



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

*Submission to the
Victorian Government on
skills reform*

Brotherhood of St Laurence
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Summary

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the BSL continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty, guided by principles of advocacy, innovation and sustainability. Our work includes direct service provision to people in need, the development of social enterprises to address inequality, research to better understand the causes and effects of poverty in Australia, and the development of policy solutions at both national and local levels.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Discussion Paper on Skills Reform. Our responses are framed around a recommendation that the Victorian Government should:

- Ensure every Victorian school-leaver develops a learner–worker identity complemented by competency in employability skills in general and literacy and numeracy in particular
- Increase and sustain funding for the range of transition supports through school to work
- Provide incentives to employers to support them in recruiting and selection young apprentices and trainees
- Fund access to skills audit and recognition of prior learning mapped to AQF qualifications for all currently employed Victorians who lack an initial qualification at a minimum of CIII level
- Equip all employers with the skills, knowledge and resources to ensure their employees’ successful participation in and completion of nationally recognised training mapped to their workplace requirements
- Adequately fund workplace literacy initiatives for all enterprises identifying issues with workplace literacy
- Offer incentives for TAFE to move away from course-based learning to customised responses, delivered in partnership where necessary, to meet the assessed needs of individuals and businesses
- Strengthen the commitment to applied learning pedagogies in all domains of teacher training.

I Introduction

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) has a long history of service delivery, research and policy analysis relevant to skills development. Our vision of an Australia free of poverty commits us to work with others for an inclusive, sustainable society which challenges inequity and in which all people create and share prosperity. Our work is focused on those people at greatest risk at the four transition stages considered critical to their future well-being:

- the early years – both at home and into school
- the years from school to work
- the periods in and out of work
- retirement and ageing.

In two of these transitions – Through School to Work and In and Out of Work – the structure of the training system and the opportunities it provides for Victorians to take up and succeed in training are pivotal to the work of BSL. As the Discussion Paper recognises, skills are a critical driver of economic growth, fostering higher productivity and higher workforce participation. **In a context of skill shortages, an ageing population and a highly competitive, globalised economy, the participation of all Victorians who are potential workers, including those who are most disengaged from, or marginally attached to, the labour market, is vital.** At the same time, skill development is a significant driver of social participation, allowing individuals to realise their full potential through engagement and advancement in the labour market. The vocational education and training (VET) sector includes a high percentage of students from low socioeconomic areas and these students complete qualifications at a rate higher than the average. However, the qualifications they complete are at the lower levels (Foley 2007). There is a social and an economic imperative that both the level and success of candidature is increased for all those disadvantaged in accessing and contributing to Victoria's productivity.

The intersection of social and economic benefits has long been a central objective framing the work of BSL and has been formally acknowledged in the social inclusion agenda of the Australian Government. The Brotherhood welcomes the Rudd government's commitment to prioritise social inclusion and skills development and the opportunities offered by a cooperative federal–state framework (Gillard & Wong 2007). We commend the Victorian Government for its existing policy initiatives in community capacity building as outlined in *Growing Victoria Together* (Department of Premier & Cabinet 2001) and *A Fairer Victoria* (Department of Premier & Cabinet 2005) and for its investment in innovation in vocational education and training. However, a significant number of Victorians hold no or limited formal qualifications, do not see themselves as learners and remain marginally attached to the education, training and employment sector. **We believe the current political environment provides a pivotal opportunity to promote and expand Victoria's social inclusion and VET initiatives as sound economic policy.**

The current strength of the Australian economy has resulted in a tightening of labour supply. Despite economists assuming that 5% unemployment would be as close as we could get to full employment, the overall unemployment rate has fallen to 4.2% (ABS 2007a). Equally important, an equivalent number of *underemployed* workers (544,000 in September 2006) are seeking more work, while another 93,000 people are discouraged job seekers who are marginally attached to the workforce (ABS 2007b). This has created a situation where those who still need skills development to enable them to participate and advance in employment often have a more complex pattern of disadvantage. **While the Discussion Paper notes that 1.4 million adult Victorians do not hold any post-school qualification, it is imperative to recognise that there are also significant numbers of Victorians who do not hold even a senior school qualification and that this is a barrier to their ability to contribute to Victoria's productivity.**

As our recent submission to the Australian Government on employment assistance indicated, research surveys of employment services clients have repeatedly shown significant co-morbidity, with around half being early school leavers with no formal qualifications (for example Horn 1998; Horn & Jordan 2006, Perkins 2007). While aggregate school retention and completion rates are steadily improving through the setting of targets (such as Victoria's 90% Year 12 completion target), there is ample scope and an increasing imperative to ensure all Victorians are equipped with at least a Year 12 qualification, at the same time as we continue to elevate the skills and qualifications of the entire workforce. To be effective, however, the Brotherhood has already argued that further investment in education and skills building must take into account the social context that influences participation in and commitment to learning for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This requires better integrated and more flexible models of learning, closely linked with relevant, well-structured industry experience. It also means attending to barriers such as inadequate access to affordable transport and learning resources. For young people entering the labour market it means ensuring intensive personal support during school and through transition to work. **Research suggests that the current level and intermittent nature of funding for initiatives supporting young Victorians moving into the workforce – such as Managed Individual Pathways and Local Learning and Employment Networks – have been compromised by their funding arrangements** (Kamp 2006, Long 2005).

The Australian Government has rightly pledged to strengthen the education and vocational skills of those both in and out of the workforce and the major commitment to expand training places to build the basic skills level of Australians to Certificate III level or higher is especially welcome. However, a substantial percentage of disadvantaged job seekers have not achieved even Year 10 education and, despite comparatively high achievements in retention, levels of unemployment, and apprenticeship commencements, **Victorian school students in 2005 were performing poorly in the skills in literacy and numeracy that provide the basis for success in the workplace and in ongoing skills development** (Long 2005). High literacy and numeracy skills are related to better labour market outcomes for young people (Productivity Commission 2007). These statistics signal the need to ensure all current and prospective workers have the prerequisite skills to engage with the opportunities that are becoming available. New approaches in the United Kingdom include 'skills health checks' to assist individuals to become aware of their own skill needs before enrolling in any program of skills development (Leith 2006). In the United Kingdom the goal is to double educational attainment at most levels and it is recognised that this requires, at least, a cultural change to viewing education, skills and personal development as one continuous lifelong journey.

The Brotherhood encourages the Victorian Government to lead the way in maximising the benefits of assessing and crediting the existing skills of Victorian employees against nationally recognised qualifications. **The Brotherhood argues that all current workers should have the opportunity to map their skill set onto national recognised qualifications appropriate for their current and future responsibilities, with training provided to bridge any gap.** Such an approach minimises the need for workers to be released to attend superfluous courses, maximises training time and maximises transfer of learnings to the workplace. It also enables a customised response to changing needs and localised skill shortages, a critical dimension of competitiveness. Such a commitment implies that TAFE and other providers move away from a course and institutionally based approach to tailored responses, delivered in the workplace, in partnership where necessary, to meet the assessed needs of individuals and businesses. Research has indicated the inappropriateness of funding on the basis of course hours within a competency-based national training regime (Burke 2003) and the need for further work to create the conditions for cross-sectoral links between TAFE, schools and other providers (Long 2005). **To encourage workers to upgrade their skills, recognition of prior learning or current competency should be fully-funded for those lacking a post-school qualification, with the cost offset by the savings accrued through minimising training in skills that workers already hold.** However, it is noted that the Productivity Commission's (2008) report on government services indicates that Victoria currently has the most cost-effective TAFE provision in the country in a context where investment across Australia has declined.

While the Brotherhood supports the intention to ensure working Victorians upgrade their qualifications, we strongly recommend a focus on the needs of young Victorians who are moving into the workforce to secure full-time work with prospects for advancement, including apprenticeships. This focus is justified on two dimensions. Firstly, despite the rapid increase in full-time jobs for older Australians, full-time jobs for teenagers have remained static and those for young adults have declined (Long 2006). Secondly, young people will play an increasingly crucial role as a source of skills, given the demographic squeeze caused by the retirement of the ‘baby boomer’ generation. The Australian Industry Group and Dusseldorp Skills Forum (2007, p.11) argue that ‘enabling ... disenfranchised young people to attain a sustainable skills base or find pathways into work must be a public policy priority’. Such an approach would contribute significantly to the 90% target for completion of Year 12 or its equivalent for all young Victorians by 2010. One key priority should be recruiting and selecting young people for full-time apprenticeships. Participation in apprenticeship, and to a lesser degree traineeship, is strongly associated with sustainable engagement in the workforce for those young people who do not go to university: gaining full-time work early in the school to work transition is critical (Marks 2006, p.3). In the most recent statistics, existing workers account for more than 25% of all national apprenticeship commencements and older age groups account for the largest proportional increase in commencements (NCVER 2006). However, the uptake of apprenticeships is insufficient to meet the national skills shortage (ACTU 2004). In Victoria, where industry makes up the largest share of the state economy, apprenticeships in manufacturing were second lowest in the country, at 13.0 per 1,000 employees (Australian Industry Group 2004). At the same time, while nearly 20% of 15–19 year olds in employment are in some form of apprenticeship or traineeship, the conflation of apprenticeship and traineeship statistics masks the extent of marginal arrangements with minimal employer commitment (NCVER 2006). This must be addressed. A further component should be support to employers to ensure not only employees’ completion of training programs but also the fostering of a learning culture in the workplace. This culture would in turn increase the pool of employers able to engage with structured workplace learning opportunities for school students and those developing skills as part of employment assistance initiatives.

The Victorian Government has already indicated its confidence in applied learning as one response to this imperative through the implementation of the Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) as an alternative senior school qualification. It has been noted that such models enhance confidence and motivation, lead to increased commitment to learning, and develop generic skills that are valued in the workplace, including problem solving and teamwork (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2006). Such an approach is vital in a context where the ability to innovate and adapt to changing market demands will be more significant than training for a current skills shortage. **We suggest there has been insufficient attention to ensuring the value of VCAL is appreciated in the broader community and this must be given sustained attention.** Despite its rapidly increasing popularity with students, VCAL, and VET in general, has continued to be positioned as an option for less able students (Kamp 2006). The potential offered by developing the VCAL initiative in the junior and middle years of schooling was signalled in 2005 (Long 2005). This proposal has yet to be acted on, despite the opportunity to enhance school retention and work readiness of young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who are most at risk of being unable to contribute to Victoria’s productivity, continuing to be argued (Black 2007). While the Brotherhood strongly supports a shift to applied pedagogies including the funding of the Victorian Government of Technical Education Centres, along with the Australian Government’s commitment to trade training wings, we acknowledge that these have significant implications for teacher training models to ensure staffing by qualified and talented teachers. This demands leadership by the Victorian Government to ensure all teacher training produces graduates able to use applied learning pedagogies that will equip school leavers with the skills to contribute creatively to rapidly changing workplaces. The recent Blueprint on Early Childhood Development and School Reform offers important opportunities in this regard.

It is imperative that all Victorians are provided with quality skills development that cements a learner–worker identity, regardless of whether they are training in the workplace, with a private or community provider, a TAFE, a school or a technical education centre or some combination.

2 Background on the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s work in skill development

The Brotherhood has a long history of service delivery relevant to employment assistance and skills development as a not-for-profit provider. The organisation is known for having piloted the Job Placement Employment and Training program (JPET) and the Transition Project, both of which have been adopted beyond the BSL. More recently, we have delivered employment assistance, transition to work support and skills development through the Job Network, the Personal Support Programme (PSP), Youth Pathways (YP), and the Disability Employment Network (DEN). We also provide vocational education and training and employment opportunities through our Group Training company, our Furniture Works Training Centre, our Registered Training Organisation and our community and social enterprises.

To effectively engage the most disadvantaged, the Brotherhood has sought to build flexible, responsive and integrated approaches to our service delivery. We have focused on geographical areas and population groups facing significant disadvantage and social exclusion, including young adults, those with disabilities, and those suffering mental illness or compromised by intergenerational poverty, as well as humanitarian migrants. We have also developed and supported innovative models of assistance with great success, including:

- *Intermediate Labour Markets* offering supported, paid employment utilising the Australian apprenticeship model delivered through community enterprises and integrating accredited skills acquisition and personal support
- *Given the Chance* workplace mentoring and network building program, which supports humanitarian migrants and refugees entering Australian employment
- *YP⁴* the young homeless job seeker trial that has sought to test a joined up approach to sustainable employment and housing outcomes (auspiced by Hanover Welfare Services).

3 Response to the discussion paper on skills reform

If government-supported training for all eligible Victorians were introduced, what should the eligibility criteria look like?

The Brotherhood argues that any introduction of government-supported training for all eligible Victorians should be framed by funded assessment of current skills and recognised qualifications. Government-supported training should be fully funded for all Victorians who lack a Year 12 or equivalent qualification and who, because of their age, are not covered by the provisions of the Youth Guarantee.

The eligibility for government-supported training for initial post-school qualifications should also be framed by assessment of current skills and recognised qualifications: those who lack an initial post-school qualification should be eligible to be supported by government in undertaking training to complete a recognised qualification at a minimum of CIII level. This eligibility could include a residency requirement: government support requires the recipient to continue to work, or be supported into work, in Victoria for a given period or repay a component of the costs.

How could the proposal be marketed to encourage higher take-up, particularly among Victorians who have never considered VET studies?

This proposal could be marketed to encourage higher take-up by enhancing understanding of both employers and workers of the Australian Qualifications Framework and the potential to link work and learning in the workplace, and to gain recognition of current skills and competencies without having to be trained in domains in which one is already skilled. Industry Training Advisory Bodies have expertise on how their industry should approach this process and this dimension of their work should be brought to the fore.

Significant achievements could be made in marketing the potential, and streamlining the processes of recognition of prior learning and current competency. The current process is counter-intuitive, often requiring enrolment in a course of study before current competency is assessed. It is also often complex, time-consuming and costly. The Brotherhood urges the Victorian Government to take the lead in integrating holistic, reflective models of recognition into all government-supported training. We also recommend a sustained information campaign to educate Victorians on the new competency-based industry training regime and how it can be integrated into their daily work.

What proportion of course costs do you think is reasonable for an individual or business to contribute?

The Brotherhood suggests that the question of contribution to course costs by individuals and industry needs to be reframed. Given the Victorian Government's commitment to up-skill the current and potential workforce, we argue there should be no contribution by individuals who lack a starting qualification. For those who hold a post-school qualification, the contribution should depend on whether the training relates to an identified skill shortage, based on advice from the Victorian Skills Commission.

The Brotherhood's experience suggests that industry contributions to training costs should vary. The nature of some industries, including those that are capital-intensive, often requires that enterprises primarily deliver their own training in the workplace through an integrated model of assessment, mapping to AQF qualifications, workplace trainers and assessors and so forth. Many industries have established their own Registered Training Organisations. In such instances, the contribution of the enterprise as the primary training provider should be acknowledged and the

focus should be on supporting this initiative, assuring quality and fostering partnership arrangements with smaller enterprises and learners. This may include the potential for bonding agreements where industries are effectively funding the training cost for an individual. Industries that rely on a 'course' model, and have not taken the initiative in moving towards organisational learning, should contribute accordingly.

Is it reasonable to introduce higher fees for students for training courses that deliver higher individual benefits with improved employment outcomes?

The Brotherhood does not accept that it is reasonable to pursue this approach, because it is likely to exclude disadvantaged Victorians from pursuing some options for skill development. Aspiration for, and access to, all training options should be based on ability and aptitude, not affordability. The tendency of disadvantaged individuals to eliminate themselves from the highest aspirations is well-acknowledged in the sociological literature (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). There is also evidence that people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be deterred from study by higher fees due to greater financial barriers and a reluctance to take on debt (Forsyth & Furlong 2003). Furthermore, the higher individual benefits that accrue from some training options do not reflect only the acquisition of that qualification. These benefits also reflect the non-economic costs of the training and the pressures and responsibilities of the vocation that demands the qualification. If the intention of the Victorian Government is to encourage people to upgrade their skills and qualifications, then the higher level qualifications should not be rendered less attractive than lower level qualifications.

Should the government consider an income contingent loan scheme as currently applies to university education?

We strongly endorse initiatives that enable all Victorians to pursue their aspirations notwithstanding their financial circumstances. Given the high engagement and success experienced in lower level VET programs by those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Long 2005), the potential to encourage upgrading of qualifications by removing the financial barriers for this group is compelling. However, we are not convinced that an income-contingent loan scheme would best meet the needs of some Victorians. Our service experience indicates that many Victorians who are keen to embark on skills development do not have the financial literacy to engage confidently or willingly with a loans scheme. Those individuals who lack economic, cultural and social capital in engaging with the workforce could be disadvantaged if this were the only avenue to gain support. We recommend consideration of a scholarships program, targeted at areas of skills shortage and awarded on the basis of ability at a range of entry points (e.g. CIII up to Advanced Diploma). If a loans scheme were to be adopted, we argue that the inadequacies of the university education arrangement, such as inability to defer costs for 'non-core' learning resources such as textbooks, need to be addressed. All students must be able to access all learning resources on an equal basis and this is not the case if only some students can gain sufficient access to recommended texts. Similarly, any income-contingent loan scheme must be designed with appropriate arrangements of repayment, perhaps linked to qualification level or domain. It is important to ensure that the perception of risk around the affordability of loan repayments should not be a disincentive for low income earners.

The Brotherhood believes any initiative to equalise the economic support offered to university and VET aspirants is important in establishing equivalent perceptions of value between the higher education and VET sectors. Furthermore, it would enhance Victoria's reputation as a state of choice for VET enrolment.

How can the system be structured to produce a better match between the future needs of the Victorian economy and the training choices made by individuals and businesses?

We argue that there is an increasing need to move away from privileging notions of ‘courses’ and resolving the issue of match by placing ‘caps’ on enrolments. We believe a focus on purchasing courses should be balanced with opportunities for funding part-courses and combinations of individual units where needs assessment indicates that is the training required. At the same time, the use of census data within the ACFE sector to inform purchasing decisions is ineffective, given the lag between collection of data and its publication. We argue for a shift to more responsive purchasing models, including the use of local research to demonstrate need, and the requirement for providers to demonstrate the link between training provision and subsequent employment opportunity. In particular, any funded pre-apprenticeship program should have an identified apprenticeship outcome.

We do support the proposal to increase direct support to small to medium size enterprises to identify their skills needs and access more responsive training. We argue for an increased focus on workplace learning initiatives coupled with a focus on intensive, holistic and customised programs for those most disadvantaged in participating and advancing in the workforce.

We strongly endorse a concerted commitment to enhancing appreciation of the benefits of the VCAL as the ideal secondary school qualification for all students moving directly to the workforce. It is of considerable concern that the 2008 *VCE and Careers Expo* promotional material in the *Melbourne Age*, supported by both VCAA and DEECD, did not feature any promotion on VCAL. In Victoria in particular, the hold of VCE on arrangements in the post-compulsory school sector is a considerable barrier to schools offering optimal opportunities to the majority of students who do not move into university study.

The Brotherhood also argues for review of the extent and quality of workplace learning initiatives for senior school students and Victorians enrolled in skill development activities as part of employment assistance arrangements. We argue for integrated models of high-quality, structured workplace learning as a compulsory component of all pre-employment programs.

How can the government best support TAFE and ACFE providers to thrive in a competitive environment?

The Brotherhood believes there is potential for training providers to be able to compete on price and that this could have benefits in lowering fees. However, we emphasise that this cannot be at the cost of quality and a minimum fee should be identified to ensure all providers implement funded, reflective processes of recognising current competency and prior learning, have holistic learner support, offer career planning and pathway development, and use innovative, learner-centred delivery and assessment methods.

Our service experience indicates that the funding model of student contact hours used in ACFE is highly problematic on a number of dimensions. It means that those providers who deliver programs for the most disadvantaged learners, for instance young people who have been excluded from secondary school, are pushed towards larger class sizes than is optimal. The model also does not allow for the individualised support that is often vital for these learners taking the first step towards gaining an initial qualification.

Similarly, ACFE providers are often small and the administrative burdens placed on them in securing funding can be disproportionately high. We recommend that compliance arrangements be reviewed to ensure their ‘fit’ with the provider in question. For instance, those providers with a

long history of compliance and quality training should be able to have minimal compliance requirements.

How can government make its support for students undertaking training available in a way that encourages training providers to be more innovative, flexible and responsive to the needs of individuals and businesses?

The Brotherhood's work and research for young people in transition from school to work and in supporting job seekers provides strong evidence for the need for integrated models of support that acknowledge and respond to the multi-dimensional needs of those who are disadvantaged in moving into and advancing through the workforce. This position has been echoed by recent NCVET research (Barnett & Spoehr 2008). Training should be tailored to learner needs through an integrated approach that includes some form of skills audit and needs assessment, funded processes of recognition of prior learning and current competency, and training delivery at a time and place and in a manner that meets the needs of the individual and their current or future employer. This implies that government must foster the conditions for partnership to enable education and training providers to work collaboratively with other sectors as well as ensuring adequate funding, perhaps through weighted payments, for those providers working with potential workers who require the maximum support to succeed.

In what ways can government help individuals and businesses better understand and access the benefits of VET?

Our experience indicates that there is a high level of confusion in the broader community about how the VET system operates. This makes it difficult for individuals, and particularly those who have become disengaged from learning, to appreciate the efficiency and benefits of training. We recommend a standard, quality format for all Industry Training Advisory Body websites with consistent language and links. We also recommend the government reconfigure the DEECD website to ensure consistent language, easy navigation and clear links based on the point of entry of the learner.

Concluding comments

At the same time, consideration of skills reform must recognise other factors that act as a disincentive. In the case of young workers, the Australian Industry Group (2003) has argued that youth wages are necessary to protect young people's ability to compete in the labour market. However, many award payments for first-year apprentices are below the Henderson Poverty Line and school leavers earning junior wages outside of apprenticeship arrangements often earn considerably higher wages (Bittman et al. 2007). This clearly can prove a disincentive, particularly for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, in deciding to commit to formalised skills development.

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