

Permission to teach VET: Enabling a vicious circle that maintains the low status of VET education

Rochelle Fogelgarn, Jacolyn Weller

La Trobe University, Australia

Karen O'Reilly-Briggs

Box Hill Institute, Australia

The Vocational Major was introduced in Victoria, Australia in 2023 to raise the status of Vocational Education and Training (VET). To address demand for qualified VET teachers in secondary schools, VET trainers without a teaching qualification are granted permission to teach VET. This policy contributes to a vicious circle which maintains the low status of VET education, compromising student learning experience, reinforcing the academic-vocational divide and disincentivising trainers from upskilling. We contend that a virtuous VET circle would include bespoke teacher-preparation designed to expeditiously and sustainably upskill industry-experienced vocational experts to become qualified (VET) school teachers.

Introduction

Multi-faceted challenges threaten sustainable, quality teaching practice. The impact of Covid-19 has exacerbated pre-existing challenges including teaching load, increased administrative duties, insufficient support for students with special needs, system-wide factors, and salaries (Räsänen et al., 2020). Australia, like many other countries, is experiencing a general teacher shortage (Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2021; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Heffernan et al., 2022). A pre-Covid report found that 52% of Australian teachers would not recommend teaching as a career choice (Heffernan et al., 2019). Within this challenging climate, schools must recruit and retain the best possible teachers to provide students with optimal education opportunities.

One longstanding challenge for schools has been the supply and demand of suitably qualified, subject-specific teachers; a field which has been difficult to empirically research (Ingersoll & Perda, 2010). Some of the measures used to ascertain the balance of teacher supply and demand include the number of teacher graduates; the number of advertised vacancies; data available through government bodies quantifying shortages; and recruitment and hiring issues (Sutcher et al., 2019). It has been stated that

... data from school administrators on the degree of difficulty they encounter filling ... teaching job openings are probably the most grounded and accurate measures available of the extent of actual staffing problems at the school level (Ingersoll & Perda, 2010, p. 566).

One strategy school-leaders use to resolve hard-to-staff subjects is allocating subjects to teachers without the relevant subject expertise. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2021a) reported that out-of-field teaching is prevalent in varying rates in all subjects, indicating teacher supply challenges span all curriculum areas.

According to the *Australian Teacher Workforce Data National Teacher Workforce Characteristics Report* (AITSL, 2021a), teachers are considered out-of-field if their initial teacher education (ITE) studies are “in no way related to the subject they are required to teach” (AITSL, 2021a, p. 25).

The phenomenon of ‘out-of-field’ teaching occurs where suitably qualified subject experts are not available to staff a school’s suite of curriculum offerings. Out-of-field teaching has a direct effect on the quality of the student learning experience (van Overschelde & Piatt, 2020). Out-of-field teachers feel they lack “the necessary content and pedagogical content knowledge to effectively manage the complexities within multi-layered diverse learning and teaching environments” (Du Plessis, 2019, p. 150). Ingersoll (2001) considered the relationship between poor student performance and out-of-field teaching unsurprising, posing a question which remains acutely relevant today: why are teachers teaching subjects outside their knowledge expertise?

The focus of the present study is the delivery of Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs in Victorian secondary schools. The AITSL (2018) national review of teacher registration, *One teaching profession: Teacher registration in Australia*, identified significant workforce challenges relating to vocational studies offered in secondary school environments. In Victoria, VET studies can be undertaken at Tertiary and Further Education (TAFE) Institutes, private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) or at school, as part of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). In 2023, the Victorian State Government introduced the *Vocational Major* (VM) as a key component of the VCE. The VM

... prepares students to move into apprenticeships, traineeships, further education and training ... or directly into the workforce. The purpose of the VCE VM is to provide students with the best opportunity to achieve their personal goals and aspirations in a rapidly changing world... through real-life workplace experiences (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, n.d.).

Our research addresses a gap in the teacher shortage literature pertaining to the demand for, and sustainable supply of, suitably qualified and industry experienced VET teachers to teach in Victorian secondary schools. As empirical data quantifying this supply-demand imbalance are not freely available, we are collecting empirical data from principals and school-leaders responsible for staffing VET. This data, hypothesised to confirm anecdotal reports of the prevalence of out-of-field teaching and the use of permission to teach (PTT) for VET trainers without teaching qualifications, will be discussed in a future article.

We contend that the unsustainable supply of suitably qualified and industry experienced VET teachers is part of a vicious circle which propagates the low status of vocational studies in schools (Brown, 2017).

VET in schools

VET in schools (VETiS) refers to school-based VET programs introduced during a period of high youth unemployment in Australia during the 1970s through to the early 1990s. A key aim of VETiS programs was to broaden school-based learning opportunities for students not wanting to pursue university pathways. VETiS programs provided secondary students with experiential, hands-on subjects, enabling them to complete their secondary school education with a national VET qualification and enhanced employment prospects. During the eighties and nineties, secondary schools experienced increased retention rates when students became more engaged in authentic vocational learning. Schools also benefited from subsequent funding increases and relationship-building with local employers providing field-work experience for VET students, in preparation for post-school employment (Smith, 2004).

Over the past decade issues of concern have been raised and documented regarding the practices and outcomes of VETiS programs. These include:

- confusion between educational and occupational aspirations of students (Gore et al., 2017),
- students forming negative perceptions of VET (Gore et al., 2017) “Many students are led to believe that VET is not accorded equal status and should only be considered by those with lower academic capability” (Gonski & Shergold, 2021, p. 6),
- the reinforcement of cohort segmentation (Clarke, 2014; Roberts et al., 2019),
- a lack of VET trainer pedagogical preparation (Clarke, 2014),

Given the Victorian Government’s current initiative to boost the standing of vocational studies with the introduction of the VM, sustainable staffing of qualified VET teachers is of paramount importance. Recent teacher workforce data indicates, however, that VET teaching has been out-of-field more often than any other subject taught in Australian schools at 84% (AITSL, 2021a). Anecdotal evidence supports this claim (Carey, 2020; Gates, 2019; Victorian government, 2021). Rasmussen (2016) asserted that “access to quality and capable VET teachers who have both teaching and industry expertise and currency” is a global problem (p. 3). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2021) has commented on the worldwide shortage of ITE qualified VET teachers.

Early analysis from interview data collected by the authors from practising ITE-qualified VET teachers in Victoria affirms the value of Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) recognised teaching qualifications adds to industry expertise. These data, to be reported in a future article, also reveal a raft of concerning ramifications when staff without industry expertise, currency, and deep knowledge of the trade teach VET. Interviewees confirm the VET teacher shortage and the impact of out-of-field and pedagogically unqualified staff on VET delivery and student safety and wellbeing.

Within the context of our current study, a registered or qualified teacher has an ITE qualification. ITE courses are required to address the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (APSTs) (AITSL, 2022). Pre-service teachers must actively demonstrate they have met each of the APSTs to graduate as a qualified schoolteacher. Teacher registration is awarded to graduates of either a four-year undergraduate ITE degree or a Master of Teaching degree. Registration to teach in secondary schools is granted for specific discipline specialisations. This means that a teacher registered to teach English and humanities would be teaching out-of-field if they were expected to teach physics. To teach in Victorian schools, a teacher with an ITE qualification must maintain current registration with the VIT. (Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2022).

To address registered ITE teacher shortages in Victoria, principals can apply to the VIT for PTT status for candidates with specialist content knowledge or training to teach a specific subject for a specified period (up to a maximum of three years). Importantly, PTT holders must be progressing towards full teacher registration (i.e., enrolled in an ITE degree). PTT is required if the program of instruction is authorised by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA, 2015). The VCAA authorised VCE is the Victorian senior secondary certificate and is required for university entry. PTT (VET) is a notable exception to these stipulations. Unlike other PTT categories, candidates wishing to teach VET only need the *Certificate IV in Training and Assessment* (TAE). As distinct from other subjects, schools do not need to demonstrate a workforce shortage of ITE-qualified VET experts (Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2023) in order to employ PTT (VET) candidates. VET trainers without teacher qualifications can be hired in schools at a lower PTT (VET) paraprofessional salary level (M. D’Ortenzio, personal communication, 28 July 2023).

VET trainer

We refer to non-ITE-qualified VET staff in this paper as trainers, as distinct from teachers. The word ‘trainer’ is used to distinguish staff with both a vocational or trade qualification (e.g., the Certificate III in Carpentry) and the TAE, the minimum training qualification required to deliver nationally accredited VET programs in Australia. The TAE, a competency-based training certificate, was introduced in the 1990s (Tyler & Dymock, 2019) for the purpose of training in workplace settings and to correlate with the development of workplace learning packages (Clayton, 2009). Importantly, the TAE was designed to be used in adult education contexts, not as a qualification for teaching school students.

The public post-school providers of VET in Australia, TAFE institutes, require staff to have appropriate trade or vocational qualifications and the pre-university level qualification, TAE. The TAE has an Australian Quality Framework (AQF) educational level classification of Level 4. In stark contrast, an undergraduate teaching degree has a Level 7 rating and a master’s degree of teaching is rated at Level 9 (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013).

We contend that to achieve the Victorian Government's vision articulated in the VM, vocationally skilled industry experts, with a deep knowledge of pedagogy and adolescent development and behaviour, are needed to teach vocational studies in schools. We argue that (a) every school student deserves to be taught by teachers who have discipline area expertise, industry currency and requisite pedagogical teacher qualification, and (b) to enable the sustainability of a qualified VET teaching workforce, industry experienced VET trainers deserve access to suitable ITE courses to become qualified VET school teachers.

The ideal VET in schools teacher

High-quality teachers form an essential part of improving student attainment and creating a world class system of education. All schoolteachers must enact the APSTs. ITE courses are written and accredited to address the APSTs. In-service teachers undertake professional learning and development, and in government schools, are assessed against these standards as a measure of the level of teacher performance (Weller, 2021). The standards contribute to the public standing of, and a quality agenda for, the teaching profession (AITSL, 2018). The APSTs encompass a broader range of pedagogical knowledge than TAFE institutes or other RTOs require of vocational trainers.

ITE-qualified teachers with VET qualifications and substantial industry experience are best positioned to impart the lived experience of working productively in industry to young adults in school (Brown, 2017). To ensure quality provision of VET programs, the Gonski et al. (2018) report about teacher excellence, and the AITSL (2018) review of teacher registration, recognise the importance of appropriately qualified teachers with relevant industry experience and qualification. In the report, *Building a high quality and sustainable dual-qualified VET workforce*, AITSL (2021b) acknowledged that consulted stakeholders indicated that "dual-qualified" is more accurately termed "triple qualified" due to "industry experience and vocational qualifications as well as VET trainer/assessor status (TAE) and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) qualifications" (AITSL, 2021b, p. 5).¹ The ideal VET in schools teacher will have

strong content knowledge, based on recent and relevant industry qualifications and experience, pedagogical skills suited to both the content being taught and the secondary-aged cohort to whom it is being delivered, and the capacity to engage and nurture their students (AITSL, 2021b, p. 5).

This view is corroborated by the Australian Council of Deans of Education Vocational Education Group which concluded "that university-level VET teacher education studies help practitioners develop the high level of knowledge and skills required for the complex work of VET teaching" (Smith et al., 2018, p. 419). Although school leaders and principals acknowledge the challenge of sourcing qualified VET teachers, official data are

¹ Henceforth in our current article, *dual-qualified* indicates VET trainers with vocational credentials and industry experience and the TAE. *Triple-qualified* denotes the ideal VET teacher, who has dual-qualification and an ITE degree.

not yet freely available to quantify the extent to which demand for ITE-qualified VET teachers exceeds supply (O'Reilly-Briggs et al., 2021). The introduction of PTT (VET) by the VIT in 2016 (Brown, 2017) confirmed an ITE-qualified VET teacher shortage in Victoria.

Given the view that the ideal VET teacher is triple-qualified, the question arises: how can vocational experts acquire an ITE qualification in their area of VET specialisation? Currently in Victoria, ITE qualification requires completion of an academic degree. For a raft of reasons beyond the scope of this article, industry experts face multiple barriers from admission to graduation in a tertiary academic context. One of several socio-cultural hurdles to be overcome is a pervasive view that vocational learning is inferior to, or *less than*, academic study. Vocational experts have reported being advised to pursue vocational subjects during their own schooling; often describing themselves as having a low academic self-efficacy (Gore et al., 2017). This perception of being 'good' for vocational work but not suited to tertiary study maintains a low-status, socio-cultural, self-perpetuating cycle.

Conceptual framework: Vicious circles

There are attributable links to low socio-economic status connected to lower education being maintained within a vicious circle. Processes that produce adverse effects can become self-perpetuating cycles which have been described in the literature as *vicious circles* (Masuch, 1985). Vicious circles occur when interdependent actions progressively feedback and loop to maintain a closed system that generates ongoing negative outcomes (von Bergen & Bressler, 2023). An example was noted by Luchinskaya & Dickinson (2019) who depicted a relationship between education, skills, and the labour market in UK research. People with lower-level occupations, described as manual and routine, identified from socioeconomic background data, are less likely to be involved in work-related training for financial gain, other than for health and safety reasons. In turn, their training has no impact on an increase in their wages compared to those in higher-level occupations who undertake training and achieve financial benefit. Lack of education puts individuals in a vulnerable position.

Vicious circles have a history of being a critique of society. Dewey's (1922) text, *Human nature and conduct: An introduction to social psychology*, discussed social life being caught in a vicious circle. Individuals who are overpowered can find themselves in conflict with an institutionalised environment. "Deweyan captivity in the vicious circle is to a large extent an educational problem. What keeps us captive are bad habits" (Särkelä, 2022, p. 1375). Our customs become a collective habit, which translates into a social belief.

Adorno, a leading member of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, identified the "vicious circle [as one that] make[s] the individuals and groups captive in its reproduction" (Särkelä, 2022, p. 1372). Individuals have their agency conditioned, and autonomy limited, through partial or half-education. Social power is exerted on the individual, situating them as, at best, survivors, while the social environment takes advantage. The power of the professional, ITE-qualified VET teacher as opposed to the relative powerlessness of the

para-professional VET trainer in schools was emphasised by Schmidt (2021). As our depiction of the vicious VET circle illustrates, VET trainers are both disincentivised and effectually obstructed from undertaking academic study which would grant them the privileges of professional educator status.

Method

This article addresses the supply and demand of the ideal triple-qualified VET teacher in Victorian secondary schools. PTT (VET) in Victorian schools requires staff to have relevant industry experience and vocational competencies, at least to the level of the VET study they will deliver and the TAE. We refer to VET trainers in schools with these credentials as being *dual-qualified*. Assuming there are dual-qualified industry experts in the community who could be incentivised to become ITE-qualified VET teachers – many of whom are already teaching in schools with PTT (VET) - we undertook a stocktake study of available courses to identify pathways for dual-qualified VET trainers to attain an ITE qualification and become *triple-qualified*.

A similar stocktake study was conducted in 2017. A key objective of the 2017 VET teacher stocktake study was to create a snapshot of the availability of teacher education programs in Australian universities offering a VET specialisation method (Brown & O'Reilly-Briggs, 2017). We replicated this national stocktake in 2022 to ascertain the options available to people wanting to become ITE-qualified VET teachers in Victorian schools, in the context of the imminent commencement of the VM and the related expected increase in ITE-qualified VET teacher demand. One of the authors of the 2017 report conducted both the 2017 and the 2022 stocktake studies. Their expertise in the field of ITE VET teaching and course coordination provided invaluable insight for data investigation and interrogation.

Stocktake studies have been previously utilised as a research methodology (Grossman et al., 2016; Haigh et al., 2011; Naidoo, 2009). Naidoo (2009) used a triangulation methodology for “stocktaking institutional and programme mobility” (p. 316) where host and source countries were compared, then cross-checked through follow-up contact when discrepancies were identified. In keeping with this process, we initially sourced ITE secondary course information from AITSL, then visited listed course websites and conducted follow-up contact when clarification was required.

Courses offered by each institution were interrogated based on outward facing online website information. The AITSL accredited teaching courses online tool (AITSL, 2022) was used to identify all accredited courses offering ITE for secondary pre-service teachers. Results from the AITSL web tool search were organised according to qualification level and Australian state and territory.

The stocktake for this study included the following procedural steps:

- searching the AITSL webtool to identify all accredited ITE secondary programs on offer in Australia in 2022;
- interrogating the website of each course provider to specifically identify the specialisations available within each course and course duration;
- documenting results for the availability of VET specialisations and the availability of credit for industry experience and trade qualification;
- emailing or telephoning institutions for written or verbal confirmation when online information was not explicit;
- de-identifying higher education institutions offering ITE courses.

Results

A total of 132 ITE secondary courses in Australia were identified. The 2022 stocktake reveals a significant reduction of ITE pathways for tradespeople and other vocational professionals to become qualified VET secondary teachers. Six ITE courses with a VET specialisation were available across Australia in 2017, compared with only two courses in 2022 (Table 1). One of the courses was an online course offering one year of advanced standing towards a four-year full-time bachelor qualification in recognition of current and relevant trade qualifications and industry experience. The other course was face-to-face and offered a half-year credit.

A limitation is noted here regarding the difficulty encountered in obtaining accurate course information.

Table 1: Secondary ITE courses with a VET specialisation in Australia during 2017 and 2022

	Australian Capital Territory	New South Wales	Queensland	Tasmania	Victoria
2017	1	0	0	1	4
2022	0	0	1	1	0

Note 1. 2017 data was collected from Brown & O'Reilly-Briggs (2017). This table's formatting replicates that of the 2017 stocktake.

Note 2. We acknowledge that no data was found in South Australia, Northern Territory, and Western Australian in either the 2017 or the 2022 stocktake study.

The reduction of ITE courses with VET specialisations in Australia between 2017 and 2022, evidenced in the findings of the 2022 stocktake study, suggests that these courses were deemed unviable by the higher education sector.

Discussion

The vicious VET circle

The 2022 stocktake study data affirmed our identification of an 'educational problem' (Särkelä, 2022, p. 137), with ramifications for both staff and students involved in the teaching and learning of VET in Victorian secondary schools. This educational problem can be described as a vicious circle, where the low status of VET is propagated within a closed system. By definition, a circle has no definitive beginning point; it is an endless circuit. The implications and long-term impacts of an unintended vicious circle inevitably have significant effects on how difficult it is to disrupt the ensuing status quo. Over time, this established status quo becomes the default thinking and ultimately, the accepted norm.

We view the elements within the depicted vicious VET circle as a way of understanding how the relative powerlessness of the para-professional VET trainer is propagated by the high impossibility of attaining an ITE qualification following a career either in industry or as a VET trainer in a school context. For the purposes of this discussion, we will begin with the introduction of the Vocational Major in 2023 to the Victorian Certificate of Education (represented in Figure 1).

Inherent in the identification of a vicious circle is the consideration of how the elements impact each other to maintain a closed system that over time, contributes to popular opinion and habituated acceptance of a social norm. In this section we expand on the interconnections and interdependence of policy change and its impact on workforce supply and demand of triple-qualified VET teachers and the plight of VET trainers with PTT (VET).

To lift the status of VET in schools the Vocational Major is introduced in 2023

The introduction of the VET Major in 2023 aimed to increase the status of VET in schools (Firth, 2020). The VM presents an aspect of parity with other discipline subjects. VET programs contribute to VCE Units in the same way as VCE Studies, providing credit towards the VCE and VCE VM (VCAA, n.d.).

Programs of instruction authorised by the VCAA require ITE-qualified teachers or suitable staff with PTT (permission to teach) who are actively completing an ITE degree. The exemption of concurrent enrolment in an ITE degree for staff with PTT(VET) is problematic on several levels.

Demand outweighs supply of "ideal" triple-qualified ITE VET teachers

The Australian Government authored report, *Quality initial teacher education review* (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021) acknowledged longstanding shortages of ITE-qualified VET teachers. The extent of this shortage is difficult to gauge. Sources can be found anecdotally (Brown, 2017; O'Reilly-Briggs et al., 2021) and implicitly in government reports.



Figure 1: Vicious circle of low status Victorian VET education

AITSL (2021a) indicated that Teacher Registering Authorities (RTAs) in each Australian state apply an ‘alternative authorisation to teach’ to address workforce shortage; VET is mentioned explicitly. The *Australian Teacher Workforce Data* report (AITSL, 2021a) quantified out-of-field VET teaching at 84% (p. 89); a consequence of the scarcity of specialisations in ITE courses for teaching different VET subjects. These data imply that PTT (VET) is an ongoing accommodation because the need for ITE-qualified VET teachers exceeds the supply.

Non-ITE-qualified staff can teach VET with PTT (VET)

Vicious circles may emerge irrespective of the initial intent underpinning a changed set of processes. The introduction of PTT (VET) changed conditions for delivery of VET in schools in July 2016 (Brown, 2017). After completing their first three years, if PTT (VET)-holders can demonstrate that they “have completed the professional development,

industry engagement and professional practice in accordance with the plan submitted as part of their previous application” they can apply for a further PTT (VET) grant (VIT, 2022, p. 11). When the policy requirement of concurrent enrolment in an ITE course was removed for PTT (VET), continued employment as a para-professional became possible for VET trainers. The pedagogical implication of this policy change for staff and students is that VET is not equivalent to other curriculum subjects authorised by the VCAA.

VET in school trainers need the same minimum qualifications as VET trainers need for teaching in the TAFE or private RYO VET sector. In addition to industry currency and vocational credentials, VET trainers need the TAE. The TAE is widely criticised for its unsuitability for preparing candidates for the complex work of teaching (Brown, 2017; O'Reilly-Briggs et al., 2021; Tyler & Dymock, 2021). VET subjects taught in TAFE or RTO use a competency-based training (CBT) model which serves the interests of government, regulators, and business (Hodge, 2016). The CBT model is incongruous with academically challenging, mainstream school curricula. Consequently, VET trainers accustomed to delivering CBT are not well-positioned to engage senior school students “with a broader knowledge base connected to critical understandings of culture and society” (p. 352) through a socially just ‘rich common curriculum’ (Mills et al., 2022). Smith’s (2022) argument that “Australia’s VET teachers [are] among the least qualified in the world, and the least educated among all sectors of education” (p. 20) reinforces the vicious VET circle which maintains the low status of VET.

Furthermore, VET trainers who work in the VET further education sector are unlikely to know about, or work to uphold, the APSTs—underscoring the need for teacher-qualified VET specialists in schools. Fulfilling this need requires a viable pathway for VET specialists to enter and succeed in ITE degrees.

PTT (VET) is a disincentive to complete an ITE degree with a VET specialisation

As VET trainers can teach VET in schools without an ITE qualification, there is negligible incentive to undertake lengthy, challenging tertiary study to attain an ITE qualification. This, we propose, has contributed to a reduction in VET specialisation ITE course demand (AITSL, 2021b) and the ensuing unsustainable supply of ITE-qualified VET teachers. Recommendation 4 in the AITSL (2021b) report about building a sustainable VET workforce is for “schools [to] provide supports for industry professionals and VET trainers/assessors to enter and complete ITE [degrees]” (AITSL, 2021b, p. 35). The feasibility of this recommendation is contingent upon universities or higher education institutes offering ITE courses with relevant recognition of prior learning and appropriate VET specialisations. Limited case study data affirm the barriers for VET trainers inherent in undertaking an ITE degree. Only with tremendous support from a school, can a VET trainer with PTT concurrently pursue an ITE qualification (AITSL, 2021b).

Additionally, graduation from the remaining Australian specialised ITE courses for tradespeople to become VET teachers requires a time investment totalling approximately 11-13 years. This comprises a four-year full-time course (with a possible credit of a maximum of one-year) with entry requiring a trade qualification (approximately three-four

years), plus five years related industry experience. If part-time study is undertaken the time investment would be 15-18 years or more. In contrast, the duration of a standard undergraduate ITE degree in Australia is four years (with no pre-requisite experience or other qualification) other than a senior secondary certificate that meets university entry requirements. Given the time commitment and financial investment incurred by pursuing undergraduate studies, it is unsurprising that the current VET ITE pathways in Australia may be unattractive or unviable for industry experts.

Moreover, from the AITSL (2021b) report, *Building a high quality and sustainable dual-qualified VET workforce*, the introduction of PTT (VET), referred to as ‘utilisation of alternative authorisation to teach’, is an action undertaken for expediency.

ITE degrees with VET specialisation are unviable for universities (Stocktake study)

The implications of the net closure of four ITE courses with VET specialisation in Australia between 2017 and 2022 exacerbates the teacher demand and supply imbalance in the secondary school sector (Table 1). The limited availability of ITE courses for vocational experts and industry experienced para-professionals adversely impacts their prospects of becoming ITE-qualified VET teachers. This part of the VET vicious circle leaves secondary students without ITE-qualified teachers with industry experience who can both capably teach and authentically recommend a vocational career.

In acknowledging that ITE degrees with VET specialisations have declined in popularity, AITSL (2021b) suggested that “better data is needed to support the understanding of the reasons behind this decline... [which] has long term implications such as a reduced supply of the dual [or as acknowledged by stakeholders, triple] qualified VETiS workforce” (AITSL, 2021b, p. 25).

Undertaking the 2022 stocktake study affirmed that sourcing a viable course for VET teacher qualification is a very challenging exercise. An expert VET and higher education academic encountered significant difficulty in identifying ITE courses with a VET specialisation. This experience foregrounds the multiple barriers tradespeople face when seeking to become qualified schoolteachers in their area of expertise.

Pragmatically, schools staff VET with vocational experts with PTT (VET) and out-of-field ITE teachers

The highest rate of out-of-field teaching in Victorian secondary schools occurs in VET studies. While these teachers have an ITE qualification, without subject expertise and current industry experience, they are unable to offer VET students the benefit of lived vocational experience. Conversely, VET trainers with PTT (VET) lack pedagogical content knowledge necessary to an understanding of school curriculum and adolescent development and behaviour. Having school teaching staff with different professional status — ITE-qualified versus non-ITE-qualified — is troubling on many grounds for the non-ITE-qualified VET trainers and their students.

Non-ITE requirement for VET delivery contributes to perception that VET is 'less than' academic study, maintaining the lower status of staff with PTT (VET)

The TAE does not prepare candidates to meet the APSTs which delineate the professional knowledge, practice and engagement teachers need to teach in Australian schools. Not having an ITE qualification has implications for VET trainers, including questionable curriculum proficiency; limited pedagogical knowledge for teaching and assessing young adults; negligible career progression opportunities which likely discourage career aspiration; teaching is limited to VET subjects and a salary differential of \$20,000 for the first ten years of employment (M. D'Ortenzio, personal communication, July 28, 2023).

Community/ Student perception is that VET is not an academic discipline leading to VET study at university

The removal of the requirement of an ITE qualification for the delivery of VET studies in schools helps maintain the non-academic and hence *lesser* status of vocational studies. The lower status of VET has educational implications for senior school students. The quality of VET teaching in schools is undermined when delivered by VET trainers rather than ITE-qualified teachers with a VET specialisation.

The low status of VET and the precarious sustainability of VET programs compromise the experience of skilled, well-educated young people who volitionally choose vocational careers. The social belief that the teaching of VET in schools by trainers is acceptable contributes to a vicious circle. This conveys the message to students that vocational studies are inferior to academic subjects which require ITE-qualified teachers. Mills et al., (2022) contended that disengaged students have traditionally been directed into less academically challenging programs that were frequently comprised of vocational subjects only (which in itself represents a vicious circle).

A vicious circle is not composed of discreet elements. In fact, constituent phenomena are interconnected and often interdependent. The value in thinking about a vicious circle lies in the realisation that people can become entrapped within a closed system. When this becomes the accepted norm, innocent people are victimised and limited in their opportunity to move beyond their current form of life.

The virtuous VET circle

The act itself of identifying a vicious circle, and then in Deweyan terms, of “pointing to another form of life” (Särkelä, 2022, p.1370) is considered “an educative gesture”. In contrast to the vicious circle, the counter-cycle, known as the virtuous circle, has its origins in social policy that contributes towards economic growth in welfare states’ discourses of the 1930s (Hirvilammi, 2020). More recently, with the impact of environmental concerns, there has been a shift to transformative sustainability as the virtuous circle direction.

Through our research we have identified an educational issue of concern in the emergence of a vicious circle which renders a supply and demand balance improbable for triple-qualified VET teachers in schools. The introduction of PTT (VET) plays a significant role in this vicious circle. We have identified parallels between the conceptualisation of a vicious circle as a social phenomenon and the maintaining of the low status of VET in schools. In this section we propose a transformative and sustainable virtuous VET circle which would benefit both staff and students, ultimately lifting the status of VET in schools and society.

To achieve curriculum justice, Mills et al. (2022) observed the importance of “disrupt[ing] hierarchical forms of knowledge ... [in order to accord] ... equal value to academic and vocational forms of knowledge” (p. 348). Discipline expertise and the pedagogical knowledge to teach specialist subject areas are interdependent skills. High-quality teaching provision requires schoolteachers who are pedagogically proficient subject specialists with an integrated understanding of the overarching purposes of school education (Mills et al., 2022).

Enacting a socially just curriculum requires teachers who are knowledgeable about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, reject deficit constructions of young people and have deep commitments to and have understandings of social justice (Mills et al., 2022, p. 351).

One way of raising the social status of VET is by enhancing the societal esteem of trade occupations, and potentially, the quality and status of those who teach VET (Billett, 2011). We posit that elevating the status of VET in schoolteachers' work will flow on to affect the quality and status of the vocational occupations they teach. This can be achieved through increasing the numbers of pedagogically proficient, degree qualified VET secondary school teachers (Smith, 2019; Smith et al., 2018). Otherwise, the 'low-status phenomenon' of VET is perpetuated, maintaining a vicious circle with profound implications for young people, PTT (VET) staff, industry, and the nation. Given the post-pandemic political and economic landscape, serious consideration needs to be accorded to providing incentives to attract vocational experts into viable VET ITE study.

The VET ITE-qualified teacher shortage requires collaborative action from government with higher education to expeditiously qualify specialist vocational teachers, enabling VET trainers to achieve career and professional parity with other teachers. Universities could consider the viability of designing bespoke academic pedagogical education for delivery to trade industry experts wanting to become qualified teachers, or for VET trainers currently working in schools with PTT (VET) status. To expedite course completion, such ITE could be delivered whilst candidates are working in schools. Alternatively, higher education providers offering industry and trade qualifications might explore the potential of offering accredited secondary VET ITE pathways. We contend that a user-friendly national register of ITE pathways for industry experts wanting to become VET schoolteachers needs to be created and made available. We propose that accessible national data relating to the extent of the supply and demand of qualified VET teachers must also be reliably collected and made freely available to schools and other stakeholders.

Limitations and further research

One of the limitations of this study was the difficulty encountered in sourcing reliable data regarding currently offered ITE courses with a VET specialisation. It must be noted that the research team are experienced ITE academics which highlights the difficulty trade and vocational experts encounter when trying to source an ITE pathway. A further limitation is that this stocktake investigated only ITE courses with a VET specialisation. Although we did not include applied learning courses in our stocktake, we acknowledge that applied learning courses might provide trade experts with a pathway towards an ITE qualification.

As the outline of a sustainable VET virtuous circle depicts in the following paragraphs, expediting the graduation of VET teachers offers rich opportunities for research. Such research could include the collection of empirical data justifying the need for and delivery of ITE VET specialised programs, supporting interested applicants to complete ITE study, and investigating the lived experience of students and staff in school VET programs. Potential exists to capture the vision and mission of raising the status of VET in schools.

Valuing the work of ITE-qualified teachers of VET validates VET status in the VCE. When trade and vocationally qualified professionals are enabled to transition into the teaching profession, they bring their industry-situated lived experience, strong community connections and a wealth of expertise and socio-cultural capital to the classroom. The array of specialised skills, knowledge, and experience that triple-qualified VET teachers bring to secondary schools is invaluable to the educational experience of young people.

A transformative, sustainable VET virtuous circle offers viable opportunities for para-professional VET trainers to concurrently become ITE-qualified with study designed to complement current teaching with PTT (VET) status. Expediting the graduation of ITE-qualified VET teachers will provide them with equity of professional staff privilege, including wage parity, opportunities for promotion and professional development. Students will benefit from triple-qualified VET teachers. VET trainers and vocational experts will be incentivised to upskill. Higher education institutions can tailor appropriate credentials in response to demand. When VET is viewed as a study with pedagogical rigour, the status of VET will increase.

Conclusion

Government policy has created a vicious circle which devalues VET in schools by not requiring fully ITE-qualified industry experts to teach vocational studies to students who deserve the best education experience possible. A virtuous transformative and sustainable VET circle would offer feasible pathways for vocational experts to become fully qualified professional educators. We see great opportunity to upskill PTT (VET) holders who are currently teaching VET in schools by providing this cohort with on-the-job professional learning leading to full ITE qualification. Triple-qualified VET specialists would offer students a quality education experience which would contribute towards improving the

status of VET in schools. Creative ITE design for vocational experts would arguably help bridge the academic-vocational divide.

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Appendix: Glossary of abbreviations

- AQF – Australian Quality Framework
<https://www.aqf.edu.au/>
- APST – Australian Professional Standards for Teachers
<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/australian-professional-standards-for-teachers>
- CBT – Competency Based Training
<https://www.tafecourses.com.au/resources/what-is-competency-based-training-faq/>
- ITE – Initial Teacher Education
<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/initial-teacher-education-today>
- OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<https://www.oecd.org/>
- PTT – Permission to Teach
<https://www.vit.vic.edu.au/register/categories/ptt>
- PTT(VET) – Permission to Teach VET
https://www.vit.vic.edu.au/sites/default/files/media/pdf/2023-08/Fact-sheet_PTT-VET_schools_0.pdf
- RTO – Registered Training Organisation
<https://www.asqa.gov.au/rto/what-is-an-rto>

- TAE Certificate IV in Training and Assessment
<https://www.asqa.gov.au/news-events/news/new-version-tae-training-package-and-transition-extension-information>
- TAFE – Technical and Further Education
<https://www.vic.gov.au/tafe>
- VCAA – Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
<https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/About-us/Pages/Overview.aspx>
- VCE – Victorian School Certificate
<https://www.vic.gov.au/about-vce>
- VETiS VET in Schools
<https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A20454>
- VIT – Victorian Institute of Teaching
<https://www.vit.vic.edu.au/>
- VET – Vocational Education and Training
<https://www.vic.gov.au/about-vocational-education-training-school>
- VM – Vocational Major
<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/vce-vocational-major-vpc-provision/policy>

Dr Rochelle Fogelgarn (corresponding author) is a Lecturer in Teacher Education at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. Her research interests include responsive classroom management; relational teacher and student wellbeing; transformative pedagogy; teacher-targeted bullying and harassment; VET and design technology teacher shortages; raising the status of vocational education in schools and sustainable, quality teaching practice.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6485-0408>

Email: r.fogelgarn@latrobe.edu.au

Dr Jacolyn Weller is a senior STEM initial teacher education lecturer at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. She is a mid-career researcher with over 20 years secondary school teaching experience and a philosophy of experiential teaching. Her research focuses on teacher sustainability through innovative STEM-teaching, professional development, partnerships including professional experience and VET and design technology teacher shortages.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3403-8157>

Email: j.weller@latrobe.edu.au

Dr Karen O'Reilly-Briggs, Box Hill Institute, Melbourne, Australia, is an experienced metal fabrication and pressure vessel welder whose PhD investigated the impact of national training reform on the pedagogy of engineering trades in Victoria. Her research interests include VET, the teaching and learning of craft trades and apprenticeships, and the status of VET in society.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6445-4664>

Email: k.oreilly-briggs@boxhill.edu.au

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