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## **Pathways to Post-School Success**

### **Review of Western Australian senior secondary pathways**

#### **Principals' Federation WA – Position Paper**

The PFWA has critically read and considered the Environmental Scan Final Report and the Review Discussion Paper. Within the Environmental Scan Background the following statement is made: “Unquestionably the WA senior secondary school system is a good system with flexibility, rigour, portability and transparency”. The PFWA agrees with this statement and supports measurable, considered and gradual improvements which will improve outcomes for students while removing the current system inequities in providing meaningful secondary pathways. The PFWA does not support significant or rapid changes that create increased workloads for staff in schools. There is not sufficient staff capacity or capability in the current environment to cope and manage any significant changes in senior school education. Any changes to the current system would require carefully considered timelines; significant resourcing; widespread professional development and training; and a comprehensive communication strategy. In an environment of critical teacher shortages and extremely high workloads for all staff in secondary schools, the capacity of the education sector to cope with change is currently severely compromised.

In the Chair’s Foreword to the Discussion Paper Professor Bill Loudon says: “WA already delivers strong senior secondary pathways that works well for many students – but of course there also challenges”. Given the geographic challenges in WA and the diversity of student needs and interests, any system for senior secondary pathway delivery would be challenged in providing for all students in an ideal or individualistic manner. The PFWA asserts that any senior school pathways delivered in WA should be developed and adjusted according to the unique conditions in this state. The PFWA is very aware of senior school pathways in other states and feedback from principals in those states points to a range of issues and problems.

The course offerings in WA (ATAR, General, Foundation, Preliminary, Endorsed) are well written and supported by SCSA and teachers have become well-tuned into the required course content and assessment standards. The PFWA supports ongoing syllabus reviews and improvements to those courses, especially targeting enhanced student engagement (interesting content and practical components).

Whether schools and teachers should be delivering VET qualifications is debateable. VET delivery is not part of preservice teacher training while the training of teachers working in schools is becoming increasingly expensive, disruptive to other classes and time consuming for those teachers. Certificate Courses come with high costs and high risk for schools. The synergy between RTO's and schools is complex and is not seamless with schools often their last consideration. The current system for VET delivery across WA is inequitable with higher ICSEA schools advantaged with parents having more capacity to provide fee for service access. Larger schools also have greater economies of scale and greater capacity to absorb costs and staff losses, while some schools are disadvantaged regionally due to distance and reduced profile hours being available. It is worth noting that in other states only Certificate 1&2 courses are offered as a secondary education pathway and in the majority of cases, these are delivered directly by the RTO, not teachers. If VET qualifications remain as a secondary pathway for WA secondary students, then greater funding support to schools is required; the inequities in access need to be seriously addressed so as not to disadvantage some schools and student groups; the cooperation and synergies between RTOs and schools needs to improvement; while the appropriateness of Certificate Courses above Certificate 2 needs strong reflection. Principals of schools which benefit from easy access to TAFE and other RTOs, have Trade Training Centres or industry partnerships, have sufficient numbers of trained teachers and have greater capacity to offset high costs generally report their desire to maintain VET pathways. However, having a direct VET requirement in the WACE or New Metrics disadvantages those schools and their students where those conditions are limited. The PFWA opposes any notion to allocate grades to VET certificates.

The question around "what is a successful student?" needs to be resolved. Given the diversity of our system and students there's a need for fluidity and flexibility in responding to local circumstances and student needs. Participation data shows most students remain in secondary school until Year 12, but many of those students leaving school earlier do successfully transition to employment, training, traineeships and apprenticeships etc. Many of these students thrive in a different environment for different reasons. Regarding a student who leaves school prior to the end of Year 12 as being unsuccessful is very broad summation and is misleading. Where parents and students choose to remain in the senior secondary schooling their key objective is to complete year 12 and attend their school's graduation ceremony along with their peers. The WACE is generally not highly valued or understood by parents and students and the WACE appears to lack currency or value in the broader community. Parents and students rely heavily on schools to track and monitor the WACE for them due to its complexity. Schools devote significant resources to both tracking WACE achievement and ensuring as many students do achieve it (91% of students in WA, 2022). The focus on high WACE achievement rates is one of the factors that have influenced a decline in the number of students undertaking an ATAR pathway (one of many factors). It is important to acknowledge that there are students who disengage from school prior to senior secondary education and during years 11&12. The reengagement of these students is not a simple case of changing course offerings as the reasons for their disengagement can be highly complex and go well beyond the functions of schools. The current WACE does present a barrier however for any student seeking to reengage during years 11&12. The PFWA would support a review into the purpose and current complexity of the WACE and would recommend simplifying it and possibly combining it with the WASSA. The WASSA which is a comprehensive statement of achievement is undervalued at present. The current situation sees ATAR participation and performance receiving accolades and status whereas those students in other pathways, including those with additional needs who manage to complete Year 12, feeling less valued and overlooked. The PFWA welcomes changes that celebrate successful students in all their forms. Significant additional funding and resources are needed by schools if there is to be success in

effectively catering for disengaged students, students with additional needs and other at-risk students. There will also need to be considerable time allowed for extensive consultation where changes are proposed.

The PFWA recognises the importance of the OLNA but welcomes a review into how the testing is implemented in schools, the associated workload and the seemingly high stakes it has. Consideration is needed regarding the number of testing windows and the impact it has on the WACE. The current conditions around how OLNA is administered in schools contributes to considerable workload for staff and disruption to the learning of students. It is a source of stress and anxiety for students, especially when they continually fail. Reporting on literacy and numeracy competency is important, but could the WASSA be a better vehicle for doing that? It is important to acknowledge that 94.2% of students in WA achieved the OLNA meaning that 5.8% of students were ineligible for the WACE and that anecdotally failure rates are higher among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability, and CALD students (Discussion Paper, pg 27). The PFWA recommends that the OLNA testing only takes place in Year 12 and the results are included on the WASSA only.

The PFWA endorses the current ATAR courses and their quality as led by SCSA. The purpose of ATAR ranking and the currency beyond university admission criteria is open to question at the current time. There is also an inequity in access to ATAR pathways and courses in our current system due to geographical location, size of school and ability to offer a suite of courses, access to suitably experienced teachers and ICSEA. Students move from one school to another in order to access preferred courses and that is generally from a smaller, regional or lower ICSEA schools to a larger or higher ICSEA schools. There are many factors affecting the decline in students attempting an ATAR pathway including:

- Meeting WACE requirements i.e. achieving 14 “C Grades”. Students who find ATAR a challenge change their pathway so as not to risk the WACE.
- Parents and students are considering health and wellbeing ahead of challenging courses. Engagement in and enjoyment of school is given higher emphasis.
- Future cost of university study versus TAFE/other training/employment.
- Alternate university entrance pathways are perceived as a better option by a sizeable group of parents and students.
- WA community attitudes towards employment opportunities in the resource sector.
- Capacity of their school to offer a suite of ATAR courses (lack of student numbers, SIDE not an attractive option, lack of suitably qualified teachers, timetable restrictions).

The PFWA recommends a simplification of the WACE (or amalgamated with the WASSA) so that students are not deterred from selecting an ATAR pathway. The purpose of and method for creating an ATAR rank be reviewed as its currency for university selection has been diminished and it has virtually no purpose post university selection other than a method of ranking school performance, which is then used for marketing purposes by schools with high numbers of ATAR students.

General Courses are well constructed and supported through SCSA. The General Courses are a viable pathway for students and there is value in them. For schools that have limited numbers of ATAR students or have limited access to VET, General Courses provide an important pathway. These courses typically cater for students who do not aspire to go to university but seek a more practical learning option other than VET. The PFWA does believe there is scope to review the courses to include more current and interesting content, while increasing the practical learning experiences contained within the courses. The PFWA is concerned that the General Courses appear to be

devalued by the DoE (refer the New Metrics) when these courses do meet the needs of a considerable cohort of students as is evident by their popularity.

The PFWA supports a review aimed at supporting the relatively small group of students who find success and engagement in senior secondary education a challenge. These include students in regions, those with disability or special needs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students where English is a second language, students with mental health issues or illness. However, the PFWA is not in support of rushed changes or large changes to our current senior secondary education provision as there would inevitably be considerable workload and cost implications. We have a “Good System” so adjust and adapt it where manageable and sensible to do so!