

Graduates in vocational study a sign of ‘job matching’ failure

People climbing down the qualification ladder shows that higher education has not gone to plan, study suggests

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With increasing numbers of Australians supplementing their degrees with vocational education and training (VET), new research suggests many could have fared better by going straight into vocational study in the first place.

An [analysis](#) of people undertaking “reverse articulation” – progressing from higher education into VET – has found that they are less than half as likely as other graduates to be in highly skilled jobs. Many are in positions that do not require degrees, and pursue vocational study because it is a “requirement of my job”. Most end up in the same or similar jobs afterwards.

The most popular VET course for degree-qualified men is a certificate in real estate practice. For women, it is a course in first aid management of anaphylaxis. Vocational certificates in training and assessment, work health and safety, accounting and bookkeeping, early childhood education and security operations also attract thousands of higher education graduates.

The study, published by the Mackenzie Research Institute, suggests that supplementary VET study does not supply higher education graduates with missing technical know-how that makes them more employable and successful professionals. Rather, it meets regulatory requirements for jobs that “do not require a degree but may well require some VET training”.

Author Tom Karmel said the findings were consistent with data showing that graduates were [increasingly taking jobs](#) “not traditionally associated with higher education”, because demand for professionals had not kept pace with the burgeoning numbers of university students.

“An increase in ‘reverse articulation’ reflects a disjunction between the production of new graduates and what is happening to the occupational structure, rather any specific dissatisfaction with higher education relative to VET,” Karmel writes.

The study crunched enrolment, completion and Student Outcome Survey data from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. It found that the number of higher education graduates taking VET courses had risen 30 per cent between 2020 and 2023. They now constituted roughly 11 per cent of all VET students, up from 8 per cent in 2016. Four in five took vocational courses for employment-related reasons, with just one in 10 doing it for personal development. Nine in 10 claimed to have achieved the “main reason for doing the training”, even though barely one-quarter thought it had improved their writing or numerical skills.

The study found that graduates chose vocational study for similar reasons, and experienced it in similar ways, to people without higher qualifications. “University graduates respond to VET pretty much as all VET students...in terms of completion rates, reasons for undertaking training, satisfaction and training outcomes.”

Karmel said the study reinforced his [earlier findings](#) that the “very substantial” personal return from higher education depended on “positive job matching”.

“A person with a degree will only get the full income benefits of the qualification if the person gets a job matched to the qualification,” the paper says.

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