More calls for VETiS review

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Australian Industry Group chief Innes Willox has joined calls for a review of school vocational training, describing the quality of programs as highly variable and lacking on-the-job experience.

"The VETiS [vocational education and training in schools] program, after some earlier successes, is now beset with a range of problems," Mr Willox said in his chancellor's lecture at Swinburne University earlier this month.

"Many employers have lost confidence in the quality of the program."

His concerns echo those of the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency which says VETiS policy and funding needs reviewing.

Chief among the issues raised by AWPA, an independent authority which advises the government on skills and workforce needs, is the fact that most of the courses on offer are at certificate I and II level which, without industry placement or further education, do not have strong employment outcomes. Further, enrolments are concentrated in areas not necessarily aligned with workforce demand, which is concentrated in the traditional trades.

"In 2010, the majority of VETiS students were in tourism and hospitality, business, and ICT courses, with most of the school-based apprenticeships in retail services," AWPA said in its 2013 National Workforce Development Strategy, released in March.

"AWPA supports the call for clarification of the policy and funding framework for VETiS to ensure it is achieving positive outcomes for young people.

"We also support a review of policy concerning VETiS delivery across jurisdictions, including implementation of the requirement for effective work placements for all VET qualifications so that industry has confidence in the quality of the qualifications delivered."

The intent of VET in schools was to allow students to get credit toward their senior certificate while gaining employability skills with a VET qualification or credit toward a qualification. It can be done in two main ways: students attend a TAFE institute once a week; or the training is delivered in school.

In Victoria, for example, the program has been operating since 1994. Each year, the department of education provides targeted funding for registered government schools that offer VET training.

VET in schools is not confined to government schools; however, and enrolments have been increasing steadily over the years in Victorian Catholic schools.

According to Catholic Education Melbourne, state-wide enrolments grew from 2200 in 1997 to 13,000 in 2010. The largest numbers were in hospitality, sport and recreation and business.

But Mr Willox said VET in schools lacked clear policy direction nationally. AI Group is calling for a comprehensive review of vocational offerings in schools, with a particular emphasis on the VET in schools plank.

"Employers' concerns about the quality and consistency in VET in schools programs continue to grow," he told The Australian Financial Review.

"VET in school programs are highly variable, some lack any workplace learning, sufficient resourcing or appropriate attention within school priorities."

"Too often we see a poor alignment between local industry and employment prospects and what programs individual schools choose to offer."

While some programs aimed to lift school retention rates, others sought to establish genuine employment pathways, Mr Willox added.

"All of these variables have led to an unclear purpose and inconsistent outcomes, which in turn undermine employer confidence."

The Queensland Skills and Training Taskforce highlighted the issue of purpose in its recent final report on reforms planned for that state.

It said although VET in schools plays an important role in supporting transitions to work by allowing students to explore interests and career options, the state government's VET budget should only fund programs that are focused on employment outcomes and aligned to the skills needs of industry.