications arising from that study.

The main focus in increased tertiary participation of young Australians over the past 20 years has been at the university level. Middle Australia has shown strong aspirations for university education and university student numbers have increased threefold since the late 1980s. This has resulted in Australia becoming number five in the OECD in terms of population holding a university qualification.

Yet growth in high-skilled jobs requiring higher level VET skills has been greater in many sectors, without the corresponding growth in VET provision in many of these areas. Moreover, much of the VET effort over this time has seen the acquisition of some skills, but most students are not going on to complete the full qualification.

The fundamental issues are clear cut:

- Not enough young people remain engaged in and are successfully completing a full secondary education.
- Not enough school leavers go onto further education and training in the right areas, with high-level VET study being the biggest gap.
- Not enough entrants to university and VET complete the full qualifications arising from that study.

A key part of any strategy to address these issues is to ensure most young people complete a full secondary education and/or go on to undertake tertiary education at university or in VET programs. Specifically we need most, if not all young people, to:

- complete full secondary school, gain the senior school certificate and go on to complete a university or VET qualification
- return to study by their early 20s and complete a VET or university qualification if they completed secondary schooling, but did not go on to further study straight away
- re-engage in schooling and/or tertiary study if they drop out early.

New national work that is under the auspices of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is seeking to address this situation. COAG's Productivity Agenda Working Group on Education, Skills, Training and Early Childhood Development is proposing that the attainment of the senior secondary certificate or equivalent of at least 90 % of all young Australians by 2020 become the centrepiece of new national agreements of education and training.

Research around retention and successful school outcomes suggests that 'in-school factors' especially the quality of teaching account for around one-third of the difference in school retention and successful student outcomes.

The remainder of these differences can be attributed to factors relating to the home and community such as socio-economic status and the education levels of parents. Other factors are also important such as gender (when the school retention of girls is significantly higher than boys), location (where outer suburban and rural retention is much lower than in other metropolitan locations), the membership of a particular group such as indigenous Australians, the refugee community or being students with a disability where retention and success rates are generally lower than for other students.

Addressing school factors alone will not be sufficient to achieve a significant

improvement in school retention and outcomes. It will also require significant attention to supporting students to remain engaged and succeed, especially students who come from families and communities or groups who do not have a history of high retention, high levels of secondary school completion or of involvement in tertiary education.

Moving from a situation where a significant minority of young Australians are not gaining the education and training they will need to prosper in tomorrow's world will not happen overnight, nor will it happen without significant and holistic reform.

Some of the strategies that need to be considered in the senior years of secondary schooling are:

- a much more customised or student-centred learning approach (rather than the subject-based approach) that relates to student aspiration, capability and interest
- individual learning plans that empower students to take control of their learning, rather than something that is done to them by adults (i.e. parents and teachers)
- provision of much more information over a number of years to help students make informed career choices, rather than relying on the too often dated and inaccurate advice of parents and teachers
- provision of quality mentoring support, and in some cases intensive case management, to help particularly those students who do not come from family situations where there is a culture of high education attainment to navigate their way through what is a daunting and complex array of career choices and subject and course options, and to help students deal with other issues outside school that may be impacting on their learning and achievement

- new and innovative ways such as the development of virtual classrooms and curriculum offered by clusters of schools, to ensure that students have full curriculum choices and high-quality teaching, even if they are living outside metropolitan areas or in areas where their local school is unable to offer such curriculum choices in the conventional way
- a transformation of the VET offerings to school students to a full choice of higher level VET, instead of the current approach to VET in schools which is too often limited and low level (being determined by what schools can offer rather than by what students and communities want or need)
- more options for students who are ready to commence tertiary education or training while still at school through enrolling in a first year university subject, or a quarterly VET course (at least Certificate III level) or a school-based apprenticeship.

A transformational reform of schooling to ensure diverse, customised and quality pathways for young people cannot be something that is focused only on the last two or three years of secondary education.

It will require a comprehensive and universal approach to the early years of every child's development from birth, not just when they start school or even preschool.

Recent advances in neuroscience research now make it very clear that a child's foundation capabilities in language and communication, in cognition and problem solving, in socialising, and in understanding the world around are set in the first three years of life. A long-term national approach to improving the quality

of every child's early development is needed.

Primary school and the middle years of schooling also need a coherent approach that involves more focus on the development of resilience and an ability to become more self-reliant as learners. Of course, much of this is already happening in our schools, but we need to ensure best practice approaches are more widely adopted that put the student at the centre of the learning process.