

## **Enhancing the standing and status of vocational education**

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### Informing young people's decision-making about post-school pathways

The decisions that young people make about post-school pathways are becoming increasingly important because of the implications for: i) their personal educational and employment trajectories and goals, ii) the effective utilisation of educational resources, and iii) meeting a range of needs associated with developing the occupational capacities required to realise communities' and nation states' social and economic goals. Globally, there are concerns that young people's preferences for universities as default post-school pathways and desirable forms of work (i.e., clean, high status, classified as professional) are reducing their participation in vocational education and training (VET) and the occupations it serves (Billett, 2014; Billett & Le, 2022; UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018b). The preference for participating in higher education (HE) over VET is leading to skill shortages (Universities Australia, 2008; Wolf, 2016), poor employment outcomes for university graduates (Nägele & Stalder, 2018) and injudicious personal and societal investments in tertiary education provisions. Some accounts identify institutional and personal factors shaping that decision-making as failing to fully and impartially inform young people's choices within the senior years of schooling and about post-school pathways (Clement, 2014; UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018b). Certainly, across both countries with advanced industrial and developing economies, there is a growing pattern of young people viewing VET and the occupations it serves as being undesirable and not aligned with their aspirations regardless of whether VET is based in compulsory education (i.e., schooling) or as a post-school (i.e., tertiary) educational provision (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018b). This sentiment is seemingly being buoyed by the aspirations of those who are close or proximal to these young people, such as parents, schoolteachers, other familiars, including what is privileged and championed by them in schooling (Cho & Apple, 1998; Clement, 2014; Fuller, McCrum, & Macfadyen, 2014; Parliament of Victoria, 2018). Moreover, at a greater distance or distally, these studies note that public discourses, portrayals in the print, broadcast and electronic media are also potentially favouring the kinds of occupations arising from university education over those that VET graduates secure (Lasonen & Manning, 2000). Of course, societal preferences for particular kinds of work have long existed and influenced views of their worth in communities and what kinds of educational provision they warrant and have long been projected by social institutions (Billett, 2011, 2014). Yet, currently and globally, there appears to be a growing and unprecedented disaffection with VET and the occupations it serves as viable post-school options. While heightened aspirations about the kinds of work in which young people wish to engage are welcomed, understandable and encouraged, there now needs to be even greater attention to decision-making about their post-school pathways and intended career destination to ensure their choices are well informed and VET is not precluded.

A consequence of such heightened aspirations is an undermining of the capacity of VET to attract students with the level of capacities (e.g., achievement) for the kinds of technical occupations that enterprises in advanced industrial societies require to provide for the social and economic needs of those societies (Wolf, 2011, 2016). It also weakens the prospects of countries seeking to develop their economic base and move away from reliance of primary production such as mining or petro-chemical sector to establish viable, enduring, sustainable and more environmentally protective economic bases. These issues have also been highlighted in the current era of a pandemic and growing geopolitical tensions which require greater self-reliance by nation states. Countries across the world have been left behind in the provision of health care and their capacities to exercise national sovereignty. The point here is that beyond personal choice, there are important and, potentially, existential risks for nation states in not being able to generate the kinds and ranges of

occupational capacities that can meet their needs. So, all these circumstances warrant substantial responses and ameliorations.

As foreshadowed, a range and an inter-weaving of influences and factors are currently transforming these aspirations into expectations (Clements, 2014), which may be difficult to fulfil. Consequently, there is a need to understand what is driving this change in young people's decision-making to identify how, in the future, it can be informed and in impartial ways so that VET and the occupations it serves can be viewed as viable and worthwhile post-compulsory school options, including at the upper secondary and tertiary level that exist in many European countries. A review of literature identifies factors and processes that inform and shape young people's decision-making about post-school pathways and indicates the complex of institutional factors and personal practices that influences young people's decision-making about post-school pathways (see Billett et al., 2022 in this volume). That review also identifies what might be viewed as being worthwhile, viable and attractive post-school pathways. It also elaborates the complex of personal practices shaping young people's decision-making about post-school pathways and discusses how these can be more effectively mediated in schools, by parents and teachers and by the actions of government, to inform that decision-making so that VET can be considered as a viable post-school option. Personal practices are taken here as what people do and how they make choices and decisions (Billett, 2009). These are shaped by what they know, can do and value. However, whilst delineating institutional factors and personal practices, this is not to set them apart as separate and isolated categories, as they are intertwined and interdependent. The delineation of these factors and practices, however, allows their relationships to be better understood and, potentially, actions taken to mediate their specific contributions to this decision-making. Indeed, effective responses to redressing this issue can best progress through actions that account for the complex of factors that shape young people's decision-making about post-school pathways. And it progresses in ways informed impartially, considered carefully, and supported in proximal interactions and that extend to mediating both the helpful and unhelpful societal suggestions advanced through social institutions such as schools, media which includes diverse and conflicting societal sentiments that project orthodoxies about the standing of occupations. So, it is the mediation of these sentiments albeit suggested proximally or projected by institutional norms, forms and practices that becomes important. For instance, whilst governments encourage young people to participate in VET, other suggestions are that this is not a socially desirable option. The intentional or unintentional guidance provided by parents, teachers and peers can mediate these conflicts in ways that amplify or mute them. It is at this inter-personal level and through interactions with these familiars that perhaps offers the best way to mediate unhelpful societal suggestions and sentiments.

The chapter sets out this case drawing upon the collective contributions to this volume and a wider range of literature that addresses these challenges. Overall, it proposes that as the standing of both, the educational provision of vocational education and the occupations it serves, are premised upon factors being exercised at national and local levels. Consequently, responses to bring about change within them need to be directed at these two levels and that given these comprise distinct zones of influence, this might be a useful starting premise. Accordingly, it is advanced that actions at these two levels (i.e., distally and proximally) are required to bring about these kinds of changes and that there are different approaches and strategies needing to be enacted at both. The chapter commences with a brief rehearsal of the need for actions being undertaken to enhance the standing of VET and its associated occupations. These are discussed in terms of the policy aims and goals intended to be achieved, followed by the curriculum initiatives that are being directed towards assisting impartial advice that achieves those outcomes. Much of this discussion is directed towards providing impartial, comprehensive and targeted advice to young people, and their parents as well as their teachers as these familiars are highly influential in decision-making in which these young people engage. The central concern is to mediate that decision-making in ways through the provision of impartial and informed advice.

Presaged here is the emphasis on this guidance that is largely interpersonal (i.e., between the young person and these familiars). It is they who variously give carriage to or can moderate societal suggestions projected by institutions (e.g., schools, government, media) that represent a less direct or distal guidance. These comprise, at a national level, the preferences generated by societal and cultural sentiments that are suggested through text, media pronouncements and imagery. As Cho and Apple (1998) show, when societal sentiments are given carriage by parents, teachers and peers, governmental efforts to bring about change become very difficult to realise. So, efforts to engage young people in manufacturing work struggled to gain much purchase, except for those young people who had a specific motive for engaging in that work. Conversely, when the suggestion is supported in the community, there is evidence that such changes can be realised. Stalder and Lüthi's (2020) account of young people engaging in degrees that limited their career prospects led to a reform of the educational system that helped maintain the standing of VET in Switzerland because it enjoyed community support. Hence, what might be promoted distally by government (i.e., encouraging young people to engage in VET) needs to be supported and mediated by industry, schools and VET institutions, and given carriage proximally by parents, teachers and other familiars. As depicted in Figure 1, there are distal institutional factors that contribute to societal sentiments about VET and the occupations it serves, and also proximal zones of influence comprising parents, teachers, familiars and community play key roles in influencing and mediating young people's decision-making associated with post-school pathways and bring about change in them. So, it is the mediation of the sentiments by those familiars that engage closely and influence that are crucial to avoid. That is to avoid what Cho and Apple (1998) identified as resisting efforts to enhance occupational status and promote its standing as Stalder and Lüthi (2020) found.

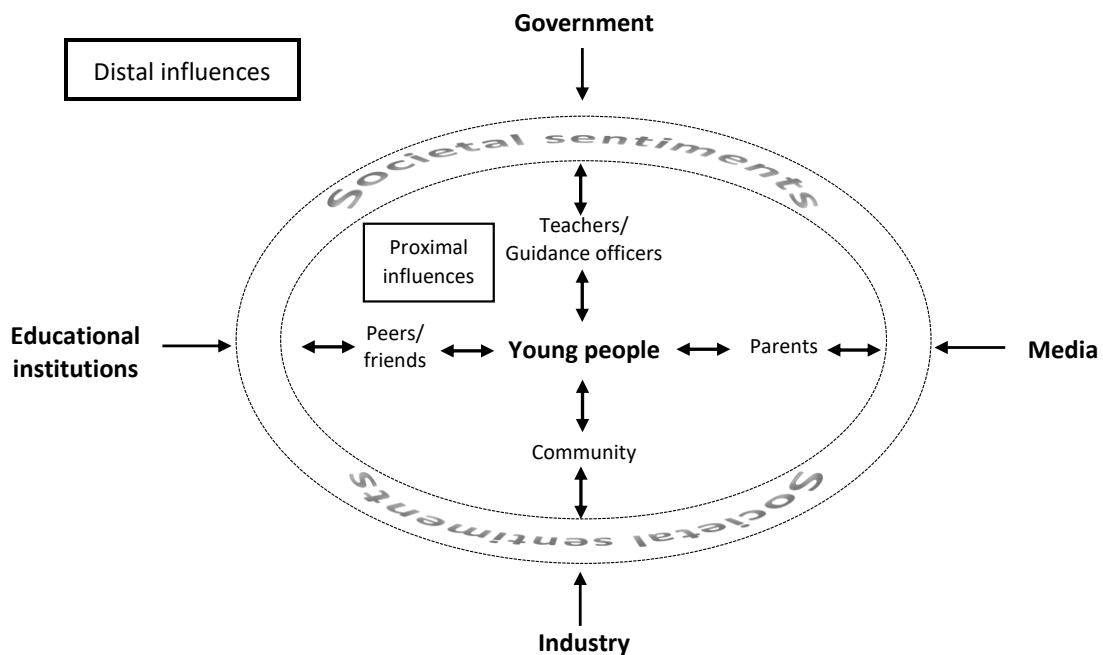


Figure 1. Distal and proximal zones of influence and societal sentiments on VET

It is this set of local and predominantly inter-personal interactions and influences that are likely to be central to bringing about redressing the relative low standing of VET and the occupations it serves.

### Redressing the low standing of VET and the occupations it serves

As reported both here and elsewhere, the societal sentiments and discourses across countries with both developed industries (Cedefop, 2017) and developing economies (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018a)

appear to be quite consistent, in positioning VET as a relatively unattractive educational option either within compulsory schooling or post-schooling option, based in part, but not wholly on the standing of the occupations it serves. There have been a few exceptions, however. In a conference organised by UNESCO in 2017, a representative from Brazil mentioned that VET had a positive status as there are so few publicly-funded places available. Also, in Switzerland, VET is held in relatively high esteem and comprises the default post-school pathway (Stalder & Lüthi, 2020), and the case is also made for Germany (Deissinger, 2022, this volume). Elsewhere, and even in countries that value skilled workers, VET is often viewed as an option for those without the ability to progress to a university education (Cedefop, 2017) and is best undertaken by those whose only option is to use their hands to earn a living (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018a). For instance, French republicanism focuses on merit as evidenced through educational achievement and favouring high levels of certification, for instance from prestigious educational institutions and, principally, universities (Veillard, 2015). Societal sentiment such as these and accompanying discourse that is difficult to negotiate around has implications for the attractiveness of VET (Haybi-Barak & Shoshana, 2020), and how it is positioned as an educational sector and the kind of support it receives both materially and is viewed societally.

Some commentators claim that the case for achieving parity between VET and HE is closed (James-Relly, 2022, this volume). Even if this is correct, a societal discourse that is open to and inclusive of VET is now required for not only the viability of the provision of VET but also for the sense of self of those who work in the sector and those who are VET students as James-Relly (2022) retorts. Noteworthy, Stalder and Lüthi (2020) indicate how personal resources that are central to securing effective job outcomes include individuals' appraisal of their worthiness, effectiveness and capabilities as a person. Persistent societal sentiments that suggest VET and the occupations it serves are of low social standing works against these important resources as Haybi-Barak and Shoshama (2020) and Veillard (2015) report. As noted, French republicanism emphasises the importance of academic merit as measured through the achievement of high levels of educational qualifications and participation in elite institutions at school and university level, and this is entrenched in processes for selecting employees and career advancement. This French societal sentiment works against VET being taken as viable and worthwhile post-schooling educational provision (Veillard (2015, 2022)). In this vein, Stalder and Lüthi (2020) make the point that all too often the standing of VET is measured in terms of student enrolment rate, employer engagement or prestige. Yet, other measures such as those that support positive learning outcomes for young people, including pathways to HE become salient. Here, Aarkrog's (2020) conclusion about institutional level strategies not being sufficient, is very evident. Instead, there needs to be coherent policy goals and initiatives that are enacted systematically to bring about change. Yet, that enactment seems most likely to be potent when it is undertaken at that local level through close or proximal interactions. It is these that ultimately mediates young people's decision-making.

### **Policy goals and initiatives**

Although the low standing of VET and the occupations it serves are global concerns, how it is manifested and/or its impact and potential means of redressal in the form of policy goals and initiatives are likely to be quite country distinct. One key divide is whether it is undertaken largely as a stream within schooling (i.e., compulsory education) or as a post-schooling option in dedicated tertiary education institutions. Even here, the concept of 'schools', their educational purposes, the age range of students and resources are quite distinct across nation states, as are the issues of redressing the relative low standing of VET. This then leads to quite distinct policy goals and initiatives. For instance, in Norway (Hiim, 2020) and Denmark (Aarkrog, 2020), there have been efforts to improve retention in VET programmes that are a common form of post-school education. Hence, initiatives to improve the standing of VET are directed towards improving its quality. In Norway, these include specific VET teacher education programs, curriculum reforms and to align more closely what is taught and experienced in VET programs, for instance, to aligning VET provisions with the requirements of work in that country's workplaces (Hiim, 2020). In Finland, there

is a concern also about addressing the declining numbers of school-leavers progressing directly into VET. A large component of the VET student cohort are adults whose engagement in initial occupational preparation is often engaged with in early adulthood (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020). It follows that a key focus of policy goals in Finland is often associated with the quality of the learning experience and how this can assist students and graduates develop the kinds of capacities that will be effective in workplaces (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020). In Denmark, the response to this kind of problem is on elevating the standing of VET through making entry requirements more demanding and making the institutions and programs more attractive to young people (Aarkrog, 2020). However, the consequence appears to have been a less inclusive provision of education, and one that excludes socially marginalised students, including those from migrant backgrounds. In Spain, initial reforms of VET were directed towards addressing issues of low literacy of those participating in VET institutions (Martínez-Morales & Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2020). Hence, the need to integrate VET provisions with schooling in which the academic curriculum is being enacted there. Later, curriculum initiatives were enacted to make the content and focus less on 'academic' considerations and more on those associated with the requirements of work.

Also, to overcome views that VET is a 'dead-end' pathway, arrangements are being implemented to assist articulation from these programs to university entrance (Billett, 2020). Unlike other countries, participation is not a key policy concern in Switzerland, instead it is the kind and range of employment outcomes for VET graduates (Stalder & Lüthi, 2020). Central among these is the ability to progress to HE leading to introducing VET qualifications with degree level outcomes and achieving work-related outcomes for VET students that are comparable with those who participated directly in HE (Stalder & Lüthi, 2020). These outcomes include comparable levels of salary and measures of work quality (i.e., discretion and collegiate interactions) that make these kinds of employment attractive. The standing of qualifications at the commencement of working life is a key determinant for productive career progression and quality of work (Stalder & Lüthi, 2020). As HE qualifications become common, concerns have grown that VET graduates without tertiary level-degree might be pushed into lower-quality jobs and careers with limited opportunities to learn and advance careers. Stalder and Lüthi's (2022) contribution in this volume partly supports these concerns. They propose that to maintain the high standing of VET, the quality of apprenticeship must be ensured, access to higher and further education and training must be facilitated, and workplaces should offer possibilities for learning, personal growth, and positive career development to all employees—independent of the level of qualifications.

Also, in this volume, Billett and Le (2022) report recommendations of delegates from countries with developing economies. These delegates suggest that single interventions such as those taking place within schools or VET institutions will be unsuccessful without broader engagement by national governments, the community, including employers. This includes seeking to inform and change the perspectives of young people and their parents. Committed and long-term government action is also likely to be required. So, just as the problem of the relatively low standing of VET is a product of a complex of societal and local factors, it can only be addressed by a similar range of initiatives seeking to redress those problems. Similarly, in the Australian investigation reported across a number of chapters in this volume, Billett, Choy, Hodges and Le consulted with schools and policy and practitioner groups to identify strategies to promote the standing of VET. They suggested a range of strategies that might be enacted by VET institutions, schools, and government and business. These strategies are proposed as means by which actions can be taken to promote the image, attractiveness and viability of VET as a worthwhile post-school pathway. They emphasise the important role of government and industry in this process. Schools and VET institutions reportedly do not have the capacity or resources to inform, let alone advise students individually about the range and kinds of occupations and available post-school educational provisions. Moreover, if the VET institutions were to promote these options, there is a risk that this would be seen as institutional marketing, not public education. Therefore, national and local leadership from government and industry is required, to demonstrate, broadcast and champion the significance of

such occupations and the demands for and requirements of skilful work associated with them. As in other countries, there is likely to be a need for industry sector-level initiatives to enhance the attractiveness of VET.

Deissinger (2022) in his contribution to this volume suggests that both the reduced role of the state, the importance of "shared practices" in the public sphere, including chambers, employers and trade unions, the mandatory character of part-time course attendance in the vocational school and, above all, the concept of "skilled occupations" underline the pedagogical legitimization of the German "institution-based approach" in VET, albeit distally. Hence, he points to the shared carriage of the responsibility for and actions associated with legitimating VET as a viable educational pathway. Combining the understanding of the purposes of VET with the elements needed for a successful skills system is a good starting point for policymakers to understand, to resource, and then meaningfully integrate policy into a wider system of education and workforce development, thus giving it genuine standing as James Relly (2022) proposes in this volume. Underpinning this imperative for standing of the VET pathway is the understanding that quality of provision and teaching standards are also inextricably linked to esteem. Consequently, employers, education and training providers, and policy makers must work together to elevate its standing, through being clear about goals, procedures and processes to achieve these outcomes. This requires a long-term strategic approach where a skills economy stands alongside the knowledge economy considering the entire tertiary landscape where skills are developed, the relationship between productivity and the shifting dynamics between skills supply and demand, the changing nature of work, spatial dynamics, and local economic variance. Having a VET pathway that has high standing in society matters because the young people taking that pathway matter. The implications, of course, are wider and include national prosperity, and the ability to be self-reliant, thereby protecting sovereignty. In this regard, and within this volume, Pantea (2022) calls for a more consolidated understanding of the political economy of VET and issues of social justice. Here also, Rintala and Nokelainen (2022) propose that instead of reforms and development projects, long-term development focused on improving quality is needed and achieved by the support of stable funding. Implementing measures to promote the standing of VET is not easy, as it requires finding a balance between different target groups and the varying aims of VET as a promoter of social inclusion and economic growth, and between HE pathways and employment are all initiatives that can guide decision-making through distal means.

### **Curriculum initiatives and practices**

Curriculum initiatives associated with enhancing the status of VET also are likely to be country specific depending upon the kinds of goals that are aspired. For instance, in Norway, curriculum initiatives attempting to make the curriculum more theoretically premised were intended to make it more educationally attractive to young people (Hiim, 2020). Moreover, the structuring of an initial broadly focused set of experiences to address a range of industry sectors rather than specific occupations was an attempt to render the curriculum narrowly on just one occupational field. In Denmark, the initiatives include providing youth-orientated educational environments, transitions from VET to HE, improving the quality of training and provision of workplace experiences (Aarkrog, 2020). In Australia, information strategies are being deployed by both federal and state governments to inform students about occupations and VET in ways intended to promote informed and impartial decision-making about postschool pathways (Billett, Choy & Hodge, 2020). In Spain, a series of reforms were enacted to initially dignify and give greater educational rigour to VET and to make it more relevant to the world of work and occupations it serves (Martínez-Morales & Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2020). Hence, initial reforms were aimed to provide more general education that later was overturned by considerations about modernising the VET provision to make it more occupationally relevant with the guidance of industry stakeholders.

Issues associated with improving pedagogic practices to make students' learning experiences more focused on capacities that will promote their employability including strong conceptual understandings also featured in Finland, Denmark, Norway and Spain. For instance, in attempts to legitimise VET in Norway (Hiim, 2020), an emphasis on improving teaching quality through a more

extended period of preparation has been introduced. Here, there is a specific attempt to address the parity question by providing students with educational experiences that are designed and enacted by occupational experts who are also qualified teachers. The provision of workplace experiences in the curriculum is adopted to enhance the relevance and the provision of authentic work experiences, for instance in Denmark (Aarkrog, 2020). Yet, as with many curriculum initiatives, without actions to identify how to engage young people and their parents at the local level (i.e., proximally), these structures alone may be insufficient. So, whilst governmental action often focuses on enhancing the provision of VET, seeking to align its purposes and processes with the world of work as distal suggestions, unless what is being proposed is going to engage young people and be supported by familiars (e.g. parents and teachers), it may not be very effective (Billett, 2020), hence the need for close guidance by teachers or other familiars that can mediate the various and sometimes conflicting social suggestions through affording informed person-relevant, impartial and fulsome advice. So, whilst governmental action might be top-down, while real and effective change is initiated and has to be supported by people working in the field, that is teachers and trainers.

From the reviews, and following this premise, the empirical evidence provided in this volume suggests that guidance by schools and, in particular, by those who teach in them play a significant role in influencing students' decision-making. This influence is exercised through both every day and specific career development practices, although the nature of information and support can differ. The role of schools in providing information, realistic and personally-focused guidance in decision making, and support to pursue the widest range of options is especially important for low SES students as their parents may have limited knowledge and levels of engagement (Krause et al., 2009). For instance, most Australian students participated in at least one career advice activity during their senior schooling (Rothman & Hillman, 2008). These activities included the distribution of printed textual material (the most common), attendance at talks by tertiary institutions, and individual or group discussions with career advisers. The more activities students participated in the more likely they were to report finding the advice provided as useful. However, Rothman and Hillman (2008) also found that young people who work part-time while at school may have a stronger sense of their career interests and may perceive the worth of school-based career advice differently from those who are not working. In another study, participation in school-based career activities and searching for career information varied between those who aspired to attend university and those who did not (Gore et al., 2015).

In Denmark, a five-day program was introduced into schooling to assist young people make decisions about postschool pathways (Aarkrog, 2020). However, it seems that this is not wholly effective, possibly because the career guidance counsellors were not equipped for the role (Aarkrog, 2020). For students who had decided their occupation, this program did little to change their choice, and for those who have not decided that pathway, it seemed not to be impactful. When appraising the series of reforms in Denmark, Aarkrog (2020) concludes that these initiatives are not sufficient. That is, intentional initiatives that do not engage or help young people, from their perspective, may be fruitless. This can include initiatives that come at the "wrong moment" (too early or too late in the decision-making process) are not sufficient. From our latest research project, we know that decisions-making is an individual process, every young person follows his or her own pace and is at a different stage in certain moments. The problem with school-based initiatives is often that they are standardised – everybody must follow the same programme and has to do the same tasks at the same timepoint. This does not work.

This extends to whether young people see the occupations that VET prepares them for are worthwhile and worthy of engagement.

There are also reported differences in perspectives between students and educational providers about the worth of career development services in Australian schools (Rainey et al., 2008). Providers claimed they delivered a wide range of services (i.e., career education, information, guidance, advice, placement and referral), but students reported that these services mainly focused on print-based information provided remotely and not processes able to accommodate their needs.



Most young people in this study reported a positive view of VET, but improvements in the engagement with broadcasted information about VET were needed. Computer-based sources and experience-based interventions, such as placement and referral were two services that were requested. Noteworthy, in research undertaken ten years later, Galliot (2017) queried the increasing use of online career information and guidance systems in Australia. She notes the use of online resources presupposes that young people possess the agency and capability for problem identification, information searches, the evaluation of alternative solutions, and making rational choices about post-school pathways. She suggested that such resources were more likely to be effective when combined with face-to-face advice that has been echoed elsewhere about the importance of proximal guidance.

Gaylor and Nicol (2016) evaluated an experiential career exploration program by examining Canadian Grades 11 and 12 (i.e., senior secondary) students' motivation and career decision-making self-efficacy. They found that most participants in this program were already intrinsically-motivated about career exploration, but that many of them had concerns about making difficult and seemingly fixed choices about their future careers. While they also found a positive relationship between program completion and career decision-making self-efficacy, they proposed improvements including to customise the process of information and advice by surveying students to identify knowledge gaps and areas of most interest to them. In this volume, Billett et al. (2022) identify a key consideration for close guidance provided by schools is the level of teachers' knowledge of VET. Teachers often base their advice to students, even inadvertently, on their own life experiences, which rarely includes VET in Australia. Yet, students see their teachers as highly influential in career choices. In fairness, teachers often acknowledge no direct experience of VET and an incomplete knowledge of its offerings and enrolment procedures. So, VET institutions themselves can be more pro-active in their links with schools, but schools can also organise familiarisation tours of VET facilities for teachers, as part of teachers' professional development; and equip career advisers and others in the school who take on this role with sufficient knowledge to advise students authentically and individually. Aarkrog (2022) adds, in this volume, that engaged teachers are the most important factor in the training environment and will have an important impact on the students' wellbeing and completion of education, thus consequently for the standing of VET, once more rehearsing the value of proximal guidance.

To address the issue of lack of engagement among a significant proportion of young people, public authorities have sought to make VET more effective in terms of labour market integration and of greater prestige among young people, as captured in the French context by Veillard (2022) in this volume. Among these means, "alternance training", comprising combining periods of training in school and periods of training in the workplace has emerged. Whilst this approach has long been accepted in the German, Austrian, Swiss and Danish system, it is seen as having a specific role to counter a national sentiments that seeks to separate work from education. So it is seen as a way of improving the credibility of training courses with employers and enhancing, their attractiveness to young people. It seems, therefore, that the enhancement of the standing of VET is intimately linked to the upgrading and social desirability of the occupations it serves. Without this, any other measure, including the development of apprenticeships, even if they are a particularly interesting form of training that combines theoretical and practical learning, will have only marginal effects in terms of making these courses more attractive. Hiim (2022) proposes in this volume that a key principle to increase the status and quality of VET is equal opportunities for vocational and academic students in terms of the scope of their interests and levels of their achievement. Another key principle is a holistic organisation of VET where learning and work experience, knowledge, skills, theory and practice are integrated. However, all this needs to be embraced by educational policy and enacted locally in ways that provide an informed basis for decision-making about educational pathways.

It is acknowledged that providing an informed basis is far more than the provision of information. Parents and teachers want their children and students to aspire to achieve at the

highest level, to optimise their potential and to offer them the means and choice of being able to fulfil that potential. This is only fair, just and proper. Yet, it seems that central to achieving these outcomes is the provision of comprehensive and impartial advice locally and through close or proximal guidance with familiars (i.e., parents, teachers and peers). Whilst prestigious professions projected may seem outwardly attractive, they can frustrate access to them, and may not necessarily be aligned with young people's capacities and interests. So, being open, informed and being aware of the challenges and risks as well as the aspirations that can be achieved through diverse pathways seems important, fair and just.

### Informing about VET and its occupations

While many studies provide evidence that the practices of family, particularly parents, and friends are highly influential in decision-making, some caution that this may not always lead to well-informed and personally-appropriate decisions (e.g. Billett, Choy & Hodge, 2020). Also, evidence to the Victorian parliamentary inquiry (2018) raised the possibility that a mismatch between parents' understandings of career options (influenced by their own education and employment experiences) and the realities of the labour market could lead to poor decisions. Australian students from a rural background reported a university-developed career development program as being able to provide information that their family, friends, and local networks could not (McIlveen et al., 2012). Similar concerns were raised in relation to the quality of information available in socio-economically disadvantaged communities (Lamb et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2015). So, localised guidance per se may be influential, but can also be unhelpful if it is not adequately comprehensive and aligned to students' interests, needs and capacities.

Consequently, extensive reliance on parents found in the Bisson and Stubley's (2017) survey raises questions about how well-equipped parents are to offer such advice, especially given the findings of a study (Bedson & Perkins, 2006) that only 11% of some 300 parents surveyed felt prepared enough for such a role and 77% admitted they had insufficient knowledge. Phillips (2012) suggested from US experience that there is a need to re-educate parents about the value of occupations that are not high on the social status scale and about the high level of cognitive and manual skills needed in many contemporary VET-related occupations, a perspective shared by Rose (2004), Crawford (2000) and Sennett (2008). In this volume, Billett et al. (2022) suggest that parents are generally not knowledgeable about VET, nor strongly engaged with schools in career choices. They may also not have considered VET as a post-school option for their child/children either through ignorance of its possibilities or as an increasing preference for university studies. Although this issue sits outside the control of schools, there are actions that could be exercised. For example, VET can be promoted as a worthwhile and viable option from when students first enrol, on the assumption that parents/carers are likely to be most engaged at that point, and continually in every year of high school through newsletters, other school communications with parents, career nights, parent-teacher interviews, etc.

It seems there is already a growing emphasis on informing high school students about post-school pathways in many schooling systems. Yet, it is important to understand the processes and outcomes of these. Sometimes, this emphasis is on selecting courses for the seniors of schooling and, in other instances it is a process that deliberately seeks to assist in forming and making decisions that has implications beyond the senior schooling years. The great risk is that these processes may come to further fuel the expectation that the default post-school option is HE, rather than questioning such an assumption and offering alternatives. These processes are important, as school students are not always well-informed when making decisions about subject selection and the pathways available to them in Australian secondary schools (Dalley-Trim et al., 2008). So, again, that support needs to be comprehensive and impartial as much as possible. Even then, the decision-making may not be particularly focused. These researchers found that the three main reasons given for choosing to participate in VET subjects were that they were: i) 'fun', 'enjoyable' subjects; ii) that the qualifications and VET experience obtained were a link to post-school pathways and

employment, providing a 'head start' for some and a 'back up' for others, and iii) that they offered a 'change of pace' from more intellectually demanding school subjects. The first and third views were problematic and contributing to negative perceptions of VET. Gore et al. (2017) also found that many Australian students lacked clear, accurate and current information about the VET sector. They suggested that schools and/or VET providers recruit a more diverse range of students and ensure that students and their parents/carers have a greater awareness of available VET pathways and destinations. Students' conceptions of those pathways and their destinations are a central factor. All of this emphasises the need for informed guidance at the local level to guide that decision-making, because the broader distal suggestions may be unhelpful.

For instance, Creed, Patton and Hood (2010) compared the career development of work-bound (i.e. moving directly into employment) and VET-bound students, relative to university-bound students in Australia. They found significant differences between the work-bound and university-bound students on career exploration, knowledge of the world of work, knowledge and use of decision-making principles, and career indecision. Significant differences were also found between work-bound and VET-bound students' knowledge of the world of work. There were clear differences between these two groups of students' knowledge and decision-making procedures. Work-bound students were reported as being the least prepared, which may have resulted from a career education in their schools focussing on HE pathways at the expense of those focussing on work and VET. Thus, work-bound students may be making occupational decisions based on insufficient career information, a poor understanding of how labour markets operate, and with limited decision-making skills. That is, the default option has been assumed. The findings of their study suggest a need to make relevant career information and training available to those students contemplating an early end to their education so they can become better informed and more skilled in planning their occupational futures. Again here, the concern is for personalised, localised and impartial advice.

Not the least here is because as with some parents, Australian students were reported as often having outdated perceptions of the VET sector (Gore et al., 2017). They also reported students tending to form an early, but largely uninformed views that university is preferable to VET as a post-school destination, a conclusion also confirmed by Hargreaves and Osborne (2017). These findings suggest that providing positive views of VET is warranted earlier in their schooling than in mid/senior high school. Students were also sometimes confused and even unrealistic about the educational requirements for VET-related occupations (Hargreaves & Osborne, 2017; Gore et al., 2017). Hargreaves and Osborne (2017) concluded that students were motivated by both structured and ad hoc opportunities to experience VET-related occupations, and that gender stereotypes continued to be a strong influence on career choice. Relatedly, in this volume, Billett et al. (2022) suggest that overcoming apathy and a lack of interest on the part of students may only come with having to make informed decisions, even post-school. Yet in the meantime, schools can provide students with links to websites that show examples of VET training and related occupations, invite high-profile VET graduates or celebrities to talk to students about VET as an alternative to university, or provide more personalised career information about VET training and jobs. In this volume also, Aarkrog (2022) suggests that developing young people's ability for making rational and realistic decisions should be prioritised. Again, this outcome cannot be achieved without informed knowledge about VET and the occupations it serves.

As noted, and as evident in the discussion above, achieving changes in societal sentiment, the attitudes of young people, parents, those who teach in schools and familiars within the community will not arise from individual and isolated initiatives alone. Instead, what is required is a systematic approach to bring about this change. As foreshadowed, the factors above influencing young people's decision-making can be delineated into those that exist at national level and those that play out at a local level proximally in shaping their decision-making. In this way, and as foreshadowed, they comprise two distinct zones of influence, those that are more distal and those that are more proximal. In the section below, these two zones are elaborated and then followed by suggestions

about the ways in which initiatives can be undertaken within these two zones of influence to inform young people more comprehensively and impartially about educational and work life pathways.

### **Zones of influence: distal and proximal**

Arising from the reviews advanced within this volume, and the contributions of country specific responses, it is possible to identify sets of factors that shape and can reshape the decision-making process about post-school pathways. As discussed above, these comprise the distal or more personally remote suggestions that are projected by societal institutions such as government, media, educational institution and industry. These are what Searle (1995) refers to as institutional factors – those from and of society. These comprise the basis of what is projected socially and culturally. Beyond these distal suggestions are those projected interpersonally and referred to as close or proximal factors, that reflect personal factors in the form of individuals' personal histories and what they know, can do and value as captured by their personal epistemologies (Billett 2009). Four key sources of advice, guidance and support for young people's decision-making about postschool pathways have been identified in the contributions to this volume. These comprise parents, teachers, peers and the community in which the young person directly engages. Commonly, these all comprise close or proximal forms of guidance, and shaped by their personal experiences and capacities. That is, these are largely exercised inter-personally (i.e., directly between the young person and the familiar). Importantly, it is these proximal sources of information, guidance and support that are most likely to mediate unhelpful and constraining social suggestions such as those that might unfairly view VET pathways and the occupations to which they lead as being undesirable. So, these close sources of guidance are those that can variously amplify or moderate that societal suggestion. This distinction is well understood in the developmental literature on factors shaping human thinking and acting, with proximal engagements and guidance often given great prominence, generally because it is the close guidance in which activities and interactions with others come to shape the construction of knowledge through those experiences.

For the purposes of this chapter and as a means by which actions and strategies for enhancing the standing of VET can progress, these sets of distal and proximal factors are seen as two distinct but interrelated zones of influence, with the proximal shaping but also mediating the distal influences (see Figure 1). The distal influences project societal sentiments through institutions and media and can include institutions of government, schools, vocational education and training institutions and industry including professional associations, unions that express the needs and demands of workplaces, as shown in Figure 2, below. This figure offers a depiction of the distal influences on what constitutes worthwhile work, the standing of occupations, the provision of experiences to learn those occupations and engage in working life and how they are rewarded, which are then either amplified or moderated by proximal sources. So, within this figure are the proximal influences that directly engage with and shape young people's decision-making interpersonally about postal pathways. These include parents, teachers, peers and familiars and the communities in which young people engage. This also can include the kinds of media with which they interact on a personal basis. As noted, perhaps the way forward is for these interpersonal forms of guidance to variously amplify or moderate what is being suggested societally. While acknowledging that there is a role for both distal and proximal contributions to young people's decision-making, the most crucial in bringing about more informed and impartial processes will inevitably be at the proximal level. Hence, beyond attempting to change what is being projected societally, it would be at this level that initiatives to enhance the standing of VET will need to be focused.

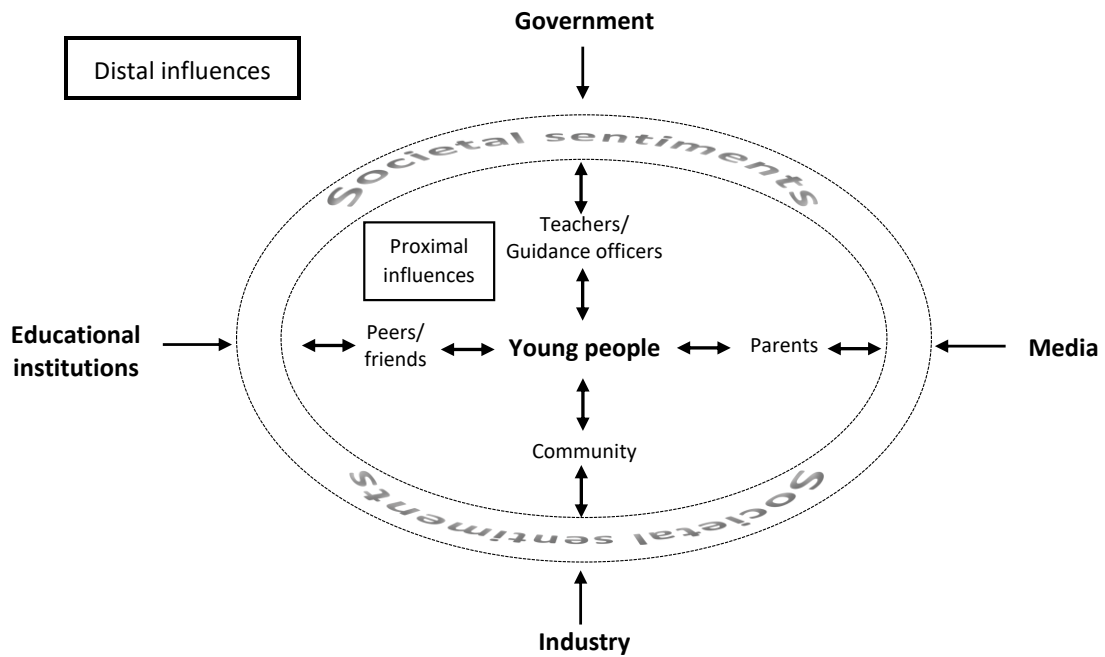
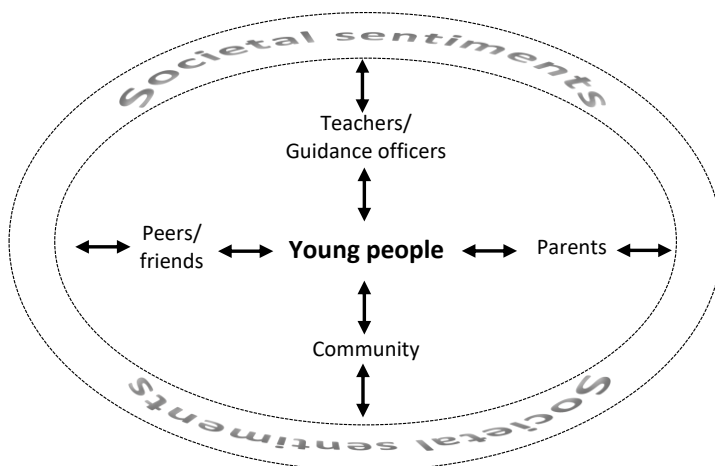


Figure 2. Distal and proximal zones of influence and societal sentiments

It is often at the distal level that policies are made about how to progress nationally and regionally, the kinds and qualities of materials prepared and distributed, structures of educational pathways including tertiary education provisions organised, and what is taken as more or less prestigious forms of work captured through their requirements and accessibility and, sometimes, but not always, through level of remuneration. However, an elaboration of the sources and implications of these zones of influence need to be progressed in ways that identify practical strategies to ameliorate or respond to the task of providing informed and impartial advice.

Figure 2 depicts how actors within these local zones of influence come to shape young people's thinking and acting, in the form of decision-making. It indicates the suggestions that are projected by parents (e.g., aspirations, inferences, openness, various focuses including pragmatic outcomes, finding satisfying or fulfilling their interests), teachers (e.g., the projection of what is seen as being societally worthwhile occupations, what is valued in schools, what reflects their experience), friends (e.g., what constitutes contemporary and localised desirable occupations) and familiars/community that project options, preferences and what is deemed to be societally worthwhile or aligned with the young person's interests (Choy et al., 2022; Hodge et al., 2022).



### Figure 3. *Zone of proximal influence*

Yet, whilst studies consistently report how common and powerful these influences are, they also acknowledge that they are often partially or wholly uninformed, or emphasise what influential others would prefer, rather than what the young persons desire. For instance, as indicated in Choy et al. (2022), teachers may lack understanding and underestimate significantly their shaping of students' decision-making, through the comments they make in day-to-day classroom discussions. Yet, from interviews with these teachers and other accounts (Fuller et al., 2014), it is evident that their views are based mainly on their own personal experience, which rarely extends to engagement in VET, those occupations served by it or even those who participate in it. As also reported in this volume, much the same seems to be the case for parents (Hodge et al., 2022). So, efforts to bring about change within young people's decision-making necessarily needs to include those influencing their decision-making at the local and interpersonal levels. These constitute their parents or caregivers, teachers at school, peers and friends, the community in which they engage. That is, efforts to bring about this change should not just focus on young people alone, but more broadly within the community and specifically directed at parents and teachers who comprise zones of influence that shape and project advice about post-school pathways.

Building upon what has been suggested above about the salience of the localised zones of influence shaping young people's decision-making about post-school pathways, and that beyond focusing on young people themselves there is also a need to inform the participants in these zones. These include parents, teachers, peers and other familiars. That is, these efforts should not be directed towards just young people themselves, but those who shape them.

### **Strategies and approaches to inform decision-making**

Following from what has been proposed above, in the following sections are some suggestions about the ways in which societal institutions can attempt to enhance the standing of VET and the occupations it serves, through the provision of information, support and guidance, followed by the ways in which interpersonal interactions with parents and teachers can likewise assist young people make informed and impartial decisions about post-school pathways.

#### **Institutional support and guidance**

As depicted in Figure 1 and 2, there are zones of influence on young people's decision-making about post-school pathways that might be described as distant or distal that inform and influence societal sentiments and perspectives that shape the available courses and access to them. These represent suggestions that are projected through institutions such as government, educational systems and media. These are rarely singular, often contradictory, and change over time. It is these that are engaged with by young people and variously accepted or rejected by them to various degree, often mediated by inter-personal interactions. Here the concern is what actions can be undertaken to bring about change in how VET is perceived by those who engage closely or proximally with young people. The contributions to this volume suggest these distal influences are largely: government, education institutions, industry and electronic, broadcast and print media. Identified from the contributions made to this volume are the actions that can be played by each of these to influence young people's decision-making. Presented below are suggestions about how these institutions can come to influence distally any decision-making. These suggestions will have a greater or lesser applicability and impact across different nation states, regions and their institutional structures and existing situations and goals. Nevertheless, they stand as having distinct roles in influencing the societal and personal discourses through their zones of influence about post-school pathways.

#### **Government**

Government, at the national, state or regional levels, can encourage a more positive societal sentiment towards VET and the occupations it serves through:

- demonstrating and championing the significance of the range and kinds of occupations and their demands and requirements of skilful work developed through VET;
- emphasising the central role of these occupations in meeting national social and economic goals and the benefits to individuals;
- the creation of VET pathways that allow to continue in higher and further education and continuing training, and offer promising and worthwhile occupational careers in adulthood.
- resourcing VET in ways commensurate with the gravitas and extent of these goals;
- securing the direct involvement of industry, enterprises and professional associations in promoting occupations that are prepared for through VET; and
- advancing policies within schooling, such as performance indicators that are directed towards giving equivalent standing to VET as other post-school options.

### **Education institutions**

There are actions that can be taken by schools and VET institutes to enhance the standing of VET and contribute to the provision of comprehensive and impartial advice about post-school pathways.

#### Schools

In some countries, VET is embedded in compulsory school systems as a distinct pathway from the 'academic' stream, and in other countries it is seen as being primarily a post-school option. There are key roles schools can play here. These include providing impartial and informed advice about post-school pathways, and also promoting VET and the occupations it serves as being viable post-school options. Actions undertaken through schools might incorporate:

- promoting VET as a worthwhile and viable option from when students first enrol, on the assumption that parents/carers are likely to be most engaged at that point;
- continually promoting VET through newsletters, other school communications with parents, career nights, parent-teacher interviews, etc., i.e., on every occasion when there is a meaningful interaction with parents;
- ensuring that senior students have the opportunity to visit VET institutions and engage in some activities within them;
- ensuring that parents are aware of government provided information on VET, e.g., the school could share the link to any digital materials;
- consistently and genuinely celebrating VET students' achievements alongside other student achievements;
- publicly acknowledging the contributions that VET and VET teachers made to a school's curriculum;
- having performance indicators that reward schools' promoting and advancing VET as a viable post-school option;
- adopting policy that VET is regarded by the school as legitimate a choice for post-school pathways as university entry; and
- developing strategies to enhance teachers' and parents' knowledge of VET and parents' engagement with schools to promote VET as a worthwhile and viable post-school option.

#### VET institutions

As has been reported across many contributions to this volume, VET institutions can play a role in providing options that are attractive to young people and institutions that they wish to enrol in and enjoy effective educational experiences. So, some of the specific actions that VET institutions can take to make the VET provision attractive to young people are:

- marketing themselves as widely and effectively as do universities, e.g., career evenings and hosting visits to these institutions in ways that engage students, parents and school teachers;
- having direct and effective communications between staff in the two kinds of institutions;
- promoting their strengths to overcome outmoded views of VET: contemporary courses and innovative teaching and pathways;
- engaging more effectively with potential students and their school advisers; and
- providing more flexible course options and an attractive social environment.

### **Industry**

In many countries, the role of industry is perceived to be disengaged, yet where they are engaged, their influence can be powerful. Consequently, particularly in countries in which industry represents occupational sectors that are addressed through VET, there are key roles that industry representatives, employers, professional bodies, unions of employees can play in informing young people and their parents about the kinds of occupations that VET serves. Employers are often those that train people, are in close contact with students in the workplace, and can advise and guide these young people's decision-making. To achieve these outcomes, those representatives might:

- be more pro-active in being represented at schooling events and sponsoring VET scholarships, apprenticeships and internships;
- organise localised events where parents can share their stories of occupations and career passages with others, and at the same time learn from others about diverse occupations and pathways;
- identify how they can assist young people who are undecided about their post-school pathways and come to understand the requirements for VET; and
- promote and champion the changing face of VET and related occupations and support key teachers and career advisers to attend VET events, to be better informed and enthusiastic about VET.

### **Media**

The print, electronic and broadcast media reach and engage people across ages and across the community. It would be helpful if these media could support vision-making through informed and impartial information, which includes challenging assumptions within society about VET and the occupations it serves. Whilst the media should be independent, it can assist by providing informed and impartial advice and in ways that represent VET and the occupations it serves in authentic ways. This could include:

- recognising the importance of the occupations that are prepared through VET;
- informing about the kinds of work tasks and requirements of those occupations;
- assisting by providing authentic images, accounts and narratives about VET;
- emphasising the important contributions and application VET makes to working people's lives and the public and private sector enterprises that generate nations' goods and services.

What has been proposed here is that these institutions comprising the distal zone of influence shape societal, regional or local sentiments about VET and the occupations it serves. Those influences can variously and sometime contradictorily shape individual and collective contributions to the comprehensiveness and impartiality of advice about occupations and VET. For instance, government efforts to make VET a viable option for post-school pathways and taking action to make these provisions and institutions attractive to young people, are countered by elsewhere promoting greater percentages of university graduates are required. These institutional influences are also found in the kinds and extent of resourcing of VET and approaches taken to secure the kinds of



educational outcomes required to perform occupational tasks and develop a strong sense of self through their occupations.

### **Proximal support and guidance**

Much of the sources of close influence about young people's decision-making about post-school pathways arises, interpersonally, through interactions and direct engagement individuals have when making decisions. These interactions are often with their parents or guardians, teachers, peers and other community members. Importantly, these familiars are influential and can either amplify and reinforce the negative societal sentiment about VET and the occupations it serves or, conversely, work against that and embrace these as being worthwhile post-school pathways. In these ways, they importantly mediate the various influences on young people's decision-making. Hence, they play a key role and are an important focus for any initiatives to secure a more comprehensive and impartial process of informing young people about post-school pathways. As indicated in Figure 2, these familiars are usually found to be: i) parents or guardians, ii) teachers, iii) peers and iv) community members.

### **Parents or guardians**

In nearly all accounts of decision-making associated with post-school pathways, either reported through its contributions or through reviews, parents are key and primary source of advice and influence on young people's decision-making. This is not to say that advice is always followed, but these familiars are influential, nevertheless. However, parents and guardians are by different measures informed about, engaged in and influential in the process of decision-making. Consequently, there are specific roles that they can undertake to assist making this process as comprehensively informed and impartial as possible. However, it is acknowledged that parents, like teachers, may struggle with impartiality because they are directed towards promoting and securing the young people's aspirations. They can assist by:

- being proactive in seeking advice from informed contacts (e.g., career guidance officers, teachers) to learn about different post-school pathways and develop understandings of different career options;
- engaging in dialogic interactions with their children and experiences to elaborate and advance to occupations they are better suited for;
- enacting processes to assist young people in a more informed and impartial deliberation about preferred occupations and post-school pathways;
- encouraging their children to engage in casual employment during schooling to develop a stronger sense of career interests; and
- participating in processes organised by schools and other sources to assist their children make decisions about post-school pathways that are suited to their capacities, needs and ambitions.

### **Teachers**

The evidence suggests that teachers are influential in the decisions that young people make about post-school pathways and perhaps, more so than they realise. Given that, there are some activities that they can undertake to assist in the process of young people making informed and impartial decisions about those pathways, including being open to consider VET and the occupations it serves. For instance, they could:

- become more informed and knowledgeable about the range of post-school pathways and associated career options
- be conscious that by referring to their own experiences and preferences they may be precluding some, and privileging other pathways

- be careful about and monitor comments they make which may be unfounded and have unhelpful connotations about vocational education the occupations it serves
- initiate and engage students in regular conversations about their career interests and preferences
- engage parents in the discussions of career guidance for their children
- participate in activities, such as those provided for students, to visit VET institutions and be informed about a range of occupations, career information, and otherwise be more open and aware of pathways that their students might take.

It is acknowledged that this is but one of the many roles in which teachers need to participate, but they would understand the power and importance of the hidden curriculum, and it seems, in the issue of decision-making about post-school pathways, that teachers are quite prominent here.

## Conclusions

Evident across the literature and in contributions to this volume is that concerted action is required to enhance the standing of VET and the occupations it serves. This action is required to occur at the societal level through the actions of government, education system and industry, including those who employ, through societal sanctioning and legitimising. Moreover, that action needs to be directed to not just young people, but those familiars (i.e., parents, teachers, peers) who intentionally or unintentionally shape their decision-making about post-school pathways interpersonally. What is suggested here is that there is a need to reset and recast societal sentiment about VET and the occupations it serves, through the action and suggestions of key institutions and familiars. It is also proposed that by informing and having initiatives at the local level that seeks to engage and inform those familiars, change at the local level can incrementally reshape societal views about VET and the occupations it serves. That resetting will help establish a societal milieu in which it will be easier and more productive to advance impartial advice about post-school pathways, including VET. Undoubtedly, it would be beyond the scope of such efforts to achieve parity between VET and university, but it is important that the distinctions between what these key pathways have to offer young people are presented in a comprehensive and impartial way. This requires suggestions projected distantly by key societal institutions and also more proximally by the engagement of familiars, principally parents, teachers and peers.

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