Open letter from VALA re VCAL Certification in the pandemic

August, 2020

I write on behalf of the membership and stakeholders of the Victorian Applied Learning Association (VALA) in relation to the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on senior secondary students who are doing the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). My name is Helene Rooks and I am the CEO of VALA.

The Victorian Applied Learning Association (VALA) is the peak organisation in Victoria for educators and practitioners of applied learning across all education sectors. Established in 2005 in response to the rapid growth in Victoria of applied learning in post-compulsory education, the organisation offers leadership, development, and advocacy to educators and practitioners of applied learning. Over the past fifteen years thousands of VCAL teachers have engaged with the organisation through VALA’s professional learning programs. The organisation also regularly engages with a wide range of government and non-government stakeholders in the post compulsory sector throughout Victoria.

Since the start of the pandemic VALA has engaged with its’ membership and stakeholders to discuss and track how the restrictions and changes to Education Department advice on the VCAL has impacted VCAL students, teachers, and their school communities.

To better gauge concerns amongst schools and teachers VALA recently conducted a survey with its’ membership to ascertain the impact of the pandemic on the expected completion rates of the whole or parts of the VCAL qualification.

The survey asked respondents to identify what practical adjustments in the implementation of the VCAL had they, or their school had to make, and the feasibility of their students meeting the VCAL’s requirements under the current Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) guidelines.

The survey received 679 responses in 105 hours. This high rate of response is testament to the urgency of the issues at hand and the commitment of VCAL practitioners to their students.

Overall, the survey indicated that the membership holds the view that senior secondary students completing the VCAL have been overlooked, sidelined, and further marginalised by the messaging and communications from authorities governing the program:

Examples from the survey reflect this concern:

***“****We are concerned that the Year 12 cohort of VCAL students are being disadvantaged due to being virtually ignored in all recent communications, bulletins and formal announcements such as official press conferences. In Victoria, two senior pathways are offered. Some students choose VCE and some choose VCAL. Each of these programs should always be acknowledged. The collective silence in relation to VCAL speaks volumes about the currency of the VCAL program.”*

*“There has not been any recognition of the significant burden placed on VCAL teachers to create innovative ways for the outcomes to be met, more than once, in differing contexts. There has been no allowance for modifications of outcomes, which are difficult to meet, without compromising the integrity of the VCAL program overall.”*

According to the survey respondents, 39% of VCAL students will not complete their certificate this year because of the repeated interruptions to face to face teaching, and the postponement of Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses. That is almost ten thousand VCAL senior secondary students completing their final year without achieving a qualification.

The survey also indicates that 52% of these students have disengaged from education because of the challenges posed by the pandemic environment.

Fairness and equity is a common thread of concern throughout the survey as suggested by the fact that 96.5% of respondents believe there should be a consideration of educational disadvantage for all VCAL students, similar to the consideration given to VCE students; whilst 94.8% hold the view that the VCAL curriculum requirements should be reduced in line with the VCE reduction.

Further to this we recommend that all VCAL students receive ‘Special Consideration of Educational Disadvantage’ as a matter of fairness and equality.

Also. VALA is familiar with the Advice paper the HEADSTART Curriculum & Learning Working Party has tabled with the VCAA. We commend the working party’s effort in succinctly summing up the issues and challenges VCAL and VET students are facing as well as providing sound recommendations to overcome these. While the focus of the VALA survey was predominantly on VCAL and VET and did not cover certain areas included in the **HEAD**START advice paper, VALA strongly supports all nine recommendations and urges authorities to carefully consider these to support VCAL/VET/SBAT students and educators.

As an advocate for the post- compulsory applied learning sector, VALA must also raise concerns about the messaging by government to the community of Victoria about the two senior pathways offered. Restrictions have impacted both VCE and VCAL and are being managed in quite different ways. This has not always been clearly articulated.

To see the VCAL frequently mentioned as an afterthought, is an oversight that reinforces the notion that senior students who elect a VCAL pathway are doing something less worthy educationally to the whole Victorian community.

We cannot endorse such commentary because we value what our membership does in the VCAL with some of our most vulnerable, disenfranchised and disengaged youth.

Here in Victoria we do in fact operate two senior secondary school pathways, that to our mind are necessary in catering for the different interests and capabilities of students transitioning to work or further study.

VALA would like to see government spokesperson’s and authorities acknowledging the VCAL and VCE as both equally valid pathways for senior students by speaking of each in turn when describing the pandemic’s effect on the senior secondary education sector here in Victoria.

Many thanks for your time in considering our concerns, and please note we would welcome any opportunity to work with you to support our students and educators during these challenging times.

With warm regards

Helene Rooks
CEO

helene@vala.asn.