Title: Disturbing the Cycle - Implementing the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) in North East Victoria

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Introduction
The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is a new qualification available to young people at the end of the compulsory years of schooling. The intent of VCAL is to offer an alternative certificate to the current senior school qualification, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). The curriculum content of VCAL is aligned more closely with training and work, but this does not exclude students from taking a combination of VET in VCE or VCE subjects (Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training, 2002). In 2001, 22 educational institutions, 15 State schools, 3 Catholic schools and 2 TAFE institutes, offered VCAL as an option and after an evaluation in 2002, VCAL was extended to other educational organisations across Victoria for implementation in 2003 (Henry, Dalton, Wilde, Walsh and Wilde, 2002).

VCAL has three award levels: Foundation, Intermediate and Senior. Each level is designed to have a progression for skills, knowledge and attitudinal development whilst appealing to students’ abilities and interests. Each of the award levels contains four curriculum strands: Literacy and Numeracy, Industry Specific Skills, Work Related Skills and Personal Development Skills.

The aim of the research reported in this paper, was to examine the implications for young people, those in the 15 to 19 year old age group, enrolling in VCAL in educational institutions in four Shires in North East Victoria. The study also examined methods of provision for VCAL that identified education, training and employment needs of young people, delivery and support strategies across the region, and implications for resources. This research also analysed current and future characteristics of the labour market, in particular existing and/or predicted skill shortages, however these will not be reported in this paper as the focus here is to document the introduction of this new certificate.

North East Region
The geographical area covered by this study falls into the four shires of Alpine, Indigo, Towong and Wodonga. Some of the data collected for this research were drawn from business and industry representatives located in Albury, even though Albury is geographically and politically affiliated with the State of New South Wales. At a local level Albury is considered part of the region as it contributes to the broader economic and social construct of North East Victoria.
As the effect of globalisation impacts on regions across Australia, it seems that many rural areas have not been developing as well as some of the capital cities. Sydney and Melbourne, for example, have experienced good economic growth in the new global economy. However some regional areas have not experienced the same level of prosperity, instead reporting a decline in services and a movement of people, especially young people to the capital cities in search of employment, jobs that have grown out of and evolved around new global markets. (Victorian Department of Infrastructure, 2000)

The North East region of Victoria is one district that has made relatively significant gains from changes bought about by the shifting nature of the Australian and world economy. Indicators from this region support an area succeeding in terms of economic and population growth. The area is growing at approximately 1.3 per cent each year and is set to be the fastest growing area in Victoria over the next twenty-five years. Private sector investment has averaged approximately $250 million per annum since 1992/93. The North East region has a strong stake in the agricultural and forestry industries. Recreation, tourism and a range of commercial industries are also significant economic contributors to the area (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001).

While the North East area of Victoria is succeeding well in terms of economic growth and the population in the area continues to increase, the number of young people who have attained the VCE does not reflect the overall success this region enjoys. In 2000 this area had the lowest rate, 53.5 per cent, of 19 year olds with a VCE of any region in Victoria. The average rate for attaining this qualification in Victoria by 19 year olds in 2000 was 67.4 per cent, which is an increase of 2.5 per cent since 1998 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001).

VCAL as a Process of Change
The development of VCAL has stemmed from a concern regarding post compulsory schooling issues faced by many young people in Victoria, as identified in the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 2000). VCAL has been promoted because of diverse vocational mix of programs and curricula being offered in the post compulsory education sectors, with the intention of providing a certificate that offers a strong work focus for young people. The focus of this new certificate of applied learning is a complementary qualification, one that offers students a strong connection to the labour market, by providing a curriculum framework for a certificate linked to existing secondary school qualifications in VET and VCE.
The implementation of VCAL has, as a prerequisite, required the need for change. Change is a process which takes place continuously and rather than being evolutionary and linear, occurs in episodes. These episodes of change are motivated by complex circumstances in the social, political and economic context within which systems and institutions function. VCAL is a response to a situation which arises especially in times of economic rationalism, where there are scarce resources, where the retention rate of young people in schooling increases as a means to keep them off dole queues, and where there is pressure towards vocationalism and training rather than a broad, general education.

The rise in numbers of young people remaining in schools until the post compulsory years of schooling has brought with it the disengaged youth syndrome. The catch all VCE, which was designed to eliminate the plethora of different certificates and credentials available in years 11 and 12 of schooling in Victoria, is no longer adequate or appropriate. The VCE was designed, in a period of social justice and was seen as a way to create equal opportunities for all learners, as far as this is ever possible. However, by the time it was enacted, which was a decade after the Blackburn Review began, (the review responsible for the instigation of the VCE), the era of economic rationalism was beginning and thus to an extent, the VCE was an anachronism before it began. Hence we have witnessed all kinds of changes and modification to it since its introduction.

It has now been acknowledged through the introduction of programs such as VET in VCE and VCAL, that VCE is not an appropriate credential for many young learners. However, the introduction of these awards also signals the rise of vocationalism in schooling and education. This results from a value for those specific skills which are workplace oriented and which will provide the human capital required to get a good job and join the workforce. Thus the emphasis is on training rather than on education in its broadest sense. Smyth (2001) in discussing vocationalism states:

This trajectory [towards vocationalism] is characterised by the development and implementation in Australia of the Mayer (1992) Key Competencies which emerged in the early 1990s out of the perceived need for the convergence of general and vocational education to ensure schooling that was more closely tied to preparing young people for the emerging forms of work and work organisation. Schooling is being required to play a more important role in vocational skill formation and job preparation at a time when the labor market is characterised by increasing levels of part-time work, creeping credentialism, the almost complete decimation of the youth full-time labor market, and a large pool of unemployed labor.
It is against this contextual backdrop that VCAL has been introduced. Thus it marks a significant change in the policy and practice of post-compulsory schooling in Victoria.

Change theories abound and the common threads that emerge when a synthesis of these theories occurs, is that there are three approaches to change which are commonly employed. The first may be called the Bureaucratic Approach where change is imposed by management or government and is thus a top-down process. This form of change works on the assumption that the instigators of the change also have the power to impose sanctions and rewards. Those who comply with the change are rewarded and those who do not are in some way negatively reinforced. This form of change has its basis in the behaviourist approach which sees human beings as responding organisms. Such change imposed from on high rarely results in commitment from those on whom it is imposed, and rarely results in pervasive and lasting change.

The second form of change may be referred to as the Rational-Empiric approach to change. This approach involves attempts to provide logical evidence and argument to persuade those who are to be involved in the change, that it is logical, valuable and will in some way be of benefit to them and the system or institution. The assumption underlying this approach to change is that human beings are logical, rational organisms. It underplays the fact that change episodes involve human emotions, feelings, values and attitudes as well as human action. The actions are more easily changed but the other elements are extremely complex and difficult to change. Change produces in people feelings of threat, anger, suspicion, alienation, resignation, and discomfort. If change is to be effective and long term and have the commitment of those involved, it is the feelings and emotions which need to be addressed through dialogue. These elements far outweigh any forms of logic or rational thought that we may wish to attribute to human beings.

The third form of change may be termed the Re-educative Change Process. This approach involves extensive collaboration, consultation, discussion, negotiation, compromise and consultation with and between all those people who are likely to be affected by, and involved in, the episode of change. Stakeholders are involved in the change process at all stages and are thus more likely to have a commitment to it and to have had opportunity to develop and modify their attitudes, feelings and values in the light of the consultative and collaborative process which occurs. People are literally re-educated to take the change on board positively and as involved players in the process of change.

The publicity for VCAL claims

The Bracks Government has decided to introduce a new qualification, called the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), to provide new
It is evident that VCAL is a response to the findings of the Kirby Review (and Report), to which students contributed, which revealed that the factors most frequently cited by students for their decision to leave school were the desire for work and their lack of interest in schoolwork (Henry et al, 2002).

It is laudable that the input of students who are involved was sought during the Kirby Review. However, it appears on the surface, that the initiatives for change which have been prompted by the resultant Kirby Report, such as VCAL, have been imposed by government with apparent haste and lack of consultation with those involved in either implementing the change or in being beneficiaries of the change. Thus VCAL appears to square more with the Bureaucratic Process of change than the other approaches and so it is problematic in terms of the commitment to or understanding of the change on the part of the key players.

Giddens’ (1997) notion of cultural reproduction highlights the transmission of cultural values and norms as being replicated from generation to generation within education systems, thereby perpetuating an environment where class and norms remain endemic and static:

The transmission of cultural values and norms from generation to generation. Cultural reproduction refers to the mechanisms by which continuity of cultural experience is sustained across time. The processes of schooling in modern societies are among the main mechanisms of cultural reproduction, and do not operate solely through what is taught in courses of formal instruction.

It is against the theoretical framework that the introduction of VCAL into the four identified shires can be explained and interpreted. This research highlights the difficulties that can arise when the timeline for implementation has allowed for minimal consultation and negotiation and lack of conversation with all parties to whom the implementation could be relevant. It has been noted during the data collection period that tensions existing between education sectors have been exacerbated during this period of change, and that the business community has rarely felt included in the process.

Methodology
As the methodology involved the collection of data from several groups in the community the methodology used for this research comprised several approaches. The groups from which data were collected and the methods used were:

1. Young people attending school in Year 10 were randomly selected and invited to participate in focus group sessions;
2. Young people not attending school in the 15-19 year old age group were invited to participate in focus group sessions;

3. School coordinators and school personnel involved in the implementation of VCAL were invited to participate in focus group sessions or individual interviews;

4. Representatives from industry, TAFE and other education or training providers were interviewed individually;

5. Business representatives from each local government area were randomly selected and invited to participate in a phone interview.

In order to determine the likely demand for VCAL by young people, a representative sample of schools across the four shires was approached. Five schools agreed to participate in focus group sessions. Schools varied in size and geographical location. All Year 10 students eligible, by nature of year level and geographical location, were involved in simple random sampling to determine those involved in focus group interviews and constituted 10 per cent of the Year 10 population.

Not all young people 15-19 years of age are enrolled in the school system and organisations that offer education and youth programs for this age group were approached to participate in the study. Personnel from the centres agreed to participate in an interview session and permission was sought for the young people attending their centre to participate in either a focus group or individual interview.

Representatives from other educational organisations such as TAFE and the Continuing Education Centre participated in individual interviews. Representatives from industry and organisations such as ATEL also participated in individual interviews.

A random selection of industries drawn from the Albury-Wodonga Industrial and Commercial Register and some businesses randomly selected from the Telstra Yellow Pages directories, N14Y and V07Y, were approached to participate in a phone interview. From the random selection, 47 business representatives were contacted, 32 of whom participated in a phone interview, no response was made to 8 invitations and 7 calls received no follow-up due to the work commitments of individuals selected. Most of the 32 business representatives in the sample group were contacted twice. The first time to make initial contact, gain permission and explain the purpose of the interviews. Few business representatives had knowledge of VCAL therefore a brief overview of the aims and structure of this certificate was faxed to them prior to the interview. While most business representatives contacted agreed to participate in the interviews, identifying a follow-up time proved to be difficult and in over half the sample four to five phone calls were required to be made by the researcher to organise a suitable time for the follow-up call. In the instances where a time had been
arranged, half the representatives had to reschedule the interview time as a result of work place issues requiring priority.

Several data gathering tools were used in this study. These were:

- **Focus Group Sessions**
  Focus group sessions were used with Year 10 students. This form of data collection was deemed the most appropriate for this selected group of individuals because, in seeking opinions and perceptions of VCAL in young people, they are more likely to feel at ease discussing their perceptions, and to give opinions if they are in a situation with other young people, such as school peers.

- **Individual Interviews**
  It was anticipated that representatives from TAFE, CEC and Industry would participate in a focus group session, however due to the varying work commitments of participants, individual interviews were organised for each person.

- **Telephone Interviews**
  A range of industries from various sectors and locations across the shires was chosen randomly and invited to participate in a telephone interview. Due to the geographical spread and likely time restraints placed on those in business, it was decided that participants would be more willing to partake in a telephone interview than a face-to-face or focus group session. Further to this, time in travel was reduced and it was anticipated that business representatives who were hard to locate due to the nature of their work could be accessed more readily.

**Findings**

The data collected from the interviews indicated that, in general, most education providers, youth support agencies, business and industry representatives are supportive of VCAL and the benefits it can offer many students. However, the data collected also indicated that there were issues for all stakeholders surrounding the implementation of VCAL. These surrounded resourcing, communication, access and equity and leadership and decision-making.

- **Resources**
  All participants interviewed indicated that the resources required to offer VCAL were neither easily accessed nor abundant. The issues concerning resources ranged from the human to physical. The availability and quality of human resources were identified by several of the representatives interviewed as a priority. For example, availability of staff with expertise, willingness and interest was a key issue in schools, whereas availability of a coordinator to represent an industry voice at a number of forums was seen as important to industry and business.
In most school environments the VCAL Coordinator has taken on the role in addition to maintaining a full teaching load. This highlights both the good will of teachers and their and willingness to support something that is viewed as educationally valuable. However, this approach is also indicative of the Bureaucratic and Rational-empiric approach to implementing change, where direction is determined from the Principal or vice Principal, albeit at the behest of the Victorian Qualifications Authority, and imposed on a mostly obliging staff.

Two distinct issues arose in the area of transportation. Both TAFE institutes draw students from the four districts studied, and both representatives interviewed noted that bus transport is an issue that has an impact upon the ability of young people to successfully complete aspects of the curriculum strands. Also, travel time for students living in communities that are 1-2 hours from a TAFE institute was raised as a difficulty for students living in out-lying communities.

Funding for courses, such as Literacy, Personal Development or Industry Specific courses, which maybe outsourced by schools, is considered to be problematic by schools themselves and by other providers.

The proposed model that has been generated within the district is not necessarily economically viable for the variety of school sizes. Size of the school population and the nature of school culture may be problematic when a single model is identified as being suitable for general implementation.

Remuneration for industry to be involved in the placement of VCAL students, to provide appropriate and quality training and subsequent documentation, was seen by some in the business sector as an issue requiring consideration. It was acknowledged that in order for a small business operator to fulfil the documentation, training and assessment of a young person under instruction required time, as well as commitment. This meant periods away from business operations and an impact on generation of business.

- Communication
  Communication is integral to the successful implementation of change. In relation to this study it would appear that while some methods of communication had been satisfactorily established and maintained, other areas were problematic. During the Kennett years and the ensuing climate of economic rationalism and micro-economic reform, an ethos of competition had been encouraged in the Victorian school system. The implementation of VCAL had been identified by VCAL coordinators as a collaborative process rather than a competitive one. However, it would appear that genuine collaboration has not occurred between schools and other providers. A number of providers indicated several hurdles that may prevent students from accessing VCAL. These included the attitudes of some school communities towards qualifications such as VCAL.
and the lack of information flow from schools about the pathways VCAL can offer to young people.

The perception of VCAL by some sectors of the community was identified as a significant concern by many of the individuals interviewed. It was felt that unless handled correctly VCAL had the potential to be seen as a course designed for less-able students. The potential undervaluing of VCAL could reinforce the community’s poor image of TAFE and pathways, (as might an alternative to the VCE) as a viable education opportunity for many young people as was identified in the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria (Department of Education, Employment and Training Victoria 2000).

School personnel interviewed indicated that it was a gamble for those in the first year of undertaking this new certificate. While the concept of VACL is generally considered to be positive by all stakeholders, the rushed implementation, uncertainty about requirements and the availability of resources provided elements of concern. Year 10 students and 15 to 19 year olds not in schools also have some concerns about their involvement as the first VCAL cohort.

- **Access and Equity**
  On a number of levels the introduction of VCAL has created several issues for discussion in relation to access and equity, specific to Year 10 and 15 to 19 year olds. Access to all forms of resources is imperative if all students are to have equitable opportunities to participate in education as provided by the state. Schools involved in this study as well as being geographically diverse, vary in student population from 200 to 1100. The number of students attending a school impacts on VCAL offerings in both a positive and negative way. The concept of individual advice and mentoring has been noted as both a suitable and effective pathway for 15 to 19 year olds, however, a limited number of students, if working under one model, have the potential to be expensive consumers of resources. Consideration must be given to alternative strategies for delivery, modelled on individual requirements if necessary, that do not always require all VCAL students to participate in units provided by RTO’s at additional expense.

- **Leadership and Decision-Making**
  Year 10 students, 15 to 19 year olds not in school and school personnel agree on the importance of the first year of VCAL and the future success of VCAL are supported by the approach some schools have adopted in keeping the cohort manageable, handpicking staff and concentrating on individual pathways for each VCAL candidate.

To ensure success and to enable VCAL candidates the opportunity to challenge perceptions of stakeholders, leadership must move to a point where structures are put into place to prevent hurdles from being created. The decision-making
position that is required for VCAL to be successful in the perceptions of young people, parents, local government, business, industry and the community, as well as education providers, is a decision-making process that is open and known.

Conclusion

For young people to make a successful transition from the compulsory years of schooling to full time employment, and to have a greater chance of staying employed, then the acquisition of educational qualifications plays a significant role. The findings from this study would indicate that if a new certificate which aimed to assist young people gain a secondary school qualification, such as VCAL, is to have a successful process of implementation over the next several years then effective communication between parties at all levels, assistance through the targeting of resources and direction through leadership will be vital.

The unsuitability of perpetuating the top-down Bureaucratic Approach that has been the hallmark of the introduction of VCAL to date has been a major concern in the reporting of this research project. An alternative action is required to interpret the findings of the research and to move VCAL decision-making and conversations beyond being reactive. What is required is for an environment to be created where stakeholders can participate in interactive dialogue and consider how best to pursue a course of action that reflects collaborative purposes and which creates the opportunity for VCAL to reach the audience for whom it is intended.

References


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