Wurundjeri Country

September 8, 2021

**Open letter regarding the Senior Secondary Certificate Reform**

I write in relation to the Senior Secondary Certificate Reform’s (SSCR) certification and implementation timelines and submit this correspondence on behalf of the Victorian Applied Learning Association’s (VALA) membership and its’ key stakeholders as the organisations’ Chief Executive Officer. My name is Helene Rooks.

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 sixteen years thousands of applied learning educators have engaged with the organisation through VALA’s professional learning programs. The organisation is considered a key stakeholder by a wide range of government and non-government entities in the post compulsory sector throughout Victoria.

The recommendations of the Firth Report, tabled in November 2020, are of particular interest to VALA because significant reforms are proposed to be made to the current senior secondary certificates that will see the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) effectively being absorbed into the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE).

As advocates of applied learning VALA commends the Andrew’s government for its’ renewed focus on applied and vocational education and welcomes the intention to raise the reputation and rigor of applied learning and vocational education in the post compulsory environment. We consider this a ‘once in a generation’ opportunity to make further improvements to Victoria’s education system.

In making our submission, VALA pays respect to and acknowledges the work of the Late Lynne Kosky, whose foresight and leadership in the development and implementation of the VCAL transformed the senior secondary landscape in Victoria.

As you are no doubt aware, Lynne spearheaded post compulsory education reform in the early 2000’s, which oversaw the introduction of the VCAL, a senior secondary qualification that recognised the diversity of student learning modes, needs and vocational objectives.

Since its’ introduction, VCAL has created successful pathways to further education and employment for many thousands of students through educational programs that have celebrated applied learning across a range of educational contexts.

The proposed changes to Victoria’s senior secondary qualifications are significant, commanding careful consideration by all stakeholders of the new qualification’s design and future impact on our students, society, and economy.

VALA questions the pace of change for the development, introduction, and implementation of the certificate.  At the present time consultations regarding the curriculum design, engagement with stakeholders, accreditation with the VRQA, and amendments to legislation have very short timeframes that do not seem to consider the demands the global pandemic is making on educators and other stakeholders.

Over the past 18 months our teaching community have carried our student’s education and wellbeing needs. With no definite end in sight our teachers are overwhelmed and exhausted. Many feel they simply do not have the time or headspace to fully engage in the consultation process.

It is also noted that student consultations on both the certificate and curriculum design have been hampered by the extended periods of remote learning.

We owe it to our current students (and those that follow over the next 2 decades) to get this right and ask that the government pause to consider the ramifications of hastily enacting the reforms for two reasons.

First, the pedagogy of applied learning, the cornerstone of VCAL’s success seems to have become lost in the new proposed curriculum. VALA believes that applied learning should be a significant consideration in the development of the new design, and yet the opportunity for educators to comment on this important underpinning, has been limited by the scope of the online consultations. We would seek that future consultations and reviews better incorporate this important component.

Second, VALA currently holds the view that VCAA’s current proposed structure and content for the new senior secondary qualification has not been sufficiently developed. The proposed new units are no more than additional VCE units. The new units have no focus on vocational specialisation, do not prepare students to transition to the work force or further training and do not cater for those students who prefer an applied learning style of delivery. We contend that the proposed changes will have unintended consequences for example, decline in students completing Year12, poorly prepared students to meet the demands of the 21st century workplace, disengaged and disinterested students. We also emphasise that, instead of expanding, the proposed certificate designs will limit future pathways into higher education and employment.

The proposed curriculum reforms are high risk that cannot be rushed.

We hope that the next year will allow teachers and students to return to the classroom, with fewer lockdowns and a return to some semblance of normality. However, like most things with COVID, we will not know the long-term impact of the past two years on the mental health of students and teachers alike, until the resumption of regular face to face teaching.

Based on the experience of teachers from the start of 2021, 2022 will require an increased and ongoing focus on wellbeing.

We would therefore contend that to expect teachers to prepare for the implementation of a new certificate and curriculum now and into 2022 is an unreasonable imposition.

VALA urges our government to consider an extension of the timeline for both the certification and implementation of the SSCR to allow for better consideration and feedback on the new certificates and curriculum designs.

Furthermore, we contend that this extension should include a pilot program and evaluation period prior to a full implementation.

VALA looks forward to continuing the work on senior secondary reform with the VCAA, the Department of Education and Training and the Andrews’ Government as we seek to provide expert advice and feedback on applied learning and the implementation of a new post compulsory qualification that truly does ensure that no young person is left behind.

Please feel free to contact me at any time if you would like to have a further discussion.

With warm regards

Helene Rooks

Chief Executive Officer

Victorian Applied Learning Association (VALA)

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