

About the research

The vocational equivalent to Year 12

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Government policies that promote Year 12 completion are based on a recognition that, on average, the completion of senior secondary schooling leads to better labour market outcomes. Completing senior secondary schooling is not, however, for everyone, particularly not for those who are less academically inclined or who are unsuited to the institutionalised nature of schools. Given this, it makes sense to talk about a vocational equivalent to senior secondary schooling.

In this paper, Lim and Karmel investigate the notion of a vocational equivalent to Year 12 completion in terms of the volume of learning, the educational complexity of courses, and ultimately labour market and other outcomes (various aspects of employment, satisfaction with aspects of life and further study). In relation to the last of these, their idea is that qualifications are equivalent if they have similar outcomes.

In determining the equivalence of outcomes, Lim and Karmel use the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) to compare the outcomes, by age 25, of alternative educational pathways with those of completion of senior secondary schooling. Rather than compare the outcomes of vocational alternatives with all those completing Year 12, they restrict their comparison to those completing Year 12 with either no tertiary education rank (TER) or in the lower half of the TER distribution. This acknowledges that alternative pathways are typically suggested for the less academically inclined.

Key messages

- In terms of volume of learning, certificate IIs are not equivalent to Year 12; certificate IIIs remain in contention.
- In relation to educational outcomes, the language of the qualifications frameworks points to vocational qualifications being different from the senior secondary certificate. This difference is also highlighted by the competency-based assessment used in the vocational sector.
- For males, all pathways (including early school leaving with no further VET study) are equivalent to Year 12 completion vis-a-vis labour market outcomes. Thus in this context the notion of equivalence has no meaning.
- For females, certificate IIIs – but not certificate IIs – are equivalent to Year 12 completion in terms of full-time employment or being in full-time employment or study.
- In terms of further study outcomes, it is clear that there is no vocational equivalent to completing senior secondary schooling.

These findings challenge the notion of a vocational equivalent for Year 12 completion. Vocational pathways must be considered an alternative rather than a literal equivalent. If a ‘vocational equivalent’ is required for rhetorical purposes, it should be at least at certificate III level.

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