



### VET in a New South Wales senior school

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#### Introduction

This paper reports on a three-year project into vocational education and equity in senior secondary schooling in New South Wales, which was completed in 2003 (Crump & Connell, 2003). The research explored the relationship between vocational education and training (VET) and young people's futures, by investigating the reforms to the New South Wales external Year 12 examination: the Higher School Certificate (HSC), in which VET courses gained a new and more challenging profile. The intent of the 'Securing Their Future' reforms was to make secondary curricula more socially inclusive and thus to set up young people with broader options for lifelong learning and employment, an aim also articulated in the New South Wales 'Charter for Equity in Education and Training' (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1996). This aim was to be achieved by reducing distinctions between senior subjects that tended to separate *VET in Schools* students from others, mainly through matriculation status. This article indicates how these reforms to matriculation in New South Wales so far only weakly counter a 'poverty of expectations' about lifelong learning options in the senior school through the description of a case study from a set of eight schools investigated.

#### Patterson High School

Patterson High School is situated in an outlying 'industrial suburb', about six kilometres east of the main township (all names for people and places are pseudonyms). It is a 'modern' school, with well-designed buildings, lots of space and generally good facilities. There are fewer than 800 students, with student numbers undergoing a steady decline from over 1000 in the mid 1990s. This school was chosen on the project matrix as Rural: Low VET: Medium SES (the other 7 case studies being variations on this matrix). The only reason the project categorised the school as 'low VET' was because of the comparatively small number of Industry Curriculum Framework courses undertaken in the first year of the new HSC and this was a deliberate strategy of the school to 'do it right'.

The school brochure describes Patterson as seeking "excellence through a caring school with high academic standards and a wealth of cultural, sporting and social activities". The school is known in the community as offering a sound and diverse senior curriculum, rather than any particular specialisation. The school has not tried to compete with the other local government secondary school, but rather to co-operate and share resources, curriculum options and professional development. There is a degree of self-interest as well as idealism in this approach, as both

government high schools face very stiff competition from a high number and wide variety of non-government options in the region.

Patterson township provides cheap housing and a variety of traditional trade opportunities through employers buying up cheaper industrial land. Many of the VET students we interviewed were hopeful to get employment locally. One student found work in Wagga Wagga but, as Doug (an employee at Patterson Metals) told us, most are "thinking of work at the bottom of Patterson Street. Anything to do with metal would be fine, except [job prospects] are not in the immediate proximity!". However, Patterson should not be characterised simply as a poor, outlying, disadvantaged area. Though undercurrents of the negative effects of poverty are there to be found, most houses show pride of ownership, with gardens well-tended and late model or well-maintained cars in most driveways. Patterson's broad range of options and curricular program flexibility are being used to provide options and opportunities for students aimed at keeping them in education and training—thus providing a basis for improving students' life chances.

#### Students, families and VET in Schools

Students at Patterson come from a wide geographical catchment, and

school zoning does not appear to operate as rigidly as it does for comprehensive government schools in most metropolitan areas: even in O'Connor (a town nearby of similar size to Patterson). Students travel up to an hour, and up to 50 kilometres, to get to Patterson, so it is very difficult to offer classes before or after school. The school organises itself so that every Thursday afternoon students are free to do a long block of their *VET in Schools*, attend Technical and Further Education (TAFE) for a VET course (called TVET) or go to a VET course at the other government school. Students are trustworthy enough, and therefore trusted to travel widely inside and outside school hours. The mix of academic achievement has changed and *VET in Schools* is seen as having "saved a lot of our kids", as Kath (a Hospitality ICF teacher) noted:

When you look at a student, behaviour-wise, often kids who hated school before, [their] self esteem improves [now]. (VET is) a positive thing for all kids.

The school unobtrusively assists many students with costs for VET courses, so it is not surprising that the commitment of students to VET courses at Patterson is strong. There is a significant allocation of resources to VET and students become committed and loyal to these courses (and their teachers). Parents seem to encourage and value what their students are learning in VET. Deirdre, the mother of Emily, a Year 11 Hospitality student, told us her daughter wanted to be a solicitor.

[However,]...she's probably worried about the situation of how to pay for it. [We're a] below average income family. Then she thought, "I'd love to teach health or aerobics"....She works at KFC [Kentucky Fried Chicken] and that's mainly because of our money problems....I can't provide her

with a fairy-tale ending. That's the way it is.

Emily's ambition to be a solicitor was not unrealistic, given that her mother's background is traditional middle class. But Emily's ambitions are unsustainable in her family situation. Deirdre told us: "When I was Emily's age, I wanted to get married and have children. That was my life's ambition. I didn't really care about anything else". Now Deirdre understands, with a degree of bitterness, that "My sister and I are nothing [laughs]. We're nothing, but yeah, you know".

While Deirdre sees her marital relationship as being based on love, class differences with her husband bring tensions to decisions about Emily's education. Despite all this, Deirdre sees Emily as different from herself—"I want her to stay that way. She's just great!"—and sees her as possibly Australia's first female prime minister ("...if she could get into Law!"). Emily had a friend who obtained a traineeship in Hospitality and, according to her mother, Emily was so envious and said, "She's so lucky. I would love that!". But her mother said, "No, you're not leaving school yet. Maybe after Year 12"!

This is one example of how a Patterson parent managed a difficult (though loved) daughter through a mix of humour and guidance through senior high school course and career options.

Deirdre's family represents a type at Patterson that finds *VET in Schools* attractive. The parents are semi-professional or self-employed who have a lifestyle at or near Patterson that is different from the lifestyle and choices they would have made in a metropolitan area; that is, less than 'middle class' in the sense that living at or near Patterson generates a different environment, and thus different life choices, for them and their children. This raises the issue, already demonstrated for the United

Kingdom (Ball, Maguire & McCrae, 2000), where middle class students tend to 'take over' VET courses once the curricula become more 'academic' and mainstream, as in the new HSC in New South Wales. At Patterson, it was the case that the students doing VET courses increasingly came from families with some composition of middle class background and values, but VET was not necessarily just a second choice, filler or 'down time' subject for these students. Many other students doing VET were from families with at least one parent who had a professional or tertiary qualification.

One of the biggest surprises to both interviewers (given the stereotypes and labelling we were operating on) was to find out that some of the parents of students we interviewed, from farms for example, were highly qualified and widely talented people mixing middle class occupations—and Sydney weekday jobs—with a rural lifestyle. In the case of mothers interviewed, tertiary qualifications had fallen into disuse, though were there for use later on and as an example to their children. Most students at Patterson have part-time work to provide money to the family and themselves, and there is at least one example of a student with her/his own business. Not one student I interviewed felt that her/his friends saw her/him as 'second class' for taking VET classes. This may be a factor of being a small and close student body, but I believe there were broader factors at work.

### **Discussion**

While the traditional divide between general and vocational education has been bridged at Patterson, there appeared to be an increasing individualisation and consumerisation of education, whereby people's choices are seen as a personal matter, not a community or social event. Education in Australia is being conceptually challenged as a public

good, and increasingly reconceptualised as a market commodity. There is good and bad in this. The failure to identify an acute academic–vocational divide in staff and student attitudes at Patterson suggests that, in this case, the traditional hierarchy of courses is becoming less relevant to students making subject selections and, perhaps, less a marker of school and career choice status and of social class. This is occurring in a context where the mix of credentials and pathways to and through careers is expanding. Senior secondary ‘success’, as traditionally defined by a high university admission score (that is, rewarded by entry into a high status degree program), thus begins to lose power as a determinant of social standing, and, potentially, of economic ‘success’ in life after school.

As demonstrated by Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000), the educational pathways and credential building practices of young people now follow abstruse, tangential and sometimes improbable trajectories, aided and abetted by further and higher education sectors keen to enrol students, often outside the matriculation process. Students’ talents are being increasingly recognised in contexts outside systemic educational institutions. *VET in Schools* students are using work to make sense of schooling, as well as to further career goals in a way that traditional schools could never assist or enable students. Teachers at Patterson know this and are able to put that knowledge to use because the school’s administration provides the flexibility and wherewithal to do this.

If *VET in Schools* leads to positive, rewarding and properly remunerated employment, as it can (te Riele & Crump, 2002), then being in a selective school—or ‘out of zone’ in a government school located in an economically privileged area—may be

seen as an appropriate choice for some, but not necessarily the best or only choice for all. This shift in perception, if more widely spread, could reaffirm the value of a community secondary school. *VET in Schools* at Patterson was a first, and positive, choice for many students, appearing to suit the practical and entrepreneurial qualities needed to live and work—or simply ‘make do’—in a rural/regional setting. But a school’s curriculum can create a perception of ‘choice’—even when that choice is narrow. Any school’s subject selection process shapes an apparition of a brighter future for young people, but this apparition masks powers and constraints shaped by both the education system (Crump, 1995) and the socioeconomic and cultural milieu of that school’s community.

VET in the new HSC in New South Wales as a policy, while largely successful, perhaps evades the need for more fundamental reform to schools and greater reflexivity within and among existing institutional structures. The Lifelong Learning restructure of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training in 2004, which brought school and TAFE units closer together, may be the next step taken to tackle the harder question of general and vocational education becoming seamless options for young people as they seek to create a future for themselves and our nation.

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