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RESEARCH & ENGAGEMENT

Drivers of student participation in, and completion of, vocational education and training (VET)

Qualitative Findings

Background

- There has been a proliferation of private and non-government providers in the VET market, historically dominated by TAFE institutes.
- NSW recorded lower participation rates in VET compared to Victoria and Australia nationwide across all age groups in 2014. Completion rates have also been declining.
- The NSW Skills Board wished to understand how people make decisions to participate in VET and how this affects completion.
- Previous research (including the literature review component of this research) has identified multiple factors, in particular relating to demographic factors, parental and peer influences, schools, geographic factors, social influences and “critical events and disruptions”.
- It was felt that further research was needed on the decision making process, to obtain a comprehensive understanding of participation in and completion of VET courses.

Objectives

The project objectives were to identify:

- Relevant factors influencing a student's decision to participate in VET (and how these affect completion);
- Factors that influence a student's decision to complete VET.

The outcomes will inform the development of policy interventions to improve participation and completion rates.

Research Design

This study is **Phase 2** of a three phased project to investigate drivers of student participation, completion and non-completion in VET courses.

Phase 1: Desktop research

This involved a literature review of relevant past research from both national and international jurisdictions (a separate report has been provided on this component).

Phase 2: Qualitative Research

Involving groups and depth interviews amongst considerers, current and past VET students (this presentation).

Phase 3: Quantitative Research

An online survey of n=1000 students.

Research Design (Phase 2)

	Certificate I & II	Certificate III	Certificate IV, Diploma and AD	Apprenticeships/ Trainees	ATSI	TOTAL
Completed VET (TAFE and private)	3x MG/ 6x D	3x MG/ 6x D	3x MG/ 6x D	3x MG/ 6x D	1x MG	**13x MG/24x D**
Did not complete VET (TAFE and private)	2x MG/ 6x D/ 1x FS	3xMG/ 6x D/ 1x FS	4x MG/ 6x D/ 1x FS	3xMG/ 6x D/ 1x FS	1x MG	**13 x MG 24 x D 4 x FS**
Currently doing VET (TAFE and private)	2x MG/ 2x D 1x FS	2x MG/ 2x D 1x FS	2x MG/ 2x D 1x FS	2x MG/ 2x D 1x FS		**8 x MG 8 x D 4 x FS**
Considering doing VET (TAFE and private)	2x MG 2x D 2x FS	2x MG 2x D 2x FS	2x MG 2x D 2x FS	2x MG 2x D 2x FS		**8x MG 8x D 8x FS**
TOTAL	**10x MG 16x D 4x FS**	**10x MG 16x D 4x FS**	**10x MG 16x D 4x FS**	**10x MG 16x D 4x FS**	**2x MG**	**42 x MG 64 x D 16 x FS**

MG = Mini-group (4-6 participants)
D = Depth interview
FS = Family sessions (conducted with 16-24 year olds and their parent(s)).

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Research Design

The mini-groups and depths were:

- a mix of male and female
- a mix of ages
- a mix of socio-economic backgrounds
- included ATSI and CALD
- a mix of school leavers and career builders
- family sessions were amongst 16-24 year olds and their parents
- from a mix of courses, and RTO's
- conducted in Sydney, Griffith, Maitland, Dubbo and Wagga

Numbers can be provided in the final report.

Contextual Introduction

- There was a difficulty recruiting students who had not completed Certificates I and II outside of school (there were many who had not completed VETis) and a higher incidence than expected of degree level students doing or considering VET courses.

- The vast majority of the hypotheses identified in the desk research phase were re-affirmed within this component of research (and will not be dwelt on in this presentation). The extent of these hypotheses can be measured in the quantitative phase.

- Within the qualitative phase, we found that there was a great deal of overlap between the completers, non-completers, considerers and currents. It was theoretically possible for one person to fit all four (and many had not completed one course but had either completed another, were currently doing another or considering another).

- This suggests that there are not always clear differences **between people** who complete and do not complete VET courses, rather there are differences in the **motivations to participate in and reasons for not completing specific courses at that particular time (and often more than one reason)**.

Contextual Introduction

- In that sense, we have focussed more within these findings on a deeper level of analysis that looks at student **attitudes**, underlying **motivations** and **barriers** to participation and completion.

- It emerged that students tended to fall into '**mindset**' segments which were based on their motivations to study, which then influenced completion.

- We have described these segments on the following pages in order to help structure the findings and illustrate the issues that need addressing to encourage completion. The segments are not mutually exclusive, and people can move between segments throughout their lives.

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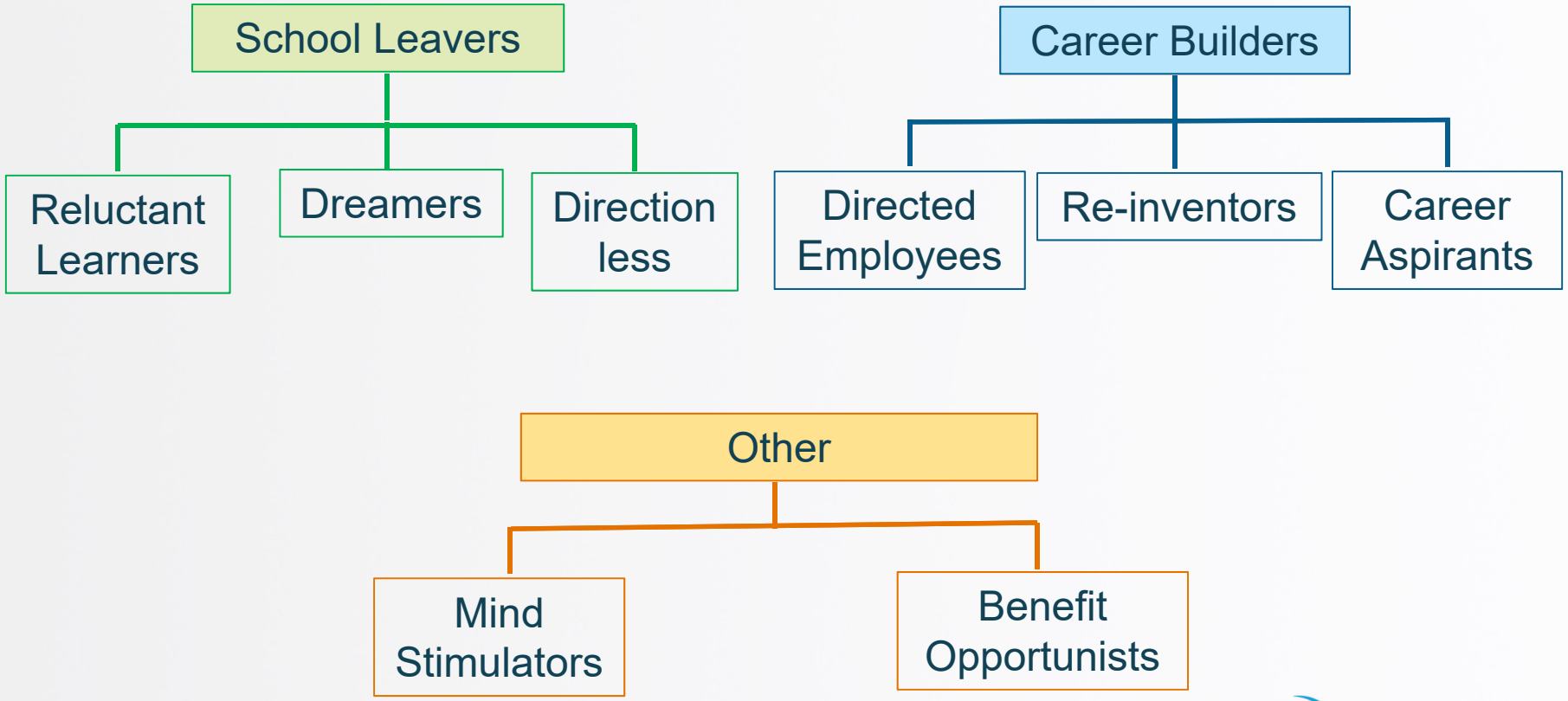
VET Student Segmentation

VET students are not homogenous

There were a number of different types of students that seemed to fall into several broad categories or segments.



Further education is seen as a ‘necessary evil’

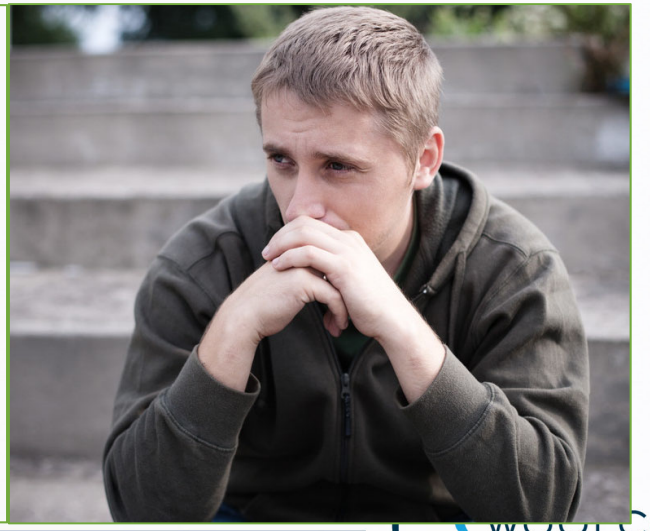
School Leavers – Reluctant Learners

Profile

- Young, limited life experience, and less academic.
- More often male.
- More often considering a trade.
- Many had not liked school, lacked motivation, did not value achievement/academic performance as much as others.

Motivations

- The need for safety/security - training and education were seen as necessary to get a job or to keep their apprenticeship.
    - Some saw it as a barrier (almost a necessary evil) to push through in order to get the qualification.
- The certificate/ piece of paper at the end was their focus, in order to earn a better wage.



Many struggle academically and financially

School Leavers – Reluctant Learners

Barriers to completion

- Less likely to complete than some other segments.
- For apprentices in particular, issues arise as a barrier to completion such as:
  - Pay so low during apprenticeship that it makes it difficult to live.
  - Employer attitudes.
- Difficulty of course and lack of study skills.
- Lack of maturity.

Overcoming barriers to completion

- More support for employers who take on apprentices.
- TAFE to support young school leavers more.
- Flexibility/assistance when employers fail to help them to complete.
- Mentor programmes, extra tutoring, personal support.
- Offer study skills guidance and support.
- Ensure courses are practical/enjoyable.

"You only get paid $7.50 an hour and then when you qualify, they get rid of you because you are too expensive"

Case Study

Joe is a 19 year old male living in Wagga Wagga. He completed Year 10 at the local high school and is now doing an apprenticeship in plastering with a local plastering company.

He is studying Cert III Plastering (a 3 year course) and travels to Albury TAFE once a week – about 1 ½ hours away by car.

He doesn't really enjoy plastering and does not want to be a plasterer so he is only doing the course to 'get a trade behind him', because his parents thought it would be a good idea and it would make him more employable in a town like Wagga. He laughs at the idea of being a plasterer forever and his real passion is fishing! He wants to own a fishing boat in Queensland one day and be a commercial fisherman.

He chose plastering simply because the company were offering an apprenticeship and he did not think it would require too much study. He doesn't consider himself a good student and did not enjoy schoolwork.

He finds his TAFE days 'a bit of a bludge' as he travels there with some mates who are also doing the course and it's better than a day at work. He describes the course as a bit boring and while his teacher seems to be knowledgeable he is not very good at controlling the behaviour of some of the younger boys in the class.

"It's pretty boring (plastering), its just to get a trade behind me….. Dad's a tradie but I don't want to be a builder like him"

Driven by passion

School Leavers - Dreamers

Profile:

- Fewer school leavers in this segment than in the 'reluctant' and 'directionless' segments.
- Passions were more likely to be in the creative area or follow family traditions (apprenticeships).

Motivations/needs

- Self-expression.
- Genuinely wanted to obtain skills in order to get into their chosen profession or to pursue a dream/or a passion (e.g. photography, chef, design, carpentry, electrician).
- Feel like they are on the right path and tended to be enthusiastic about getting into their career upon completion of the course.

Barriers to completion are often out of their control

School Leavers - Dreamers

Barriers to completion

- Overall they are more likely to complete than the other segments.
- However, the course not covering what they expected/wanted can lead to non-completion.
- Difficulty of the course.
- Others being disruptive on the course.
- Losing apprenticeship/employer going bust.
- Unexpected life events e.g. pregnancy, moving location, illness.

Overcoming the barriers:

- Offering a one page course outline showing course content, any practical components and expected time needed to put into it.
- Support through difficult elements of the course.
- Teachers managing the disruptive students better.
- Flexibility and support for unexpected life events.

Case Study

Kim is 20 and currently doing an accounting degree at UTS in Sydney.

However, she does not enjoy the course and would really love to do something more creative and become a hairdresser.

She went to a private school where the careers advisor and teachers encouraged everyone to go to university. VET courses were not offered and not mentioned as future options.

She hasn't discussed her dream with friends from uni, only her parents as she thinks there is a "stigma" associated with doing a VET qualification. Her mum is supportive but her dad thinks she should finish her degree.

A friend has just finished a VET course in hairdressing and loved it. Her friend's parents had a salon and made a good living.

She believes that if she completes her accountancy degree it will help her to follow her dream of setting up her own salon one day, so it will not be wasted.

She has looked into a couple of options – TAFE or a private RTO. However, she found the TAFE website confusing so has postponed looking for a course for the moment.

"I am doing it but I don't love it (accounting)."

"If you are academic you are pushed down the uni route."

No clear idea so experimenting

School Leavers – Directionless

Profile

- Young, inexperienced, no clear idea of what they want to do.
- Both genders.
- Working after school in part time jobs

Motivations

- No real motivation to do anything in particular but believe that further education is required to secure a decent job (so not reluctant learners).
- No understanding of what courses are on offer, where they could lead, what different careers would be like.
- Tended to find careers advice at school very unhelpful.
- Parents often nag them to do “something”.
- Often end up starting further courses and/or different types of jobs in varied fields (‘jump about’).

School Leavers – Directionless

Understanding the possible careers upfront may help completion

School Leavers – Directionless

Barriers to completion

- Less likely to complete than some other segments due to lack of motivation/drive/commitment to specific course.
- Likely to change their minds - realise they don't enjoy the course/ no longer have the desire to follow their initial choice.
- Course not meeting expectations.
- Lack of study skills (used to being "babied" or "spoon fed" at school).
- Online courses.

"I had to start something to get my parents off my back"

Overcoming the barriers

- Careers advice after school.
- Promoting TAFE career advisors.
- Career pathways for different types of courses.
- 'Short experiences' of different types of career.
- Anecdotal descriptions of different course outcomes.
- Study skills guidance and support.

Case Study

Ash lives near Parramatta and is studying a Cert III in real estate.

When she left school a couple of years ago she had no idea what she wanted to do. She has had a few jobs in recent years, but hasn't managed to keep one for any length of time. The jobs have not been in the real estate area. She has also been on Centrelink benefits but is not currently.

She has attempted to complete the course twice before. She dropped out previously as the difficulty level increased and she found that she lost motivation.

She also did not have home internet connection and needed to go elsewhere to study which made it more difficult.

She attended a catholic school she described as 'in the dark ages'. She had no assistance or direction given in terms of further study or career. Also did not fit in with the 'cool kids'.

Her mother suggested several options and prompted course enrolment. Her aunt is in real estate and suggested that she consider it.

"I did not have the motivation. I was immature."

Education is a means to an end

Career Builders - Directed Employees

Profile

- Currently working.
- Happy in their chosen career.
- Tend to do short courses.

Motivation to study

- Not actively seeking further education, rather it was a directive from an employer or a skill (certificate) they needed to either stay in their current position or proceed further in their career.
- Low personal motivation - most were focussed on the course length and wanted to almost 'get it over and done with'.

Work and home life commitments often get in the way

Career Builders - Directed Employees

Barriers to completion

- Loss of job or moving jobs/employers/industry.
- Requirements/legislation changes.
- Life events e.g. pregnancy, illness (sometimes have to do whole course again not just components they haven't done).
- Lack of motivation.

Overcoming barriers

- Flexibility of course, being able to complete in own time.
- Flexible exam dates that work for them.

"It was a compulsory qualification whilst I was working as a customer service representative at the Commonwealth Bank."

"I had been thinking about it for a while but the trigger was my employer changing the policy to require it."

Case Study

Steven lives in Batemans Bay and wanted to be a volunteer firefighter.

However before he could start work as a firefighter Steven needed to complete a Certificate III in Firefighter Operations run by NSW Fire & Rescue. The course was short but very demanding, with about 2 weeks of online course modules and then 8 days of 10+ hours face-to-face at a Fire & Rescue training centre.

Steven found the theoretical parts of the course difficult as he isn't very academically minded and had been out of school for over 10 years (he left at the end of year 10). However he really enjoyed the practical components of the course and was determined to gain employment as a firefighter so he pushed through and finished the course successfully.

He did not have to pay for the course himself.

He has now been a volunteer firefighter for around 6 months and is considering further study to improve his skills.

"I did the course because I had to but I'm glad that I did, they had some great teachers who taught me a lot"

"I had been hoping there would be less theory and more practical stuff but I guess they're both important."

Education can be life changing

Career Builders – Re-inventors

Profile

- Young to middle aged, many with families.
- Have been in employment and now want a career change (males in particular).
- Wanting to/needing to return to the workforce (females in particular).
- Breadwinners who want a better paid job (in a different field) to pay for family.
- Older blue collar workers who need a less physical job.
- Some in regional areas where jobs in their first chosen field are sparse.

"It's something I've always thought about – I'm now 40 and I've always been in business but now I want to give back a bit"

Cost and location are key

Career Builders – Re-inventors

Motivations

- Many of these 'Re-inventors' had hit a road block / dead end in their career or had become dissatisfied with their career choice and saw education as vehicle for a change of industry.
- Short courses were preferred over long courses due to the desire to get on with the next stage of their lives.
- Courses that are conveniently located and provide flexibility were preferred.
- Some re-inventors continue to do more courses if the first course doesn't work out for them (and become a perennial course doer).

"I just couldn't work all day then come home and look after the kids, get dinner and then hit the books"

"I'm a single mum and I need a career in a field where there are jobs and where I can earn better money"

Not meeting expectations can lead to non-completion

Career Builders – Re-inventors

Barriers

- Course content or workload not as expected.
- Life gets in the way, e.g. have families and find it difficult to juggle work, family and studying.
- Often start online courses because of flexibility but then find them hard to complete because of lack of motivation/support and ease of withdrawing.
- Been away from studying too long, no computer skills, finding course difficult.

Overcoming the barriers

- Shorter course lengths.
- One page course outlines offered upfront.
- Better support in studying skills and for those doing online courses.

Case Study

Felicity dreams of running her own business, but for most of her life has been too busy as a single parent.

Now that her youngest child has entered high school, Felicity finally feels ready to pursue her career.

Felicity decided to become a celebrant and is currently completing a Certificate IV in Celebrancy online. Once that is completed, she intends to study a Cert II in business administration, with the aim of working up to a Diploma of business.

She is highly motivated and determined, but also somewhat hesitant about her chances as an entrepreneur. Because of this she carefully researches and evaluates courses and institutions before committing to registration.

She prefers TAFE institutions as she considers them to be more legitimate and to offer better quality education at a lower price than private RTOs. She also prefers online courses due to their flexibility, and so she doesn't have to share the classroom with younger students.

"I've always wanted to run my own business, but I've never been sure of what it will be."

"The last thing I want is to be stuck in a room with a bunch of kids."

Education leads to knowledge and status

Career Builders – Career Aspirants

Profile

- Currently working or studying.
- More likely to be settled family people (but can also be younger singles).
- Status conscious.

Motivations to study

- Education was seen to help build a better career with higher salary and better job prospects.
- Motivated by the need for self-actualisation – reaching their potential and becoming a specialist/fine tuning skills/learning more skills in a specific area.
- More likely to be doing or considering a private RTO course than some other segments, e.g. business, administration, IT, management.
- Some had been recommended courses by colleagues.

Education provides an opportunity for a higher salary

Career Builders – Career Aspirants

Barriers to completion

- Stopped working in the industry or stopped working altogether (e.g. maternity leave).
- Being time poor, juggling work and family.
- High expectations and then courses not living up to those e.g. some complaining that the course was disorganised, badly taught, poor administration, was teaching the wrong information (these people more likely to pick up on this than school leavers).
- Cost – more likely to be paying themselves than some of the other segments.

Overcoming the barriers

- Higher quality, more professional 'leading edge' courses.
- Costs confirmed upfront.
- Better online courses or more out of hours face to face courses (particularly in regional areas).

"I did an eyelash extension course and they were using all the wrong (dangerous) glues"

Case Study

Jennifer is in her 30s, lives in Gunnedah and works for a mining company.

She completed a Cert II in Administration online last year at TAFE, is now doing a Cert III and thinking about a Cert IV.

She decided to do the courses because she thought it would help in her current role but also because she is worried about job security in an increasingly uncertain industry. If she loses her job she wants better employment prospects and a higher salary.

Her employer is supportive of her studies and her co-worker has also completed the courses. If she is not overly busy at work she can do coursework there.

However, she has found Cert III difficult compared to Cert II and would like better support. Ideally she would like someone to show her how to go about a difficult aspect (mail merge) face-to-face as she feels she can't continue without some guidance.

Cert II has been useful day to day but Cert III has not been as useful so far (but she feels it could be in future jobs and if she gets promoted).

She has financed the courses herself so far (with some funding for prior learning) and her employer may even fund Cert IV if she chooses to go that far.

"I was a bit bewildered about how to go about it at the beginning. It wasn't that simple. But I got the hang of it."

"If I wasn't able to do it at work I don't think I would be able to find the time."

Motivated by the need to broaden their minds

Other – Mind stimulators

Profile

- People who have an interest they want to pursue (not in an employment capacity).
- Most likely to be retired or non-workers (e.g. housewives).
- They pay for the courses themselves (or some on disability or other benefits get government funding).
- Some turn into perennial course doers.

Motivations to study

- The need to keep the mind active, gain self-worth/self-esteem.
- Something to do to fill time.

"I want to be recognised. People ask: how are you and then what do you do?"

Motivated by the need to broaden their minds

Other – Mind stimulators

Barriers to completion

- They are interested so more likely to be motivated to finish.
- However, they do not have to do the course for career or employment reasons so are more likely to give up if something gets in the way, e.g. course too difficult, the practicalities of doing the course (regional).
- Illness or unexpected events.

Overcoming the barriers

- More course flexibility.
- Encouraging and supporting them to find employment after the course.

"I started doing a horticulture course but then they told me that I had to travel for an hour and a half every week to complete it. It just wasn't practical."

Case Study

Jenny is in her 50s, lives in Maitland and is ATSI. She does not work full time.

She currently works on a casual basis for a mystery shopping organisation and gets paid very little. She cannot work full time as she has a lot of medical problems and a disability.

She has completed numerous courses Cert IV in small business management, Cert IV in Marketing, Cert IV in HR, Diploma in Business management, Cert IV in PR and Cert IV in advertising, and now thinking of doing a course in emarketing.

She feels that one reason she can't get work is because TAFE courses are not respected – *"they prefer University degrees".*

She is motivated by a need to be recognised as a person and is frustrated with not being able to get work that suits her. She likes to keep doing courses to continue learning and remain up to date.

"I think it is important to keep learning. You have to keep yourself up to date and relevant"

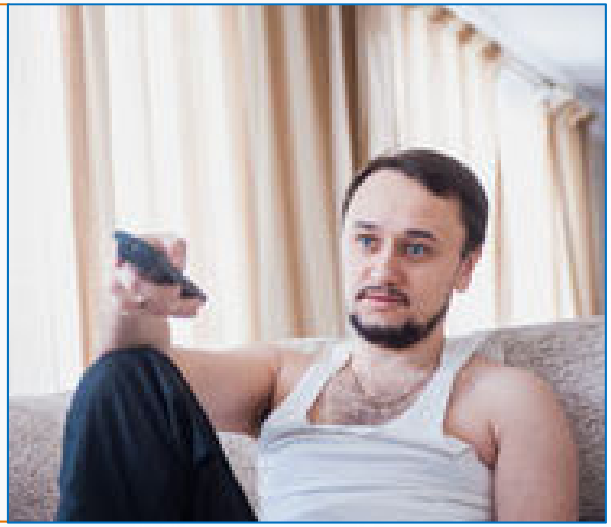
"It makes me feel good about myself when I am learning new skills."

Education is a means of ensuring benefits continue

Other – Benefit opportunists

Profile

- On benefits, i.e. Centrelink payments.
- Tend to be young, male.
- Lazy, happy to be on social security – not actively wanting to seek employment.
- Perhaps more likely to do private RTO courses (less scrutinised).



Motivations to study

- Some on social security either need to be actively looking for work or studying to claim benefits. Studying is seen to be an easy option.
- Happy to start courses and see where they lead if anywhere, as courses are paid for.

Education is a means of ensuring benefits continue

Other – Benefit opportunists

Barriers to completion

- Lack of motivation in the first place.
- No intention to complete.
- Lack of confidence/self esteem.

Overcoming the barriers

- Pick up on people not attending /handing in assignments earlier so this segment can be identified faster.
- Provide better support, e.g. social workers, counselling, careers advice to help increase confidence and motivation.

Case Study

Sally is in her 40s, lives in Maitland and has a son who is unemployed.

She is currently completing a Diploma of Community Services herself to try to get back into the workforce.

Her son is currently receiving unemployment benefits however, to continue getting his payments, he needs to be either looking for work or studying.

He has started four courses over the last two and a half years and hasn't completed any. He says he doesn't like the courses and stops going.

It seems to take a while for Centrelink to find out that he has stopped doing the course – when they do he starts another. They can suspend payment if they find out that you are not attending.

"He doesn't want to work. He is happy getting Centrelink payments.

"It takes a long time for them to catch up with him and to find out that he is no longer studying"

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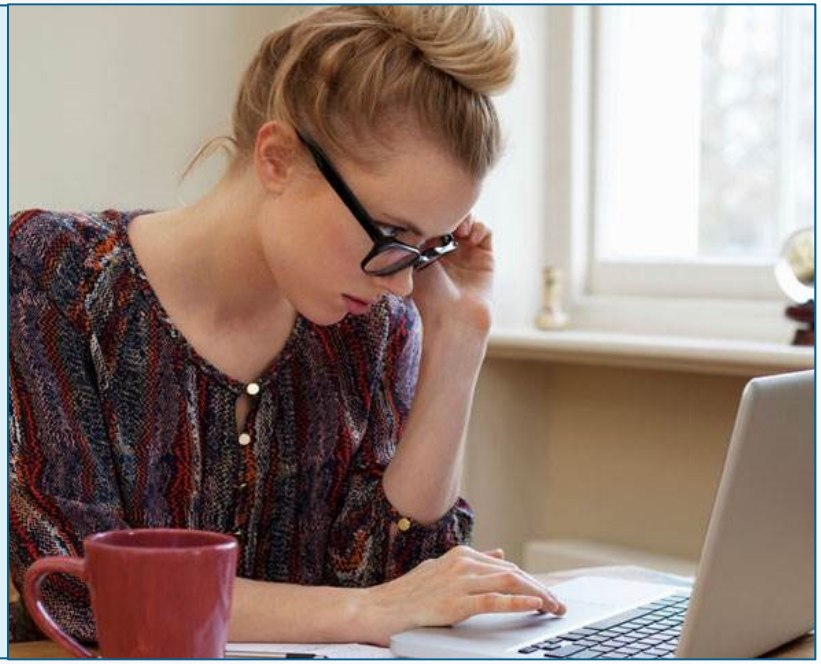
Decision making, key influencers and impact on non-completion

‘Googling’ of courses is a key step for the majority

- The first step for VET was often googling to find courses - to see what was out there and where it was offered.
- This was unlike choosing to go to University where the institution could sometimes be the first port of call then choice of the course.
- However, many found their search often resulted in confusion.
- Google searches seemed to result in a long list of VET provider sites rather than a list of courses and where they are offered which was the expectation.



The TAFE website is confusing and unhelpful for some

- Some end up on the TAFE site because of the difficulty navigating information on courses and providers, however this was thought to be difficult to navigate and confusing in itself.
- This led to some people not choosing suitable courses because of the lack of clarity on course offerings.
- Some ended up going directly to TAFE (particularly regional areas) without being aware of private RTOs as an option.

Overcoming the barriers

- Clear, easy to find central website listing of courses and providers
- Ensure the TAFE website is easier to use

Third parties can be involved in signing up potential students

"From my initial enquiry they emailed me everyday – and texts!.....it might be a good course but it put me off."

"I gave someone in a shopping centre my details and then cold callers wouldn't stop calling me – they must have sold on my details."

"It was like impulse buying".

Providers can be quite convincing to potential students

In terms of initially looking for a course, the key broad influencers were:

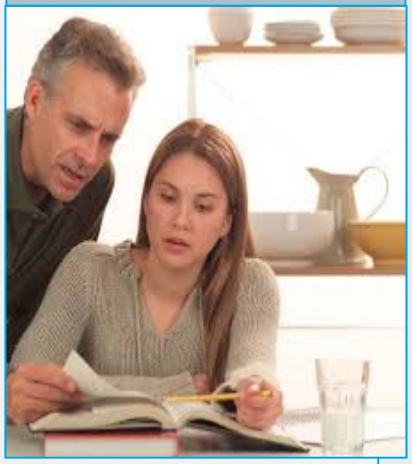
PROVIDERS

- Quite a number of people suggested that the provider/broker had been quite a strong influence on their decision to start a VET course (and where they studied).
- With some offering:
  - 25% discounts (if sign up there and then) and offer of VETFEE-HELP.
  - Upselling from certificates to diplomas on the promise of better career prospects.
  - Doing a 'hard sell' – talking up the course, encouraging to sign up on the spot, getting them excited about the course.

- This can be an issue for the young, inexperienced, indecisive student who is lacking direction and who is more likely to get talked into doing something that ends up not being appropriate for them.

Parents are influential in course selection

PARENTS



- Particularly for the school leavers.
- Some were influenced by their parents' own career options.
- Young CALD participants tended to be particularly influenced by their parents to go to university.

"My parents don't think TAFE is good enough and are really pushing me to go to University"

"They are from a 3rd world country and went to university so they think that because I grew up here I should definitely go."

- Parents also referred their children to relevant family and friends.
- Parents also helped school leavers with information seeking process, filling in application forms, etc.

"Dad thought it would be good if I did a trade – yeah he is trade based"

Careers advisers are not well regarded

CAREERS ADVISOR

- Many of the school leavers went to their careers advisers for assistance in suggesting courses. They were perceived to have all the knowledge at their fingertips, however many did not find their adviser all that helpful.
- Most said that students at school had to make an appointment to see the advisor so the unmotivated tended not to bother.
- It seems that the student had to have the idea first before the adviser could then direct them to appropriate literature.
- Advisers tended to hand out Uni information (not VET), particularly in private schools.
- One or two had been to a TAFE careers advisor and found them to be extremely helpful (but most did not know they existed).

LOCATION

- Location was a key consideration for many, especially those who were juggling work or families.
- Those in regional areas tended to by constrained by what was near to them, if they were not in a position to move away from home.

Advertising plays a role in driving awareness of Private RTO's

CAREERS DAYS

- Some had been to a careers fairs or expos where providers showcased their courses (more so in larger regional and city locations).

PEERS

- Younger people were influenced by friends who were currently doing the course or thinking about doing the course (together). Or through discussions with older family friends or relatives about different vocational options.

ADVERTISING

- Some had seen/heard advertising from colleges and one or two were influenced by promotions.
- A few claimed to receive pop ups when online from Colleges and Private RTO's which tended to arouse suspicion and create annoyance.

Key influencers emerge in the work place

EMPLOYERS

- Career builders (particularly 'Directed Employees') were often motivated by employers suggesting career path options which included furthering their studies/education.
- Many employers were directing employees to a PTO for specialised courses (some without having any say).

WORD OF MOUTH

- For career builders work peers and friends were key influencers for some. They had either been through the course themselves or had heard positive things about the course.

VETis

- VETis did not appear to be a strong influencer on whether people did a course after school or completed a course (although in some cases a positive experience did encourage participation after school).
- Those who had done VETis felt that it was a very different experience to VET after school.
- VETis was not offered at some schools and was still seen as a 'second class' option for those students who were less academic.

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Course related issues and impact on completion

Experience of the course has an obvious impact

- Majority of participants were quite positive about the course they did/are doing.
- TAFE courses in particular were felt to be very practical. The lecturers were considered knowledgeable and supportive.
- The level of difficulty for these courses was mostly thought to be pitched at the right level and tended to meet expectations.

" I really enjoyed it, it was practical and taught me things that were relevant"

"I like it (TAFE) we have a good teacher, a big group of people and we have a laugh together"

Courses not meeting expectations is a disappointment

- However, there were a number of course related issues that did impact on completion:

Perception of poor course quality

- Some had found their course to be disorganised, not up to date, irrelevant, badly structured, boring.

Regional/rural factors

- Unable to complete courses at the nearest campus.
- Not offering exactly what they are after.
- Being forced to complete online courses.

Lack of support

- Some found that teachers were very unsupportive and did not help when needed (particularly the case for online courses).
- Not having any support from peers in online courses.

Course not as expected

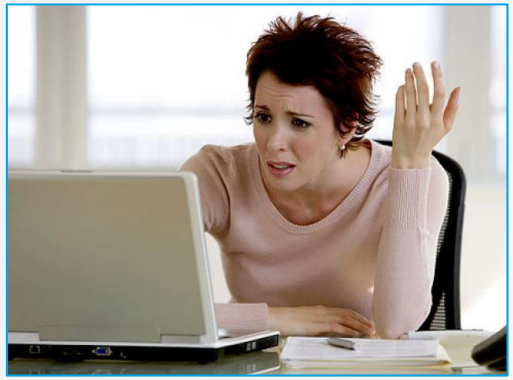
- E.g. inclusion of practical elements/work placements they weren't expecting.
- Subject area not being what they imagined.
- More difficult than they expected.

Online courses per se were not as well regarded

Online Courses

- Many of those who had or were doing online courses seemed to find the course difficult:
  - Hard to remain motivated.
  - Difficult to work from home.
  - Only being able to work at night after work and/or the family are in bed.
  - Lack of support from the RTO.
  - Lack of peer support.
  - Slow responses from the College/TAFE (i.e. slow to give feedback, answer questions, get marks back).

"There is always a load of washing to do or something to distract you at home."



"They took forever to mark my assignment which meant I could not proceed to the next module."

"It took them 72 hours to get back to my email. I needed a reply much sooner."

"I thought I had the discipline to do it myself but it was too hard to keep it up."

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Perceptions of providers and impact on completion

TAFE is well known but Private RTO's were less familiar

VET Options

TAFE

TAFE was an extremely well known concept and it was discussed in a very generic sense, with no real differentiation in perceptions between different institutes or campuses.

Private RTOs

Knowledge of private RTOs depended on the subject area. Most knew they existed, and saw them as being very specific 'colleges', 'schools, 'institutes' or 'academies'.

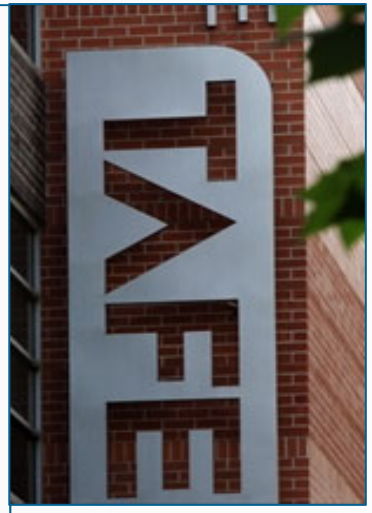
Universities

Everyone had heard of universities, and were familiar with many of the bigger ones. Some had a degree already and were doing a VET to obtain more specific qualifications. A few were doing a VET course to lead onto a degree.

TAFE is synonymous with those seeking a trade

Image of TAFE

- TAFE's were primarily seen as a place for people who wanted a trade qualification.
    - A place for school leavers to go if they did not want to, or couldn't get into university
    - White collar occupations had lower association with TAFE e.g. business, real estate, marketing
- It was also a place where courses were offered to help build on your career / a place to go to 'top up' your knowledge, or help change your career direction.
- Courses were seen to be much more practical and hands on than university and much less pressured/difficult.
- In that regard it was seen as a place for everyone – undiscriminating and accepting.
- TAFEs have been around a long time so the courses were imagined to be well recognised and the institutions trustworthy (also as Government run).
- But also a bit 'not-up-to-date' / not leading edge content or technology.



"It's not that I think I'm better than TAFE…"

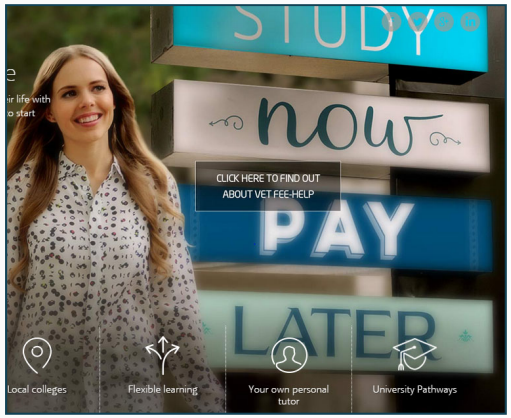
"I wanted TAFE because I wanted quality – to know how to do the work properly"

"There's not modern and edgy… a bit archaic"

Private RTO's can be more aspirational but are surrounded by uncertainty

Image of Private RTO's

- Awareness of Private RTO's was vague.
- Most knew that there were private colleges around, and some had heard/seen advertising for them, however detailed knowledge was often poor.
- They were felt to offer more specialised courses than TAFE in specific vocational areas (and non trade areas),
- More commercial in their approach and some slightly more aspirational in image terms (but not all).
- However there was some uncertainty around how recognised the qualifications are and not all private providers were seen as bone fide.
- Regarded as more expensive than TAFE (and therefore for people with more money), although a minority were thought to offer VET FEE HELP.
- Seen to be more aggressive in marketing terms, some with appealing and attractive incentives.



"Those courses didn't seem legitimate – the hooks to get you in were all about doing it faster."

"They are for international students aren't they?"

Perceptions of Uni's were well defined and consistent

Image of Universities compared to VET

- Universities were seen to be the 'elite' of further education and were often pushed as such by careers advisors and parents.
- They were thought to offer a broader education and were well recognised by employers nationally and internationally.
- More academic than practical/ more difficult courses (so for smarter people).
- Courses that can get you higher paying careers.
- Seen as more expensive than VET, but can use HECS and pay by semester.
- Lots of private school children/ people from well off backgrounds.

"Lots of employers say you need a degree."

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Financial considerations

Smart and Skilled is only vaguely known in terms of its impact on the individual

- The cost of VET courses and the degree of Government help available was not well known to all.
- In particular, there was poor knowledge of “smart and skilled” and what that meant for the individual.

  ‘I’m not sure how much the course would have been otherwise.”

- Others felt that the upfront nature of course fees in the case of VET FEE-HELP was less flexible in comparison to University HECS where there is a cost per semester.
- Many who had signed up for VET FEE-HELP were more familiar with the process and a high proportion felt that they would not be paying it back as they would never reach the threshold.
- However, many who had not completed the course were unclear about whether they would have to pay back the full fees.

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ATSI Differences

There were some differences for ATSI students

- The ATSI students had their courses funded which encouraged participation but not necessarily completion.
- The ATSI students interviewed were studying some ATSI specific courses, e.g. Future Leaders, Dharawal language, which they were encouraged to do by an Aboriginal Liaison Officer.
    - They particularly enjoyed these courses as they found them very tailored and highly relevant, with lots of group work and discussion.
    - They provided childcare on one course and dinner on site for both which was really helpful and a big incentive to participate.
- Some were also studying more general courses such as Business Administration and Training and Assessment which they found harder.
    - Initially some struggled with some of the language used by the teachers and in the text books.
    - Homework and written assessments were particularly difficult.
- Some had negative careers advice at school – low expectations i.e. they weren't encouraged to go to university or do other further study.

"The course was amazing. Very tailored and relevant."

"I found it really full on. I almost didn't go back after the first session but my friend talked me into it."

"Everyone was black so we all helped each other."

"There was heavy literacy content."

"They had 40 names at the beginning and only 12 at the end."

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Summary

Summary of reasons for non-Completion

Life events
- Medical/health issues (either self or family) or gave birth
- Relocation or moving employment/loss of job

Reason for studying no longer exists
- Got a job/promotion

Course factors
- Disorganised/poor communication
- Lack of relevance
- Out of date content
- Poor teaching quality
- Online too hard
- Lack of support
- Too difficult/lack of study skills

Changed mind
- Realised low pay and low amount of work in the area
- Realised not what wanted to do
- Enrolled in higher qualification instead

Apprenticeship/work placement issues
- Low pay
- Conflict with/poor employer
- Couldn't do the work placement
- Needed to be currently employed

Work/life balance
- Lack of time/competing priorities

Location
- Too much travel
- Traffic

Financial issues

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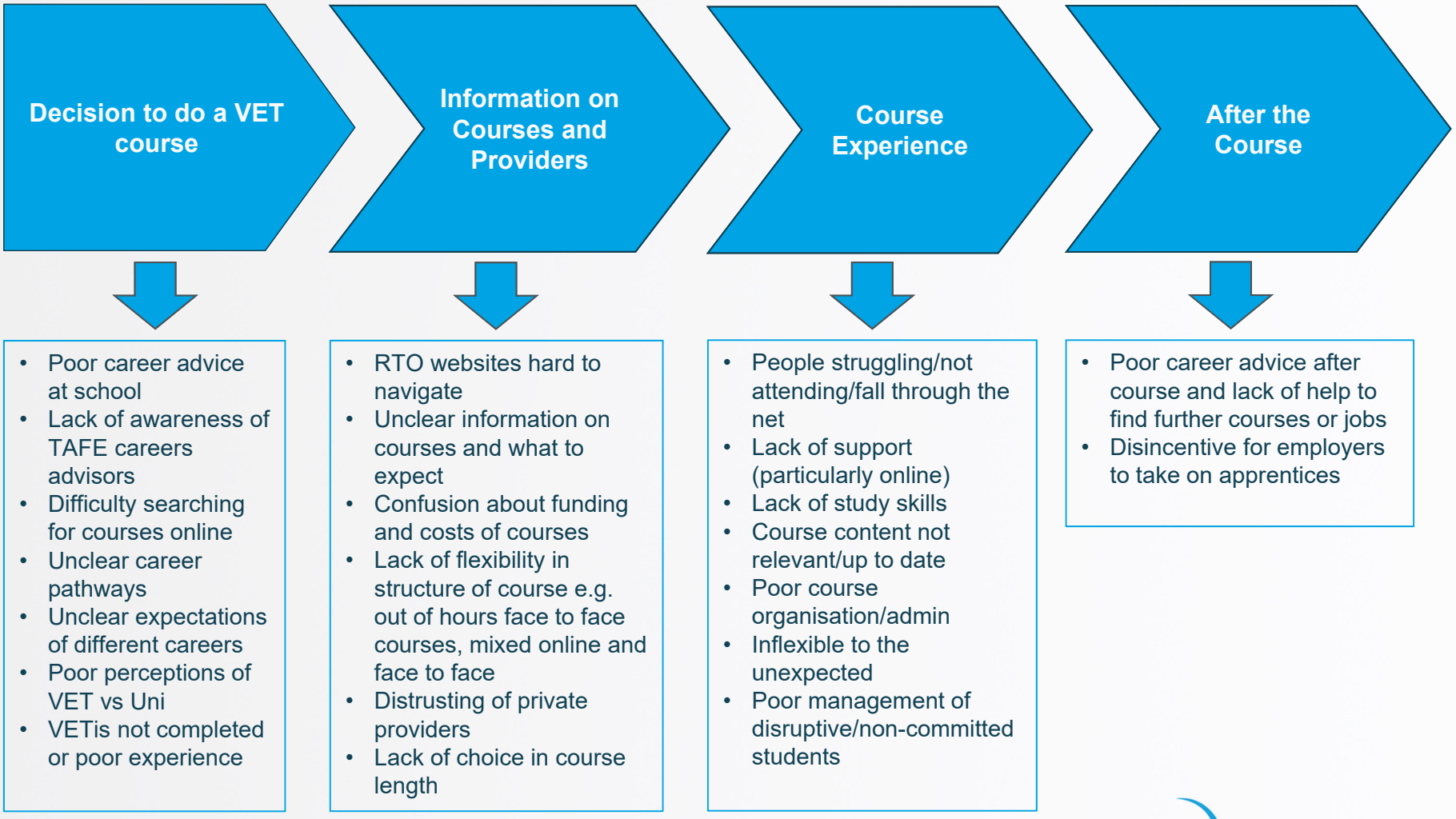
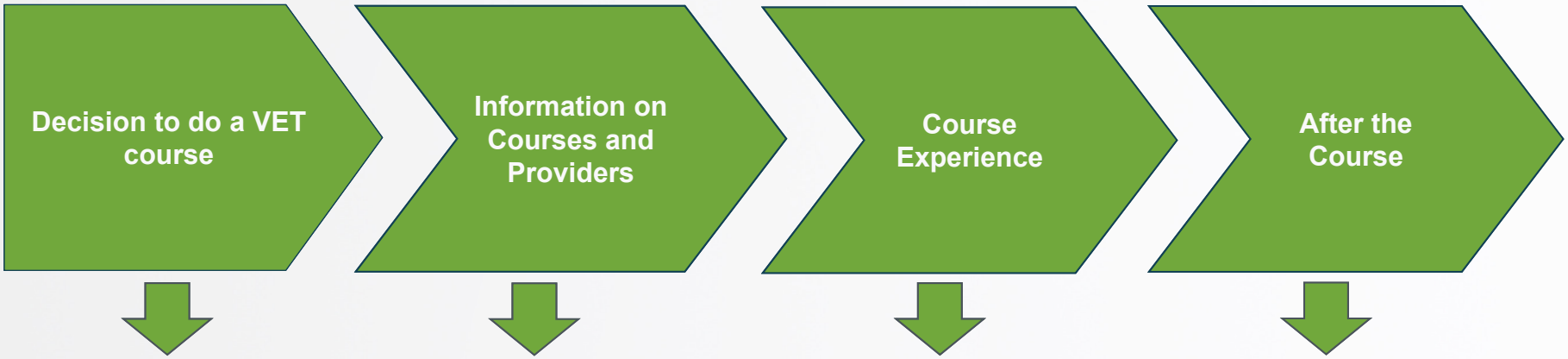
Journey Map – Issues affecting participation and completion



Journey Map – Interventions that could impact participation and completion



- Quality careers advice at school and afterwards
- Central portal/website for courses
- Promotion of TAFE career advisors
- Career pathways – where courses are likely to lead
- Short experiences of different careers
- More positive perceptions of VET vs Uni (break down barriers as in Europe)
- Ensure VETis is a positive experience

- Better websites
- More clarity on course offerings, easier comparison.
- Concise course overview - better information on a course e.g. one page summary that has to be signed by student
- Costs confirmed up front
- More choice in how to do the course e.g. out of hours face to face courses, more mixed online and face to face
- Gaining more trust of private providers
- More variety in course lengths

- Identifying people struggling/not attending
- Mentor programmes, extra tutoring, personal support (partic. online courses and ATSI)
- Study skills guidance and support
- Practical/enjoyable/relevant/ up to date content
- Better structure and organisation
- Flexibility/adaptability
- Management of disruptive/non-committed students

- Help to find jobs/other courses after completion
- More support for employers to take on apprentices

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Next steps

Next steps

- The next stage of the process will be to conduct a quantitative study amongst n=1,000 VET students, across each of the four categories:
    - Completed VET (n=300)
    - Did not complete (n=300)
    - Currently doing VET (n=200)
    - Considering doing VET (n=200)
- The main objective will be to test the **magnitude** of the *changeable* issues impacting participation and completion.
- Confirmation by the NSW Skills Board about which factors are *changeable* will be helpful going forwards into the next phase.

Implications for Quantitative Research

Therefore the key areas for investigation in the quantitative study will be:

Motivations for starting a VET course

- Prevalence of reasons for starting a VET course
  - Size the segments - use of multiple attitudinal statements and other questions.
  - How does the motivation for starting link to completion?
  - How many are not completing because their reason for starting is no longer relevant, e.g. they get a job or promotion during the course?

- Key influencers in course choice (e.g. provider or 3rd party driven, careers advisors at school and outside, teachers, employer, parents, other family, friends, peers, self)

- Determine the decision making process
  - Extent of information gathering, online searching (perceived difficulty), social media
  - Extent of contact with providers – websites, email, phone, face-to-face
  - Factors involved in choice to do/finish course e.g. location
  - Pinpoint areas of confusion or perceived pressure
  - Did they find the 'ideal' course e.g. length, flexibility, online/face-to-face?

- Future career expectations
  - Knowledge of career pathways
  - Certainty about choice
  - Expectations of chosen career

Implications for Quantitative Research

Past education experience

- Past VET and other education history
  - There will be overlap between the categories so it will be important to gain an understanding of past study/decision making.
  - E.g. students who drop out of uni and then do VET – how likely are they to complete?
- Participation and completion of VETis
  - How does VETis experience or perceptions affect VET participation and completion?

Experience of the course

- Satisfaction with the course/s, support provided, what they found difficult (e.g. literacy or studying issues)
- Differences between experience of online, face-to-face and mixed courses
  - What helps people to complete an online course?
  - What types of people are more likely to complete an online course?
- Degree to which course met/is meeting expectations
  - How many students found out information after the course started that made it difficult to complete e.g. number of practical hours?
- Work aspects of the course

Implications for Quantitative Research

Barriers to completion

- Reasons for non-completion

Providers/3rd parties

- Perceptions of different VET providers (vs uni (2nd choice?)) and any marketing
- Incidence of signing up through a 3rd party
  - Are those signed up by a 3rd party more or less likely to complete?
- Incidence of being directly targeted by providers
  - Are those directly targeted by providers less likely to compete?

Finance

- How courses were funded
  - How many know about Smart and Skilled and know the total cost of their course?
  - If they fund more of it themselves are they more likely to complete?
  - Any confusion in relation to funding

Demographics

- Age, gender, location, subject, type of course, place of study, apprenticeship, working or non-working, on social security, highest education level obtained, HSC result (if applicable), home situation e.g. living with parents, ATSI, CALD, disability