

# Reforming Vocational Qualifications in Victoria (Australia)

*This is one of three case studies illustrating how assessment policy has developed in three jurisdictions and the contextual factors that have shaped this.*

*The case study is mainly based on interviewees' accounts so reflects the views and opinions they shared. Loic Menzies, 2023.*

## Introducing the Victorian qualifications

In Australia, each state runs its own qualification system and in Victoria the main school leaving certificate is called the Victoria Certificate of Education (VCE). Pupils sit VCE exams at 18 (in year 12), though most courses are spread out over two years. Pupils normally take five or six subjects which are mainly assessed through an exam, although there can also be an element of coursework.

Students' scores on the VCE are converted to an "ATAR" (Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank) score which is a standardised, rank-based score across states allowing for comparison at a federal level. This is used for university admissions. Some students (around 10%) chose to take their VCE on an 'unscored' basis. These students do not need to sit an exam and do not get an ATAR score (The Age, 2022). This might happen where a student is going straight on to TAFE (technical college).

There are vocational alternatives to VCE. The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) was a qualification based on literacy, numeracy and an employment-based course, but is being merged into VCE as part of the reforms discussed in this case study. Students can also sit a 'certificate 2 or 3' in a vocational area, often at a TAFE.

Pupils also take 'the GAT' - a generalised attainment test, and the score can be used as a proxy if a student misses their final exams. Many schools also set an internal test in Year 10.

Across Australia, pupils take a federally mandated test known as "NAPLAN" in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 to track school and system-level performance. The test includes reading, writing, conventions of language (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy.

## Reforming vocational qualifications

Extensive reforms are currently underway to bring VCAL into the VCE as a 'Vocational Major' option and there are various other reforms to vocational education going on alongside this.

### What problems are the reforms setting out to address?

- Parents perceive vocational qualifications to be low value, despite 'tradies' getting sky-high salaries.
- Schools occasionally 'soft exclude' pupils who are not going to pursue academic tracks by not offering vocational alternatives and saying they were 'academic schools'.
- Schools were not valuing a sufficiently broad range of achievements.
- Teaching VCAL is sometimes perceived as something with which to fill up a free period, rather than being recognised as a skilled activity. The reform is therefore partly about changing perceptions of vocational *teaching* not just learning.
- Vocational qualifications are seen to be "a mess" across states, so the problem is not unique to Victoria. Other states are therefore looking to the current changes as an example.

### The process of reform

There were widespread calls for a review of vocational education from professional associations; senior civil servants (particularly Stephen Gniel, one of the deputy secretaries in the Victorian Department of Education); and employers. Victoria's education minister at the time, James Merlino was supportive of

these calls, and he asked John Firth to lead a review. Firth was a highly respected and influential individual who had previously been the CEO of the Victoria Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). He was also a board member of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and was involved in setting up NAPLAN and MySchool. The fact that he was brought in to lead the review demonstrated that this was a serious priority since normally a review like this would simply be led by the VCAA and involve some routine consultation with parents, teachers and pupils. Because Merlino was also the Deputy Premier the review had high level support. The review was commissioned in 2019 and published in 2020 (Firth, 2020).

In an effort to break down a 'two tier' education system, the review called for VCAL to no longer be a separate qualification and instead to be integrated into the VCE as a 'vocational major.'

The review's recommendations were all accepted by ministers and hundreds of millions of dollars of funding were signed off by government ministers. Funding was not a problem because it was 'Gonskiable' – a term used to describe expenditure that counts towards nationally agreed spending pledges. Because 'Gonskiable' funding has already been committed it becomes a question of how it is spent rather than whether it is spent, so expenditure is not in competition with other departments. The changes required legislation which secured bipartisan support, partly because they addressed a widely agreed need, and partly because they linked to different actors' respective agendas.

The overall direction of travel would probably have been the same even if a different party had been in power, but under a different government (for which this was less of a priority) there might have been less senior-level oversight with less pressure to deliver. It might also have been less well-resourced and more work outsourced.

Actioning the recommendations involved:

- Creating new qualifications and courses,
- Making core vocational courses available in all government schools and ensuring access to other programmes through partnerships with other schools or TAFEs,
- Piloting 'Headstart' - a new school-based apprenticeship model integrated into senior secondary school.

A new division or taskforce was created in the Department for Education and Training to implement the recommendations. This was jointly chaired by the Department and VCAA. Around the same time, Stephen Gniel moved over to be the new CEO of VCAA and he continued to work closely with the Department. As explained below, the VCAA has a slightly different governance arrangement compared to similar authorities in other states which may have played a role in this collaborative approach. Shifting gear from operations and finely tuned delivery towards change management – whilst simultaneously keeping day-to-day delivery on track was also tricky.

Implementation has gone to plan despite fears that the pandemic would disrupt plans. The taskforce spoke to all the key stakeholders to "cover our bases" and there was some negotiation but no real opposition.

In order to promote the new VCE Vocational Major route, commercials were targeted at pupils on the basis that they would then influence their parents. The slogan was "Many talents one VCE"

The VCAL reforms were coupled with other reforms to vocational education, work experience and careers education.

The Firth review recommended replacing the 'Foundation VCAL' with a new 'Victorian Pathways Certificate'. The Foundation Certificate was believed to lack consistency and rigour and certain pupils were being pushed onto it due to low expectations. The new certificate is intended to carve out a different level of achievement for a specific cohort whilst maintaining the flexibility to move in and out of different

pathways. It is aimed at pupils returning to school after a period of disengagement or with certain disabilities. The certificate is at level 1 of the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF).

The Pathways certificate reforms involved “regular and exhaustive meetings” with critical stakeholders, (including providers, schools providing for at-risk kids and special schools). There were a lot of tricky issues to iron out and the decisions were made to keep consulting and engaging until these had been resolved. At times it seemed like more time was being invested than was reasonable, but this is believed to have paid off. The certificate is deliberately low profile as it is only intended for a small part of the cohort.

Alongside this, the Government and the Department recognised that disadvantaged pupils often lacked the necessary connections to secure work experience and that wraparound support was needed. Dandolo Partners - a consultancy, was therefore contracted to conduct an evidence review in 2018 and a support group was set up and led by a Deputy Secretary. The review showed a significant gap which shaped a ‘transforming careers education programme’ focused on government schools. A business case for the programme went to ministers as part of budget proposals (\$126million) and again, because it was ‘Gonskiable’ it was not hard to sell.

### **Verdicts on the process and outcome**

The review went down very well because:

- The problems the reforms were setting out to solve were keenly felt by a range of stakeholders including schools, employers and parents.
- The reforms played to multiple different agendas and sat close to the core of what different groups believed to be the purpose of schooling. For example, The Green party supported them because they were anti-elitist and inclusive; others bought into the employability and economic growth narrative; there was a potential risk that the Liberals might see the changes as a threat to rigour but in the end, no one saw it that way. The policy is therefore safe-ground for bipartisanship and all parties supported the recommendations.
- Links to employability and the economy helped secure ministerial support. The reforms also played to a government that was reformist in character and wanted to get things done.
- The reforms were fully backed by Merlino who was highly influential and experienced and wanted it to be part of his legacy. A new minister might not have had as much success.
- The review was consultative and included the sector through unions and peak bodies – as interviewees put it, “you have to road test these things with the sector”; “we had a clear plan for how we’d take the sector with us”; “It’s teachers who sell this.” Plans were socialised in advance and this was a careful political calculation that paid off.
- The positive reception for the review created a mandate for change when it came to the detailed reforms, and people knew they were coming. This process contrasted with other reforms that landed on people unexpectedly (e.g. learning specialists who were announced when schools had already planned out their workforce for the next year, or the tutoring programme with 3 months’ notice).
- Press coverage was positive
- Funding for the changes was Gonskiable so funding was relatively unconstrained.
- The plans built on a precedent and the institutional architecture: TAFEs are already well-established. There are also many private vocational providers (though some of this provision is shoddy). Schools were therefore not suddenly being told they had to do everything.

Although the content of the reforms has not been contentious, there have been some criticisms of the process:

- Some felt the reforms went too fast. This feeling grew once the reforms had teeth, with schools potentially being penalised for not complying. Post-pandemic there was also a sense of: “of all the years to be putting this through!”

- Schools who did not want to offer vocational qualifications have been somewhat resistant to the reforms, seeing them as a threat to their high status.
- There have been some frustrations with specific elements of the process, for example with onerous data requests.
- There are some concerns about the workforce element. It will be tricky to secure the necessary staffing, particularly because potential instructors on vocational courses have the alternative of earning high wages in their trades. This has not necessarily translated into opposition from schools because it will not be them in the firing line if there is a problem with TAFE provision.
- There was more opposition to reforms of the certificates. This came from schools working with challenging students who wanted the pathways certificate to be accredited at a higher level than Level 1, or who wanted more flexibility and further input. Ultimately the VCAA said 'that's the level it's at' and this was something it was not possible to compromise on. However, extensive consultation meant that opposition was gradually resolved.

## What factors have influenced and shaped the process?

### How has the environment shaped decisions and approaches?

#### **National and state history, the constitution, and the political system**

Constitutionally, schools are a state's responsibility. According to some, Australia looks like one country but is in fact a collection of eight countries stuck together, all with different cultures and personalities. Over time the federal government has 'leaked' into education. There is a form of hierarchy of states in terms of power and influence and alongside New South Wales, Victoria is one of the most powerful. Other states and territories are therefore looking to its lead when it comes to vocational education reforms.

Australia has three-year electoral cycles at both state and federal level which leads to a high degree of churn and constantly shifting dynamics. However, Labour has now won three elections in a row in Victoria and is continuing to make gains, providing a stable platform for the reforms.

The country has benefited from a strong economy over several decades. It was relatively insulated from the great recession and has ridden a long-running commodities boom. The combination of this economic performance - alongside a commitment to increasing funding for education (linked to the Gonski-review - see below), has led to significant investment in the sector. Education reforms can therefore precede with limited financial constraints. Indeed, some argue that the free-flowing cash in education has resulted in limited scrutiny and poor choices.

Victoria has had a long-running focus on education. When Daniel Andrews (the current State Premier) was first running for power, he pledged to make Victoria 'The Education State' - even changing the slogan on car number plates to state this. Melbourne is seen as an intellectual city and the state is seen as being at the 'leading edge' on some aspects of education according to one faction, though others point out that it has been 'a laggard' in areas like phonics and equalising state and independent school funding.

Victoria had a particularly tough series of lock-downs which has driven an appetite for change in terms of the role of technology; a heightened focus on health, well-being, and inclusivity; and an increased focus on improving teaching and learning for pupils falling behind

#### **Education policy history and precedent**

The highly inequitable state of school funding is a major pre-occupation. Around 30 percent of pupils attend independent schools which are state subsidised and there is a huge discrepancy between most of these schools' budgets and those of state schools - though there are also some under-resourced independent schools. The Gonski review of 2010-11 was intended to resolve this problem but has never achieved its intended goals (Greenwell & Bonnor, 2022).

According to some, Australia prioritises novelty and autonomy in education policy rather than reliable and well-evidenced practice. There are strong tensions between advocates of phonics and ‘the science of learning’ - and those advocating more child-centred pedagogies. The media is pre-occupied with these battles, particularly ‘the reading wars.’

### **Narratives, ideologies, and policy orientations**

The dominant narrative about education is a ‘human capital’ orientation (Bell & Stevenson, 2006) focused on education’s economic functions. The discourse tends to concentrate on employers’ needs and how to fuel growth. There is a strong focus on narratives of equity on both sides of the political divide. These reforms played to the core of these debates.

In previous elections, education has been salient and Labour has made pledges on education an important part of their platform, however this was not the case at the most recent election.

Australia has long been pre-occupied by questions of ‘alignment’ (Savage, 2020). The totemic story is of the railways which were built to different gauges in each state and territory, making it impossible to run efficient inter-state train services. This leads people to refer to a lack of alignment as “the railways all over again.” Federal government therefore tries to drive increase alignment between states and territories, with varying degrees of success.

There is some concern regarding Australia’s falling performance in Pisa. However, comparisons between states and territories’ (including through NAPLAN results), and the dynamics of their diverging approaches often take precedence. Victoria does well by Australian standards (though this may be a product of its demographics) and this limits the sense of crisis. Some describe a form of stagnation based on a view that “we’re fine” and “if it’s not broken...” Others believe that there is a sense of crisis and that this drives a constant stream of initiatives, none of which ‘move the needle.’ The introduction of NAPLAN has prompted much more comparison and data-ification than there was previously.

Some people consider poor educational performance to be a product of the country’s approach to pedagogy and curriculum but others maintain that it is a problem of funding due to the failure of the Gonski reforms.

Narratives around the culture wars have gained some traction but efforts by some politicians and certain tranches of the media to escalate these along US lines have not gained significant traction.

## **Who have the key actors been?**

### **Government**

#### The Department of Education

The Department of Education has been a key player throughout. It operates with a considerable degree of autonomy from ministers compared to what has become the norm in England. Ministers are hands-off and are said “not to bring us into politics” and to be “respectful of our role... we don’t have to think about what is doable in their political position, that’s not our job.”

Beyond setting a broad direction and providing political support for the reform, it has therefore largely been down to the bureaucracy to shape the changes.

#### The VCAA

VCAA is responsible for assessment and curriculum not just for state schools but also for independent schools. It sets standards and oversees 1,800 schools in the state. It is a statutory authority with an unusual structure defined in legislation. This involves having fifteen board members who provide governance and are responsible for the authority’s functions. However, the CEO is not employed by the board - instead, they are employed directly by the Secretary for Education (who is equivalent to England’s

Permanent Secretary). VCAA's CEO reports on policy to the board rather than the minister, and the board in-turn reports to the minister. The Secretary for Education advises ministers on the VCAA (as they do on other matters) and the CEO of VCAA sits on the board of the Department alongside the other Deputy Secretaries. This approach came from a recognition that you cannot talk about education without talking about curriculum and assessment. This arrangement is described as "complex and messy" but effective since it forces actors to "rely on relationships rather than structures." This arrangement contrasts with other states where curriculum and assessment authorities are separate from the department and relationships can be more adversarial. The reforms described in this case study provide an example of what this approach looks like in practice.

The VCAA delivers all exams and is therefore highly operationally focused, running exams for 80,000 pupils a year, as well as internationally. It is therefore effective at continuously refining and adjusting delivery but this makes focusing on strategy and significant change-management difficult. Addressing this has been a key focus for Stephen Gniel and has required him to draw on external expertise from consultancies.

#### Stephen Gniel:

Gniel was previously a deputy secretary within the Department. He has been a key player in the reforms and his background within the Department has helped him make a success of the joint approach taken over the course of these reforms.

#### Merlino

As a long-serving education minister who was also deputy premier Merlino had considerable political capital and influence. He could therefore take on ambitious reforms.

#### John Firth

Given his previous roles, Firth combined deep expertise with credibility. His report was therefore taken seriously and recognised as being highly significant.

### ***Social stakeholders (Parents, teachers, employers, 'the public')***

- Employers have been actively involved in flagging up the issues the reforms are designed to solve and have been involved in shaping the solution.
- The Firth Review commissioned market research among parents and parental attitudes play an important part in this issue. Policy makers chose to address parental attitudes indirectly through advertising targeted at pupils.
- The Firth review worked with Peak Bodies, representing the sector in the early stages of the consultation and there were additional rounds of consultation with the sector throughout, including road testing the ideas. The consultative approach is credited with having helped the reforms land well. Teachers and the profession took an active role in more detailed debates around the foundation VCAL/Certificate reforms.

### ***Other policy actors***

- Australia does not have a particularly crowded think-tank and policy ecosystem. The Grattan Institute and the Centre for Policy Studies are relevant players across the country and Learning First is a particularly important player in Victoria, but none of these were flagged as key actors in these specific reforms.
- As noted above, VCAA used consultancies to help it deliver the reforms and Dandolo partners played a particular role in the careers education reforms.

### ***Dynamics between different players***

- Tapping into multiple agendas (around inclusion and anti-elitism, as well as economic growth and employability) secured a broad coalition of supporters.
- Schools serving marginalised pupils worked together to influence government on the Certificate reforms.



## What role did evidence play?

The role of evidence in the reforms includes:

### Expertise:

- The Firth review involved extensive consultation with expert stakeholders. Visits were conducted to rural school and groups like Principal Forums, the Principals Association of Victorian Catholic Secondary Schools, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated general conference

### Quantitative data:

- Surveys were conducted as part of the Firth review but these only received a low numbers of responses (n=185 education, training, industry and community stakeholders; n=279 students; n=76 parents and carers (Firth, 2020, p. 1) )

### Research studies:

- The Firth review drew on a range of studies, many of which were reports from government bodies. Cited research tended to be focused on employability and vocational education in Australia, although there were some OECD studies and a few studies and sources of information from other countries - for example on vocational education policy in England, Germany and Finland. Research from various Australian states including Western Australia and New South Wales was included.

## How do assessment arrangements relate to other features of the education system?

- Schools in Victoria have a relatively high degree of autonomy compared to other states.
- There is a well-developed and established network of TAFEs that provide a credible and well-respected vocational education offer.

## References

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