

29 November 2017

Ms Kerryn Riseley
Executive Officer
Economics, Education, Jobs & Skills Committee
Parliament House
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Dear Ms Riseley

Inquiry into careers advice activities in Victorian schools

The Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce (VACC) welcomes an opportunity to respond to the Victorian Government's Inquiry into careers advice activities in Victorian schools.

The Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce (VACC) is Victoria's peak automotive industry association, representing the interests of more than 5,000 members in over 20 retail automotive sectors that employ over 50,000 Victorians.

VACC members range from new and used vehicle dealers (passenger, truck, commercial, motorcycles, recreational and farm machinery), repairers (mechanical, electrical, body and repair specialist, i.e. radiators and engines), vehicle servicing (service stations, vehicle washing, rental, windscreens), parts and component wholesale/retail and distribution and aftermarket manufacture (i.e. specialist vehicle, parts or component modification and/or manufacture), and automotive dismantlers and recyclers. VACC engages strongly with Australia's vocational education and training system (VET) and has provided advice on VET arrangements for many decades.

Employers in the automotive industry employ apprentices, both as a means of equipping their own businesses with the appropriate skills, and also as a means of ensuring a broader industry skills pool is generated, through which all employers draw on, over time. This notion of building capability across an industry, and through individual investments by employers, is an underpinning feature of apprenticeship training in the automotive industry in Australia, and has been since the early introduction of motor vehicles.

The engagement in VET, by employers in the industry, is generally through local schools, TAFE institutes, private training providers and via group apprenticeship schemes. Group apprenticeship schemes have a strong presence in the automotive industry, and many employers prefer this method of employment and training, due mainly to the growing complexity and cost of apprenticeship recruitment and training.

VACC is active and integral to VET/industry engagement by supporting industry employers and leading the way in employment pathways and promotion of careers through its group training program, Auto Apprenticeships. Auto Apprenticeships promotes automotive careers at career forums, in secondary schools, engages in school based programs and employs full-time apprentices in order to address the skill shortages experienced by the industry. Currently this program employs and manages the training of over 500 apprentices in Victoria and in Tasmania.

An integral part of this initiative is the work VACC undertakes in the secondary school system and specifically in the engagement of young people who are considering their career options.

VACC has provided highly skilled careers advisory staff into schools for over three decades, with a primary aim of providing accurate and coherent advice to school students who may be considering a career in automotive, either post-school or as part of their VET/school studies.

The success of this service to schools is enhanced by the engagement and training of new entrants to the industry, up to trade level. This engagement in over 250 schools across Victoria has enabled VACC to clearly understand the world of the careers advisor (its strengths and challenges) in the school system, and understands where improvements could be made to the current careers advisory arrangements.

In offering advice to this Inquiry, VACC reflects on many occasions where it has been asked, by governments, to provide a perspective on careers advice in schools. On each occasion VACC advice has been consistent, forthright and reflective of practical experience. In all cases, VACC maintains that trade-based career advice in schools should be undertaken by personnel who have a deep understanding of the industry, its structure and the many career options that may be available to school students and school leavers. Importantly, students need to understand the expectations of industry, as individuals need to be matched with the relevant sector in the industry and with the most appropriate employer.

This deep and dedicated understanding of the industry is the very least that can be afforded to school students seeking to understand the myriad of career and training possibilities that are available to them. Anything less than this is potentially misleading, and in many cases, unhelpful.

The nature, breadth and scope of the automotive industry is something that is understood over time and through direct employment and engagement in key roles in the industry. This is not something that should be undertaken by a multi-tasking careers advisor, who is likely to be heavily reliant on career manuals, web sites and snippets of information found in career guides. It is no surprise to VACC that a significant number of apprentices fail to complete their early years of training, given the sometimes poor advice that is levied at them by inadequately uninformed careers personnel, and teachers.

VACC accepts that being critical of school careers advisors is not helpful here and VACC understands the constraints and pressures that careers advisors are working under.

Often career advisors are time poor and confused by the diverse expectations from various industries. Advice on careers can be difficult to obtain and advisors may also face limited support for students wanting to pursue a vocational qualification rather than an academic one. However, leaving the system in its current state of play would be to encourage its demise and ultimate redundancy.

VACC congratulates government in undertaking this Inquiry and welcomes system-wide changes that result from this work. VACC has a deep interest in this matter and will positively engage with the Inquiry to assist its purposes.

Specifically, VACC provides the following feedback:

1) The relationship between school career advice and youth employment outcomes

VACC makes the point that poor, or inaccurate careers advice is a contributing factor in the misalignment of young school leavers into job roles. Whilst VACC accepts that many students will have multiple starting points in their careers, it also suggests that many students are still directed into trade occupations, based on a perceived lack of academic ability.

There still persists, in the Australia psyche, an entrenched view that academic students should first strive for an academic career and only fall back on a trade career as a second or last option. This jaundiced view has not only misguided many students into poor career matches, it has also left many trade industries with high levels of skills shortages; an unfortunate anomaly given the rate of youth unemployment in Australia.

More so, trade roles are still seen by many teachers, as the dumping ground for students who have a poor 'fit' into more academic career roles and professions. A consequence of this is poor advice about trade careers, and is the creation of a demeaning mantra that "a job in a trade is better than no job at all".

An automotive apprenticeship is the commencement of a career, but unfortunately it is not understood to be a viable career by many advisors. Inaccurate advice can be highly damaging to employers and students, setting them both up for failure.

Due to the challenges faced by career advisors, students are often not equipped with detailed advice on industry expectations, including advice on the skills and attributes required for the learning and development phases of an apprenticeship.

Poorly conceived careers advice based on a scant understanding of an industry is misleading and has the potential to see students bounced around the employment market, with some school leavers losing their footing very early in their career journey.

2) How well current career advice meets the needs of school leavers

While VACC suggests this is a question that is better answered by school leavers, VACC experience shows that students rarely receive good, accurate and reliable advice as part of the school careers advice program. VACC has noted the transient role of the careers advisor in schools, and we believe this is partly attributable to students being directed to academic careers instead of trade occupations. We have also seen students that have been directed to automotive to engage in a VET-in-schools program that is not connected to the formal and preferred programs delivered jointly with industry.

VACC would suggest that engagement with school leavers on this question should be supported with a review of different models, practiced in different countries, and from environments that have similar characteristics to Victoria's geography and demography. In our view, an alternative model is justified to reduce the frustrations experienced by school career advisors, students and employers.

3) The challenges faced by school career advisors

The role of the school careers advisor would be, by all accounts, the most difficult job of all. With the multitude of careers and job roles available in the employment market and the rapid emergence of new job roles, it would seem an impossible task for a careers advisor, or even a team of advisors, to be reasonably informed on the design, content and requirements of the different roles available to school leavers. In the automotive industry alone, there are at least fifty distinct job roles, some of which are interconnected and others that are stand-alone. While, in some schools concerted efforts are made to engage industry and other professionals to help inform students on different industry career paths, in other schools this is poorly achieved.

In most cases the energy and capability around industry engagement, and the coordination of subject experts to discuss specific industry careers with students, comes down to an individual in a school who is highly motivated and dedicated to the career aspirations of students.

In addition, where the individual is capable, the school environment needs to be flexible and supportive of vocational career pathways, including the engagement of industry to deliver work experience and practical placements in both VCAL and VCE studies.

Where resources are limited, either human resources or financial, a default position is often taken that leads to a narrowing of careers advice and coordination. It is easy to understand this default position, given the breadth of the careers advisors role, however, the outcome for students is limiting and wholly reliant on the specific careers and occupations the careers advisors "choose", as a narrowed target source for the school. Schools that promote successful university acceptance often fail to tailor options for students that may be suited to alternative career options and pathways.

4) Strategies to improve the effectiveness of career advice activities for school leavers

VACC contends that a primary factor in the provision of careers advice to school students is an insufficient engagement and coordination with industry. For the automotive industry, VACC would be a key provider of industry careers advice to young Victorians in schools. Where VACC works closely with a dedicated careers advisor, inroads can be made into the careers advisory circuit, however, this level of engagement would represent less than 10 per cent of all Victorian schools.

Where schools have dedicated VET automotive programs, with qualified industry personnel running this part of the curriculum, the careers advisory information is significantly enhanced, especially where the program collaborates with industry for access to technology, resources and contemporary information.

VACC schools advisory staff report significantly higher levels of specific industry knowledge in these schools, and the benefits of a practical environment where students can test some of their perceptions around a trade role.

Specifically, VACC asserts that:

4.1 Schools need the capacity, human resources and financial scope, to engage individuals from industry, to provide dedicated careers advice. This engagement strategy should include leading employer bodies, who often have the expertise and knowledge to properly inform students of the various job roles and career opportunities in an industry.

4.2 Government careers advisor funding to schools should be expanded and broadened to enable leading industry bodies to develop career resources, and information channels to properly engage and inform school students.

4.3 Government should consider effective personal development programs for careers advisors, a requirement to collaborate with industry and the requirement to allow for more flexible structures in the school environment where students can participate in vocational learning either through a VCAL or VCE program.

4.4 More students should have the capacity to access VET-trade programs in consultation with industry and its relevant peak bodies.

5) Career advice needs of young people in regional Victoria

VACC observes limitations in regional areas, compared to metropolitan and suburban areas, where students have access to more diverse career events and a broader range of career possibilities to draw from.

While there are also limitations in the range of career options that may be promoted in regional schools given a natural bias to local employment, the connection to local employers can be an advantage as schools and the community collaborate more effectively.

Industry associations can play a key role on this issue, and in particular where they have strong links to local employers and their business networks. Funding should be considered that enables associations to work more closely with regional schools, in the promotion of industry careers.

6) Exploring what other jurisdictions both in Australia and overseas have in place that could be implemented in Victoria

The geography and physical spread of communities in Australia and Victoria, have a uniqueness that is replicated in few overseas countries. While examples of best practice teaching and learning strategies can be cited in Northern European countries, it should not follow that their examples of careers advisory practices would be fit-for-purpose in Australia.

VACC argues that Australia and Victoria have a unique set of conditions that are seldom found elsewhere and consequently, local solutions should be trialled and tested in Australia. Current career advisory services are diverse, some purport to provide careers advice, but have other purposes, while other programs, despite their limited resources are providing positive careers advice. We caution that any review of existing programs should not be based on the assumption that all deliver quality outcomes.

VACC is concerned that over previous decades, the role of state funded careers advice has been, to some degree, replaced by commercial operations that have a vested interest in promoting courses that lead to a training outcome. This situation has encouraged inappropriate and often misleading advice to be provided to school students and school leavers, often driven by a desire by course promoters to enrol students in courses and qualifications, many of which have low potential job outcomes.

VACC encourages government to reassert their obligation and commitment to deliver competent and meaningful career advisory services to Victorian schools, and in doing so, engage closely with industry and its associations.

Yours sincerely,



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