Curriculum Conversations and Actions: Flexible Pathways that Increase Equitable Outcomes

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Introduction
The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), a new post compulsory qualification for young people, is in its first full year of operation. The story of its development and implementation well illustrates the theme of this conference. Many dynamic conversations and actions have taken place in the shaping of this new qualification, in its implementation and particularly about its effect on students and their learning outcomes.

VCAL is the first major accreditation process undertaken by the Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA). This new regulatory body has been responsible for all qualifications, other than higher education, since it was set up following recommendations in the Final Report of the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria (Kirby 2000). The VQA began operation in 2001 as the peak accreditation, certification and quality assurance body for post compulsory education.

The objectives of the VQA are to:

- develop and monitor standards for education and training normally undertaken in, or designed to be undertaken in the years after Year 10;
- ensure and support appropriate linkages between qualifications;
- facilitate procedures that make it easier for people to re-enter education and training and acquire qualifications throughout their lives

(http://www.vqa.vic.gov.au)

Policy Context
The Kirby Report found that too many young people were leaving school before completing Year 12 and were often not equipped to engage in further education and training when they did so. There was concern that the employment they could undertake was often short-term or part-time and their pathways to the future were uncertain. It was recognised that the one school certificate, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), taken over a two year period, was not meeting the needs of all students.

To inform the Kirby Report, consultations were held with all key stakeholders throughout Victoria over a period of several months. Many young people who had left school early told the Review Panel at these meetings that what
had encouraged them back into education were programs offered in other sectors. As well, schools reported on alternative programs which they conducted for students who were failing in mainstream programs. There was considerable evidence that the system needed to be more flexible and responsive in meeting the needs of young people.

The Kirby Report recommended that this could only be done by offering courses and qualifications broadly equivalent to the VCE through: recognising a broader range of learning outcomes for young people; integrating cross sectoral programs and services; recognising these programs by accrediting them; and monitoring the outcomes of these programs.

Following the adoption of recommendations from the Kirby Report, the Government set the following targets:

- By 2010, 90 per cent of young people in Victoria will complete Year 12 or its equivalent
- By 2005, the percentage of young people aged 15-19 in rural and regional Victoria engaged in education and training will increase by 6 per cent.

The setting of these targets gave new urgency to the development of a qualification which would engage a broader cohort of young people in learning, particularly at school, and increase more equitable outcomes for those whose needs were not being met.

Development and Trialing of VCAL

There was considerable evidence of the kinds of pedagogical approaches to learning that did engage young people who were not suited to the largely academic curriculum of the VCE. The Victorian approaches and curriculum in the Commonwealth’s Full Service Schools (FSS) Program provided useful background (Anwyl: 1999). A number of reports on initiatives and issues in the FSS Program (Bradshaw et al 2001; O’Dowd et al 2001; Stokes 2000) and its evaluation (James et al 2001) showed that programs were successful when they had a vocational orientation, were part of an integrated approach to learning, and included practical activities. This approach needed to include:

- Inclusive and differentiated curriculum designed around individual and group student needs and capacities, including programs delivered by schools in partnership with other providers;
- Supportive learning environments in a combination of settings;
- Regular relevant experience in a workplace and/or paid work;
- Teaching relationships which value the learner; and
- Personal support offered by teachers or other individual adults.

The term “applied learning” was used initially as a way of identifying the proposed new qualification and to distinguish it from a range of vocational education and training (VET) programs already operating in schools. The intention of the new qualification was to provide a flexible and broader range of post compulsory options for young people whose needs were not being
met by the VCE. These options were to be developed as a coherent qualification framework, which would include vocational elements already accredited.

The title Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) was adopted. The Victorian Government committed $47.7m over four years for the statewide implementation and further development of the new certificate.

In late 2001, sites for the trialing of the certificate in 2002 were identified. All of these sites had a history of offering successful alternative programs for their students, generally at Year 10, but also in Year 11, or in the case of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes, or Adult and Community Education (ACE) settings, to young people who had dropped out of school. Each site received additional resources to participate in the VCAL trial.

The design of VCAL was undertaken with the involvement of curriculum experts and teachers and students at the sites involved. The experience of teachers and the ways of engaging students were based on adult and youth development principles informed by existing good practice. To inform the development, an evaluation was conducted as action research by the Research Institute for Professional and Vocational Education and Training (RIPVET), a consortium of Deakin University and the Gordon Institute of TAFE, Geelong (Henry et al: 2003).

The certificate was accredited by the VQA in July 2002, following advice from the evaluators and endorsement by the VQA Board, and RIPVET completed its evaluation of the VCAL trial in early 2003. The report concluded that the certificate was strongly supported in the trial sites, was well designed to improve pathways for young people from school to work, further education and/or training, and appropriate for rolling out across the State.

The VCAL trial project was successfully completed in December 2002. A total of 546 students enrolled in the VCAL at the 22 trial sites with the majority successfully completing the certificate or making successful transitions into apprenticeships, traineeships and other employment. Subsequent data shows that 59 per cent of students in the trial undertook a one year program and that 66.7 per cent of these students successfully completed and were awarded a VCAL certificate at the end of 2002. Of the 546 students enrolled in 2002, 196 have re-enrolled in VCAL this year with 98 enrolling in VCE. Of the others, 28 per cent are engaged in apprenticeships, traineeships or other employment and 14 per cent are enrolled in TAFE or ACE courses. (VQA data).

Qualification Design
To be awarded a VCAL, students must successfully complete a Learning Program which is made up of 10 credits. Curriculum components may be drawn from VCAL units (accredited by the VQA), VCE units, VCE VET units
and VET or Further Education accredited units which require completion of 100 hours.

VCAL is a framework qualification which enables accredited curriculum from a range of sources to be grouped into coherent Learning Programs at the following three award levels:

- Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (Foundation)
- Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (Intermediate)
- Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (Senior).

The 3 qualification levels provide flexible entry and exit points for a range of student abilities and interests.

VCAL is delivered as a complementary qualification to the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). Students can transfer credit for successful completion of units in a VCAL to the VCE and vice versa.

Curriculum and Assessment
VCAL curriculum consists of four strands:

- Literacy and Numeracy Skills
- Industry Specific Skills
- Work Related Skills
- Personal Development Skills

The curriculum selected for the Learning Program must cover all four VCAL curriculum strands. A minimum of two VCAL units, one Literacy Skills unit and one Numeracy Skills unit must be included.

In the Literacy and Numeracy Skills strand, curriculum can be selected from VET or Further Education (FE) modules or the VCE as well as from VCAL accredited Literacy and Numeracy units (VQA: 2003a).

In the Industry Specific Skills strand, accredited VET units are selected.

Curriculum in the Work Related Skills strand and the Personal Development strand are selected from VCAL accredited units.

All VCAL units are based on learning outcomes and enable content to be developed or planned at the local level to suit the individual needs of students and to utilise community resources. Each unit is 100 nominal hours which include both scheduled and unscheduled time. VCAL units are available at all three award levels (VQA: 2002).

Each VCAL unit learning outcome has a set of assessment criteria which must be met for satisfactory completion of the unit. Assessment tasks need to be designed to enable the learning outcomes to be demonstrated. This can be
through one integrated activity or spread over a number of activities. Students need to keep a portfolio that contains evidence of successful completion of the learning outcomes for each VCAL unit they are enrolled in. Evidence from a wide variety of sources is encouraged.

A Quality Assurance process for the VCAL units has been put in place. Nine regional Quality Assurance Panels comprising 3 VCAL practitioners and the Regional Consultant review sample assessment tasks in Semester 1 and sample portfolios of assessment in Semester 2 (VQA: 2003b).

Implementation
In the second half of 2002, following the early success of the VCAL trialing, expressions of interest were sought from schools who wished to offer VCAL in 2003. Consequently this year 235 providers are running the qualification for 5316 students (see Table 1 below). They are supported by central staff from the VQA as well as VCAL consultants based in each of the 9 school regions in Victoria.

Table 1 – VCAL 2003 enrolments by sector and certificate level as at 10 September 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider type</th>
<th>Total Providers</th>
<th>Found. level</th>
<th>Inter. level</th>
<th>Seni. level</th>
<th>Total Enrolments</th>
<th>% Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Govt schools</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>1573</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>3837</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic schools</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>423</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE institutes</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>861</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACE centres</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>2219</td>
<td>2723</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>5316</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VQA: data 2003

Notes:
1. Includes 12 providers who were not funded but who have enrolled VCAL students.

Nineteen Further Development Pilot Projects have been set up in 2003 to test the applicability of the curriculum framework in meeting the needs of a broader range of students. There are three categories in these pilots:

- VCAL Industry Themed (for students seeking a range of experience within a particular industry sector)
- VCAL for Diverse Needs (for students with diverse needs to ensure that VCAL is culturally inclusive) and
VCAL Senior Extension (for students who have successfully completed either Senior VCAL or VCE and who wish to undertake an intensive preparation for further study)

An evaluation of these pilots is being conducted by RIPVET.

In the VCAL Diverse Needs pilots there are three Koorie projects being conducted, two in TAFE (in Mildura at Sunraysia TAFE, and in Shepparton at Goulburn Ovens TAFE) and one in Morwell at the Woollum Bellum Koorie Open Door Education school. Also there is a project for refugee young people at two school Language Centres in Melbourne’s West, Braybrook and Broadmeadows.

All of the pilots are demonstrating that the VCAL framework encourages continued engagement by a wide range of students, but that additional support is crucial to students with diverse needs obtaining successful outcomes.

The VCAL Senior Extension has led to the accreditation of additional units which recognise the need for intensive folio preparation and tertiary preparation needed by students with art and design as their pathways, but further evaluation is required to determine its future directions.

Themed VCAL fits well within the overall qualification framework and can be chosen by schools where there are several students who see a particular industry area as their pathway.

(Further details are on the VQA website.)

For 2004, a further 87 sites have been accepted to offer VCAL with most of the current sites offering students a further VCAL level as well as taking in new student cohorts.

Table 2 - VCAL providers for 2004, as at 10 September 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider type</th>
<th>VCAL 2003 providers</th>
<th>VCAL 2004 New (providers)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government schools</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic schools</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE institutes</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACE organisations</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (not funded)</td>
<td>(12)</td>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>Not known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VQA: data 2003

Pedagogy and Professional Learning
A major issue with the implementation of VCAL has been that of encouraging teachers to adopt a pedagogy different from that of their traditional teaching. Underpinning VCAL is the empowerment of students to become active learners, and that requires pedagogy based on: student negotiation; working in groups; visual, oral and written communication to a wide range of audiences; learning both practical and theoretical skills; and applying that learning in the community. While accredited programs from VCE and VET are part of VCAL, all of the VCAL accredited units specify the Learning Outcomes for each Strand and Level. In documents and guides published by the VQA, sample tasks have been provided for teachers. In many cases, schools are designing and implementing innovative curriculum based on VCAL pedagogy. One community school now uses a VCAL Student Programs approach as the basis of all of its curriculum.

Two full day programs of Professional Development are offered to all schools and other providers undertaking VCAL in 2003, but there is some evidence that teachers find it rather threatening to take risks in exploring other than their traditional approaches to teaching. This will be overcome as VCAL gains wider acceptance and more teachers are involved. It is also advanced by the exchange of experiences that teachers are having as they see the growing confidence and success of their students. Good news stories abound about the engagement of young people in the applied learning activities which are enabling them to continue with their education and training with enthusiasm.

Partnerships
A key to the conduct of VCAL is the setting up of partnerships between providers, business, the community and organizations which have an interest in conducting programs. This is also important in finding local solutions to problems which young people can tackle.

There are already many examples. Several statewide organizations, such as the Red Cross, St John’s Ambulance, Surf Life Saving, the Duke of Edinburgh program and the Country Fire Authority, are partners in VCAL with their courses able to be given recognition, generally within the Personal Development strand.

Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) support the development of partnerships in their areas. There are 31 LLENs across Victoria set up following recommendations in the Kirby Report, that all the key education and employment stakeholders work together to “develop collaborative approaches towards planning and improved delivery of post compulsory education training programs and services” and “investigate and trial key elements of regional coordination and delivery of programs” as outlined in the report. (Kirby: 19). Several LLENs themselves are involved as partners with VCAL providers, and many others provide the contacts and support to form new partnerships.
Since local projects can be developed as part of VCAL, either in the Personal Development Skills or Work Related Skills strands, there are many opportunities for students working together with groups undertaking projects with senior citizens, the environment, local government, and the arts. Working with children in primary schools in sport, tutoring or recycling, also forms ongoing partnerships. Many of the partnerships which can benefit students and the local community can be formed through existing networks which teachers and students already have (Anwyl:2003).

Evaluation and Monitoring
The ongoing evaluation and monitoring of VCAL and that of the pilot projects is important in monitoring what needs to change in the program, how it is taken up and the outcomes for students.

As well as the formal monitoring, a communication strategy has been put in place to publicise the new certificate and its outcomes. This has included a VCAL Achievement Awards ceremony at Parliament House, media advertisements publicising the “hands on” nature of VCAL, and presentations by VCAL staff and students in a wide variety of forums.

While results of this cannot be measured with great accuracy, there is certainly growing evidence that the certificate is meeting the needs of all stakeholders – students, parents, employers and the community. Stories about changes in student attitudes to learning abound, with grateful parents observing the difference that VCAL has made to the lives of both students and parents. Students themselves are ambassadors for the qualification, particularly as the nature of their learning encourages contact with a wide cross section of the community. Videos, radio broadcasts, displays, magazine and newspaper articles are all contributing to the evidence that VCAL is working for a large number of young people.

Access and Equity
VCAL is open to all students, whatever their previous educational attainment. It is designed so that success is achieved by meeting goals which are clearly set out so that they can be understood by the learner. The highest number of students in 2003 have enrolled at the Intermediate level (2723) with the number enrolling at the Foundation level being 2219. Teachers make the judgment about which is the appropriate level, but it is possible to combine more than one level and with Recognition of Prior Learning processes, students can gain credit for what has already been learned. This is an advantage to many students who have worked part-time or undertaken a community activity previously unrecognised in any qualification.

There is an issue of access to VCAL for students in isolated or rural schools where small numbers do not allow great diversity of curriculum. The VQA is undertaking a project in 2003 to examine opportunities to increase access to VCAL for these students. Cooperation with other education and training
providers and the involvement of Distance Education Victoria in VCAL in 2004 should expand access for rural and isolated students.

Next Steps
The expansion of VCAL next year will enable the second phase of the statewide rollout of the certificate. All TAFE institutes and additional ACE providers will offer VCAL in 2004, as well as an increased number of government schools and schools in the Catholic system.

There are still challenges ahead not least being that of changing pedagogy through professional learning strategies. In the spirit of VCAL this could be undertaken by using the applied learning model and learning by doing. However it also takes effective networking among teachers to exchange ideas and strategies on teaching and learning. With greater numbers of schools undertaking VCAL in a geographic area, there is likely to be some spontaneous professional learning supported by LLENs and other local professional groups.

Another challenge is that VCAL is a post compulsory qualification and students cannot enrol before they reach Year 11. However VCAL studies in Year 10 are on the same basis as VCE studies in Year 10, that is students can be given credit for previous work on enrolling in VCAL at Year 11. It is also possible to apply VCAL pedagogy in earlier years.

Resources are also seen by many schools as intensive for VCAL programs, but it requires some rethinking about how current resources are used. While a new student-centred funding model for post compulsory education and training is on the drawing boards, every provider needs to allocate resources that meet the needs of all students. In fact every young person should have an entitlement to pursue his or her education and training pathway at least until the age of 19.

The VQA is examining other matters which impact on access and equity, the most notable being the development of a Credit Matrix. The credit matrix is a new approach to the way achievement in different kinds of qualifications can be described and compared. It is an approach that could potentially be applied across all the different kinds of qualifications available in Victoria. It allows a value to be put on achievement, and for comparisons to be made through a system of levels - for complexity of learning - and points - for the amount of learning - (VQA Website).

Conclusion
VCAL is in its infancy. It has been implemented with great rapidity, but the need for such a qualification and curriculum approach has existed for some years. This was in fact demonstrated by the success of alternative Year 12 programs such as STC, in the 80s and early 90s. While times have changed, the learning needs of students have not, in that practical activities and applied learning engage and empower them. Many people have suggested that all
would be solved by “bringing back the tech schools” but we have moved on to a new sophistication driven by technological change, the new face of employment, and communities which require cohesion and activism.

It remains to be seen if VCAL students acquire the skills to live and work happily as adults. It is not speculation, though to see that their learning has given them pathways instead of dead ends. Many of them now feel empowered to continue with education and training, a thing most had never thought possible before.

References

Anwyl, J. (1999) “Framing Curriculum for At Risk Students”, paper delivered at ACSA Biennial Conference, Perth, Western Australia


(The interim evaluation and a summary are on the VQA website - www.vqa.vic.gov.au)


*PDF files of these publications are under Resources on the Successful Learning Website (http://www.successfullearning.com.au/resources.html)

**Files of VCAL material are under Teaching Resources on the VQA Website (http://www.vqa.vic.gov.au/vqa/vcal/providers/teaching_resources.asp)