

Vocational capabilities: *what the research shows*



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New opportunities are emerging as Australia shifts to a knowledge- and service-based economy that is reliant on digital technology and tied closely to manufacturing industries and services in other countries; at the same time, jobs in traditional industries and manufacturing are declining.

As a result of these changes, the pathways from school to work have become more complex. It is now more essential than ever for young people to develop the capacity to manage career planning, career pathways and work transitions. This paper explores the provision of career information using the concept of vocational capabilities.

As vocational capabilities are needed for adapting to work in new and emerging industries, as well as responding to changes in traditional ones, providers of career information must also evolve. Over the course of their lifetime in today's workforce, students who make transitions to post-school options and those who don't are both likely to work in a diversity of fields that may or may not be related. So, it is important that both groups develop the vocational capabilities to navigate the complex array of post-school education and training qualifications and opportunities available.

Research for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), focusing on the provision of vocational education and training [VET] in Australia, explored pathways from VET in schools, pathways within and between VET and higher education, and pathways in the labour market (Wheelahan et al, 2015). It showed:

- the link between qualifications and specific jobs is very weak
- the match between qualifications and jobs is high in regulated occupations.

The research therefore argued that the link between qualifications and labour markets would be enhanced by reforming qualifications and employment to support learning for vocational capabilities and vocational streams, rather than competences for specific jobs.

It is therefore crucial to provide career information and tools to support the delivery of career education in this changing world of work at the most strategically effective points in young people's decision making about their future. Career practitioners and teachers involved in

career development, as well as other key influencers on young people's thinking – such as parents, carers and those involved in community and youth activities – need to have an understanding of the changing nature of work and the relationship between courses, qualifications and occupations. Drawing on research about the importance of post-school education and training, and how people have used courses to progress to different labour markets, myfuture provides essential information for people at all stages of their career planning, and for those influencing their decision making.

Vocational capabilities

Derived from theories of human capabilities, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (see Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011), the vocational capabilities framework argues that focusing on wellbeing, development and social justice places emphasis on how to support people's real opportunities to do and be what they value.

Vocational capabilities enhance their ability to:

- understand the working of labour markets and opportunities
- identify interests, preferences and support needs
- recognise links between knowledge, skills, qualifications and occupational streams
- move between jobs at similar or higher levels
- make choices and take opportunities within and across broad occupational pathways.

Vocational capabilities for learning to manage the self

Despite Australians becoming more educated than ever, skill shortages are still commonplace and both VET and university graduates fear underemployment or underutilisation of their qualifications. There is a potential mismatch among qualifications, skills and occupations. In 2015, Wheelahan, Buchanan and Yu reported that only a third of VET graduates were in jobs directly linked to their qualifications. Similarly, myfuture's research, drawing on 4.4 million Australian Census records (myfuture *Insights* paper *Rethinking the link between study and the world of work*) found the match between education and jobs varied considerably.

Understanding the link between education and jobs requires looking at the nature of labour markets and the purposes of education and training. In some industries, qualifications are used as a signal that a person has the skill necessary for a regulated occupation – such as nursing or a licensed trade. In others, qualifications are used as a general indicator of abilities – to screen applicants for jobs. For example, someone with a Bachelor of Arts in history will be recognised not only for having advanced knowledge of the history field, but also for having high level skills and the ability to manage complex activities and take responsibility for making decisions in relation to products or people.

Securing employment in a chosen occupational area therefore depends not only on the relevance of the skills and knowledge acquired for a specific labour market, but also on how well education and training has served broader educational and personal development purposes.

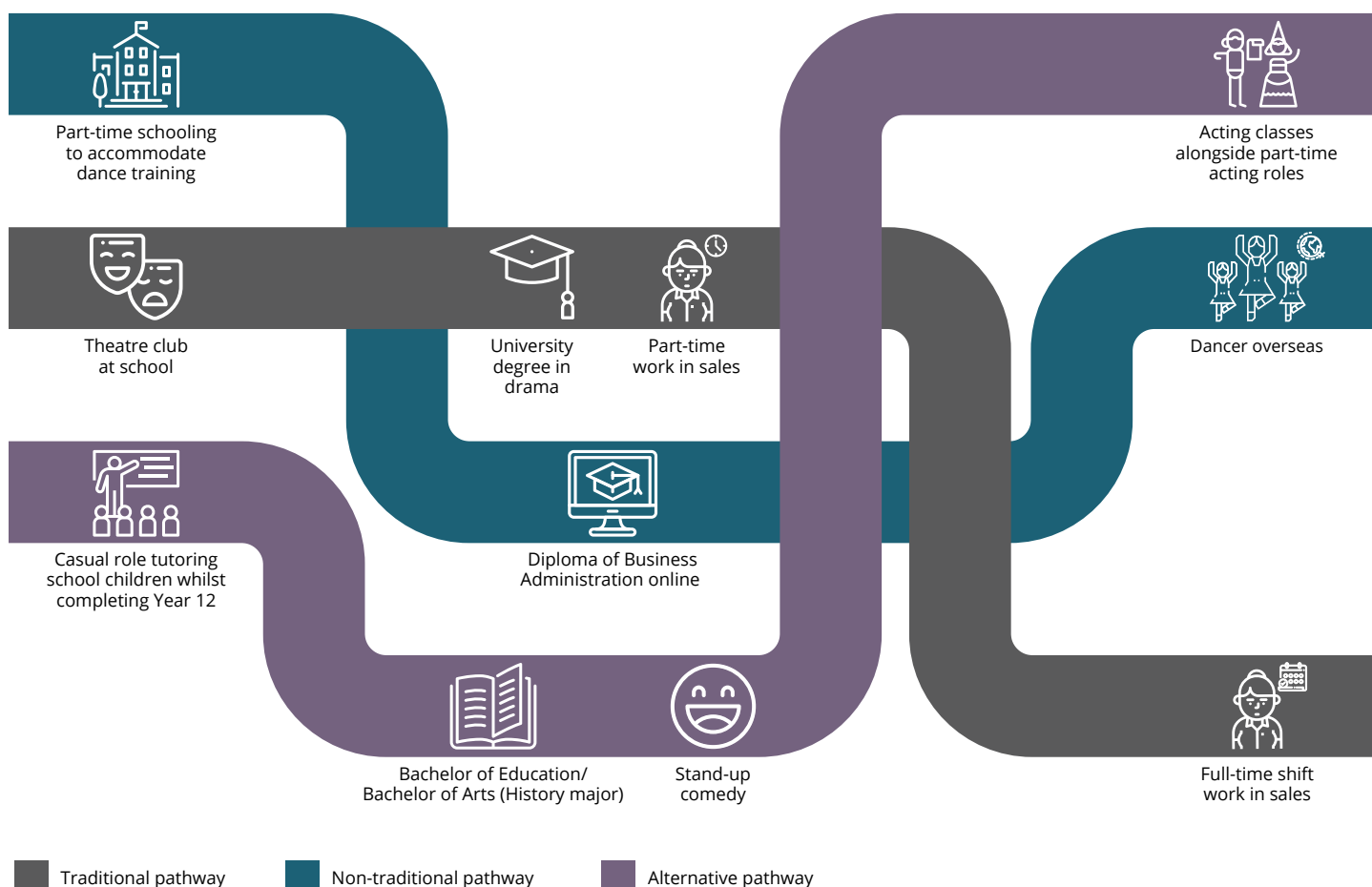
Exploring pathways to jobs and careers with myfuture

Vocational capabilities can be developed and explored in various ways on the myfuture website, such as:

- completing activities using the career exploration tool, *My career profile*, to identify interests and education, skills and work preferences for vocational capabilities
- searching courses by discipline area and seeing which occupations match particular courses and qualification levels
- exploring clusters of occupations and seeing which courses and levels match to particular occupations and industries or service fields
- exploring a particular industry and identifying the different roles and jobs within it, and the education and training pathways for progressing horizontally or vertically across and between different jobs in that industry
- exploring courses and qualifications to identify the vocational capabilities that can be transferred from one industry or service field to another.

Therefore, the myfuture website has aligned with recent research on vocational capabilities and is designed to encourage students to develop and learn about vocational capabilities through exploring pathways to courses and occupational areas.

Figure 1: Pathways from school to occupations through post-school qualifications in VET and university can be diverse and non-linear.



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