

2023 Premier’s Vocational Education in Schools Scholarship

School Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBATs) – What’s in it for me?

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# Introduction

What is not news to anyone in the education sector is that the quality of life is improved for those people who have completed Year 12. When NSW raised the school leaving age from 15 to 17 in 2010, it was seen by many as a means to decrease youth unemployment. While this may have been a consequence of the decision, overall quality of life post-school was the larger aim.

Keeping students in school longer is better for them later in life. But what about students who are disengaged or those who struggle with academic subjects? The disconnect between raising the school-leaving age and supporting those students is real. This project seeks to answer the question: What opportunities are provided through School Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBAT) and Vocational Education and Training (VET)?

# Focus of Study

With identified skills shortages across a number of industries and pending changes to VET in NSW schools, the question frequently asked is: Why do an SBAT when you could simply leave school?

Research for this project consisted of interviews across South Australia, Victoria, NSW, and Queensland. To understand best practice organisations such as Departments of Education, Catholic and Independent school systems, Australian Apprenticeship Support Networks (ASNs), Employers, schools and (where possible) student perspectives regarding issues, success and opportunity for improvement were sought.

# Significant Learning

### State systems

#### South Australia

South Australian education has undergone significant changes over recent years. Utilising a data-informed approach, the Department of Education reviewed Vocational Education and Training Delivered to Secondary Students (VETDSS referred to from here as VET) and more recently, explored Career Education in Secondary Schools.

“The biggest VET program that we were running across the state was Certificate III in Fitness. It was being funded and the issue was, when we looked at job outcomes … we were getting about a 1.5% employment outcome.” – Dennis, 2023

The VET review looked at Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and VET offerings from a quality viewpoint, as well as value for money and post-school employment outcomes. Employer feedback triggered reforms to VET to ensure that courses delivered were robust and that they filtered students into 28 identified skills pathways known as Flexible Industry Pathways (FIPs). This creates a ‘pipeline of young workers for industry’. The idea is that students studying VET commit to a VET pathway rather than an academic pathway, and the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) is then built around the student.

Schools were no longer allowed to deliver VET and a list of Department approved RTOs has been created.

#### Victoria

In 2019 the Victorian Department of Education trialled a program called Head Start to lift the quality of SBATs in the state. Head Start provided support for students from start to finish, including matching students with employers. The program has seen student apprenticeship completion rates increase from 50% to 70%. In addition, schools are creating better industry connections and knowledge through their partnerships with Head Start staff.

The subsequent Firth Review resulted in the development of the Victorian Certificate of Education Vocational Major (VCE VM) pathway which allows students to complete their VCE with a combination of academic and applied subjects, alongside a VET course. The recommendations included assigning a set number of days for the completion of SBATs to more closely align with other states.

“It will just mean that students that are doing vocational learning have the same level of recognition as the VCE student doing an academic pathway with no Vocational Learning. Schools will be more equipped to accommodate students with a Vocational Pathway.” – Gauci, 2023

#### Queensland

Queensland holds the largest number of SBATs in the country due in part to Government support and length of contracts.

The Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) structure is similar to the SACE, with students completing a number of compulsory subjects. SBATs in Queensland must impact on the student’s school timetable and are managed independently of the school through the Department of Education, Small Business and Training (DESBT).

All RTOs delivering training for an SBAT must be external to the school to attract government funding. The diverse range of RTOs in Queensland means that students may attend Queensland TAFE, onsite at an RTO, or RTOs may deliver training face-to-face in the workplace or even fit into the school timetable.

Senior Education and Training (SET) planning is integrated into Queensland schools for Year 10 students across sectors. This allows schools to work with students to review career aspirations and plan accordingly for senior schooling. There is currently a push to move this to Year 9.

### Comparisons

#### Senior Secondary Certificates

Each of the Senior Secondary Certificates, SACE (SA), VCE (Vic) and QCE (Qld), have undergone significant change over recent years to recognise and support non-academic pathways.

The flexible SACE consists of four compulsory subjects, including English and Mathematics. Students need 200 credits to achieve their SACE. Year 10 students can commence courses which contribute towards their SACE. If an SBAT student completes their compulsory units in Year 11 they will be able to undertake additional work days in Year 12 while still maintaining their connection to their friends and support of the school.

VET subjects contribute to the SACE, additionally skill clusters from a training package can also contribute. For example, if a student studies food handling with coffee skills, without completing a Hospitality Certificate, the units will contribute to the SACE.

Victoria recently commenced the VCE VM on Firth’s recommendation, aimed at overcoming the poor standing non-academic pathways have held previously. Students completing the VCE VM will undertake a VET course, alongside a range of academic and applied subjects. One negative raised about the model is that there is still no VCE pathway for students who are unable to complete a VET course.

Queensland’s system has similarities to South Australia. Alongside compulsory units, students need to complete courses totaling 20 units. If undertaken with their compulsories, a Cert III qualification will fulfill a student’s unit requirements. The change from OP to the ATAR system in Queensland has meant that applied subjects are recognised, so students will achieve a QCE and staying to completion gains meaning. While students have until they are 25 to complete the QCE, school Principals are measured on their QCE completions.

#### Measures of success

Successful SBATs rely on creating appropriate pathways and success is measured differently across the states.

South Australia tries to remain flexible, limiting barriers to pathways. While in Queensland, DESBT takes success personally. Overseeing all contracts, whether full-time, part-time or school-based, actively visiting employers to ensure scope of works is appropriate and employees are working well. This is successful considering there are over 27000 apprentice and trainee contracts in the metro area, of which close to 2000 are school-based.

Victorian success is evident in funding for the Head Start program being extended across the state. The initial trial’s goal of 1700 SBATs by June 2022 was achieved by March and has pushed out to 2500 SBATs in the program currently. This model provides wrap around support for students and employers to maximise successful outcomes.

#### Funding

South Australian reforms focus on Return On Investment for VET offerings. Literacy and Numeracy testing has been introduced prior to commencing funded VET in order to improve completion rates. Limitations of this testing, in addition to offering only 28 funded VET options, restrict the exact group of students who need to access it according to Independent and Catholic systems.

SA recognises that undertaking VET creates more work for schools and maintains funding for students leaving classes to undertake SBATs. Additionally, they provide extra funding to Government schools for students studying VET. Alternately, Victorian funding is tied to class numbers. Leaving a Cert II to undertake a Cert III SBAT means the school loses funding for the Cert II class, disincentivising schools from encouraging SBATs.

Queensland utilises user choice funding for traineeships and apprenticeships. Using their funding to undertake an SBAT may impact on a student’s future training options. People only have access to two rounds of funding, so Senior Education and Training (SET) planning in Year 10 is very important.

#### Career Counselling

SET planning is a common feature across the three states. Queensland has this in place across sectors and South Australia is currently implementing a Career Development Blueprint across the state’s Government schools.

Catholic Education Brisbane Metro implemented mapped 7 to 12 Career Education and created opportunities by linking with DESBT to expose students to SBATs in developing projects in their local area. The focus of the Careers program is to give every pathway a fair go.

#### Timetable

Timetabling at schools poses a number of issues. ATAR students are typically discouraged from undertaking an SBAT because losing 2-3 days each week to work and study VET is difficult to catch up. Rigid timetables where, for example, senior classes are blocked together, can impact the student who may continually miss important subject specific learning due to requirements for VET courses. Where timetables aren’t blocked by subject it is easier to adjust a student’s classes to accommodate work and VET.

In Queensland SBATs have to have some impact on the school timetable, this could be work days or training but there is flexibility. Schools can use VET training or early departure from school to meet this requirement.

In some schools interviewed, up to 50% of students might be out one day per week for VET training. This is challenging for teachers. Some schools block their VET day to minimise the disruption of VET and SBATs, but this is limiting for employers and RTOs who may not be capable of fitting into a school’s timeframe.

#### Days

Employers in Victoria requested more days on the job as a result of skills fade, complaining that students attend one day and have forgotten what they learned the previous week. This results in their VET training running ahead of their actual workplace skills development. Head Start aimed to overcome this by embedding two days per week in the workplace and working with RTOs to structure training appropriately to address this issue.

With no minimum number of days set in Victoria, the requirement for SBATs is that students are in employment and training for 13 hours per week on average over 4 months. Typically composed of 7 hours of work and 6 hours of structured training in a week. Head Start encourages employers and schools to undertake a gradually increasing number of days in the workplace to build skills.

In Queensland, an advantage for students is that SBATs can be completed in one year. This means a student can complete their SBAT in Year 11 and pursue an ATAR pathway in 12, or pick up the SBAT in 12 and gain employment leading into graduation. Qld Tafe raises the issue that students completing these qualifications in a traineeship are not at the same industry standard as someone working full time.

#### Vet Delivery

The most common model of VET delivery observed in South Australia is an offsite RTO, a method mirrored in Government schools across each of the states. This typically involves missing a full day of school, a challenging option for ATAR students as most students undertaking an SBAT will miss at least two days of school per week. Missing double lessons adds significant pressure to students undertaking VET.

One school overcame the issue innovatively by offering a number of popular VET courses outside school hours from 4pm to 7pm. This option requires a flexible arrangement for the staff member supervising, or an offsite location. In Queensland, a range of private RTOs offer flexible delivery, which can be delivered at school or even within the timetable.

A further issue with externally delivered VET is that trainers are not teachers. The adult learning environment provided with VET can be daunting for young students and highlighted, in some sectors, as a contributing factor in high attrition rates. One Technical College’s Director, who is also a trainer, works with VET trainers to become better at delivering to school age students, resulting in higher completion rates.

#### Work Experience

Work placement is not compulsory for VET students outside NSW (with exceptions for Plumbing and Electrical), placements provide a valuable insight into whether a particular pathway is appropriate for students. Many schools do not have compulsory work experience in Year 10, but it is noted by most as pivotal in gaining SBATs and making an informed decision.

OECD research highlights the importance of career readiness and work experience. Finding a fit is as important to the success of SBATs for the employer as it is for the student. Regardless of how talented or skilled a student is, if they don’t ‘gel’ in the workplace they won’t stay.

#### Commencement

South Australian students can commence their SBAT anywhere from Year 10 through to Year 12. If their compulsory SACE units are complete, they may be eligible to work up to 4 days per week while maintaining their connection with the school.

Victoria commence SBATs from Year 10 onwards, as does Queensland. However, in Queensland, students may make a case for Year 9 commencement, which DESBT will review and assess on an individual basis. As SBATs in Queensland are managed outside of the school by DESBT, an SBAT can commence within 2 weeks of finishing Year 12 because it will automatically roll over into full time employment post school.

#### Flexibility

In terms of flexible delivery, many pathways exist. Catholic Ed SA instructed their Principals to be more flexible with timetables for SBATs, stating that one day per week is not a good fit for employers.

One South Australian school structured students on SBAT pathways into one school day per week, a strategy that both employers and parents are pleased with. Students maintain their connection with school and are in the workplace and VET training on the remaining days. While Queensland is predominantly structured as one work day per week, a Catholic Metro school is trialling 2 days. Head Start Victoria are working with schools and employers to gradually build work days from one in Year 10 to 3 days in Year 12. Depending on the qualification, other students are attending school full time and working weekends or outside school hours. This is particularly useful in Hospitality and Tourism where peak hours may fall outside school times.

Course offerings differ vastly across the states, typically commencing at a Certificate III qualification for SBATs. In Queensland, it is possible to undertake a Cert IV or Diploma in conjunction with your QCE, with Diplomas growing from 9% to 11% over the last two years. While the advantages of this opportunity include direct access to university entry with ATAR equivalents, critics suggest that student maturity and comprehension of complex materials may be lacking.

Queensland have some restrictions in terms of days required for different qualifications of the same level. Hospitality is considered a more complex course and therefore requires 100 days. Employers saw this as an issue which was losing them employees. Students expressing their frustration at remaining on a trainee wage for longer, meaning that they were completing the same work as others and could be paid more in unqualified roles. The Industry Advisory Body made changes to the Business Certificate so that it could include some Hospitality units while still meeting the needs of business. This reduced the number of days required and helped with employee retention, also accounting for the significant difference in traineeship numbers compared to apprenticeships in Queensland as the majority of SBATs are in Hospitality.

### Benefits

#### Early Pipeline

A significant benefit identified in SBATs is the early employment pipeline they provide. Early pipelines into employment pathways are recognised by big business, governments, and across sectors. Government (SA) and school systems (Cath Ed SA & Cath Ed BM) identify SBATs as integral to future workforce planning. They noted in Education for example, a student undertaking Education Support at school gains skills and experience in the classroom through an SBAT, thus determining whether this is their pathway, while also providing skills to enable work while studying at University.

In addition to the skills development and exposure to industry SBATs provide, exposure to industry jargon puts students ahead of their peers. While undertaking a Health Services SBAT in Nursing, a student was required to learn specific industry terminology. Moving on to tertiary Nursing studies post-school, this provided a distinct advantage over classmates trying to assimilate course content and language simultaneously.

#### Head Start Program

Victoria’s Head Start program provides a well-structured platform for student success through SBATs, commencing with work trials to assess a student’s suitability for a job (which can be paid work experience in Victoria). The Head Start team assess student’s work readiness, carefully matching students and employers.

A series of questions helps to determine the student’s readiness to undertake an SBAT, supporting students and parents throughout the process and maintaining connection with the employer, Head Start have achieved a 17% higher completion rate. It is important to note, not all students who are put forward will be selected to participate in the program.

Traditionally in Victoria, SBATs were made up of 75% traineeships. Head Start has reversed this weighting. In Victoria GTO’s and Labour Hire companies were utilising Federal Government Funding to gain cheap labour and supplement their workforces. These SBATs often had little to do with a student’s career plan and, while still possible, are not the aim of Head Start.

### Issues

Some schools utilise SBATs as a ‘rescue package’ due to their flexibility. While they can contribute to Senior School Certificate completion, failing to have appropriate career planning attached undermines the program. Additionally, schools have used this pathway to market to ‘naughty kids’. This is a recipe for setting students up to fail, resulting in poor completion rates.

Appropriate career planning is vital to the success of SBATs and student maturity was raised as an impediment numerous times. In terms of course content, it can be difficult for young people to fully understand their responsibilities and their duty of care.

However, it is important not to use this as a reason to discourage students from undertaking SBATs. Those who remain connected to school while completing an SBAT often bring the maturity gained from the workplace back to school and can be a positive influence on other students.

Lack of driving ability was also a recurring theme, putting an additional strain on families or the employer, which is particularly felt in country areas.  Licenced apprentices are often called upon to collect additional materials or make their way to various worksites. In one example the nearest RTO, which required weekly attendance, was an hour drive each way.

The traditional pathway of leaving school to undertake an apprenticeship has a number of weaknesses. Only 66% of students who have left school to undertake an apprenticeship will complete the first two years of their apprenticeship. Overall completion rates are at 50% nationally, so half of these apprentices will have no SSC, no qualification and their likelihood for future prosperity is greatly diminished. Reintroducing or adding a subject if an SBAT collapses is far less drastic because the student is still within the educational setting.

With SBATs across school sectors, ASN’s and Employers both comment that lack of uniformity is an issue. Systems, support and funding are all different depending on where a student attends school. One frustrated employer said “I don’t care where they go to school…[SBATs] are supporting our business” Gebauer, 2023. DESBT undertakes a review of best practice each year and, as the exception, provides advice and support across sectors.

### Opportunities

Head Start and DESBT provide the greatest opportunity from a system viewpoint. DESBT contact employers when contracts are transitioning, asking about potential future SBATs? Then they offer contacts from local schools for the employer to reach out to. In addition, traineeship qualifications run until the end of November which opens up opportunities for Christmas work, or to move directly into full-time employment. This allows employers to train and retain more effectively.

“Our role is to encourage schools to take up [SBAT]s. Dealing with employers and educating them to take them on.” Dickinson, 2023

An issue raised about the Queensland model and addressed by Head Start, results from the school not signing the SBAT contract. The connection with the school is limited. Support from the school for SBATs can mean the difference between students completing their apprenticeship and dropping out.

As an adolescent, maintaining connection to school can assist with the development of maturity through an age-appropriate, supportive, and familiar environment allowing the student to achieve the same milestones as their peers, such as graduation. An SBAT provides a bridge between the school and the Adult environment.

Catholic Education Brisbane Metro sought to improve this transition further through the implementation of an Industry Liaison Officer (ILO) who attends signup, tracks the RTO and work hours, to ensure students achieve the required QCE hours.

### Employers

The main concerns identified by employers revolve around lack of time with students, with many suggesting that contrary to full time apprentices, SBAT students attending the workplace one day per week suffer ‘learning fade’ and often do not see a job from start to finish. The additional 25% loading paid to SBATs can also be a deal breaker for some employers.

It needs to be remembered that first-year apprentices aren’t productive, they don’t have skills on the tools, understand the workplace dynamic and they cost money. Employers can’t afford for them to quit, because that costs them more finding and retraining another apprentice. However, with national apprenticeship completion rates hovering around 50% there are some opportunities in SBATs.

Promoting SBATs to employers by highlighting the valuable industry connection opportunities and the benefits in only needing to provide one to two days of work per week for first year apprentices is an effective strategy being implemented by one interviewee. With careful planning for effective skill development, costs are reduced, students maintain a valuable connection with school, increased maturity and work readiness, resulting in improvements in completion rates.

In addition, rather than ‘falling into a job’ after school, students choose to complete an SBAT in their field of interest. As one Victorian employer mentioned ‘This industry has a lot of people fall into it when they need a job. By taking students as school based I get good applicants and I can train them our way.” Paul, 2023

Similarly, a Queensland employer stated SBATs are an integral component of their recruitment and succession planning. Over 60% of staff in the business have come from SBATs. Most staff who are retained post SBAT will average 5 years with the company.

As part of their data-informed planning, Head Start employer feedback indicated that 90% of employers said that SBATs either increased productivity or had a neutral impact in the workplace. It was consistently seen as a beneficial and cost-effective way of attracting new staff into the business.

# Conclusion

Increasing the flexibility of SBATs as a pathway is the major recommendation from this research. Schools need to be able to increase their flexibility to increase the number of days on the job as an apprentice’s skills increase, thus improving the level of skill at completion.

Cross-sector uniformity is essential for success. Modelled on Headstart with the support of NSW Training Services, cross-sector uniformity of SBATs would be of benefit to the NSW employment sector. Sharing best practice, such as Head Start’s wrap around support and DESBT’s employer relationships across sectors serves to benefit all students, while providing a future workforce to meet current workforce shortages as well as future needs.

With traineeships, a reduction in the number of days for completion so that a student is able to complete in one year, will open up opportunities with SBATs. Students will be able to complete an SBAT in either senior year, either pursuing an ATAR if they start earlier or starting later and using the SBAT as a lead-in to post-school employment. Apprenticeships continue after school, so commencing later would also pose opportunities, while maintaining the benefits of school connection.

Schools must offer options beyond those allowed under the current HSC model. For example, allowing the option of Cert IV and Diploma courses, thus meeting industry needs and allaying parent fears by providing alternative pathways to university. Completing core HSC requirements in one year would open opportunities with timetabling. Schools could create an SBAT class which utilises project-based learning to better cater to students when missing two or more days a week for their SBAT. Recognising clusters of units from VET packages towards a student’s HSC or creating additional Board Developed Courses with no exam, yet contribute to HSC units, would benefit all non-ATAR students, but be of particular use to SBAT students.

Ideally, uniformity across the states is also important. Uniformity would benefit students close to the border both during and after school. As SBATs, this would open up opportunities in border towns and support students on a level playing field. For industry, SBATs are not uniform and this may cause issues of experience and qualifications in interstate employees.

Whilst many parents whose children are undertaking SBATs comment on the positive difference in their child upon embarking on an SBAT, there is still a large parent population who do not understand or recognise the many pathways for success. If SBATs are to grow, ongoing parental education in successful alternative pathway options is essential.

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