

CONFERENCE ADDRESS

MARTIN RIORDAN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
TAFE DIRECTORS AUSTRALIA

'ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH IN SCHOOLS WITH SKILLS'

TO

2010 VETnetwork BIENNIAL NATIONAL CONFERENCE

ADELAIDE CONVENTION CENTRE, FRIDAY 17TH SEPTEMBER 2010

(Slide 1)

Thank you for this invitation to address this year's ***VETnetwork Biennial National Conference***, being hosted by South Australia.

I am honoured especially because each year the DEEWR-sponsored Australian American Fulbright VET Scholar has been invited to speak at this event. My appreciation to both DEEWR and the organisers, for making this a repeat event this year !

The topic I have chosen takes two forms:

- A look across the Pacific to trends in alternate school pathways in the American school and college system -- particularly innovative school management and completion strategies emerging in at least several states of the US, and
- New research in Australia which may hold some important road signs for what has in recent years been an increasingly heavy Government investment area for Australian schools and TAFE

Institutes – especially in areas like the \$2.5B Trade Training Centres, on top of the \$550M invested by the Howard Government with 23 Australia Technical Colleges to 2008.

So there are sound reasons alone to understand international practice.

This week we have two new Ministers in the Gillard Cabinet for the sector – Senator Chris Evans and for our area of responsibility today, Peter Garrett, to include VET in Schools.

And it is useful to be on top of the very considerable Election 2010 campaign pledges – in Labor’s case, further expenditure to extend Trade Training Centres in Schools.

For example, is it worth asking for clear objectives of multi-billion dollar commitments to Trade Training Centres?

Given this invariable is to resource students completing subjects within VET in Schools during Years 11 and 12, are there evidence-based outcomes linked to a funding strategy ...??

And should we as a sector promote that for Budget 2011, VET in schools funding should be re-designed to follow the student ?

In other words, is there a skills objective for schools successfully bidding for infrastructure support to build or extend Trade Training Centres ??
.... or is this to extend a general education????

Adelaide based NEVER data tracks this area. Recent data confirms there are the many hundreds of thousands of young Australians in Years 11 and 12, opting to enrol in a VET in School subject, or attend one of the increasing number of stand-alone vocational colleges.

In at least two states, the data shows this has passed more than 50% of these final year school students, and we also know that with most states and territories extending the school leaving age to 17, the framework of schools and skills has increasingly become a focus for discussion –

TAFE Directors Australia hopes that moreover – schools and skills will collaborate more effectively to energise and motivate much improved policy in this area, and some wins for students and parents in what is one of the most formative opportunities for enjoyable applied skills and experiences in their young lives.

NOTES FROM THE UNITED STATES

I need to preface by saying my Fulbright topic was not alternate school pathways and skills – instead my topic was financial models developing in community colleges – particularly with non-core State funding, and corporate funding.

However, I included a review in this exciting schools transitions area at many of the interviews with American leadership; this included visits to 20 community colleges, across nine states in three months in Q1 2010.

I was also interested to explore these trends with my host, the association of American community colleges, and key lobby interests in Washington DC, like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Hitachi foundation, and groups like the American Youth Policy Forum, and the Academy of Educational Research.

One overriding theme in US Education Policy today is completions.

The important initiative – rebranded now several times over several administrations – has been '***Achieving the Dream***' – an initiative driven largely by America's largest corporate philanthropic and benefactor foundations -- and on a wider scale the Obama ***American Graduation Initiative***.

The Obama declaration during and after his election, that America would seek to be a world leader in degrees in Education-- still looks to be a sleeper.

The \$40 Billion-Plus budget visionary pledge to support such a ***schools to skills*** investment was derailed – mainly thanks to congressional horse-trading in the final weeks earlier this year. This was attributed to compromises from the Obama congressional team to achieve a victory on their critical health insurance legislation.

Instead of the \$12B finally passed for new education measures, just a trickle ended up flowing to States – a funding scheme called “***Race to the Top***” – a novel competition style cross border motivator to encourage US States to share school and college completions data.

As a policy measure, it has already been showing surprising take-up from otherwise protective states vis-à-vis Washington DC.

The measures revealed to date in school data across middle America remains scary :-

- approximately one-quarter of all students DO NOT graduate from high school over the normal four years (to Year 10)
- just 70% of American School Students complete school
- Graduation rates hover at 55% for African American males, Native American and Latino youth, and
- That number dropped to 44% males.
- 7,200 US students drop out of high school each day. [i]
- Of these, only 53% enter college directly from high school, and
- Just 35% earn a degree. [ii]

Reviews of America's education system in past years -- like that from the *New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce* -- has declared that the US is continuing to lose the education race to other nations in the global economy.

Much needed structural change has been articulated by lobbyist bodies, but change has been slow – especially with the American Schools system, with some notable exceptions. [iii]

One group I visited was the ***American Youth Policy Forum***.

This Washington DC-based lobby – funded jointly by corporate foundations and government contract research -- has been highly effective, especially with what it calls “Field Trips”.

Field Trips are regularly staged for school and College leadership, policy junkies, and Congressional and House MPs -- designed to visit various sites in cities and regions across states which have initiated various reform legislation.

One interesting trend from such visits was their work to initiate School Career Academies, and variations of these in other states, called Parent Academies.

For instance in the State of Florida, with legislation from 2007, all state schools introduced Career Academies, and also altered Year 7 curriculum to add an International Baccalaureate option to the completions certificate.

Florida also insisted principals seek to test students with a Graduating Certificate to facilitate College admission into accredited diploma and degree courses.

Not surprisingly, with this schools to skills articulation focus, school completion rates have jumped, and with similar initiatives happening in many of the 14 Florida Community Colleges, this southern state has established a marker as one of the most improved educational performance centres in the US today.

(Slide 2)

I can also report that Alternate School Pathways have become increasingly widespread:

- ***Still in Florida*** -- I was hosted by Miami Dade College to review its dynamic Hospitality Institute. The Institute is led by Jeanne Westphall, a former senior policy expert for Tourism to President Jimmy Carter, whose retreat to sunny Florida has overseen the creation of a truly innovative Institute -- for what they term school drop outs and job seeker post-school aged students.
- Yet this Hospitality Institute is funded almost entirely by local hotels and restaurant chains, with direct teaching from those firms to mentor and coach younger and older Miami residents and out of work job seekers how they might secure a job in the hospitality industry

(Slide 3)

- I visited **Gateway Community College in Arizona**, which is an American Community College that has co-located a senior high school on campus. What is a tad different is that articulation is granted for those students who ‘try a trade’ or similar skilled course, after graduating and enrolling into a Community College post-school course (EG associate degree).

Included in the arrangements is direct local industry co-investment, with automotive and engineering companies donating equipment for teaching students hands-on skills

This is on a similar scale to some states in Australia that not merely provide VET in Schools, but facilitate some form of pre-apprenticeship articulation for those students wishing to extend their VET in school subject studies into a working career in skills.

But because the US post-secondary Community College system has nurtured a product called an Associate Degree --- mainly achieved over two years of full time study with either humanities or science core subjects – these school students can articulate into College or university for far broader subjects beyond trade apprenticeships.

- In the case of **Gateway Community College, this remains** the only one of the 10 Maricopa Community Colleges in Arizona with traditional trade apprenticeship courses within their college

– *something other state Governors including California have been busy questing of their community colleges*

(Slide 4)

- **Still in Arizona** – The State has been trialling separate Technical Education VET Schools, open to both school age and adult education, with separate times and classes to better utilize infrastructure. This College at Scottsdale, a thriving district in Phoenix, has been open almost eight years, and has a wide option of courses from culinary to technical and traditional trades
- Further west in the US, I met **Mildred Phillips, Principal of San Diego Met High School**, an on-campus Year 11 and 12 high school totally immersed in Mesa College, in down-town San Diego.

This College high school has achieved internship agreements with dozens of small and larger businesses through the city, to allow their students to take part in practical on-the-job-training, while also completing traditional schooling. “Learning through Internships” is above everything a community-based mentor system, whereby community businesses are interviewed and approved to be directly involved with young students – students who otherwise would be in the workplace without this back-up supervisory role of the Met School.

(Slide 5)

- American Corporate foundations have been really active in funding these measures –

- * For instance, **Johnson & Johnson** run a “Bridge to Employment” scheme ’ and introduce at risk students to career options in the healthcare sector
- * The Gates Foundation along with 190 corporate donors co-funded with the Obama stimulus package a special workplace jobs support program called “**Rebuilding America’s Workforce**”. This program was mainly workforce retraining, but certainly helped many high school graduates undertake entry-level training and design career pathways with mentoring
- * In NEW YORK CITY, **La Guardia** is working with leading financial bankers to begin special vocational schools curriculum -- including basic courses like financial planning to avoid student debt !!
- * AND ... **Queensborough Community College** in New York has established something quite different again --- this is a dedicated foundation directed to create and support a Holocaust Museum, with memorials to all the world’s holocausts – an effective outreach across all that outer New York City community, to school, college and university communities
- * In California and Washington State (home of Bill Gates in Seattle), legislatures are pushing actively to encourage Community Colleges to allow rationalization of relocation of technical and vocational into Colleges, to enhance workforce and productivity measures.

So while the 1,200 American Community Colleges largely focus on a two-year post-school qualification called an Associate Degree—vocational and traditional skilled schools are increasingly being moved back into Community Colleges. The latest is legislation in Georgia.

At the same time, so too are on-campus arrangements for Alternate School structures, to facilitate skilling and ‘*Vet –in- School*’ arrangements with college and university credits.

This can help skilling students achieve higher qualifications.

For instance, in many US States, for those students completing a vocational qualification, just an extra year or subject credits can earn an Associate Degree qualification – a significant step up from rigid employer-only apprenticeship structure that Australia has retained leaving the Cert III or Cert IV as the only qualification outcomes.

There is much unfinished business in this area in the United States, but certainly I observed that broadly, there is a healthy relationship and respect between schools and colleges in the US – with more maturity than we see in practice here in Australia.

Now with federal monies starting to flow on ‘***Achieving the Dream***’ and similar school and college course completion strategies under the ***American Graduation Initiative***, this whole area is fertile for experiment. It is certainly the driver in the new education targets being set by the Obama Administration.

Australian Experience

In Australia, some states and territories report more than half of its Years 11 and 12 high school students enroll in a VET in School subject.

(Slide 7)

- NCVET data shows NSW now have 54% of students enrolled in a VET subject – in parts of Queensland this has reached a staggering 78%.
- Across Australia, the number of school-based apprentices and trainees is now 25,700.

In April 2008, the Australian College of Educators with Professor Denise Bradley as their then Chair joined with TAFE Directors Australia to host a National Forum on Youth Engagement and Skills, in Hobart.

The National Forum was in the context of many states and territories moving to legislate compulsory school completion ages of 17 years of age.

TDA and ACE published an ***Occasional Paper*** with proceedings of the event.

However today I would like to especially note the contribution from Peter Noonan, the VET consultant, and ultimately a member of the Bradley Review of Higher Education.

- **Peter Noonan** noted the discrepancy between school and VET in School funding – basically the problem schools face is that in many states funding does not follow the student – creating de-motivating issues for schools to fully embrace VET in Schools as a concept.
- Later the then Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard and DEEWR adopted one recommendation of that National Forum – ***this called for detailed research into several types of the alternate school and vocational colleges which have emerged in Australia.***

(slide 8)

As a result, in 2009 ACE and TDA commissioned a research project that looked at how innovative vocational school and college models from around the country have improved the retention, completion and transition of 15 – 19 year-old young people.

This project, undertaken by the Work-based Education Research Centre (WERC) at Victoria University, used the Key Success Factors for Upper Secondary Skilling developed by the 2008 Hobart forum to identify nine innovative ‘best practice’ case studies of vocational and/or alternate schools from a number of Australian states.

The project was also underpinned by an extensive national and international literature review.

The Key Success Factors can be categorised under the following broad headings:

- ***targeted information***
- ***identification of needs***
- ***effective monitoring***
- ***quality teaching***
- ***coordinated support***
- ***development of connections***
- ***organisational leadership***

(slide 9)

The outcomes of the project were to include:

- advice to inform policy and practice; a body of information on alternative models of engaging young people;
- an analysis of strategies that work to support, guide and retain young people in vocational education; and
- some methodologies that can be used by other organisations.

The study has now been completed and the report will soon be released. So what did it find?

(slide 10)

It found in these centres that a range of factors *work in combination* to keep young people in vocational education. Individual factors can make a difference, but it's when they're combined that the big improvements in engagement and retention occur.

The study found that staff ‘on the ground’ are particularly good at finding and implementing new ways of working with students because they are attuned to students’ needs – and that this is much easier to do when there is active organisational backup, and when grassroots improvements dovetail easily with organisational systems such as student support. Sometimes this can mean doing things in new and sometimes unorthodox ways, and so it is important for these kinds of innovations to be championed at the organisational and/or funding body level.

The study also found that these factors vary from place to place; that local context matters greatly. With that in mind, however, some generalisations can be made:

In the area of **teaching**, success factors include:

- personalised and flexible delivery tailored to students’ needs and interests. This can include changes in delivery style such as all-day practical workshops instead of subject classes, or a degree of flexibility with what a student learns on a particular day
- working with the ‘whole student’, including an understanding of individual circumstances, family and community - especially in the case of those students deemed ‘at risk’. If a student, for instance, hasn’t eaten breakfast or is sleeping rough, then it is understandable if they are not concentrating on their school work.
- The practical relevance of training for students, which was seen to be a bigger issue for students in VET than in the more academic forms of study. This includes practical work and life skills,

establishing a career path early (such as using apprenticeships to ‘get a foot in the door’ ahead of school leavers) and paid work.

In terms of **information**, the study identified the following for review ---

- the quality of information provided *to* students. By ‘quality’ we mean the ability of this information to help students make informed choices about their future *when they need it*, such as key career decision-making junctures, and to imagine futures they may not have previously envisioned. This can include career fairs, timely advice from industry, and printed material written in a way that makes sense to students and their families.
- quality data *about* students that helps organisations and governments evaluate and improve what they are delivering to students, and that is consistent across institutions and systems. This includes data on pathways, transitions and completions. The study found that this data is largely lacking and forms one of the big areas for systemic improvement.

Other factors involving **systems and processes** include:

- The importance of integrated teaching, support and welfare systems that are truly responsive to students’ needs. One provider, for instance, makes a point of having student support workers contactable by mobile phone, and ensures these workers are constantly seen in areas where students gather. This provider also

has teachers working periodically in student support roles, so that a collaborative culture is established between all the people who work directly with students.

- the development of close working relationships with stakeholders outside the institution including industry bodies, local business, government services, schools and community agencies. In one examples, industry representatives are brought on-board by a school to deliver hands-on training and act as independent mentors to school-based apprentices
- And as stated previously, it's important to develop an organisational climate that supports success by fostering innovation by staff and 'whole-of-organisation' approaches.

(slide 11)

In the end, what really counts here is the ability for young people – and particularly those young people from backgrounds that include disadvantage and relatively low levels of education - to see tangible options for their future, so they can see the point to completing their studies and are less likely to be discouraged or put off by obstacles that will occur along the way.

(slide 12)

After undertaking the study, the project team revisited the Key Success Factors once again, with the result being a tested and expanded evaluative framework that others can use as a checklist for examining existing vocational programs, or for developing new ones. This will be available soon when the report is published.

(slide 13)

So, to quickly summarise in this preview of the Survey, the Victoria University Research Centre found that the 'big three' success enablers from the *Enhancing Retention* study are:

- **Context:** being able to understand - and respond to - local needs and circumstances
- **Working together:** creating coordinated, whole-of-organisation approaches to working with VET students
- **Structured pathways:** involvement of all stakeholders (including industry and community) in the creation of tangible pathways for students' future careers

And on the flip side, the three most important success dampeners are:

- **Misunderstandings about TAFE:** some parents, teachers and communities still see TAFE as inferior to Higher Education. Successful VET programs have countered this by actively engaging and educating with families and the community
- **Logistics:** structural issues loom large as obstacles to success, particular transport in regional areas (and the accompanying expense for poorer students) and disparate funding models that can make delivery of hybrid models difficult
- And, lastly, **lack of shareable data.** Lack of standardised approaches to data collection means that it's much harder to learn from what happens over the long term and to do things better in the future

Maybe 'Race to the Top' from the US in motivating more sharing of data between States and Federal on schools has equal application here in Australia.

We know that NCVET has yet to be given the brief to extend its labour market focus from VET to Higher Education.

Bringing focus to VET in Schools clearly is important, and the learnings from the US create much food for thought ahead of the next round of major Federal spending in Australia in this area.

ENDNOTES

i American Youth Policy Forum., *Success at Every Step: How 23 Programs Support Youth on the Path to College and Beyond.* (page ix).,Betsy Brand, Sarah Hooker., October 2009

ii American Youth Policy Forum., *The College Ladder: Linking Secondary and Postsecondary Education for Success for all Students.* Jennifer Brown Lerner, Betsy Brand. P.vii., Sept 2006

iii The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce., Mark Tucker and Betsy Brand., *Media Release: Tough Choices or Tough Times calls for Budget changes in American Education.* Sydney Dec 14, 2006.