

Executive summary

The concept of a vocational equivalent to completing a senior school certificate (denoted by the completion of Year 12) has been a feature of recent government policy; for example, it features in the Adelaide Declaration goals:

All students have access to the high quality education necessary to enable the completion of school education to Year 12 or its vocational equivalent and that provides clear and recognised pathways to employment and further education and training.

(Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs 1999, Goal 3.6)

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Meeting in Hobart on 30 April 2009 similarly agreed to the following attainment targets, all incorporating the notion of a vocational equivalent to Year 12.

COAG agreed as well that the most appropriate measure of the 90 per cent Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate target is:

- for 2015, the proportion of young people in the 20–24 year old age group who have achieved Year 12 or a certificate II or above as measured by the Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Education and work; and
- for 2020, the proportion of young people in the 20–24 year old age group who have achieved Year 12 or a certificate III or above as measured by the Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Education and Work.

Increased Year 12 completion is being targeted because it is recognised that completion of senior secondary schooling leads to better labour market outcomes than non-completion. However, it is also recognised that an academic path is not for everyone and this has led to a realisation that there should be alternatives to Year 12 completion. For example, Dockery (2005), amongst others, highlighted that completing Year 12 may not be the right pathway for all young people, particularly for those who are less academically inclined or who are unsuited to the institutionalised nature of schools. The idea of a vocational equivalent to Year 12 is a response to this.¹

While the Council of Australian Governments has designated certificate II as the vocational equivalent to Year 12, little work has been undertaken to establish an empirical underpinning for the equivalence. Further, it is interesting to note that the vocational equivalent to Year 12 will change from certificate II in 2015 to certificate III in 2020.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate what might be the vocational equivalent to Year 12.

We argue that there are three dimensions that could be considered: volume of learning; attributes; and outcomes. The paper looks at each of these in turn.

We find that a Year 12 qualification has nominal hours greater than those of an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) level II qualification, with hours that align more closely to those of an AQF level III qualification. From this perspective a certificate II does not look like a likely candidate to be an equivalent to Year 12 completion.

¹ In fact the setting of Year 12 or equivalent targets has been Australian Government policy since the early 1990s when the Finn Review (1991) recommended that, by 2001, 95% of 19-year-olds be participating in or have completed Year 12 or its equivalent level in vocational training.

The second dimension of a qualification is course attributes. The complexity of the subjects and the expected learning outcomes from completing the qualification comprise the attributes of a qualification. In the Australian context, the draft descriptors arising from the recent review² of the AQF define the aim of Year 12 as providing a basic preparation for civic and working life and a foundation for lifelong learning. This is quite different from those relating to vocational certificates, which are less broad and more focused on the world of work. Thus course descriptors do not provide a useful basis from which to draw equivalences.

These general descriptors can be moderated by the degree of complexity. Complexity is generally measured through a system characterised by various levels, such as the Victorian Credit Matrix. While systems such as these have the capacity to provide a very precise characterisation of qualifications, it is not obvious how they could be used practically to define broad equivalence across qualifications.

The third dimension is that of outcomes: we would define two qualifications to be equivalent if they had similar outcomes. Such an approach begs the question of the nature of the outcomes and the age at which the outcomes are realised. The Adelaide Declaration's 'clear and recognised pathways to employment and further education and training' provide straightforward guidance here, and we focus on a range of labour market and further study outcomes. Specifically, we consider:

- full-time employment
- full-time engagement (full-time study, full-time work or part-time work and study)
- occupational prestige (measured using the Australian National University's scales of occupational prestige)
- gross weekly wages for those in full-time employment
- further study at diploma or higher level. This level of further study is chosen because it is the level to which Year 12 typically provides entry.

Gender differences play a significant role in outcomes, since more females may choose to work part-time due to caring or family responsibilities. For females, therefore, further consideration is given to whether or not they are in part-time employment; occupational prestige and wages are measured for females who are working part-time (and not studying).

Our choice of an age at which outcomes are measured is purely pragmatic. Our analysis of outcomes uses data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). Ideally, we would measure outcomes over an individual's adult working life. LSAY, however, follows individuals until they are 25 years, so this is our choice. By this age, however, most young people have made the transition to adulthood.

One of the issues in determining equivalence is that Year 12 or a senior secondary certificate spans a very broad spectrum of difficulty in subject matter and in the ability of students.³ To compare the outcomes of those undertaking vocational studies with highly academic students would load the dice too much against the former. Therefore it would not be appropriate to include all those who had completed Year 12 in the comparison group. After all, there are very large differences between those at the top of the academic achievement distribution and those at the bottom. The notion of an equivalent to Year 12 is directed towards those less academically inclined, and therefore this latter group provides a sensible comparator. To be precise, our comparator group consists of all those

² <<http://www.aqf.edu.au/Portals/0/Revised%20tables%20V6%209%20February%202010%20FINAL.pdf>>.

³ It is interesting to note that the senior secondary certificate spans a number of levels in the qualification frameworks of both South Africa and Ireland. More details on the frameworks of other countries appear in appendix A.

students who have completed Year 12, but either did not obtain a tertiary entrance rank (TER) score or obtained a TER score in the lower half of the distribution. To further ensure that the comparisons are fair, we weight the data to ensure that the comparison groups have a similar distribution of background characteristics.

Our general conclusion is that the concept of equivalence is problematic. In terms of volume of learning, certificate IIs are ruled out, while certificate IIIs remain in contention. From the point of view of attributes, the language of qualification frameworks points to vocational qualifications being different from the senior secondary certificate. Our analysis of outcomes is also unhelpful in defining equivalence. For males, all pathways (including early school leavers without further VET study) are equivalent to Year 12 completion in relation to labour market outcomes, while no vocational pathway is equivalent to Year 12 completion in terms of further study. Year 11 plus an apprenticeship is superior to Year 12 in terms of wages for full-time workers. For females the picture is a little more useful. While the pathway does not affect all labour market outcomes, certificate IIIs – but not certificate IIs – are equivalent in terms of full-time employment or being in full-time employment or full-time study. The picture for further study is the same as for males, in that there is no vocational equivalent to Year 12 completion.

There is a place for a vocational alternative (which would have to be at least a certificate III) to the completion of Year 12, since the lack of an alternative might deny opportunities to those who are not academically inclined, particularly in light of the national participation requirements (Council of Australian Governments 2009), which stipulate that individuals must be in education, training or employment until the age of 17. That said, vocational qualifications must be considered as an alternative rather than a literal equivalent. In this context, the term ‘equivalence’ becomes a useful rhetorical device rather than a precise concept. But the ‘equivalent’ vocational qualification should be at the certificate III level, not certificate II.