

# Initiatives to open up vocational pathways in Victoria

**Dennis Gunning**

## **1 Introduction.**

Australia has a federal system of government. Unlike the UK, however, there is a national education minister as well as an education minister in each state. There is also more use of national frameworks and protocols to which all states' education ministers are committed. One of these is the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), which is a descriptive, rather than credit-based, framework rather like that of England. It has three distinct ladders of qualifications for senior secondary, vocational and higher education (AQFAB, 2002).

In Victoria, following the 1999 state election, the new government commissioned an urgent review of the post-compulsory education and training system, focussing particularly on participation rates and outcomes for young people. The post-compulsory review report (Kirby, 2000) described uncertain, unequal and poorly signposted pathways for young people; the mediocre standard of Australian education and training by comparison with international standards; poor participation and retention rates; lack of coordination; and lack of accountability. The report's concern was that young people who were disengaged from learning while at school were likely to experience poor levels of success in learning and in employment later in life.

The government accepted most of the report's 31 recommendations. One was the setting up of a Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA) to pull together policy and quality assurance responsibility for all qualifications except those of higher education; Victoria was the first state in Australia to set up such a qualifications authority. Another recommendation was that modifications or alternatives to the state's senior secondary certificate, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), be considered to increase relevance and choice for young people at that stage of education.

## **2 Post-compulsory opportunities in Victoria**

In Victoria, as in the UK, higher education pathways are seen as having higher status than pathways involving vocational qualifications or employment. The VCE is used by the Victorian universities in their admissions procedures. It is successfully completed by around 67% of the age cohort – but the review of post-compulsory education found that 10,000 Victorian young people left school without a formal qualification and others, having dropped out of school, found their way, sometimes at a relatively early age, into vocational colleges or into adult education centres.

Attempts have been made to broaden the appeal of the VCE and to reduce drop-out rates by including vocational subjects in the options available. This aim is not dissimilar to the intention of Higher Still (SOED, 1994) in Scotland. In both cases, vocational subjects adopted the same structure as traditional secondary subjects, including the use of external examinations, in the expectation that this would provide parity of esteem.

In Victoria, the number of students taking vocational subjects in the VCE has grown but achieving parity of esteem by structural means has been more elusive. Employers have raised concerns that occupational standards, on which vocational subjects are based, are compromised when used as part of a senior secondary certificate. At the same time, universities generally treat vocational subjects as less demanding and therefore as carrying less weight in their selection processes.

The setting up of the VQA provided a focus for debate of these issues. Field work by the VQA showed that many schools had developed their own, uncertificated alternative programs

to meet the needs of young people who did not want to follow the VCE pathway. Analysis of these successful programs showed that they tended to be:

- explicitly based on vocational pathways into apprenticeship, vocational courses or employment
- constructed so that a significant portion of the learning takes place out of school
- based on community partnerships, with contributions to the programs made by local employers, community and voluntary groups, local college and adult education providers
- strongly focussed on key employment skills such as literacy and numeracy and on building self-esteem and interpersonal skills.

These approaches shared much in common with those advocated in an ACER report on the development of lifelong learning skills in secondary schools (Bryce and others, 2000). The VQA designed a new qualification around the practice it had observed, based on learning programs built around partnerships with organisations in the local community and consisting of accredited units and modules in four mandatory curriculum strands – literacy/numeracy; personal development; industry-specific skills; and work-related skills. Each program has to be coherent in terms of the needs of the individual student and to provide vocational experiences which help the student to choose a future pathway. The qualification is available on three levels, each nominally requiring a full-year learning program.

The new qualification, called the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), is therefore designed to provide an alternative senior secondary pathway to the VCE – a pathway with a strong vocational focus (VQA, 2002). The concept and general approach have some similarities to those of General Scottish Vocational Qualifications (GSVQs). The VCAL was piloted in 22 schools and colleges in 2002, with an independent evaluation of the pilot by Deakin University (Henry and others, 2003).

The response of students, parents, teachers and the local communities involved in the pilots was very positive. Parents spoke of their children's expectations of, and engagement in, learning being transformed; employers found young people who were eager to learn new skills; teachers described the change in young people from being disengaged to being positive and committed learners. The evaluation also highlighted a range of issues which would have to be addressed if the VCAL were to be implemented across Victoria, including the need for

- staff development for providers and staff in implementing centres
- the adoption of a distinctive approach to pedagogy for the VCAL
- resources to ensure that VCAL programs and community partnerships are well-established
- a communications strategy to ensure that all users and stakeholders are aware of VCAL and its distinctive purpose
- the establishment of credit relationships between the VCAL and other qualifications, especially the VCE

One notable feature of the VCAL has been the incorporation by providers of external programs such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award, the Victorian Youth Development Program and the Green Corps as the basis for assessment in the personal development strand. Another has been the use by schools of literacy and numeracy approaches used in adult education programs such as the Certificate of General Education (Adults) as more appropriate to students than English and mathematics units of the VCE.

The VQA is now implementing the VCAL statewide. The state government has committed over 50 million Australian dollars (nearly 20 million pounds sterling) over four years to provide additional staffing for coordination of VCAL programs in implementing centres, for staff development support and for information for students, parents and employers. The VCAL is being offered in 220 centres across Victoria in 2003, with around 5000 students likely to be enrolled. By the end of 2004, VCAL is expected to be available in virtually all

government schools, Catholic schools and vocational colleges and in many adult education centres.

While the original design of VCAL is being implemented, pilots of new variants are also being explored in 2003. These include VCAL programs focussed on

- a broad occupational sector such as manufacturing or land-based. The aim is to help students to make a more informed choice of a specific course or job within that sector.
- the needs of students whose learning takes place within a different social or cultural context; traditionally, such individuals are among the lowest-achieving groups. One pilot relates to the needs of indigenous young people; another, in an adult education centre, relates to the learning needs of refugees.

The combination of the original VCAL design and the pilots of new VCAL variants should provide qualifications which meet the needs of a much wider range of learners than the VCE. Victoria therefore now has two senior secondary certificates, both group awards consisting of a coherent program of units and modules and both designed for the senior secondary years but also taken by students in vocational colleges and adult education centres as well.

The end result of VCAL's implementation – a twin-track approach - therefore has stronger similarities to the recommendations of the Howie Committee recommendations in Scotland (SOED, 1992) than to the outcomes of the Higher Still Development Programme.

The VCE is a two-year program with a single exit point and is seen as the pathway to higher education. It has a significant element of external assessment which is theoretically not part of the VCE's minimum requirements but is essential if the student wants to progress to higher education.

The VCAL is a one-year program available on three levels; students can therefore plan successive VCAL programs spanning two or three years. It is designed as a pathway to specialist vocational courses, apprenticeships or employment. It is internally assessed and therefore does not provide the examination marks used by the Victorian universities for the compilation of entrance rankings.

The introduction of VCAL has raised the issue of 'equivalence' between it and the VCE, just as arose in the debate on Howie's proposed Scottish Baccalaureate and Scottish Certificate. The VQA's response has been to focus on fitness for pathway rather than equivalence and to justify a qualification's place in the Victorian system if it opens up the pathway which it is designed to open, rather than whether it provides access to higher education. Another important aim in Victoria – and a major issue which arose in the debate in Scotland on the Howie Committee recommendations - is to ensure that there are credit bridges in place between the VCE and the VCAL so that students can change their choice without being penalised through significant loss of learning time.

It will be interesting to conduct a comparative analysis in the future on the two approaches which have been taken to senior secondary qualifications. The first approach, with National Qualifications in Scotland and the National Certificate of Educational Achievement in New Zealand has a single-track approach with wide choice of options. The outcome of Queensland's review of its senior secondary qualifications system signals a similar development there (Education Queensland, 2002). By contrast, Victoria joins England, with GNVQs and A-levels, and Ireland, with the Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied, as proponents of a twin-track approach.

### **3 The wider Victorian context**

The VCAL is one of a range of initiatives in Victoria to widen participation rates and to encourage lifelong learning.

A major issue in Victoria, and in Australia more generally, is the limited availability of credit transfer for students moving in either direction between vocational and higher education courses. For example, studies have shown that only 3% of entrants to higher education who have completed studies at a vocational college receive advanced standing for those qualifications (DEST, 2002). Although there has been a recent attempt to provide national guidelines (AQFAB, 2002) for credit between higher-level vocational qualifications and degree programs, credit transfer arrangements remain strongly based on individual relationships between institutions, faculties or even individuals.

But pathways between the various education sectors are becoming more common. As more students follow a vocational pathway (and there may be more of these if VCAL is a success in Victoria), some will want the opportunity to progress to degree-level studies later in life, just as do HNC and HND holders in the UK. And students who have completed a degree and wish to acquire occupationally-specific skills may wish to spend time in a vocational college to improve their employability. Lack of credit transfer will be a significant barrier to such pathways.

The VQA is consulting on the development of a credit system to enhance the operation of the Australian Qualifications Framework in Victoria. The approach is similar to those of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and the National Qualifications Framework in New Zealand. The aim would be to provide a common currency which could be used to improve the frequency and consistency of credit transfer between qualifications, to provide a better basis for designing qualifications and to assist students and others in planning pathways (VQA, 2003).

An early example of such a credit system has recently been introduced to make routes into and out of the VCE and VCAL more flexible, especially for those adults who did not achieve a senior secondary qualification at school and want to complete it later. Credit arrangements have been set up so that those who have completed vocational qualifications or who have achieved the Certificate of General Education for Adults since leaving school can count these as credit towards the VCE or VCAL.

Another part of this development work on a credit system will focus on ways in which informal learning in the adult education sector might contribute 'start-up' credit towards a qualification, if the learner decided to move on from that informal learning into a more formal course. The aim will be to devise criteria which might provide the basis for such credit but without changing the nature or attractiveness of the informal learning.

In another move to open up vocational pathways in Victoria, institutions other than those of higher education will be able to award bachelor degrees in their own right (Kosky, 2001) thus, for example, allowing a vocational college to offer a degree in specialist vocational areas where it already offers qualifications up to and including advanced diplomas (which equate to HND level in the UK).

A related discussion is taking place in Australia on whether the advanced diploma, which is available in both the vocational education and higher education ladders of the AQF, should be replaced in one or both ladders by associate degrees. The claim has been made that Australia's competitiveness in attracting overseas students is being damaged by the availability in other countries of courses at this level which used 'degree' in the title – such as associate degrees in the US and foundation degrees in England. A consultation was carried out (Allen and Gientzotis, 2002) which failed to find evidence to support for any change. The issue is therefore unresolved at the time of writing this paper.

#### **4 Conclusions**

There are many parallels between the qualifications reform debates in Australia and those of the UK countries, Ireland and New Zealand. The issues which have driven those debates have included the need for

- better outcomes for students in secondary education
- greater employment focus in vocational education and training
- a qualifications system which reflects and encourages a variety of student learning pathways
- a learning and qualifications infrastructure which is not trapped in its traditional education compartments.

The reforms have followed different routes, at different paces, reflecting each country's starting point and political structures. The broad outcomes, though, have been strikingly similar, in terms of overall qualifications frameworks, approaches to the design of qualifications and intentions to encourage diversity of learning pathways throughout life.

Developments such as the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, degrees offered in a wider range of institutions and a formalised approach to credit between qualifications are steps towards the freeing up of the badly compartmentalised education and training system and may be seen as a good start in responding to the findings of the review into post-compulsory education back in 2000.

There are, though, at least two unanswered questions. In a state with an ambition to have its economy based on high-value, high-technology employment, can the current approach to the development of national occupational standards for vocational qualifications ever deliver the flexibility and responsiveness, and the subject-based secondary school curriculum the grounding in creativity and problem-solving skills, that such an economy will demand? And in a state which is evangelical about the need for, and the benefits from, lifelong learning, what are the levers that will turn that evangelism into a reality?

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