



Making it real: The benefits of workplace learning in upper-secondary vocational education and training courses



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ABSTRACT

In OECD countries, 'real world' upper-secondary vocational education and training (VET) programs are used to engage less academically oriented youth in learning, while helping to prepare them for post-school work and/or further education. In general terms, VET programs with high employer involvement, such as apprenticeship schemes, are considered to be superior to classroom-based VET programs that are typically found in many English-speaking countries. In this study, we examine outcomes from a potential 'third way': classroom-based VET with a short-term structured workplace learning component. Using propensity score matching and PISA data linked to information from the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth, we find this model is associated with higher school completion rates and better employment transitions.

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1. Introduction

Youth unemployment in OECD countries has consistently remained around twice the rate of that in the working-age population as a whole over the last two decades. In 2010, 18% of 15–29 year olds who had left school in the OECD area were unemployed, compared to 10% for the working age population as a whole (OECD, 2010a). To deal with youth unemployment, governments around the world have focussed on improving engagement in education, especially for students at risk of dropping out of school and becoming long-term unemployed.¹

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¹ For example, a key objective of the European Commission's 2020 Agenda to revive the European economy is to reduce early school leavers to less than 10% of youth and to ensure at least 40% of 18–24 year olds have a tertiary qualification or equivalent (European Commission, 2011). In the United Kingdom from 2013, youth will be required to remain in education or training until age 18, up from 16. In Australia, the Government has a target of 90% secondary school completion (or equivalent) for 20–24 year olds by 2015.

In English-speaking countries where the focus is on general upper-secondary education, a key measure to improve engagement in school has been to integrate vocational education and training (VET) courses into the upper-secondary school curriculum.² In the main, the training in these VET courses is predominantly classroom rather than workplace based. Understanding the outcomes of these programs and how they vary across different models of provision is important in designing effective youth transition policies.

To meet this end, in this study, we estimate the school and post-school impacts of taking upper-secondary VET subjects in Australia, including the benefits from taking courses with a short, structured workplace learning

² For example, the number of vocational qualifications attained in secondary school (level 1 and 2) in England has increased by around 50-fold between 2003/04 and 2009/10 (Wolf, 2011). In the United States, access to career and technical education in schools is mandated in national legislation (Carl Perkins Act of 1984 and subsequent amendments), with the objective of meeting the needs of disadvantaged communities.

component included within classroom-based programs. Structured workplace learning (also called work-based learning) involves on-the-job training to acquire prescribed job-specific and general skills and contrasts with work experience where the main objective is to familiarise students with work. Studies to date, mainly from the United States, have found generally positive school completion and labour market outcomes for those who take predominantly classroom-based upper-secondary VET courses, relative to those who take only general education courses (Bishop & Mane, 2004; Kang & Bishop, 1989; Meer, 2007). We build on these studies in two important ways. First we examine a larger range of outcomes, including post-school education outcomes to gain a more nuanced picture of the outcomes from school VET programs. Considering impacts on post-school education is important because it sheds light on whether vocational training in school complements or substitutes post-school education. If in-school courses substitute post-school courses, then the benefit of these courses in the upper-secondary school curriculum is diminished, while the opposite is true if they are complements.

The second major contribution of this study is in examining whether including a short, structured workplace learning component in classroom-based upper-secondary VET courses improves student outcomes. In several country reviews, the OECD has recommended greater use of workplace learning in upper-secondary VET courses, see for example country reports for Australia (Hoeckel, Field, Justesen, & Kim, 2008) and the United States (Kis, 2011; Kuczera, 2011). The OECD (2010b) claim that the use of workplace learning helps develop work-relevant technical and general skills that cannot be learnt in the classroom, while providing opportunities for employers and students to connect (OECD, 2010b).

To date, evidence on the benefits of workplace learning is limited to studies that compare outcomes of those who complete an apprenticeship to those who do some form of general study (see Ryan, 2001; Wolter & Ryan, 2011 for reviews). While this evidence is positive, especially in terms of initial employment outcomes, it does not necessarily imply that incorporating workplace learning into classroom-based VET courses should also improve outcomes. First, unlike an apprenticeship, a workplace learning component typically does not involve an employment contract, which means employers may not have the same vested interest to provide quality training. Second, to accommodate the academic demands of a general upper-secondary education curriculum, the amount of time spent in workplace learning is relatively short compared to time spent as part of an apprenticeship.³ Third, time in the workplace may have a disruptive effect on the student's academic performance, especially if it comes at the expense of time in other classes. Fourth, studies on the

benefits from completing an apprenticeship are compared to outcomes from general study and hence do not isolate the effect of workplace learning within a VET course of study. The measured benefits of apprenticeships relative to general study may be due to their vocational nature.

To try and estimate causal impacts of taking upper-secondary VET subjects, including the causal impacts from incorporating workplace learning into classroom-based VET, we use propensity score matching and a rich dataset to control for self-selection bias. Self-selection bias occurs when factors that affect both enrolment into upper-secondary VET subjects and outcomes of interest are uncontrolled for (Bishop & Mane, 2004; Meer, 2007).⁴ The data used are 2003 and 2006 PISA cohorts linked to data from the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2011). LSAY is one of only a handful of longitudinal surveys that can be linked to PISA cohorts. Most important in dealing with selection are available controls for academic performance, education and occupation aspirations and school programs and resources.

Not only are the data novel, but the Australian context is important. Upper-secondary VET programs in Australia, known as 'VET-in-schools' subjects, provide a unique opportunity to examine benefits from incorporating workplace learning into classroom-based VET subjects. VET-in-schools subjects are offered in almost all schools in Australia, and because they count towards national qualifications, students are required to attain minimum job-specific and general skills (known as competencies). Importantly, whether the prescribed minimum skills are attained exclusively in the classroom or in combination with a workplace learning component is up to the VET provider, which in most cases is the school. If workplace learning is not used, minimum skills that require demonstrated performance within a workplace setting, such as, the correct use of equipment; an ability to communicate effectively with clients and safely complete tasks with minimal supervision are attained by simulating workplace conditions in the classroom.

We find that taking an upper-secondary VET subject improves the chances of school completion and the chance of successful transition from school to work. While taking an upper-secondary VET subject is estimated to have no effect on overall enrolments, it is estimated to increase enrolments in post-school VET courses and reduce enrolments in higher education. Importantly, we find that both the benefits to school completion and initial labour market success are greater for classroom-based VET courses that incorporate a workplace learning component. These results add weight to the OECD recommendations for increasing the use of short-term workplace learning in classroom-based VET programs in English-speaking countries.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 sets out the Australian VET-in-schools system,

³ In Australia for example, among classroom-based upper-secondary VET subjects that last a year, those that involve a workplace learning component involve on average 15 days of training in the workplace; compared to at least 96 days of training in the workplace per year for apprentices. Data are from 2003 and 2006 Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth.

⁴ To the extent that lower ability youth are more likely to select into school VET courses, failure to control for selection is likely to lead to an underestimation of the benefits from VET programs (Meer, 2007).

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