

## **LINK 13: The VCE media debate: 1989-1992.**

Jack Keating and Sujatha Pannel

### **Introduction**

A case study of the media coverage of the debate and contestation over the design and implementation of the new Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) during the three years of late 1989 to late 1992 is complex. The complexity is a result in the first instance of the size of the study. The debate and contestation was over a long period of three years and it generated an enormous amount of media coverage. This was located mainly in the two major state wide newspapers, the Age and the Herald Sun. However, it spread to regional and national news papers, and the electronic media, including a state government funded media campaign.

The complexity is also a result of the role the VCE debate had in the broader political contestation that was to culminate in the October 1992 elections when the incumbent Labor Government was defeated and replaced by a Liberal Party Government. Early criticism of the VCE, especially from some influential actors, led the Liberal Party to identify it as a potential election issue. Although this position was not taken by the National Party, the politicisation of the new certificate did much to shape the nature of its public debate. The criticisms tended to be linked with the supposed weaknesses of the government: ideologically driven, too influenced by certain interests, and administratively incompetent. In the context of the recession of 1990 -92, which hit Victoria with its manufacturing base harder than other states, and the associated problems of major financial losses through an investment bank failure, the Labor government was vulnerable.

A third factor that contributes to the complexity is the nature of the actors. The debate attracted contributions from politicians, university academics and leaders, principals and teachers, school system leaders, teacher and principal organisation officials, journalists, business and social commentators, and sundry members of the public. In many cases these contributions exploited the opportunity of the VCE to express views and issues that were at time tangential to the design of the new certificate.

The VCE debate, as a case study is heavily influenced by its politicisation within the electoral cycle. However, this influence was not total as the debate emerged before a decision was taken by the then Liberal Party Opposition to use it as an electoral issue. Criticism of the VCE emerged from a number of sources and took clear forms. The sources included the Vice Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, and teachers and school leaders, mainly from independent and more academic schools. These different actors carried ideologies and were attached to institutional forms. As such the media representations of the issues were influenced by the behaviours of the actors, their ideologies and the associated institutional forms. A further variable was the characteristics of the media itself. The study concentrates upon the two state daily newspapers. These papers have different editorial traditions, readerships, and styles. They also had different histories. The Age has a long liberal tradition, a strong readership amongst educational professionals, and positioned itself as a positive

contributor to educational debate and development. The Herald Sun was formed from daily morning and afternoon papers during the period of the VCE debate. It was and remains tabloid in its style and conservative in its political orientation.

### **Method**

The main sources of material for the study are extracts from the Age during the period – late 1989 to late 1992 and the Herald-Sun from mid 1991 to mid 1992. Prior to mid 1991 two papers – the Sun and the Herald had existed – albeit under conjoint editorial regimes. As a consequence the long debate over the VCE was played out most strongly in its pages, with numerous opinion pieces, letters and editorials over the three years. In the lead up to 1992 state election the Herald Sun ran a strong anti-government line, to the extent that the Victorian Trades Hall Council attempted to organise a readership boycott of the paper. While it also carried numerous pieces on the VCE they tended to be reports of its journalist, with infrequent pieces from other actors.

As a consequence the case study concentrates upon the coverage of the VCE in the Age for the three years prior to the 1992 election. This period covers the initial opening shots from some of the main actors to the period of political and administrative crisis management prior to the state election. Across the three years there are almost 1000 separate items on the VCE included in the Age. They range from items such as study tips to full opinion articles and editorials that variously criticise or defend the VCE, and its designers and the Government. Most of these items can be considered as contributions to the ‘VCE debate’. A systematic analysis of these items is difficult because the VCE debate was not essentially located within the newspaper, the issues and the character of the debate changed over the three years, and as the debate ensued the Government was brought and to an extent chose to come into it. As a consequence items in the Herald Sun only for a year prior to the state election have been included in the analysis in order to provide some contrast with the editorial approach of the Melbourne Age. .

This allows for some comparison between the behaviour of the two newspapers in the pre-election period: the Herald Tabloid Herald Sun and its populist and possibly right wing approach, and the Age broadsheet with its semi intellectual and mostly liberal philosophy. This method allows for an analysis of the behaviours of the actors over the longer period as expressed through the most prominent mass media organ for education.

The case study therefore should not be seen as simply the representation of issues and ideologies in regards to educational purposes through elements of the media. These representations do exist. However, they are heavily mediated by other factors. They include the representations carried to and through the newspapers by different actors and the utilisation and fashioning of representations to portray views on the directions and capacity of the state government of the day. As a consequence the study needs to take into account the nature and behaviours of the actors, the institutional and cultural legacies of senior secondary curriculum and certification in the state, and the relationships between the newspapers and their ownership with state government and opposition of the day.

The newspaper items have all been sourced through microfilm copies of the two newspapers, as the period predates the availability of electronic records. The study

also utilises a series of interviews that were conducted for another project with some of the major policy actors at the time.

## Historical perspective

Traditionally the final year certificate had been a Matriculation Certificate. To matriculate is

*“to enrol oneself in a society. The University is called our **alma mater** (propitious mother). The students are her **alumni** (foster-children), and become so by being enrolled in a register after certain forms and examinations. (Latin, **matricula** a roll.)*

Source: Brewer, 1894.

From 1856 to 1964 the Matriculation Examinations were conducted by The University of Melbourne. In 1964 a new entity—the Victorian Universities and Schools Examinations Board (VUSEB)—was created and charged with conducting Matriculation Examinations. The change was brought about not through any change in the purpose of matriculation but because there was now another University, whose needs had also to be met. Monash University was established in 1960 and in 1964, by agreement between The University of Melbourne and Monash University, VUSEB was established. In 1967 La Trobe University also began to admit students.

The Matriculation Certificate continued until 1969. It could be argued that for the long unbroken period of 113 years, Victoria’s final year examinations and resulting Matriculation Certificate were developed and intended for a single purpose—that of university entrance (Musgrave, 1992). In the sixties and seventies, however, numerous other changes were taking place in Victoria which had an impact on the nature and purpose of the Certificate. School retention rates had begun to soar: in 1966 there were 18,373 candidates who presented for the Matriculation Certificate; by 1970 the number had grown to 22,000. The apparent retention rate was growing in Years 11 and 12 and went from 28% in 1982 to 82% a decade later<sup>1</sup>.

There were also changes in views about learning and teaching and more value was placed on students undertaking individual research as opposed to rote learning. In addition to the push for more independent styles of learning there was a move to incorporate different assessment modes alongside or instead of external examinations (Reed, 1975; Hannan, 2009).

Societal demands on the final years of schooling were increasing in their nature and intensity. The final certificate could not remain solely for the use of tertiary entry. VUSEB itself recognised the need for change and acknowledged that the purposes of the certificate were becoming wider. It stated that even when the Board was established in 1964,

*“...it was at a time of considerable educational and social change. Sixth form students were already feeling the strain of the competition to gain places in university quotas and Commonwealth Tertiary Scholarships. Because of the increasing social mobility more students were staying on to sit for the Matriculation Examination. As the standards of those applying for admission rose so did the entrance requirements to the institutions requiring them. Employers became more interested in those who had, at least, attempted the Matriculation Examination as being better equipped and more mature. **The Matriculation Examination, originally intended for those seeking entrance to a university, became a multi-purpose examination.** As a result, the*

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<sup>1</sup> ABS, Schools Australia Cat No. 4221.0

*newly formed Board found that it could not restrict its thinking to questions of university entrance qualifications. By the nature of its influence on education in all types of secondary schools, and its unique position in the Victorian educational scene, it has been **forced** to consider much wider educational issues.” [emphasis added]*

Source: (VUSEB, 1967)

While the School Leaving Certificate (for non-matriculates) remained in the system at Year 11 to cater for those students not intending to proceed to further studies at University and continued in Victorian schools till 1972, changes were taking place in the final year of schooling. The Matriculation Certificate was replaced in 1970 by the Higher School Certificate of Victoria, to be administered by VUSEB. The VUSEB Handbook for 1970 gives some clear, insightful reasons and justifications for the changes.

*“...the title Matriculation Certificate has been changed to the Higher School Certificate of Victoria. There are several reasons why the change became necessary. First, because of University quotas, **candidates who pass the examination do not necessarily matriculate, i.e., enter a university and sign the matriculation roll.** Secondly, the examination is **now used for a number of purposes other than application for entrance to a university.** Thirdly, because the title was misleading, it was **causing confusion in the minds of many parents, students and employers who did not understand that only a university has the power to confer matriculation status.**”*

Source: VUSEB, 1970

The recognition of the changed circumstances expressed above encapsulates the shift that was occurring in secondary schooling. The purpose of the final certificate was changing and there was a broadening of the nature of the participants whose concerns had to be considered in decision making about the nature of secondary schooling.

The Victorian Institute for Secondary Education (VISE) was established in 1979 to replace VUSEB. It brought in another certificate called the Higher School Certificate (HSC)—dropping the “of Victoria” from the earlier VUSEB certificate. University entry was catered for under VISE through the examinations conducted for Group 1 subjects. Under new arrangements established by VISE a series of Group 2 subjects were developed. These subjects were developed outside of but accredited by VISE and were assessed at the school/provider level. Some of these subjects were accepted for consideration for tertiary entrance by some of the Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE’s), but generally not by the universities. The universities were not concerned about the level or status of the other courses or subjects being offered providing a certificate and examinations were retained to enable effective selection of students into appropriate courses.

VISE was the first of the education authorities charged with administering the final year certificate to have been established under an Act of Parliament (the VISE ACT 1979), in marked contrast to the history of the HSC IN New South Wales (NSW). Nevertheless, VISE remained at “arm’s length” from the State government and the VISE Council was empowered to directly employ staff and determine its own structures according to its needs.

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board (VCAB), which replaced VISE was also created by an Act of Parliament. It was responsible for the introduction of the single Victorian Certificate of Education which is the subject of this analysis.

The table below provides a chronological summary of the developments described above.

**Certification bodies and final year certificates 1856—1992**

The University of Melbourne	<u>Single Certificate</u> Matriculation	1856-1963
Victorian Universities Secondary Education Board (VUSEB)	<u>Single Certificate</u> Matriculation	1964 -1969
	<u>Single Certificate</u> Higher School Certificate of Victoria (name change significant—recognises that the certificate was needed for more than one purpose)	1970-1978
Individual Colleges of Advanced Education and some TAFEs	<u>Alternative final year certificate.</u> Tertiary Orientation Program (TOP) Accepted by some CAE's and TAFEs	1975-1989
Victorian Institute for Secondary Education (VISE)	<u>Single Certificate</u> Higher School Certificate  3 new Group 1 subjects introduced with protests from the universities.  <u>Introduction of another tier of subjects</u> Group 2 Subjects, which were not used for university selection, but recognised by some CAEs and TAFEs	1979-1986
Introduction of T12 for students in Technical Schools	Students in Technical Schools had traditionally left at the end of Year 10. The certificate was designed to offer a Year 12 certificate to these students who would not attempt the HSC	Year??

Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Board (VCAB)	*Introduction of a single Certificate—the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE)	1986
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The chronology of the different bodies that ran the final year certificate illustrates the changes in the nature of that certificate and its progress from a single-purpose to one that serves diverse needs. The control of the senior certificate for over a hundred years by the University of Melbourne passed in 1964 to a more widely representative body (VUSEB) but one still controlled by a group of universities. In 1979 the establishment of VISE saw an expansion of representation as well as explorations of different types of subjects and assessments at the end of schooling. The establishment of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board (VCAB) in 1986 led to the development of the VCE and a challenge to the strong link between the purpose of senior certificate and tertiary selection

## The Blackburn Report

### The context

In its basic form the case study of the VCE debate is a study of the clash between competing demands: between those supporting the status quo and the forces for change in the face of a rapidly changing environment. The Ministerial review of Post-Compulsory Education (also known as the Blackburn Report) of 1985, on which the VCE was largely based, endorses the “public purposes of education”. Quotations like the following are to be found throughout the Report:

*“We do not claim that education necessarily makes people more moral or more humane. We do believe, however, that it potentially does provide for sharing the collective experience of the human race, for gaining a sense of identity with it, and for gaining access to its best validated knowledge and artistic achievements. Such a basis provides a common background important in **binding a society**, in making possible more equal and reasoned discourse within it and **confident participation in its affairs**. Learning environments which themselves build a sense of mutual responsibility and cooperation can additionally **contribute to the effectiveness of democratic processes**.”*

Source: Blackburn, 1985 Section 3.19 p.16 [emphasis added]

The language used in the Blackburn Report about the purpose of education, especially in the final years of schooling, was relatively new in the Victorian context and the emphasis on the contribution of education towards enhancing the democratic processes through ‘participation’ and ‘binding’ society is different from anything that had preceded it. This is not entirely surprising as matriculation had served a limited purpose and it was only when other factors such as increasing enrolments occurred that the wider debate became pressing. Increasing enrolments and the changing needs of students in the final years of schooling had been evident for many years. There is, however, frequently a time-lag between societal changes like that described above and changes to policies in education, and the creation of the corresponding structures and

bureaucratic procedures that are necessary to support and assist these changes(Ringer, 1979).

The pattern of secondary schooling up to the 1960's in Victoria had been that of a series of exit points which most students took before Years 11 and 12. Only a minority of students continued to Year 12 to matriculate and enter university. It was seen as appropriate, therefore, that it was The University of Melbourne that conducted the examinations at this level. With changing rates of participation in the final years of schooling, however, changing forms of assessment were required. Further, participation at all years of secondary schooling needed review. As a consequence, the Blackburn Report recommended a comprehensive model of schooling, bringing an end to the divide between the existing (junior) Technical Schools and High Schools, as well as recommending a single certificate to replace the multiple Certificates that had previously existed.

The introduction of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) therefore represented a major change in the purpose of the certificate and signalled a change in the governance of senior secondary curriculum and certification in the State. The three most significant changes were:

- The re-creation of a single certificate at the senior level to replace the multiplicity of certificates that had been established in the intervening years after the demise of the Matriculation Certificate.
- The un-coupling of the purpose of the certificate from the single purpose of tertiary preparation and selection. VCAB 's intention was to assess students and report on their results without scaling or weighting for the purposes of tertiary selection as had been done by the bodies formerly in charge of the final years of schooling. As a result of this change in policy, the universities gave the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) additional power and the resources to undertake scaling for the purposes of tertiary selection.
- The absorption of year 12 assessment and certification into the statutory and administrative orbit of government. VCAB like VISE was created by an Act of Parliament, but unlike VISE it came firmly within the ambit of the Public Service. The level of government involvement in many aspects of the development of the VCE was high and was, no doubt, one of the reasons for the 'politicisation' of the certificate and the excessive press-scrutiny that resulted.

# Conceptual approach

## Public purpose, actors, ideologies and institutions

Education may be seen as an institution, with multiple subsets. Here we define institutions as '*a relatively enduring collection of rules and organised practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources.*' (March and Olsen, 1989, p3). While they include formal structures such as the formal structures and governance arrangements for the senior secondary certificates, they also include informal aspects such as policy actors, their behaviours and the operational assumptions that influence behaviours and expectations. In this sense the 'organisational practices' that had been followed for the design and governance of the senior secondary certificate are regarded as institutions.

The institution of education and its subsets, such as the senior secondary certificates have various degrees of partial or relative autonomy (Ringer, 1979; Offe, 1984). This autonomy is from the state and more broadly from the society, or possibly the civil society. Autonomy is variable, mutable and multi-dimensional. However, it is rarely absolute and rarely absent, especially within a liberal democratic state and society.

The relative autonomy of education systems from the state, such as those of Victoria and New South Wales (NSW), has differed historically. The states of NSW is compared in this case study with that of Victoria. Apart from the fact that it is the largest state it provides the strongest contrasts in governance styles with those of Victoria. The NSW 'system' has been seen as more centralised and more public than that of Victoria (Ely, 1973; Barcan, 1988). Within these systems elements of education systems, such as the senior secondary curriculum and their associated agencies have varying degrees of autonomy (Keating, 2000). Autonomy can be gained through and subsequently can strengthen links with other actors and agencies.

In upper secondary education there are multiple actors, apart from the state. They include schools and universities and their associated actors. In Australia the autonomy of upper secondary curriculum and certification has been the most extreme. Here until the late 1970s the agency responsible for the design of curriculum and assessment and the management and issuing of the award was appointed by and controlled by the universities (Musgrave, 1992b). This was in radical contrast to the situation on NSW where the responsible agency was appointed by government and chaired by the director general of education.

The Victorian legacy was product of economic, social and political histories where public secondary schooling was resisted in favour of private schooling (Bessant, 1984). This was influenced by the economic structure of the state and its demographics with a large urban bourgeoisie (Peel, 1989). This was reinforced through a political regime that saw the Labor Party as an infrequent and short term visitor to the treasury benches. As a consequent senior secondary curriculum and certification in the state was received with distinctive sets of institutions, actors and ideologies.

### *Institutions*

There are two institutional legacies that frame the case study. The first was the division of secondary education in the state into technical and secondary schools. The technical schools were a legacy of the political and social resistance to the establishment of secondary education with the public sector and the indifference and



lack of political strength of the labour movement. The belated evolution of public secondary education was framed upon the basis of curricula and relations with tertiary education that had been established through a largely private secondary education system (Musgrave, 1992a). On the other hand the technical schools sector had no relationships with the university sector as its graduates went into apprenticeships, work or technical colleges. So the institutional relations between university and secondary education were unsullied by the needs and claims of these schools, their students and their sectoral agencies.

The second is the relationship between the universities and secondary schooling. During the 1960s and 1970s the certificate and curriculum were managed by the Victorian Universities Secondary Examinations Board (Derham, 1972). This was replaced in 1977 with the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education, and subsequently in 1987 by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board (VCAB). At each stage the influence of the university sector was weakened in favour of the school sector, with a strong representation of teacher and parent organisations in VCAB, plus three state parliamentarians.

Towards and across this period, the state education department had almost no role in senior secondary schooling. It did not set the curriculum and conducted no programs. On the other hand the former technical schools division had an active curriculum and qualifications role. It designed curriculum and awards in the form of the Tertiary Orientation Program and the Technical Schools Year 11 and Year 12 certificates. The decision by state government to establish a common award, the VCE, effectively eliminated this role and the legacy of these awards. As a consequence the formative phase of the VCE, the late 1980s, saw virtually no role for the Victorian education department. The only exceptions were proposals from the State Board of Education for provision models for the government secondary system that would facilitate the introduction of the new VCE (Hannan, 1988). It is notable that this agency drew its policy capital from sources that were essentially external to the education department. This was represented in particular through its chairperson, Bill Hannan, who had a strong background in the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association (see below).

The immediate impact of these two institutional legacies was a type of client relationship between the academic secondary schools and the universities. The relationship was facilitated essentially through the operation of the academic curriculum and the assessment and scoring system for the former Higher Schools certificate and associated interactions of actors through subject committees, subject associations and other forums for academic and cultural engagement. A large percentage of the school personnel came from the independent school sector, which has always been strongest in Victoria, and together these actors formed policy networks (see Smith, 1984) around the curriculum and assessment systems that governed the school – higher education route in the state.

This legacy was confronted in the form of the Blackburn Report on Post Compulsory Education (Blackburn, 1985) with a radical claim that all students should be able to complete secondary schooling and that this should be facilitated through the common award of the VCE. At the same time it was confronted with a more interventionist state government that was willing to attempt to change the institutional arrangements. This was done most directly through a reconstituted agency, the VCAB that would have a different membership and relationship with government. The reasons for these changes were the major decline in full time youth employment and associated rises in

school staying on rates, the demise of the technical schools that also was associated with the labour market changes, and the advent of the first Labor Government since the 1955 split in the Party.

### ***Actors***

As a consequence of these institutional changes the positioning of the actors within senior secondary education changed (see Craig and Spear, 1982). The establishment of a single senior certificate brought into the main scene actors that formally had been associated with non-mainstream courses, the technical courses and an alternative academic course, the Schools Year 12 Certificate that had been established and supported by VSTA activists, including Hannan.

The range of actors also was extended by the changing labour market and school participation contexts. These changes in turn created greater pressure for larger and wider access to tertiary education and the range of schools. Parents and school council organisations, as well as the Catholic school sector had increased interest in patterns of access to and outcomes of senior secondary education.

These actors had always existed. However, the changed circumstances brought them into a new stage, which was a common stage with the established actors from the subject networks, the university sector and its client schools. A further change was the role of the state government which unlike previous governments in Victoria that had taken relatively passive roles in senior secondary curriculum and certification now took a more interventionist role in the context of high levels of youth unemployment that had existed across the decade.

### ***Ideologies***

The ideological context for the VCE debate also is complex. As a broad backdrop Victoria has been characterised by a political culture of small 'i' liberalism, or Deakinite liberalism (Jones, 1994). This was certainly the tenor of the outgoing Liberal Government of the 1970s and early 1980s and was reflected in the senior secondary curricula. Under the VISE regime in secondary schooling there were two groups of studies and awards: Group 1 HSC, which consisted of partially externally assessed subjects; and Group 2 subjects and whole courses, including the STC, which were assessed at the school level.

While the curriculum senior secondary curriculum had been highly contested in the state, with strong campaigns to change the award during the 1970s this arguably was a product of the liberal environment in the state and the absence of education department participation, in comparison with the more corporatist style in NSW. The political culture also had helped to produce multiple teacher unions: those for primary, technical and secondary teachers, and limited engagement between the unions and the government, especially in the area of senior secondary curriculum and assessment, where government chose a hands off approach and trusted the established institutions and their actors.

The liberal political environment was also in the context of a less defined social or class culture in Victoria. A higher percentage of residents in Victoria than NSW than saw themselves as middle class (Holmes, 1976). Demand for higher education has been higher in Victoria than NSW, and Greening (1961) argued that the Melbourne Catholic community had a strong drive for social mobility than elsewhere in Australia. The higher entry scores for Melbourne University Arts courses, compared

with those for Sydney University there is evidence that education in Melbourne retained a higher status value.

Senior secondary education in Victoria therefore was subject to high levels of positional competition, and was located within a relatively liberal policy environment with relatively autonomous policy actors or groups of actors. The twin catalyst of the changes in the change in government and its influence on the composition of the policy networks and the decline in youth market therefore produced a more contested policy situation than in the more centralist political culture of NSW. These catalysts also disrupted the client relationship between the universities, and especially the sandstone University of Melbourne, and their feeder schools.

Underpinning this relationship was the cultural form of the academic curriculum. This curriculum was seen by many of the new actors as representing cultural capital that advantaged the traditional university clients (Bourdieu, 1973; Teese, 2000). However, opposition to it was not single dimensional. Some actors, especially those who were involved in the school based and negotiated courses, including the STC, favoured a more constructivist approach within the VCE curriculum. This tended to mingle with post structuralist approaches and a broad concern that the curriculum should be accessible for all students. Other actors, including Jean Blackburn and Hannan, viewed the curriculum more directly in cultural terms and were concerned to ensure that all students participated in some relatively common cultural studies (Ashenden et al, 1984; Hannan, 1984). The former group were strongly represented on the subject committees for the certificate, and to an extent replaced or at least partially supplemented the traditional participants formed through the university and client school relationships. The latter group were more prominent within the higher level policy makers who helped framed the policy context within which the VCE was to be constructed.

These two sets of actors represented various constructs of public purposes. Both sets represented the democratic view that all students had the right to participate in and complete secondary education. Hannan had long championed this principle and shared this view with the former director of secondary education in Victoria, Ron Reed (Reed, 1975). Blackburn was arguably the first person to transfer this principle into public policy through the state government's acceptance of her report.

The latter group represented a stronger cultural statement about a curriculum that would deliver all students common sets of knowledge, including core cultural heritages in history, literature and civics. These public purposes were not rejected by the former group. However, there was a wariness of curriculum constructs that represented the dominant academic curriculum, which they saw as exclusionary, both culturally and instrumentally.

As semi ideal types, therefore there were three sets of actors that contested the new curriculum domain of the VCE: the established actors that were formed through the university and client school relationships; those who had been nurtured in the traditions of school based and negotiated curriculum construction; and those who argued for a more common but accessible curriculum for all. In fact there was considerable overlap in both personnel across the three areas, and in the ideologies of the of the three sets of actors. None could claim a monopoly over public purposes. However there were clear and significant types and degrees of difference in their constructs of public purposes.

The first group can be termed as traditional conservatives in their concept of curriculum and culture (Young, 2007). In a social sense this was certainly an elitist construct and was built upon the use of cultural capital and the scholastic power of client schools in their relationship with university access and curriculum. In this sense the construct of the curriculum and the certificate served private purposes. As traditionalist, however, the curriculum was located in the disciplines that are constructed and governed in a hierarchical manner. While this curriculum is elitist it does make a claim upon public purpose. This is not a democratic construct, but an argument about the nature of cultural traditions and their transfer (Eliot, 1948; Oakshott, 1989). This comes out in some of the media debates about the VCE.<sup>2</sup>

The second group was quite broad and could be described as student centred. It did consist of people who had a constructivist approach to the curriculum. However, it also included people who felt that the competitive pressures of the HSC were unjustified and that they dictated a teaching and learning style that disadvantaged many students. Essentially they took a democratic view of public purpose: the right of all students to complete secondary education and the right to achieve success in their learning.

The third group drew from the positions of both of the other two groups. It shared the democratic ideal of access and success for all, but argued that the knowledge component of the curriculum should not be differentiated for different groups of students. This was based upon some notion of a common or democratic curriculum where all students would have access to the more important areas of learning, or in Young's Grams kite terms 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2007). The public element of this position was a combination of traditional civics and citizenship, the democratic right of social and economic inclusion, and a rich and active civil society.

It needs to be stressed that these groups are essentially ideal types, as in reality individuals tended to have a mixture of positions on various issues. However, the establishment of VCAB and its committees and the acceptance by the government of having a common certificate to replace the multiple awards had the impact of marshalling actors who previously had not been central in design and management of the HSC.

It is significant that these ideal types do not include forms of neo-liberalism. This is curious given the strength of neo-liberalism in the UK and USA at the time, and its subsequent impact under the Liberal Party Government in Victoria from 1992 to 1999. 'New Right' think tanks were well established by this time, and arguments for self governance in schooling and the use of vouchers were widespread. However, the initial core issue with the VCE was contested access to university, and what the new policy actors saw as privileged or sponsored access for middle class groups. Ironically measures proposed by some of the new actors were for the deconstruction of the assessment systems which they argued were culturally and institutionally biased against the interests of less advantaged students. Neo-liberalism therefore had no real ideological voice in the debate and if anything would have sided with some of the more radical curriculum deconstructionists. However, given its association with

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Kevin Donnolly who gained his media profile through the VCE debate began his criticisms with attacks upon some of the texts listed for VCE English. His argument was based upon a view that all students should have access to the most important texts and authors, and he was influenced in this by people such as Jean Blackburn and Bill Hannan and their writings about a common curriculum.

the Liberal party neo liberal advocates inevitably entered the VCE debate as it became a key focus of the attack upon the wounded and what proved to be terminal Labor government.

Three sets of changes that were brought in through these actors provide key pressure points for the subsequent VCE debate and contestation:

- The most significant changes were those designed to weaken the competitive pressure of the senior secondary award. These changes included the separation of requirements for the award of the certificate from the assessments for the purposes of tertiary selection; the use of P/N grades for year 11 subjects; the reduction in external examinations; and the reduction of the grading scale.
- The decision to establish a common and compulsory subject, Australian Studies. This subject covered Australian history, civics, literature and other cultural artefacts. Initially it was designated as compulsory in year 11.
- The design of some key subjects – History, English, Science and Mathematics. Broadly these subjects initially were designed in less hierarchical ways, and with a greater capacity for breadth and choice within them.

These three sets of changes, with their origins located in the two ‘democratic oriented’ sets of actors and ideologies, provided the main areas of contestation over the extended VCE debate. However, it must be stressed that overlaying these changes and the criticisms of them was a campaign against a state government that fell deeper into crisis over the course of the debate. With the appointment of Joan Kirner, who had been a parent and community activist, as education minister and subsequently premier the attacks took a strong ideological tone. Kirner who was a member of the Socialist Left faction of the Labor Party was cast as a social engineer. With the VCE being launched under her watch as education minister and premier and with the strong influence of the new sets of policy actors, many of whom had backgrounds in the teacher unions and parent organisations, these accusations naturally flowed through to the new certificate. While these accusations clearly had political spin, they were cast in assumptions about purpose

### **The Narrative: Attack and defence.**

The VCE had been subject to some criticism through the latter half of 1989, and in particular from the Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University, David Penington. In mid-October of that year these challenges gained sustained media attention. On 15 October, the *Sunday Herald* published three articles that were critical of the VCE. One headed "*English facelift*" criticised the VCE English course that would enable students to "*study virtually anything including popular songs, television programs and even the writings of other students*". A second by journalist Geoff Strong saw the VCE as "*an exercise in social engineering with political motives*", and cited the Melbourne University member of VCAB, Geoff Opat in saying that VCAB had been "*stacked by teacher unions and fellow travellers such as some parents' associations*" (Herald Sun, 15.10.89).<sup>3</sup> The third was a long article by Penington (Herald Sun, 15.10.89) who in raising questions about Australian Studies, the requirements for breadth, the assessment systems, and the grading scale, also called

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<sup>3</sup> Strong had worked for John Cain as a media adviser. According to Joan Kirner (1987) he had a falling out with the government and "*then had it in for us. He had it in for me in particular. He was one of the boyos.*" (22.9.96)

for the development of the VCE to be a more open process rather than being “*handled by bureaucrats and a small group of educationalists behind closed doors.*”(14)

These articles were followed two days later by another in *The Age* by the shadow education minister, John Richardson (17.10.89), in which he accused the education minister Joan Kirner of pursuing social rather than educational goals for the VCE. A number of conservative journalists and social commentators joined the fray. In the same month B.A. Santamaria (Australian, 24.10.89) writing in the *Australian* gave support to Penington, and the conservative *Age* columnist Michael Barnard (24.20.89) joined in with accusations of political duress on the part of the government.<sup>4</sup>

Penington (*Age*, 2.10.89b) followed with another article on 2 November, in which he questioned the validity of the study design concept and the Common Assessment Tasks (CATs) that were to be the basis for the VCE assessment, especially when used as preparation and selection for higher education.

These types of criticism were to continue, albeit in a diminished number, until the October 1992 election in which the Labor government suffered a landslide defeat. The media attention broadened to radio, especially to the popular and conservative Melbourne station, 3AW. The criticisms provoked a variety of defensive activities from both the Board and the government including public forums and presentations. VCAB commissioned an independent evaluation of the progress of the VCE, and of the pilot programs that were being conducted for the new studies and the CATs in a number of schools (see Northfield & Winter, 1993).

As a case study, the VCE displayed a number of features that possibly have made it unique in the Victorian, if not the Australian, experience of the past few decades. The debate was sustained and highly politicised. It maintained a considerable amount of media attention, which was characterised by populist rhetoric.<sup>5</sup>

### **Higher education, private schools and ideology.**

As a curriculum reform the VCE it was in the comprehensive tradition, but with an academic bias. Only three of its 44 studies were technical, and to a considerable extent this was due to the strong desire amongst the government and Catholic school representatives on the Board, strongly backed up by the FOSCs and officers of the Board, to maintain a common framework (Kelly 26.9.97). The framework that was

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<sup>4</sup> Santamaria had been an influential figure in Victoria for fifty years. He has been closely associated with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and had been deeply involved in the split in the Labor Party in 1955. His National Civic Council, and its journal, *News Weekly*, were closely associated with the Democratic Labor Party, created by the split, and which helped to keep Labor out of power in Victoria and the Commonwealth throughout the 1950s and '60s (Murray, 1972). His article on the VCE displayed elements of the Mannix thesis, in stating “*in my day the Christian Brothers literally worked their butts off to overcome the social, economic and racial disadvantages of working-class families to enable them to compete successfully with students from private schools*” (*News Weekly*, 1.7.90). Santamaria’s intervention demonstrates the complexity of the VCE debate. He had little time for neo liberalism and would have been in accord with the traditionalist in curriculum.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the newspaper headlines included: *VCE: a lesson in lunacy*; *VCE ‘Socialist’*; *‘Mickey Mouse’ Marxist fears*; *VCE Subjects Raise Visions of Monty Python* (Gill, 1995); *The VCE Fumble* (*Herald Sun*, 27.9.91)

The figures included Penington; a number of journalists: Matthew Pinkney of the *Herald Sun*; Geoff Strong of the *Sunday Herald*, Christopher Bantick, a freelance conservative journalist; radio journalists Margaret Fletcher, and Neil Mitchell of 3AW; teachers: Kevin Donnelly of Camberwell Grammar, Michael Hallpike of Bendigo High School; Babette Francis of the Endeavour Forum. The right-wing think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs, also joined the fray.

achieved required all studies to be accepted by the university for tertiary selection. In this sense the public purpose was a strong and unique statement that all students had the right to access or at least compete for access to university.

One interpretation of attacks upon VCE has been that of the reaction of conservative educational interests in the universities and the private schools (for example, McDonnell, 2.10.96; Morrow 11.7.96). Northfield (1993) has concluded that “*many in the community failed to accept the underlying rationale for the VCE*” (111). Gill (1995) argues that “*the reform redefined and broadened the senior secondary curriculum in terms of comprehensive courses of study and broad-based assessment procedures*” (111). Collins (1992a, 1992b) has argued that the VCE constitutes a common cultural approach to the curriculum, that is not individualist or elitist, and which challenges the codified academic traditions, especially those established in the positivist subjects of mathematics and physical sciences.

There was a considerable degree of disquiet within the universities over the developments in post-compulsory curriculum and certification. John Legge recalls that “*the universities had a feeling of simply not being listened to*” and that the universities were “*highly suspicious of the plans that were being developed*” (3.2.97) by VISE. But he believes that the universities had accepted the aim of increased levels of participation and in the end “*we realised that we weren’t going to get away*” with resisting reform. He also recalls going to the VVCC in 1987, just before the endorsement by the Board of the VCE policy, and saying to them “*if you can’t live with this, then it is about your last chance. And basically they didn’t do anything*” (3.2.97).

There was not a united front, however, either across or within the universities on the key issues associated with university pressure.<sup>6</sup> The Vice Chancellor of Deakin University, Malcolm Skilbeck, was supportive of the reforms, and John Scott of La Trobe University was sympathetic (corr. to J. Legge, 1990). Mal Logan of Monash University was generally regarded as being on side (Hill, 24.7.96), although his Deputy Vice Chancellor, John Hay, was more critical of the VCE.

The evidence for sustained university resistance is qualified also by the fact that there was a considerable degree of concern on the Board, and especially on the executive of the Board, about the nature of the mathematics, English and some of the science studies. Kelly recalls that we “*really let maths and English go on for too long before doing anything about them.*” (26.9.96) It had also become clear to some by 1992 that the verification system for the assessments was becoming close to unworkable (Kelly, 26.9.96; McKay, 2.9.96).

The argument that the exaggerated public debate on the VCE was primarily the result of a sustained assault from a higher education sector in response to its loss of hegemony is difficult to sustain. One reason for this is that the sector during this period was changing rapidly. The *Dawkins revolution* in higher education was having

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<sup>6</sup> In May 1990 the Vice Chancellors of Deakin and La Trobe Universities, Malcolm Skilbeck and John Scott both wrote to John Legge, the acting chairperson of VCAB, indicating their acceptance of the new VCE assessment policy. By 1990, Mal Logan of Monash was able to say that “*Monash is certainly more supportive of the VCE than most other Victorian Universities...It is important to remember that the VCE must serve a range of markets - not just the universities.*” (Age 12.11.90). These responses can be compared to Penington’s letter to Tisher the new Board Chairperson which concluded with the words. “*Decisions about University entrance are for the University to make, not for VCAB to pass judgement upon.*” (15 June).

a profound impact with the rapid growth in the sector, the amalgamation of institutions and the abolition of the binary system of universities and colleges of advanced education. Just as difficult is the argument that the debate was initiated by the push back of academic and private school interests who felt that their client relationships with the universities was threatened. Attackers and defenders came from all three sectors: independent, government and Catholic.

It is within that context that the role of David Penington, the most prominent of the critics, needs to be considered. Penington replaced David Caro as Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University in 1988. He began his assault on the VCE in late 1989 and was the principle figure in the debate that followed over the next three years. He rounded on most of the prominent issues: the rigour and contents of the study designs (English, mathematics and physics); Australian studies; student workload; the CATs; and grades.<sup>7</sup> He did not adopt the rhetorical style of some of the other critics, and was careful to point out that “*the VCE is here to stay...we want to get it right*” (19.6.91), and expressed concern that the students from working class areas should not be disadvantaged.

Kelly recalls “*I think that David Penington’s role in all of this has almost been a curriculum version of Francis Urquart in the Final Cut (a BBC series): Really calculating, and very very clever; appealing to the common touch but at the same time making sure that particular groups were looked after...I think that what motivated him was clearly a desire to undermine the minister and destabilise the perceived push to the levelling, as it were.*” (26.9.96) He employed a research assistant, John Daley, who made his own contribution to the ‘debate’ (The Age, 20.3.90) and attempted to furnish him with some basis in educational philosophy where the libertarian aspects of progressive education philosophies drawn from a confused combination of Dewey, Piaget and Gramsci were exemplified in the figure of Bill Hannan (3AW, 19.6.91).<sup>8</sup>

McRae’s view that Penington “*organised a group of academics and private school principals to correspond to the Age and generally make themselves felt in the media*” (23.10.96) is supported by Kelly (26.9.96) and Hill (24.7.96). Hill offers the most analytical view of Penington’s behaviour: “*At the time thinking within education was dominated by the notion that we should be extending access to tertiary education to more students...The vice chancellors were wanting more enrolments. David Penington came to the Vice Chancellorship with a vision of what Melbourne University would be, and it was against the stream. His thoughts were that the future of the University of Melbourne would be in the extent to which it could become a world class university, and this meant attracting the very best students as opposed to what some universities were wanting - to attract the very most students. So one thing that we encountered at the time and didn’t realise it was that Melbourne had a particular philosophy that did not sit with the VCE, nor indeed with the philosophy of other universities, such as Monash...in the debates that I had with the Vice Chancellors it was clear that the VCE was vigorously supported by Mal Logan, Skilbeck and indeed by Scott.*” (24.7.96)

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<sup>7</sup> See The Age, 2.10.89, 17.10.89; 3AW 19.12.90, 19.6.91; 3LO, 24.6.91.

<sup>8</sup> Daley had taken this combination from an earlier article attacking Hannan by B.A. Santamaria in News Weekly.

John Legge recalls Penington expressing his concern about Hannan’s role in VCAB and the VCE. “*I told him that was wrong and that he had no role in the policy. But I don’t think that he believed it*” (3.2.97).



Ann Morrow recalls “a report of an interview he (Penington) gave to the *Straits Times* about the VCE and Victorian education under Joan Kirner. Penington was out campaigning, even to the extent of saying things in a foreign country.....he wanted to preserve the elitism of Melbourne University - a world class university - and a very good way to do this was to cream off the best students.” (11.7.96)<sup>9</sup>

Penington was one of the few in the VCE debate to consistently favour a segregated certificate. He questioned the common framework (Herald Sun, 15.10.89), initiated a move by Melbourne University to endorse a set of 22 subjects that could be included in students’ best four studies, and later began to support a German style of binary post-compulsory education (1994).<sup>10</sup> Faced with Commonwealth and state governments with strong policies of increased levels of participation, greater equality of access to higher education, and the elimination of the binary system, it was natural that Penington should make his campaign political. In doing this he recruited supporters who were anti-Labor.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand this is essentially an elitist position, and a highly political one for a vice chancellor of the nation’s most prestigious university.<sup>12</sup> One interpretation of Penington’s lack of political and social bipartisanship is the strength of class capture of elite education in Victoria, and the consequential arrogance of some of its champions towards the state.

Symbolically Penington represented a section of the community that while not rejecting the right of all to compete for entry into the university, were not prepared to allow this right to unduly influence institutional forms that they saw as undermining the institutional forms of knowledge and the curriculum and the status and influence of established institutional agencies: the elite universities and the elite schools. In this sense the public democratic purposes needed to be kept in their place.

### **The establishment, the media and the new right**

A second interpretation of the VCE debate is that it was the response of the social and economic establishment and elements of the new right towards a curriculum and certificate structure that challenged their cultural and institutional hegemony. McRae describes it as group conflict: “It was a loss of hegemony, probably at root, and still is. The certificate was the plaything of the private schools, and the elite sector. We were the Paul Keatings (the Labor Prime Minister - 1992-96) of education in a way. We knew what we wanted, the analysis was good, it had a lot of energy.....I think that affected them more than anything else....There were so many efforts at all levels to build bridges. It was culturally impossible. It wouldn’t happen anywhere else in

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<sup>9</sup> The *Straits Times* is a Malaysian newspaper.

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that Penington, despite having got these proposals through the university council, was eventually forced to drop them. There was resistance from groups such as the Catholic Church which objected to the omission of religious subjects, and from discipline interests within the university. His letter to the new VCAB chairperson, Dick Tisher (June 3 1990) who had objected to the measure, was a bristly assertion of university autonomy on the matter of selection. This letter was very different in its tone to one sent by Penington to the Catholic Archbishop Little (July 2, 1990) possibly indicating an acceptance of the Archbishop as part of the establishment. It might also indicate an assertion of autonomy from the state agency, on the one hand, but not from an important element of the civil society, on the other.

<sup>11</sup> While Penington was most probably politically conservative, he has also opposed conservative governments, as he did against the Victorian Liberal Party government over youth drug issues in 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Prestige is difficult to measure. But given the relative strength of the educational culture in Victoria compared with NSW, and judged by cut-off scores for the elite courses in Melbourne and Sydney (the other claimant to the ‘most prestigious’) universities (Moodie, 1995), Melbourne’s claim as the most prestigious is probably justified.

*Australia because of the assumptions of the establishment of the state, and their proprietorial rights over anything that has major social consequences. It's visible every time you read the Age*" (23.10.96).

Hill believes that there "was a shadowy group located within the independent school sector" (24.7.96) that was supplying Penington, the shadow education minister Don Hayward, and the *Herald Sun* with information. Private schools more directly represent the interests of the bourgeoisie in Victoria than do the universities. The responses of many of the most prominent of these schools indicate that they would prefer to retain the HSC structure which had served them well.<sup>13</sup> The major objections were to those aspects of the VCE that would restrict the capacity of schools to maximise the TER. Australian Studies and the provisions for breadth would hinder the concentration upon the high scoring subjects of maths, science and languages; the two-year certificate would limit the practice of many schools of effectively providing a two-year preparation for the Group 1 studies; more time was needed to prepare for the VCE; and the external exams were generally regarded as being a more secure means of gaining high scores.<sup>14</sup> These same views were expressed by Don Marles (corr. to Tischer, 1990) on behalf of 18 private schools in a letter to Dick Tisher, the Board Chairperson.

For a number of reasons, it is difficult, however, to interpret the VCE debate as primarily a resistance to the shape of the reforms on the part of the private schools. Firstly, the VCE debate was not an educational debate. Its rhetoric was political, as well as cultural, and conspiratorial. Secondly, there were elements of the prestigious private school sector which were supportive of the reforms. The principals of three prestigious schools, Tony Hill of Melbourne Grammar, Steven Lorch of Mount Scopus Memorial College, and Tony Hewison of St Michael's Grammar were all progressive educationalists and amongst the most public of the advocates for the VCE. While other principals such as Marles and Tony Conabere of Wesley college were prominent critics, the private schools displayed a diversity of responses.<sup>15</sup> One large element of the private school sector, the non-systemic Catholic schools, were kept relatively silent by the work of the Catholic Education Commission (Doyle, 18.10.96).<sup>16</sup>

This is not to say that the elite private schools did not see themselves in a client relationship with the year 12 certificate. This small sector has always been the most demanding towards the certificate; has consistently gained disproportionate representation on the Boards and subject committees, and has extracted favours from the office of the Board.<sup>17</sup> The views of progressive principals within this sector were that as long as the VCE did not threaten their interests they were willing to support it both on educational grounds and for the social aims of increased levels of

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<sup>13</sup> See responses to the VCE Options Paper: A. Aikman, Haileybury College, 1987; W Broadbent, Carey Grammar, 1987; I Good, Ivanhoe Grammar, 1987; I Day, Tintern Grammar; D Marles, Trinity Grammar; J Nelson, Geelong Grammar. (VCAB)

<sup>14</sup> This was reflected in the support given by Heads of Independent Schools Association for a one year certificate (Age, 13.2.95).

<sup>15</sup> See transcript of the public forum on the VCE, Monash University (1990)

<sup>16</sup> Tom Doyle, the Director of the CEO, was always careful to keep the elite Catholic schools within the fold by ensuring that the Archbishop was on side.

<sup>17</sup> In 1995 a public controversy occurred over the fact that the executive director of the new Victorian Board of Studies had allowed a remarking of assessments, in contravention of the rules, after being prevailed upon by a number of private schools.

participation and opportunity. As yet there is no real evidence to show that the VCE has disadvantaged the private school sector (Bradley, 2007).

Thirdly, much of the rhetorical aspects of VCE debate were carried out by figures in the old and new right in Victoria. Santamaria's *News Weekly* ran several articles attacking the VCE. Babette Francis' Endeavour Forum was an anti-feminist organisation. Both Santamaria and Francis (1990), who could not be described as neo-liberal, attacked the CEO for its support of the VCE. Robert Gottliebson the editor of the *Business Review Weekly* and a strong Hayekian free marketeer advised parents with school-aged children to leave the state. The Institute of Public Affairs (IPA, 1991) published a number of criticisms of the VCE, as did the conservative journal *Quadrant* (for example, Hallpike, 1990).

Fourthly, the VCE debate was effective at two levels. At one level, it was marked by a range of exchanges in correspondence between the Board and interest groups, memoranda from school authorities, public forums organised by education bodies, and the occasional attempt at an objective newspaper article.<sup>18</sup> At the second level, it was a media campaign, the most sustained element of which was an attack upon the English study (Gill, 1994).

The media itself, by this stage, had become more politically partisan. In the depth of a recession and a budgetary crisis for the Victoria government, elements of the media had turned strongly anti-Labour, and were receptive vehicles for the more rhetorical elements of the debate. In particular, Piers Ackermann the editor of the *Herald-Sun*, the largest selling daily newspaper, was strongly anti-Labor, and his education writer, Mathew Pinkney, sustained an anti-VCE line in his articles.<sup>19</sup> The Ministry of education submitted a complaint (Morrow, 1991) to the Australian Press Council over two articles printed in the *Herald Sun*, one titled "*Hookers give VCE lesson*" (24.3.91). Even an ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission) radio journalist could introduce an interview with Howard Kelly with the words: "*And now the VCE, another way of saying shamble*" (Jost, 3LO, 18 Feb. 1992). Penington's advantage and genius was that he was able to operate at both of these levels. As the senior educator in the state he had to be taken very seriously in the negotiations surrounding the VCE. But he was willing to associate his arguments with those of the rhetoricians and give them a credibility that they might otherwise not have gained.<sup>20</sup>

### **Politics, the government and the bureaucracy**

Explanations of the extreme reaction to the VCE that are located in the conservative educational interests in the universities and the private schools, and the social and economic establishment and elements of the new right need to be supplemented. It is necessary, therefore, to look towards the state as an important element in the VCE debate. From the establishment of VCAB until the change of government in 1992, the Labor government had little direct influence over the VCE policy. The only intervention was an indirect request to increase the grading scale.<sup>21</sup> The VCE policy

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<sup>18</sup> For example, see Marles to Tischer, 1990; Francis, *The Age*, 28.10.90; Penington, 3AW, 19.12.1990; Doyle, 29.10.89; Monash University Forum, 1990.

<sup>19</sup> Ackermann had been editor of the *Adelaide Advertiser*. The union movement organised a successful boycott of the paper because of its conservative bias. An attempt at a similar boycott in Victoria was less successful.

<sup>20</sup> For example, 3AW, 19 December 1990; and references to the Brownlow Medal, a local football award (3AW, 15.10. 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Under extreme pressure from Penington.

was the work of the Board, and until the 1988 elections it had enjoyed bi-partisan support. There was a number of factors that drew the VCE into the realm of the state.

The Liberal Party's change of attitude was exemplified in newspaper articles and radio interviews given by its leader (3AW, 28.8.92) and shadow minister (Age, 17.10.89).<sup>22</sup> Some of the more prominent critics of the VCE had strong Liberal Party links. They included teachers Michael Hallpike and Kevin Donnelly who, towards the election openly supported the Liberal Party (1992); Greg Craven (1990) who would later work for the Attorney General in the Coalition government; and Tim Duncan (1991) who had worked for the Liberal Party.<sup>23</sup> The basic reason for the Liberal Party's attacks upon the VCE was the belief that it would weaken the Labor government. Joan Kirner believes that opposition to the VCE came from an alliance of conservative education interests, "*greatly aided and abetted by Piers Ackermann in the Herald Sun who looked around for three things that might kill our government: unemployment, financial management and the VCE - the triumvirate of devils.*" (22.9.96)

A second factor was that the state got drawn into the debate. The government took the decision to strongly back the VCE through a Ministerial Statement (Kirner, 1989), public statements of support by the government, and an advertising campaign.<sup>24</sup> Kirner believed that the bureaucracy was "*reeling a bit from the attacks*" (22.9.96), and Morrow notes that while the "*VCE came from the bureaucracy. It was the politicians who got landed with it...It was very in-house and the community was not brought along...There was a certain naïveté or arrogance that 'of course we have got it right'*" (11.7.96). The Board itself appeared to founder after chairperson Hill's departure in late 1989. There was a limited candidature to succeed him in the position of chairperson with the selected applicant, Gary Willmott of South Australia, deciding not to accept the position. Dick Tisher, from Monash University, having accepted the position resigned after a very difficult year in the job.

The appointment of Joan Kirner as education minister strengthened the politicisation of the debate.<sup>25</sup> As somebody with a strong identity within the education community and the first education minister from the Socialist Left faction of the Labor Party, Kirner was strongly and incorrectly associated with the VCE. Kirner had virtually no role in the development, and knew few of its details upon taking office, but the rhetoric of the debate included frequent references to her. Duncan (Herald Sun, 7.7.91) stated that "*devising the controversial VCE experiment on Victoria's school children was the culmination of her life's work.*" Barnard (Age, 89) referred to "*Mrs Kirner's grand new social manifesto*". The Age columnist Ryan wrote "*..Mother Russia has been at work harder than you may think.*" (Age, 18.5.91)<sup>26</sup> The more cautious Age could refer in its editorial to the "*suspicion that Ms Kirner's agenda in this is as much social and political as it is educational*" (23.11.89). As late as 1994, the generally serious journal the *Independent Monthly* carried an article by Christopher Bantick (1994) which stated "*The VCE was the vision of Joan Kirner.*" (13) The

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<sup>22</sup> In 1989 Kennett was on the backbench, but returned as leader in 1991.

<sup>23</sup> Donnelly was subsequently awarded numerous consultancies by the new conservative government and appointed to the VBOS (Age, 28.10.98).

<sup>24</sup> Kirner continued to do this as Premier, for example, 1990.

<sup>25</sup> Contrary to the views of a number of people interviewed, I believe that there is evidence to suggest that the Liberal Party in particular had targeted the VCE before Kirner's appointment. Haddon Storey's failure to attend the VCAB Board meeting at which the VCE policy was ratified is one example.

<sup>26</sup> *Mother Russia* was one of the terms used against Kirner.

interventions of the government most probably exacerbated the situation. The television advertisements were populist in their tone. McRae recalls being appalled at the advertisements. *“They were going for tizz. It had to be sober, thoughtful and considered. I knew we’d lost it in terms of the seriousness of what was happening”*.(23.10.96)

By 1990, the government had become more isolated. It was electorally dead in the water and was facing hostility from its support base in the unions.<sup>27</sup> The VSTA chose to target the VCE in its various industrial campaigns with various threats of sabotage, including the refusal to process CAT results.<sup>28</sup> There was some support from the parent organisations, but it was only the Catholic school sector that was prominent in the defense of the VCE through letters to the newspapers and memoranda to schools.<sup>29</sup>

With these partial exceptions, the government was landed with both the VCE and the debate. It was, therefore, free game for anyone to associate the claimed ills of the VCE with the apparent sins of the government, which by now was depicted as representing a minority of organisational and ideological interests. As a consequence, the codification rather than the content and construction of the VCE was crucial in the messages that were to be sent to the public.

### **Ideology and the state**

The VCE reforms were complex, as have been most of the similar reforms in upper secondary education of the last decade or more. In transmitting the intentions of these reforms to both the broader education community and the public, an educational agency and its associated policy networks will need to codify the reforms in a manner that will be acceptable to the prevailing culture. This is essentially a bourgeois culture, and this is especially the case in Victoria. As an apparently radical reform, the VCE was codified as ideology. This was the experience of Cathie, Hill and Praetz who believed that *“the notion of the line is very important in Victorian educational politics, or was at the time.”* (24.7.96) The two most powerful elements of *the line* within the VCE were the common framework and the study structures. To a large extent the CATs were an outcome of these two elements. The rhetoric that codified this ideology was that of ‘parity of esteem’, ‘flexible design’, ‘success for all’.

The ideology had developed within the school education networks over several decades in the vacuum created by the university dictates of the VUSEB and the Group 1 subjects under VISE, and the almost complete absence of the education department in policy making about post-compulsory schooling.<sup>30</sup> The expression of this ideology within Group 2 subjects and whole-course structures was not a serious challenge to university, private and some government school interests, or their clients, the middle

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<sup>27</sup> The government suffered a long strike by the Tramways Union over the introduction of driver-only trams (Cain, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> The VSTA largely lost interest in the VCE. It was preoccupied with internal power struggles and with the amalgamation with the other two teacher unions. Its increasingly industrial view of the VCE is demonstrated by Graham (1991).

<sup>29</sup> For example, Stafford and Arthur (Age, 7.11.89); Leahy (Australian, 23.1.91); Doyle and Hill (Sunday Herald, 29.11.89); Doyle, 1991.

<sup>30</sup> This was to remain the case under the Labor years, except for the activities of the State Board of Education and of Hannan after he became Manager of School Programs within the Office of School Administration.

class. But its translation into the common framework of the VCE established the theatre for potential conflict.

The particular structure and history of government secondary education in Victoria had never encouraged the development of an alternative and middle-class oriented educational ideology at the post-compulsory level within the state system. As a consequence, the development of ideology within the school sector had occurred largely through organisational and, in particular, union political processes. The philosophical foundations of this ideology were not exceptional at the time, being largely about allowing the working class to gain greater access to secondary and university education. But the codification of this philosophy into greater equality of outcomes, parity of esteem, and commonness was in conflict with the tenets of differentiation, individualism and merit that are central to bourgeois culture. And the educational instruments of these codes, largely expressed as limitations in the essential instruments of differentiation, central syllabi, exams and grades, were also in conflict with bourgeois values.

This provided the particular context in Victoria for the VCE debate. As an educational reform, the VCE maintained a strong degree of support within the education community. Upon the basis of the responses to the options paper, the educational institutions of the bourgeoisie could live with the VCE, especially the VCE that has emerged in the mid 1990s.<sup>31</sup> There is also evidence that business was happy with the reforms. The chief executive of the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, David Edwards, “*congratulated the Board on bringing the VCE reform as far as it had.*” (VCAB, 1990). But there were two other sets of changes. One was the rhetoric of the reform, and the other was who was calling the shots in upper secondary certification.

*Parity of esteem, study structures, ‘common’ assessment tasks, verification, authentication and Australian studies* are not the language of the academic curriculum, and privileged access. They may not, in themselves, constitute a threat to bourgeois interests, but they lack the security of *examinations, percentage marks, standards, and syllabi*.<sup>32</sup> Those familiar with the rhetoric and details of the VCE could be reassured. But those less close to the developments were more susceptible to doubt. The rhetoric of the VCE allowed its association with a broader social and political rhetoric of *levelling, socialism, mediocrity*, the language that frequented the writing of the rhetoricians, such as Donnelly, Hallpike, Ryan, Francis and Pinkney. In some cases, such as Donnelly and Hallpike’s campaign against English, the rhetoric could be attached to a grain of truth, and fed by a defensive and somewhat righteous VCAB office. The association of the rhetoric of the VCE then allowed a codification of the VCE that was most certainly a threat to the bourgeoisie, a fact quickly realised by the Liberal Party. As David McRae has lamented, and as Ann

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<sup>31</sup> The examination components of most of the key academic studies was at least 50%, and the study designs were possibly as tight as those of Group 1 subjects.

There is also no certainty that the VCE has delivered more equal educational outcomes for the working class. Apart from Vickers’ (1995) argument that the diversity of the Victorian HSC led to increased retention rates, the fall in retention rates in Victoria from 1991, the year prior to the full implementation of the new VCE, has been greater than the national average.

Source: ABS, Cat. No. 42210.0, 1995.

<sup>32</sup> Howard Kelly later reflected “*We should never have used the term common. It should have been special assessment tasks, or something else*”(12.9.96).

Morrow has concurred, the government's advertising campaign only served to reinforce this codification.

The other essential element was to associate this code with elements of the education community with radical histories. Hannan and the VSTA were the obvious targets. John Legge recalls how Penington (1991) was convinced that Hannan was behind the VCE, and characterised him as the embodiment of the ills of progressive education. Donnelly (Sunday Herald, 26.8.90) claimed that "*the certificate is the product of a particular ideology. One only needs to note how many aged hippies and ex-VSTA activists are working for Joan Kirner and VCAB to realise the truth of that claim*". The IPA (1991) described the VCE as "*the kind of education that might produce what the Italian Marxist Gramsci hoped for*"(3)<sup>33</sup>. The Australian editorial regarded "*Australian Studies as a vehicle for propaganda*" (25.10.91). And Francis (28.10.90) wrote of "*Mrs Kirner and the left wing of the Labor Party who believe that by changing education and selection into the universities, they would change the structure of society.*"

The campaign against the VCE was an amalgam of the electoral opportunism of the Liberal Party, elements of the radical right that found a natural target in education under a left-wing feminist Labor woman education minister, and elements of the educational establishment in Victoria.<sup>34</sup> Penington was happy to speak at Liberal Party forums, but rigorously proclaimed his independence.<sup>35</sup> The same could be said of the private school sector as a bloc, whose more prominent critics of the VCE did not associate themselves with the rhetoricians. Penington's consistent line was that there was a need for change, but that there were things wrong with the VCE which had to be put right<sup>36</sup>. He argued that there was resistance to open discussion about the VCE. While this protest lacks credulity in the light of the range of his criticism, and the accuracy of some of his statements, Penington was essentially asserting the authority of the University of Melbourne in this area, and in particular its independence from government.

There was no love lost between Penington and the Commonwealth Labor education minister Dawkins who decided to weigh into the VCE debate with criticisms of Penington and advice to the Victorian government to tell "*Professor Penington where to go*" (Herald-Sun, 10 Feb. 1991). At the same time encouragement was given by the University to a number of schools that were considering introducing the International Baccalaureate, and Penington was happy to rattle the sabre of "*mount our own tests*" (Herald Sun 13 June 1990).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This was ironic as he drew his earlier views on core cultural knowledge from a Gramskian framework.

<sup>34</sup> The National Party, although part of joint press releases attacking the certificate, was consistently moderate in its criticism, and supportive of the VCE through its Board members David Evans and Bruce Skeggill (Kelly 26.9.96).

<sup>35</sup> For example, 10 Sept, 1990 a forum held by the Bentleigh Electoral Committee of the Liberal Party (Southern Cross, 22.8.90).

<sup>36</sup> In 1990 when consulted by the government about the wisdom of increasing the marking scale, which Penington had been demanding, Mal Logan advised that the scale should not be increased. In his view this would only encourage Penington, and allow him to move on to another demand, and then another (personal correspondence).

<sup>37</sup> A briefing paper to the VCAB Board, (26/5/91) noted that while there was only one school in Victoria that will offer the IB: The Kilmore International School, "*greater interest has been expressed in the IB by some non-government schools during the past year, apparently due to continuing doubts about the position taken by The University of Melbourne on the status of the VCE.*"

The considerable irony of the VCE is that its form and its code were the particular products of an education policy interests that were strongly separated from the state. Even the major elements of the state policy apparatus, the State Board of Education and the VISE committees were virtually separate or isolated from the state. Yet it was the state, and particularly the Labor government, that was linked to the ideological codes that were formed through the gradual public exposure of the VCE and its major players.

The attacks upon the VCE were initiated by conservative interests that had until the 1980s enjoyed a high degree of autonomy in secondary and university education. This was essentially an expression of private purposes against the broader public purpose of the reforms. Because of the nature of the attacks the state, in the form of the Labor Government that had initiated but not designed the reforms, felt the need to defend them. It is significant that those elements of civil society that had developed relationships with the state both traditionally and more recent through the structural economic reforms of the 1980s, such as the Catholic education system and the industry groups, remained strong supporters of the VCE reforms. Those groups in education that could be characterised as traditionally elitist and autonomous – some private schools and elements of the universities – felt threatened and led the attacks. With a weakened government the political opportunity to use these attacks against the Government was considerable. Once these attacks began they were joined by sundry elements and individuals, many who could be described as ideologues.

This case study is set within a community with a strong tradition of the separation of upper secondary education from the state. One outcome of this separation was the formation of policy interests associated with government schooling that were also relatively autonomous from the state. Faced with a highly autonomous policy networks linked to traditional educational forms, consistent with Ringer's (1979) point, and a disjointed bureaucracy, the Labor government was not able to fully develop or articulate its reform agenda. As a consequence, the VCE reforms were codified into ideology and this, combined with the electoral vulnerability of the government, allowed the assertion of traditional educational ideology in a hegemonic form. As a settlement it was not consensual, and thus left more dynamic conditions that allow for greater diversity to emerge.



## **The media**

Within these conditions another set of traditionally autonomous institutions were to play a major role. The media typically is militant about protecting its autonomy, especially from the state. This autonomy may be threatened by the modern state where governments invest substantial resources into media management and provide the media with substantial revenue through paid advertisements. However, at the time of the VCE debates it would be difficult to assert that the Victorian government had any substantial influence over the media. Its levels of investment in media management and in advertising were minimal compared with contemporary standards, and it was highly vulnerable both politically, with a majority of only 3 in the parliament, and electorally in the context of a recession and an image of administrative mismanagement.

The autonomy of the media and especially the daily newspapers is also expressed through a robust editorial role that is manifest in formal editorials and in the selection, content and style, location and timing, and headings of news items, and in the capacity of individuals and organisations to have opinions and letters published.

Of the two Victorian dailies the Age provides the richest case of media treatment. The Herald Sun has mostly taken a more populist and less liberal position on social issues. Within the political context of the time, and under its editorship it took a strong anti-government/Labor position and its reportage of the VCE debate was clearly subjected to this agenda. As a single newspaper it was formed well into the VCE debate, and at a time when the links between the assault upon the VCE and the vulnerability of the Government has clearly been established. Arguably its editorial approach to the VCE was strongly mediated by its broader editorial approach to the state government of the day.

# The Age VCE Coverage—1989-1992

## Introduction

This case study concentrates upon the coverage of the VCE debate in the age over the three years prior to the state election. The Age has been chosen because it provides continuity, which is not possible in the other morning daily newspaper, the Herald Sun, which was formed through an amalgamation of two newspapers during these years. It also carried more items and a wider range of contributors than the Herald Sun, where most items were penned by its journalist.

This analysis of the VCE media debate illustrates a case of an imbalance in the understanding of the public and private purposes of education. The educational issues became ‘muddled’ by the media coverage including the press and eventually, by 1992, ‘mired’ by the intense political and electoral context of a government in crisis. Professor Jeff Northfield, the academic who conducted an independent evaluation of the implementation of the VCE in the pilot schools, said of his reason to accept the invitation that:

*“It seemed an excellent opportunity to provide an account of school progress with the VCE and perhaps include the school perspective and educational issues into a debate which seemed to centre on tertiary level concerns, lowered standards and worrying trends in assessment practices.”* (Northfield, 1990)

For this study over 1,050 articles, editorials, features and letters to the press from 1989 to 1992 have been surveyed. The VCE debate extended beyond the pages of the daily newspapers. Apart from the national newspapers (mainly the Australian) and local newspapers the VCE was discussed by radio journalist and many callers on talk-back radio. Numerous radio and TV interviews were also conducted with some of the key actors.

The press items include many articles of a factual nature which appeared in pages specifically devoted to education issues. These include articles from The Education Age and from Smart Study in the Herald-Sun. For the purposes of this study, the articles of interest are those from the general news, letters and opinion pages of the print media.

Over the years in which the Certificate was first trialled and then progressively introduced the debate took a number of different directions. It started with the debate about its suitability as a method of tertiary selection. Additional factors became important as time progressed, including the ‘extra workload’ for students and staff, questions of ‘social engineering’, ‘styles of learning’, problems with implementation and the greater politicising of the qualification.

The study broadly considers three discrete but over-lapping issues. The first issue was tertiary selection, the second concerns problems of VCE implementation (workload,

cheating and errors in marking) and the third issue was about the politicisation of the VCE.

The review of the press items indicates that, in 1989 when the VCE issues were beginning to make an impact, there is no evidence that the press media deliberately set-out to target the VCE or its supporters. The media coverage that took place grew out of concerns expressed as reports in the newspapers of speeches given by prominent academics or educators which were then followed by community concerns as seen in letters to the papers. There was a ‘snow-ball’ effect in the press created by the interest shown by the public in the issue.

## Issue 1—Tertiary selection

*“The debate is not primarily about selection into universities, it is about the quality of education, about developing and maintaining high standards...”* Extract from article in The Age, 7 November 1989 by Professor Penington

It could be argued that the debate in the press and elsewhere about the VCE was focussed ‘primarily’ upon tertiary selection. The authors of the Blackburn Report were mindful of the needs of the users of the various certificates that preceded the VCE: *“The users of the certificates to which these studies lead, as well as the society at large, have an important and legitimate interest in the nature of studies and standards of achievement which they represent.”* In order to cope with the different requirements of courses of study at this level, the authors of the Report acknowledge the need for greater ‘differentiation’ at the senior level than what exists in the compulsory years. However, the authors warn that these *“differentiations must be accommodated within a framework that expands rather than restricts subsequent options for all students and continues to emphasise their common humanity and citizenship.”*

(Blackburn, 1985, p13)

The debate that ran through the press beginning in 1989 over the introduction of the VCE, especially in the early days of its conception and inception, was based largely upon a more narrow set of questions than those to do with the ‘common humanity and citizenship’.

The pre-occupation concerning the introduction of the VCE at this time was whether, in attempting to be a wide-ranging certificate, it could cater adequately for the purposes of tertiary selection as well. The single certificate proposed by the VCE certainly posed a problem for different sectional interests. Articles and letters to The Age appeared regularly and in 1989 through to mid 1991, these were still mainly about the issue of tertiary selection.

The Herald-Sun did not take much interest in VCE issues at this stage and only became a serious player when the VCE had become a full political issue by the middle of 1991 and again in 1992. The following is a selection of headlines and quotations from 1989 to 1991 from The Age, which illustrates this pre-occupation with the VCE as a suitable method for tertiary selection.

- **Changes to Victorian school system come under attack.** Article by Geoff Maslen<sup>38</sup>, The Age, 11 May 1989 *“Professor Brian Start<sup>39</sup> said that universities would have to look at alternative selection methods, given the pressure from Victoria’s teacher unions to reduce the influence of external examinations in the*

<sup>38</sup> The long standing Age education journalist and former government school teacher.

<sup>39</sup> Conservative education academic at Melbourne University.

*Victorian Certificate of Education*” Professor Start’s remarks were made at a conference in Sydney organised by the conservative “think-tank” the Institute of Public Affairs.

- **VCE is an unsuitable test for selection of tertiary students.** Letter from G.A. Wood, headmaster of Yarra Valley Anglican School to *The Age*, 16 May 1989. *“The new VCE that will be fully in place by 1992 will provide a very inadequate instrument to cope with this process (of tertiary selection). It will be blunt—incapable of any fine discrimination, unwieldy—it will impose very considerable and unnecessary burdens on both teachers and students and it will be unreliable—it will be difficult to compare performances in different schools”* This concern about the inadequacies about the VCE expressed early in 1989, a full three years before the Certificate was due to be fully implemented, is indicative of the nature of the pre-judging of its capacities by its critics. The letter ends with a call to the Universities to take up the challenge posed by the VCE. *“If they (the Universities) are happy with the process, then so be it. If they are not, they may find others in secondary schools similarly placed and there still may be time to do something about it.”*

This call by Mr Wood to the Universities to protest only if they were ‘not happy’, was indeed taken up by the then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, Professor David Penington and by other headmasters of some of the major Independent schools.

- **Certificate of education raises questions** Letter to *The Age* from A.D.P. Dyer, 18 September 1989. The Chairman of the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria wrote *“...there remain several important unanswered questions. Among these are: How soon will tertiary institutions make agreed entry requirements public?”* The uncertainty about how tertiary selection was going to take place in 1992 posed a planning problem for all secondary schools and this was strongly expressed especially by the heads of the independent schools.
- **New VCE poses university selection problem** letter from Professor Penington to *The Age*, 4 October 1989 *“Mr A.D.P. Dyer raises important questions about assessment in the VCE.... The form of assessment proposed by VCAB with a great deal of internal assessment may not lend itself to appropriate grading of achievement in subjects appropriate for selection for higher education.”*

Professor Penington’s suggestions included the following principles for the development of the Common Assessment Tasks (CATs) for VCE studies. *“Externally assessed CATs will need to form the backbone of competitive selection for higher education if reasonable justice is to be achieved... and grading in these externally assessed CATs will have to be far finer than ‘A’ to ‘E’ if real achievement relevant to higher education is to be recognised.....There are many positive features about the new VCE. However, assessment for post-secondary education is very important to the 50 percent of students who will go on to colleges and universities. I do not believe that sufficient attention has been paid to these problems.”* At this stage, Professor Penington appears to be still in favour of aspects of the VCE and his tone is measured, especially in contrast with articles published later, such as the one following.

- **Education too vital to be badly flawed** Article by Professor Penington in *The Age* 7 November 1989. He complains that any *“criticism of the new VCE or identification of its failings has been met by hyperbole and misrepresentation....presumably we should meekly follow our fearless leaders until it*

*can be demonstrated that disaster has overtaken the education system of the state or of the nation! Education matters enormously. The future careers of young people are at stake as is the future cultural, economic and social fabric of our society.” He also claims that “the debate is not primarily about selection into universities, It is about the quality of education, about developing and maintaining high standards and about ensuring that young people of high ability, from whatever social background have the chance to get ahead.” He makes the point that the current HSC needs to evolve, but defends the existence of numerous different certificates available at Year 12 as it “caters for diversity with standards maintained in each of its various directions. Group 1 subjects cater primarily for those seeking higher education. Group 2 subjects offer an extremely wide range of choice for all students including those not going on to higher education. Separate alternative routes are offered for others coming to higher education from unusual backgrounds and for those needing technical skills....’justice’ and ‘equity’ should mean people of comparable ability and achievement being compared by the same yardstick.”*

The real sticking point is the introduction of the single certificate. Professor Penington uses language associated with valuing the ‘public purposes of education’ as opposed to narrow sectional interests. He talks about the ‘quality of education’ being his prime concern and refers to ideas of ‘justice’ and ‘equity’.

The “*Public purposes of education are defined as educational purposes that advance the interests of a society as a whole, rather than the interests of individuals or special interest groupings and about which there is a general consensus as determined by the democratic processes and structures of that society.*” (Reid, et al, 2007) In the debate about the VCE each of the opposing groups claims to have education at the centre of their concerns rather than narrow sectional or ideological interests.

- **The VCE: there’s too much at stake to get it wrong** article by Professor Penington in *The Age*, 21 January 1990. The author questions whether “*the social agenda of the reforms is that of ‘equalisation’ or is it ‘socialisation’?*” He goes on to say “*I would very much regret our having to set our own entrance examination. The quality of education is the most important issue...*”
- **Students may face regrading for uni entrance** Article by Luke Slattery, *The Age*, 12 August 1989. This article deals with the problems that would be faced in tertiary selection as a result of the fact that there would be no standardisation of results in the VCE. “*In the past, results were standardised into a numerical score, which made it easy for tertiary institutions to pick students above a cut-off point. The VCE will give only letter grades for assessment tasks, which will include tests, projects and research work.*”
- **Assessing VCE one year away from its launch** article by Luke Slattery<sup>40</sup> in *The Age*, 16 October 1989. In what *The Age* describes as a ‘progressive report’, their Education reporter describes the VCE as “*a thorough overhaul of the old HSC system. Its opponents seem to overlook, however, the extent to which that system had become complex and unwieldy. Like a mushrooming cloud HSC grew over a number of years to include group 1(academic) and group 2 (non academic) subjects and the certificates known as TOP, STC and T12....But in the areas of assessment and reporting of results—especially those used for tertiary selection—the VCE has proved most contentious.*”

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<sup>40</sup> The Age education writer.

- **External exams are best indicator.** Letter from M.H. Woods<sup>41</sup> to *The Age*, 12 October 1989. “*David Penington is absolutely right to raise questions about assessment procedures in the new VCE.....External examinations, independently marked remain the most reliable indicator of progress and potential.*”
- **VCE: A black box to decide fate of youth.** Letter from Tony Conabere<sup>42</sup> to *The Sunday Age*, 22 October 1989. “*Professor David Penington’s call for caution regarding the VCE is timely, if not overdue....This reform may be fatally flawed. We are being asked to commit students to a system that is incomplete with unexamined implications. If our fears become realities when all is revealed no amount of rhetoric will alleviate the heartbreak of the sincere student who discovers that a ‘black box’ driven by secret codes has determined his educational standing.*”

The following collection of headlines from 1989 illustrate further the fact that the overwhelming issue of interest about the VCE is the issue of its suitability for tertiary selection.

- **VCE: social goals v. education**—*The Age* 17 October 1989 “*...the obvious sticking point is tertiary selection...*”
- **Students need a definite statement.** Letter to *The Age* 21 October 1989— from supportive Victorian Parents Council secretary—but it “*has worries re: tertiary selection.*”<sup>43</sup>
- **Year 12 work needs to be fairly, accurately assessed.** *The Age* 24 October. Sub-heading “**The new VCE—Triumph or Tragedy?**”
- **The big sell fails to give VCE credibility.** Article by Michael Barnard<sup>44</sup>, *The Age* 31 October 1989. “*...the depressing problems it will create for tertiary institutions and demanding employers.*”

The issues surrounding tertiary selection and its coverage in the press took different forms and lasted several years. First, there was the pre-occupation with the single certificate and whether it could cater for the wide range of students and provide the discrimination in scores to satisfy tertiary entrance requirements. The universities adopted a “wait-and see” position until the 5 point scale adopted by the VBAB Board was announced. This did not satisfy the critics. The Universities wanted a fifteen point scale and the issue was finally resolved when the report by a committee chaired by Professor Barry McGaw recommended a ten point scale, which was eventually adopted.

The debate did not end there, however. Several months later, the question about the need for two externally assessed CATs in VCE English flared. There was also criticism of the Maths Studies from the University of Melbourne. In addition, the wide range of VCE English texts was a source of concern. All issues were covered extensively in articles and in the letters pages of *The Age*. As can be seen from many of the quotations above and others following, Professor Penington became a rallying

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<sup>41</sup> Independent school head.

<sup>42</sup> Then a campus principal at Wesley College, a prestigious private school.

<sup>43</sup> The Victorian Parents Council represented parents of non-government and mainly independent schools. It was not represented on the VCAB, in contrast to the government schools Victorian, Federation of State Schools Parents Clubs, and the Victorian Council of State Schools Organisations, both of which had members on the VCAB.

<sup>44</sup> The conservative ‘Age’ feature/opinion writer

point for opponents because of his stand on the VCE. He was articulate and as Vice Chancellor of The University of Melbourne his views carried a lot of weight. In the period between 1989 and 1992, Professor Penington wrote nine letters to the editors of *The Age*, five feature articles on the topic of the VCE and was quoted or referred to forty seven times in articles or letters.

By 1990, however, there were other voices from the tertiary sector joining in the debate sometimes in opposition to Professor Penington, like the following.

- **Let's call the bluff of the tertiary institutions** article in *The Age* by Michael Bartos, 13 March 1990. This was a response to the threat from the universities to set their own entrance examination. Michael Bartos argues that the *“recent interventions are not about what is the best education for young people. They are about the social role of schools and universities and whether the fast-track from private schools to highly paid professions can maintain its exclusivity.”* He argues that the high-minded call about the purpose of education by Professor Penington to *“Transmit to the next generation the culture which we have inherited as a community”* masks the fact that these terms are not simple. *“They are and always have been contested. What is needed is a process of to adjudicate between competing claims over curriculum content.”* He ends with the claim that *“some university heads seem not to have caught up with the fact that the post-compulsory years of secondary schooling no longer just prepare a minority of students for entry to higher education....I believe that the tertiary institutions are bluffing when they threaten to introduce their own entrance examinations...”*
- In a letter to *The Age* 5 June 1991 **Shotgun tactics on the VCE**, Bob Bessant from La Trobe University writes that *“There was a time when it needed only a phone call from the vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne to the Minister for Education for the university to get what it wanted, especially in regard to senior secondary school examinations. After all, the university had effectively controlled these since the 1860”s....Holding a gun at the head of the Minister for Education may have worked in the past, but it will not in the 1990’s. Shotgun tactics to get its way bring no credit to the university or its staff.”*

In the end, no entrance exam was introduced and after four years and many battles there were compromises around assessment issues, which were accepted by the tertiary sector.

## Discussion

The media debate over tertiary selection carried several messages. The two most obvious were ownership and purpose. As we have stated the Blackburn Report – VCAB regime and changes signalled a radical change in ownership and control over the senior secondary certificate. This prompted media excursions from some of the traditional owners – the universities, and especially the University of Melbourne, and personnel from independent schools.

Ownership was associated with the traditional client relationship between these agencies and their actors, and traditional purpose of the certificates as a cultural and procedural representation of this relationship. The salvos across the bow of the VCE contained the assumption that the VCE should serve as a fine selection vice for university entrance. Inherent within these assumptions were traditional curriculum and cultural constructs. However, rather than state these constructs the assailants chose to use straw arguments about ‘equalisation’ and ‘socialisation’, and implications of non-meritocratic forms of tertiary entrance.

These initial media items set a tone that essentially were about private purposes: selection, merit, and the maintenance of a secure and controlled pathway for traditional clients into the universities. The Blackburn principles of supporting a broader participation in senior secondary education, wider sets of pathways, and the cultural and civics implications of a new certificate gained almost no coverage.



## Issue 2—Implementation Disasters

### VCE implementation kicks too many ‘own goals’

“*The VCE was the curriculum equivalent of Princess Diana—any story you have about it will get on the front page*”. Howard Kelly, Chair VCAB

“Journalists love controversy and seek to represent issues as black or white” Professor Penington, from article in *The Age*, 9 June 1992

In response to questions from students who were tired about being described as ‘guinea-pigs’ and about why the VCE got so much media attention, Mr Howard Kelly, the Chair of the Board gave them the response quoted above. Judging from the number of articles, letters, comment and editorials about the VCE that appeared in the press, there was an element of truth both in his response and in Professor Penington’s view of journalists and their love of controversy.

The implementation of the VCE was a complex and difficult task. This was true for both the administrators of the system and at the school level. The scale of the reform as well as the need for consultation at all times, led to several delays in implementing the final Certificate. Delays in turn led to frustration in schools and there was a need to run a ‘hybrid’ HSC/VCE model for more years than was initially envisaged.

For supporters of the VCE, the cause was not helped when the implementation was dogged by a by a series of mishaps. There were errors in marking, sometimes minor which in a normal assessment regime may go unnoticed. But as the VCE was so much under scrutiny every failure, every error was highlighted, magnified and played out in the press and on talk-back radio.

If *The Age* was largely giving the VCE a ‘fair go’ in its editorials, there was nevertheless, plenty of negative criticism in the letters and ‘opinion’ pages of the paper coming from some sectors and actors: the conservative media commentators and some Independent school heads and teachers. As well as a series of errors in marking, there were other implementation issues and problems of excessive workload which provided ammunition for the anti-VCE lobby. The following headlines give a spread of the nature of the issues.

- **Current system too demanding** article by Kevin Donnelly<sup>45</sup> *The Age* 31 October 1989
- **VCE error found, and 2,200 get better passes** article by Ingrid Svensen, *The Age* 19 January 1990
- **How a maths error foiled VCE English** article by Geoff Maslen, *The Age* 23 January 1990
- **Marksman in the bullseye over VCE** article by Geoff Maslen, *The Age* 2 February 1990
- **Discrepancies in marks casts doubts on VCE** letter to *The Age* from E.D. Thompson 2 February 1990

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<sup>45</sup> Then a teacher at Ivanhoe Grammar who was to become a major right wing media commentator on education, especially through the *Australia*, over the next two decades.

- **VCE: the word will spread that it's too much work**, letter to The Age from Edward McArdle, teacher. 22 April 1990
- **VCE may lead to cheating**, article by Geoff Maslen, The Age 20 May 1990
- **Guinea-pig speaks out against VCE**, letter to The Age from Justine Martin "*Projects do not assess skills in maths nor can there ever be any guarantee that they are the works of students themselves.*"
- **VCE has become timetabling nightmare**, letter to The Age from T.G. Hastings writing as a principal trying to implement the VCE, 12 November 1990. "*In practice VCE is a timetabling nightmare for many schools, particularly those with small enrolments in Years 11 and 12. No matter how inspirational some curriculum changes have been such schools simply cannot offer the range of subjects promoted...*" The rest of the letter is prescient in predicting what was to happen as a result of difficulties with implementation of the VCE. "*Practical considerations will undoubtedly force changes to the VCE within a few years. Australian Studies will become non-compulsory; the bizarre combinations of mathematics will become narrowed and some subjects currently offered will disappear altogether. The assessment and reporting system, already the source of much controversy will be modified.*" All of which subsequently happened.
- **Bungle in VCE marks** Headline in The Herald Sun, 17 January 1991. An article about an error by a marking panel in VCE Art, which affected about 40 students.
- **Some VCE results under review**, article by Luke Slattery The Age 7 February 1991. This article was written in reference to anomalies found in the marking of the ESL paper in the VCE. Some errors in assessment (mostly minor and fixable), like the one described in the article above are a fairly common aspect of all assessment procedures and mostly get fixed and go unreported, but because the VCE was constantly under a microscope every anomaly became newsworthy and grist to the mill of the opposition and the anti-VCE lobby.
- **Exam assessors 'not experienced'**, article by Carolyn Jones, in The Herald Sun, 17 February 1991
- **Libraries buckle under VCE pressure**, article by Luke Slattery in The Age 5 April 1991
- **Better planning will cut library rush** article by Greg Pyers, The Age 23 July 1991. The article was a reminder of some of the over-enthusiastic research efforts by thousands of VCE students as they went in search of resource material which put a strain on many institutions. "*Earlier this year, public libraries, government and various other organisations were made very aware of CATs, as hordes of Year 12 students besieged front desks and jammed phone lines in search of material for their CAT. This widespread and intensive assault on the resources of these bodies soon took its toll.*"
- **VCE: year of stress, muddle, cheating, lost teaching time**, letter to The Age from Garry Brice 28 August 1991. This teacher of mathematics feels that the "*virtues of the new mathematics studies are outweighed overwhelmingly by the problems encountered. I can honestly claim that that I have never seen (after 26 years) students with more stress than attempting CATs 1 and 2 in Change and*

*Approximation.*” To add insult to injury, he continues “*Some VCAB personnel forwarded to all schools demonstrably wrong solutions...*”

- **Overwhelming vote to ban VCE**, article by Geoff Maslen, *The Age* 18 October 1991. The threat of all government VCE teachers boycotting the VCE was another unwelcome addition to the mix of ‘own goals’.
- **VCE students stressed** Letter from chiropractor Allan Powell, to *The Age*, 17 June 1991
- **Man sold VCE maths answers** article by Luke Slattery and David Bruce in *The Age* 7 March 1992
- **Inquiry into VCE re-marking blunder** article in *The Age*, 10 April 1992
- **VCE HEALTH RISK—Workload exhausts students, staff** article by Matthew Pinkney in the *Herald Sun* 6 June 1992
- **Maths book breaks VCE rules, the Board tells schools**, article by Luke Slattery and David Bruce in *The Age* 25 July 1992. This refers to a booklet produced by the Senior Students Resource Centre, which the VCAB Board declared as providing ‘undue assistance’.

Also reported extensively in the press were accusations of cheating and of CATs being sold at different markets. Reports of other ‘disasters’ were frequently aired in the press and on talk-back radio. For a certificate that started off with a ‘bad press’ over the tertiary selection issue, the ‘disasters’ that followed described above did not help its acceptance and its ‘bedding-down’. The stage was now set for the VCE to become a political ‘football’.

### **Discussion**

The design and implantation of the VCE were complex. This complexity derived from the attempt to mix multiple purposes within the certificate. One set were the traditional purposes of preparation for and progression to university, with attendant patterns of private sponsorship through the cultural forms of the curriculum, and patterns of preparation, tutorship and guidance that are finely connected to the structures of the curriculum and assessment systems. A second set relate to a practical need to accommodate a larger number and wider range of students within senior secondary education. This called for new curriculum forms that would meet the interests and needs of these students. This flowed into a third area of purpose that was based upon the democratic principle of equality of opportunity and a democratic objective of higher rates of school completion and university access amongst disadvantaged student groups. A further purpose came in the form of the nature of the curriculum, including the idea that the VCE should represent some type of Australian curriculum.

The establishment of VCAB, as we have argued, signalled a claim by government over policy making and administration for senior secondary curriculum and certification in the state. Education systems and agencies have typically claimed, sought and defended their autonomy (Offe, 19??; Ringer, 1979). The degree of autonomy that is achieved by different agencies varies considerably, and the behaviour of actors within or associated with these agencies can also relate to this relative autonomy.

Halligan and Power (1992) have seen Victoria as "*characterised by a weak political system and a strong managerial system*" and the "*prominence and relative autonomy of public corporations*" (34). This was certainly the case in upper secondary certification and curriculum until the establishment of VCAB. As a consequence the agencies and actors associated with this area of public policy had established a high degree of autonomy. They included the universities, private and grammar schools, and the office of what became VCAB. While VCAB did include new personnel on its Board and amongst its staff, most of the staff had been appointed under the previous VISE and most actors within senior secondary certification and assessment had experienced a high degree of autonomy from government.

While the Blackburn Report and the VCAB and its brief had been commissioned by government, the various actors carried their own purposes into the processes of public policy formation. So while these actors brought different purposes to the new certificate they all were schooled within regimes of high levels of autonomy in senior secondary certificate.

There were two effects of this. The first was complexity as the 'common certificate' attempted to compromise the multiple purposes: tertiary selection with minimal grading levels; school based and external assessment, continuous and summative assessment, criterion referenced and standardised assessment, subject choice and common studies, constructivist and hierarchical forms of knowledge. This led to complexity in subject design, and especially in assessment and the awarding rules, and as it proved to over engineering of subjects and their assessment and completion requirements.

The second was resistance to the role of government. Initial guidelines on the development of the VCE were developed by a working party chaired by the Minister for Education. They were then handed to VCAB and contestation was mainly between the different actors as described above. While the Government initially stayed out of the emerging 'VCE debate' it was forced to enter into it as the debate was politicised.

However, some of the issues were not of its making. The complexity, the assessment system and the workload demands were outcomes of the multiple demands upon the new certificate, and it is some irony that a stronger state role may have resolved some of these issues in the development stages of the certificate.

This suggests that expression of public purpose in the senior secondary curriculum is complex and fraught. Different actors, from both the left and the right, make claims about public purposes – either directly in terms such as access and subject forms and content, or symbolically or rhetorically in terms such as 'standards' and 'quality'. Contestation over these purposes proved to be at multiple levels: through the design of the certificate, through the character of the discourse including the symbolic implications and power of the rhetoric, and through the engagement of government.

As the VCE debate became politicised the Government was drawn into it. Yet its participation was mediated by two factors: the assumed autonomy of agencies and actors, including VCAB and its committees and the media. The mixture of these elements – the design as a complex outcome of competing purposes and claims, the autonomy of the actors in the design, the politicisation of the debate, and the media proved to be a potent mix. This was because the VCE could be depicted variously as a shambles for which the Government was responsible, one that threatened the

interest of those who accessed the university route, a culture of equalisation and social engineering, and an associated lowering of standards and quality. Within this broad discourse private purposes could be transferred into public purposes of stability, surety, and standards, with associated assumptions of cultural maintenance.

### Issue 3—Politicisation of the VCE

#### The role of the media.

“Politics kills off the VCE bit by bit”, Geoff Maslen (The Age 14 October 1992)

This headline about the VCE 14 October 1992 on captured the truth about the VCE as it became one of the defining issues in the state elections held that month.

Luke Slattery describes the role of the media in his article **Media’s role in VCE strife** in The Age, 8 April 1992. He writes that “*the print media plays a crucial role in the creation of public debate about social change. The VCE by any measure represents one of the most profound changes to secondary schooling in a generation.*” The fact that within the heated debate, students, schools and teachers are forgotten was also made by Professor Jeff Northfield, whom Luke Slattery cites, “*According to the author of the influential Report on the VCE, long-term criticism of the certificate has proved damaging to teachers’ morale. After twelve months of hard work, they find themselves confronted at year’s end with a news media primed and eager for the perennial VCE scandal stories...*” Slattery felt that the media should pay more attention to things happening at the school level and “*provide a more informed debate*”. He argued that The Age was already seen as “*soft*” on the VCE and “*by extension soft on the Kirner government.*” He does acknowledge that the job of giving the VCE a fair hearing is “*made difficult, however, by the impending state elections and the over politicisation of the VCE.*”

Each side of politics accused the other of having ‘politicised’ the certificate. In a letter to The Age, **Kirner’s brain child in tatters**, 15 December 1991, Kevin Donnelly states that “*Education under Labor has been politicised, the bureaucracy is full of teacher unionists.*” On 13 February 1992, Jennifer Haynes, President of the Victorian Association of Teachers of English argued in a letter titled **VCE thrown to the wolves** that the changes to English were made to satisfy “*the ravening wolves of the opposition.*”

The politicisation of the VCE was not as evident in the early years. In 1989, the press clippings were largely about whether the certificate suited the purposes of tertiary selection. There was little political reference, though there was the occasional jibe in the letters column about left-wing ideologies etc being behind the development of the certificate. At this early stage, it was only The Age that ran any substantial press coverage. The Herald Sun did not carry much about the VCE until 1991 when VCE issues were polarising the community and the opposition took it on as a line of demarcation between their education policy and that of the Cain/Kirner Labor government.

In reality, the process of politicisation had begun earlier. Once the Labor government became the spokesman for the VCE and ran a million dollar advertising campaign in 1990 to convince the public that the VCE was better than what it replaced, the

certificate had become thoroughly 'politicised'. The media campaign appeared to misfire to some degree. A letter to The Age from Rob Aikenhead on 9 June is headed **The VCE is being sold to public like fast food**. He argues that "*the original teacher enthusiasm for the intent of the VCE is rapidly evaporating in anger and frustration as the reality of trying to construct quality courses in post Tri continental*<sup>46</sup> *Victoria becomes apparent. The money spent on advertising could have been used to provide some substance to the diet of the 'guinea-pigs' taking VCE in 1991*".

The resistance to the certificate by the University of Melbourne, some Independent schools as well as the series of errors that dogged the implementation of the VCE meant that the opposition was given a 'weapon' with which to fight the next election. As early as August 1990, Don Hayward, the opposition spokesman on education said at a meeting of the party's state council that "*the VCE would be scrapped*" when the Liberals came into power. The Age editorial on 14 August 1990, headed **VCE deserves a fair trial** was in response to the Hayward's statement. The Age felt that "*it may be that there are still some problems with the VCE, but the new certificate is entitled to a fair trial. If the Liberals get their way, this will not happen.*"

However, nothing firm was decided by the opposition until it announced its education policy in October 1991. The proposed fate of the VCE by this time had softened to 'extensive reform' not 'scrapping'. Robyn Dixon, the state political reporter for the Age reported in an article titled: **Coalition plans to dismantle the VCE**, quoting Hayward "*We think the VCE is a failed experiment in education and the tragedy is it is having perverse results in that it is working against those it tries to help...*" (18 October)

The editorial in The Age, which appeared on the same day as the article above (18 October 1991), is headed **Education: the choice is stark**, states that Victorians will "*face starkly unambiguous education policy choices at the next state election.*" It goes on to outline the proposed changes to the VCE, which it calls reform rather than replacement. "*Mr Hayward has a clear-eyed view of the shortcomings of the new Victorian Certificate of Education. Given that there was bound to be trial and error in the early implementation of the VCE, he is right in to offer to reform rather than replace it...And he may be reflecting a community preference in pledging at least 50% external assessment and a single score achievement mark for each subject. Mr Hayward has not, as he hoped, taken the ideology and politics out of education. But he has offered a serious education alternative that will shape a critical state policy debate.*"

The editorial quoted above (of 18 October 1991) is a contrast to the earlier editorials in the Age. It would appear that the measured support for the VCE had waned somewhat and been replaced by a 'wait-and-see' approach. By mid 1992, it was becoming increasingly clear that, regardless of the concessions made by VCAB and the government, issues to do with the VCE were not going to go away. The momentum for a change of government and a re-vamping of the certificate was now becoming unstoppable. The 'wait-and see' approach of The Age had now given way to a more pragmatic acceptance of the inevitability of the changes that were coming. The following two headlines from editorials in 1992 sum this up.

- **The VCE: still more changes needed**, editorial The Age 12 June 1992

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<sup>46</sup> Tri Continental was a merchant bank established by the State owned State Bank of Victoria. Similar to similar ventures in NSW and South Australia it lost over \$1 billion in the housing bust and led to the sale of the State Bank to the Commonwealth. It was a major factor in the image of the State Government as incompetent.

- **Time for a broader education debate** editorial The Age 17 June 1992

The Herald Sun in an editorial on 19 March 1991 entitled **Surviving the VCE** made a plea against political point-scoring using the VCE. “*The VCE clearly has a long way to go before it settles down. It would be unfortunate if the debate surrounding it were to descend to mere political point-scoring*”. The rhetoric is high-sounding, but in practice, the paper failed to live up to its own call!

Both the Labor and the Liberal Parties used the press as best they could. The giving of ‘exclusives’ was played by both sides of politics. The Herald Sun became the anti VCE paper, which supported the Liberals into the 1992 election campaign, whilst The Age largely tried to remain impartial.

## **VCE PRESS COVERAGE—A CONTRAST IN STYLES**

### **An examination of how two daily newspapers covered the VCE**

Whilst the debate about tertiary selection and other aspects of the VCE went on in the pages of The Age almost daily from 1989 until the election in October 1992, it is hard to see any deliberate campaign by this newspaper to undermine the VCE. Although there was quite a lot of negative information about the VCE in the newspapers, these were mainly delivered in the letters pages. The editorial policy of the newspaper was, with reservations, largely supportive.

By contrast, the policy adopted by the Herald Sun from the beginning was not as measured.. For example 17 March 1991 the front page of the Sunday Sun carried a banner headline three centimetres high and in thick black capital letters: VCE DISASTER REPORT, Mass cheating, drop in literacy. The ‘exclusive’ report by journalist Caroline Jones was about a series of reports produced by the Board’s own audit team, which had conducted reviews across several pilot schools. The auditors had found some minor evidence of cheating. There were some other critical findings as well as some encouraging ones.

This contrasted with the style of reporting in an article on 26 March 1991 by Luke Slattery on the same reports. The Slattery article is described below and entitled *The good news about the VCE*. He acknowledges that because of the manner of the release of the Reports, which were published as a result of a Freedom of Information request by the Opposition and accompanied with a commentary by the Shadow Minister for Education that, “...only the most critical observations contained in the reports have entered the public domain. Yet the documents contain evidence that many schools are ‘comfortable’ with the VCE, and that good work is being done in the pilot schools....In fact they contain much that supporters of the VCE regard as ‘good news’, such as the revelation that student workload in the VCE is manageable and ‘in line with past experience’...On the whole the findings are the pilot school staff are extremely happy with the VCE course. They believe the courses are challenging yet accessible and that students are producing better work than they had ever expected...” He concludes with the observation that “Such comments made in the context of the review team’s openness to criticism of the VCE are at odds with the conclusions reached by Mr. Hayward.”

The Sunday Sun on 24 March 1991, followed with an Editor’s Note that the Jones article “based its story on a series of eight VCAB reports and quoted the reports at length.” It did concede that “in the first edition of the Sunday Sun, a paragraph stating that ‘on the

*whole the pilot school staff are extremely happy with the VCE courses' was omitted, but included in later editions."*

Other examples of the contrast between the Age's supportive approach and the Herald – Sun's critical approach include the following:

- Response to the Northfield report on the VCE pilots:
  - The Age's editorial of 2 March 1991 was headed "*Useful addition to VCE debate*". This contrasts with:
  - The heading the following day for a series of letters, all critical of the VCE in the Sunday Sun (3 March 1991): "*Education's in a sorry state*"
- Responses to the second Northfield report:
  - An article by Luke Slattery in the Age (5 March 1991) *Students give VCE the 'thumbs up*.
  - Two days earlier in the Sunday Sun reported that "*Students 'Crushed' by the system.*" *In response to the same report.*
- Further reporting of the Northfield Report included:
  - VCE on the right track, article by Luke Slattery in The Age, 6 March 1991. He states that the Northfield report "*contributes little to the discussion about tertiary selection, what the Report does, however, is give the community an accurate picture of the first, uncertain steps in the implementation of a massive education reform.*"
  - Two weeks later The Herald Sun largely ignored the Northfield reports, which had reported favourably on the VCE. Instead it gave headline and column space on 19 March 1991 to a report produced by the Institute of Public Affairs on student reading. The headline ran "*Students' reading mediocre*". The VCE was implicated in this apparent failure.
- The Age editorial of 14 February 1991 was headed "*VCE passes the examination*" in relation to a rise in year 12 retention rates to 87%. It warned against '*political point-scoring*' with the VCE. The Herald Sun did not run report on the improved retention rates, but a little later ran a story headed: "*Hooker gives VCE lesson*" on 24 March 1991 about a class where two prostitutes spoke to an Australian Studies group at Carey Grammar. The article also outlines the opposition criticisms of Australian Studies as "*irrelevant, politically motivated and the equivalent to social engineering by the Kirner Government wishing to impose a socialist dream on impressionable teenagers*".
- A further contrast between the two newspapers on the question of assessment was in the following items:
  - An article in The Age by Darrel N. Caulley (12 June 1990) was headed: "*Cats show well in trials*". The article reported on a study by academics from Latrobe University who conducted a series of interviews with students and teachers about their experiences in implementing the VCE. The report acknowledges that there are problems with overwork and with authentication, but generally was favourable.



- An article by Carolyn Jones in the Herald Sun (5 May 1991) was headed: “*VCE exam plan fear*” The article concerned the VCE English examination and was heavily reliant on the views of Kevin Donnelly and Robert Doyle, a state Liberal Party MP

Other examples of the headings for Herald Sun and Sunday Sun items include the following:

- “*VCE a minus for maths students—Maths and English failing to make the grade*” article in the Sunday Sun, 3 November 1991
- “*VCE Maths set for overhaul*”, article by Matthew Pinckney (Herald Sun 16 November 1991”;
- “*Students hit by new maths*”, article by Carolyn Jones in the Sunday Sun (7 November 1991);
- “*Son a VCE Victim*”, letter to Sunday Sun (7 November, 1991);
- “*VCE exam flaw - wild Fluctuations in Marks*”, article by Matthew Pinckney and Campbell Fuller, Herald Sun (27 November 1991);
- “*Marking time with the VCE gamble*”, article by Tim Duncan<sup>47</sup> (Herald Sun 30 November 1991)

These headings compare with those in the Age over the same period, the following headlines from:

- “*Fine tuning still needed on the VCE*”, The Age editorial (13 March 1990).
- “*VCE: time for a compromise*”, The Age editorial (17 March 1990);
- “*The VCE is not a bargaining chip*” The Age editorial (16 October 1991);
- “*Students and parents should not suffer*”, The Age editorial (21 October 1991); about a threatened teachers’ boycott of the VCE
- “*Improvement in retention rates*”, The Age editorial (16 December 1991) in which it is noted the retention rate has risen dramatically and that part of this was because students found the new VCE “*more appealing*”;
- “*VCE passes the examination*” The Age editorial (14 February 1992).

While the editorial line of the Age was largely positive towards the idea and form of the reforms there are reservations. On the whole the newspaper tended to adopt a measured tone. The number of editorials on the VCE also is indicative of the importance that the paper gave to this topic.

The Age items were not universally in favour of the VCE. It also had columnists like Michael Barnard, Babette Francis, founder of the Endeavour Forum and Anne Henderson, who were critical of the VCE. The following headlines and quotations illustrate some of the dichotomy of the reporting in The Age about the VCE at the time.

- *What’s next in the VCE farce?* (The Age 25 September 1990) (which contrasted with the editorial heading “*Ban on the VCE unjustified*”). Here Michael Barnard sees the VSTA proposed boycott as a “*Significant irony—as the teacher body whose leaders had heralded the VCE as the greatest of innovations,*

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<sup>47</sup> Duncan had worked as an staffer for the Liberal Party

*is now faced with a revolt on its hands...The point educationist's social engineers refuse to recognise is that no matter how much schooling is directed towards a (lowest) common denominator and masking of poor or mediocre performance life outside is...essentially keyed to competitiveness...*" According to his own yardstick, Michael Barnard should be applauding the teachers for what he calls their "new-found capacity to dump it (the VCE) when self-interest intervenes."

- "Victorian education in crisis" - an article by Anne Henderson, Director of the Sydney Institute (The Age 9 February 1992), where she argues that "the VCE will produce a class of poorly educated youngsters who believe that success is a matter of social justice."

However, the comparison between the approach taken by the two daily newspapers is stark. The Age's supportive approach to the reforms and even handed treatment of the key issues within the VCE debate contrasts with the Herald Sun approach. Across the period February 1991 – October 1992 the Herald Sun carried 136 articles that could be located within the VCE debate. Of these:

- 103 were news items. Of these 82 were negative, 5 were positive and 8 were negative in their content and tone;
- 9 were opinion articles. Of these 8 were negative and 1 was positive. Authors for the negative included Kevin Donnolly, Tim Duncan and Don Hayward who were all connected to the Liberal Part. The Minister for Education, Neil Pope was the sole author of a positive article.
- 24 were letters. Of these 25 were negative 8 were positive and one was neutral. The negative letters included those from 5 Liberal members of parliament. The positive letters included those from 4 VCAB representatives.

The items in the Herald Sun had a heavy slant towards the private school sector. Several of the news articles included reports of negative views or concerns from independent school personnel, and several of the letters were from private school personnel. No letters from government and Catholic school representatives were published.

The headings of the articles across a one year period included the following:

- Why Joan Kirner's rise signals a dangerous left turn (24 Feb. 1991)
- Uni blasts VCE board (6 July 1991)
- VCE health risk (6 June, 1991)
- Young students suffer for VCE (14 June, 1991)
- VCE a lesson Joan Kirner won't want to forget (10 August, 1991)
- Flaws in VCE evident (22 August, 1991)
- Behind the VCE gloss (4 September, 1991)
- Cathie<sup>48</sup> blasts VCE standards (17 September, 1991)
- The VCE fumble (27 September, 1991)
- VCE flaw row (16 October, 1991)
- VCE course chaos (12 December, 1991)

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<sup>48</sup> Ian Cathie was a former state Labor minister for education.

- VCE education a joke (4 December)
- VCE principals anger (16 December, 1991) – a report of independent school principals' views of Australian Studies;
- A study in stupidity (editorial – 16 December, 1991)
- VCE donkey stamp (editorial 27 December)
- Schooling a failure (6 January, 1992)
- Unfair VCE cops blast (4 February, 1992)
- VCE trial students at risk (13 January)
- Education at crisis point (20 February, 1992)
- VCE maths crisis (14 February, 1992)

## Discussion

### The press and

*“What constitutes public purposes of schooling is a complex question relating to the intangible and inherently autonomous entities of public values, knowledge and beliefs. Within a liberal democracy these entities are the product of the interplay of family and community heritage, independent cultural agencies (such as religion and the media) and public agencies.”*

*Source: “Researching the Public Purposes of Education” SAPPA Journal April 2007 by Professor Alan Reid, Associate Professor Neil Cranston, Professor Jack Keating, Professor Bill Mulford*

This analysis of how the VCE was covered in the press in the period from 1989 to 1992 is an attempt to examine some of that “interplay” that takes place between public agencies and some independent cultural agencies—in this case the daily press in Victoria. It has attempted to highlight some of the stages of the coverage, the issues that took centre-stage and, to a lesser extent, the impact of the press coverage on the certificate. The VCE was a significant reform which challenged the status quo and there was heightened public interest in all aspects of the certificate. For a few years ‘education’ did take centre stage in the press—unfortunately, however, not in a manner that was advantageous for the introduction of a complex reform.

The press coverage put the implementation of the certificate under total scrutiny. In doing this it also created an educational environment that felt increasingly under pressure. It was impossible for the changes to be introduced in a measured manner. Over the years, the almost daily barrage of coverage in the daily press took its toll on students, teachers, parents and school administrators. Students began to resent being called ‘guinea-pigs’, teachers to having their professionalism relentlessly questioned, and parents and the general public confused and worried about the future prospects of their children. Luke Slattery in an article in *The Age*, 8 April 1992, *Media’s role in VCE strife* claims that “*School communities appear tired of the VCE debate, tired of the critics. They just want to be left alone to get on with it...they feel victimised, even ‘bashed’ by the media*”.

Jeff Northfield (1991) who conducted an evaluation of the pilot schools found the response by the media to his reports on the pilot schools “*shattering*”....“*The description of the schools’ responses to the VCE was of little interest to the media still preoccupied with the erosion of standards and the concerns of tertiary institutions.*” This statement about the media’s lack of interest in what was happening in the pilot VCE schools reflects, to some extent, the nature of what is considered ‘newsworthy’. Margaret Gill (1992) describes the VCE presentation in the press in a similar manner as “*this massive educational reform represented in the media as little more than a drama of dissonant voices: a power struggle between particular public figures and public bodies...the educational work of schools and their communities in grappling with major curriculum change in order to implement the VCE was trivialised or ignored.*”

Obviously the mundane day-to-day attempts by students, teachers and schools to adjust to a new system were not newsworthy. Rather, it was the sensational aspects of the education reform that captured the media’s interest: the accusations of cheating, of errors, of ‘social-engineering’ and the clash between vested interests in the development of the certificate.

Yet the media and in this case the Victorian daily press cannot be seen as neutral. What is reported, the nature of the writing, the headings for articles and letters, the location within the newspapers, and who and what organisations are given access to the paper all carry bias or potential bias. For this study the contrasts between the two dailies is stark. The Herald Sun and Sunday Sun ran a strongly biased coverage during the 18 months prior to the election. It utilised all of these mechanisms in running this campaign.

However this begs the question of public purpose. It could be assumed that by siding with the Liberal Party in its utilisation of the VCE as an electoral weapon that this newspaper did reflect private as against public purposes. This assumption is reinforced by language such as 'equalisation', 'social engineering', and 'lowest common denominator'.

On the other hand the heavy bias was directed at least in part against a government which was seen as incompetent and in the grip of sectional interests, especially the unions. This perception of course can also be regarded as consistent with a priority being given to the private purposes of schooling. Nevertheless it is necessary to consider the media behaviour as cultural agencies in the context of its relationship with other actors and agencies.

### **The press, ideology, agencies and actors.**

The case study has outlined a theoretical approach within which ideology is inter-related to institutions and their mutation and the place and behaviour of policy actors within a broader framework of the political processes and contestations. Across the debate the interactions of these elements were frequent and extended in time. Their ideological forms had multiple constructs and expressions and the clarity of these forms was muddled through political and strategic opportunism.

As a consequence it is suggested that the media role was two fold. In the first instance was a channel or a platform for the contestants to exploit. State and national daily and regional newspapers were all accessed by protagonists, and inevitably the debates flowed into the electronic media. In this role the media influenced the public – private discourse through its patterns of access, selection of 'news' topics, and the location and character of its coverage.

The second is the more subtle question of the representations of the purposes of education within the press coverage. This representation has both a received and a constructed form. That is actors and agencies who access the media carry representations, and the press forms representations through their choice of reportage, articles and letters and the content and language constructs, banners and locations of these items.

We have argued that some distinct, albeit it overlapping, groups were juxtaposed through the processes that led to the establishment of VCAB and its agenda: those served through the university – grammar school relationships; those who located the democratic opportunities of the new certificate through more localised and constructivist curricula forms; and those who saw the new certificate as an opportunity to deliver core and valuable learning in a more democratic manner. Some of these groups had agencies to represent them or a basis for influence, including influence with the media. They included providers such as the universities and prestigious grammar schools, and professional and parental organisations.

Four other factors need to be considered before any attempt at judging the press' assumptions about purpose.

- First the Blackburn Report and the subsequent developments signalled an assumption by government of control, albeit mediated by other factors including the cultural artefacts of standards and the meritocratic university route. This was a significant challenge to the traditional owners, those associated with the university – grammar school relationship.
- A second and associated factor is the relationship between government and the competing groups of actors and agencies. The earlier VCE as a 'compromise' help tensions over assessment and grading, some of the studies and Australian studies, and as a consequence workload. The traditional autonomy of the groups and indeed the agency responsible for the VCE – VCAB – from government allowed the development and implementation phase to be too long, and possibly the ambition of some of the elements of the certificate to be too radical.
- Third, the government carried a new agenda. The Blackburn Report was arguably the first official document in Australia that carried the principle of the right and capacity for all to complete secondary education that was endorsed by government. Therefore, a new agenda that clearly challenged the university – grammar school relationship was set down. It cannot be assumed that the media intrinsically rejected this objective, especially in the context of high levels of youth unemployment that had emerged in the early 1980s.
- Fourth, is the political context of a government in crisis. This crisis only became linked to the VCE after the decision by the Liberal Party to target the certificate. However, this decision was prompted by the attacks upon the VCE that came during 1989 and the early part of 1990. These attacks came essentially.

The interplay between actors and the press carried strong messages, in which on balance the 'private' purposes of education were more prominent than the 'public'. This was at several levels:

- The language that was used to describe purposes such as 'standards' and the assumption of university led hierarchies of knowledge were located essentially in the university – grammar school relationship;
- Conversely the type of language about social or public purpose that was used in the Blackburn report was rarely aired in the media coverage. Rather the language of public purpose was refashioned into terms such as 'equalisation', 'socialism', 'social engineering'.
- The main actors who were present in the media came from groups mostly associated with conservative and individualistic philosophies: private school personnel, right wing think tanks, Liberal Party politicians, and conservative university personnel.

These traits were present in both newspapers, not with standing the clear bias of the Herald Sun in its editorial policy. The bias was not apparent in the Age. However, it could not control the debate: the issues chosen, the construct of the discourse over them, and the behaviours, energy and positioning of the actors.

This study does not conclude with the claim that the press media was neutral in its ideological representations of social issues, even in the case of the Age. However, it concludes with two points:

- The first returns to the concept of relative autonomy of actors and agencies. This was a powerful factor in the Victoria context in regards to senior secondary curriculum and certification at the time, and it contrast to the more centralised culture of NSW. This high degree of autonomy allowed for more distributed ideological formation on the part of actors and agencies. This is the core explanation of the extraordinary nature of the Victorian ‘VCE debate’, which appears to be unmatched in Australian education history. This autonomy of ideology created the core condition for the clash, which other factors exacerbated.
- The second takes us back to the press. Because the actors and their ideologies were highly autonomous they behaved in different ways. While the more democratically oriented groups gained the whip hand in the institutional formation of the VCE, they did not control the ideology – either in its form or its discourse or rhetorical formation. As a consequence the conservative and right wing actors took the initiative in this area and used agencies that remained autonomous from government and the VCE development processes – the media. This largely, but not totally explains the representations of public and private purposes in regards to the VCE debate within the press, if not in the Herald Sun then in the Age.

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