

Kevin Rudd's 'education revolution' has stressed two objectives: first, that education provides everyone with the opportunity to realise their potential, regardless of their social background. The second is that Australia becomes one of the most skilled countries in the world, through improving the quality of our education and training systems. These are worthwhile objectives, but Labor has not yet got all the policy elements in place that it needs to achieve them.

An important start has been made. Labor's commitment to invest in early childhood education and to improve school retention rates are key elements, as is their commitment to increase the number of VET places, particularly for higher level qualifications. Increasing the availability of VET-in-schools, including for school students in years 9 and 10, is also positive, even if the proposed method of implementation is problematic.

Labor has emphasised the importance of the public TAFE sector, in contrast to the demonising of TAFE by the Howard government, and it has committed to work in partnership with the states, in contrast to the decidedly uncooperative federalism of recent years. We also will be able to focus on education and training rather than the ideologically driven industrial relations policies that the Howard government insisted on inserting in VET and higher education programs. These are all welcome changes. But they are not enough.

While Kevin Rudd credits public education with making it possible for him to be the boy from Nambour who has made it to Prime Minister, this is not the norm. Australian education outcomes are still shaped by social class. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are under-represented in higher education, despite being designated as an equity group since the early 1990s. They are particularly under-represented in the Group of Eight universities, and in programs that prepare students for the elite professions.

In contrast, students from low socio-economic backgrounds are over-represented in VET and they are concentrated in lower level VET qualifications. This means that pathways from diploma and advanced diplomas to higher education will not necessarily be a mechanism for social inclusion for these students.

Students who undertake VET-in-schools are more likely to come from low socio-economic backgrounds, they achieve lower academic results and they are much less likely to go to university compared to other students. Labor needs to be careful therefore, that it does not entrench these class differences through exhorting more students to do VET.

These differences will be entrenched unless Labor implements policy to ensure that participating in VET *opens* opportunities, rather than closes them. VET needs to provide a 'climbing framework' to higher level qualifications, particularly in higher education. The status of VET will improve if it provides more access to these opportunities.

A climbing framework will also contribute to increasing the skill level of the Australian workforce, by linking educational progression to occupational progression. Labor policy emphasises the need to equip the Australian people to engage in lifelong learning, but it does not yet have the lifelong learning policy to support this.

Labor's policies are differentiated by educational sector, so that its VET-in-schools policy is not considered as part of its overall VET policy. The proposal to establish a trades training centre in every school is ill-conceived, as schools cannot possibly hope to provide the range, scope or depth of programs offered by TAFE. It would be much better to fund collaboration between schools and TAFEs, including the staff who need to mediate these arrangements.

Similarly, its higher education policy has been developed with no relation to its VET policy. Yet, lifelong learning depends on continuity and coherence between the sectors, so that pathways build on knowledge and skill.

Labor needs to develop a lifelong learning policy that considers senior school, VET and higher education policy as part of a coherent framework. It needs a cross-sectoral source of advice about these issues. There is no cross-sectoral source of policy advice to government beyond that provided by the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board, and its role is limited. The Howard government dismantled the National Board of Employment, Education and Training that was established under Labor Education Minister John Dawkins. We need a similar type of body now.

This would enable policy to be developed that went beyond the vested interests in each education sector. It would also enable policy to be developed that looks to the future, rather than current policy (particularly in VET) which privileges the immediate and short-term interests of employers. Too close an identification between education and the workplace results in reproducing existing practices, not in their transformation.

Labor also needs to reform VET qualifications so that they include two outcomes: the first is to prepare students for a vocationally specific outcome, and the second is to prepare them to study at higher education. If VET qualifications are to do the latter, they need to go beyond competency-based training, which ties *all* outcomes to tasks and roles in the workplace. VET qualifications do not provide a good 'climbing framework' to higher education, and they need to if lifelong learning is to become a reality.

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