

Australia's P-TECH venture takes big leap forward

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by Brett Henebery | 20 Jan 2017



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The Federal Government recently announced that it will support a further 12 [Pathways in Technology](#) (or P-TECH) schools across Australia as the Coalition continues to expand its innovation and science agenda.

Skilling Australia Foundation (SAF) has been contracted by the Federal Government to establish the 12 new pilot sites – located in NSW, Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland and Tasmania – in addition to the [Geelong and Ballarat sites](#), where students are already doing workplace visits.

This week, the Federal Government released university student completion data, revealing that the dropout rate is worsening with around one in three students failing to complete their studies within six years of enrolment.

However, SAF CEO, Nicholas Wyman, told *The Educator* that many of today's rewarding and well-paying jobs do not require a traditional university degree, but do require some form of post-secondary training, as well as general workplace

skills.

"These include the ability to communicate well, to collaborate, to problem-solve, and to adapt to change – and this is what P-TECH offers Australian students. It's the same core curriculum, but delivered in an innovative way," he said.

"Learning by doing is essential"

Wyman said that for many students, "learning by doing" is essential and gives them the opportunity to engage in hands-on workplace-like experiences

At P-TECH, students undertake an advanced STEM learning program with support from the school's industry partners. The programs match each student with an industry mentor and provide opportunities for them to connect their learning to real life applications.

"This is an important way to align education with working life, and that's where the employers play a key role – with mentoring, site visits and access to real world projects," Wyman explained.

"Employers engage with students at a younger age, and that takes away the intimidation factor in older years. This way, students become more confident in workplaces."

Wyman said that through the P-TECH model, students get "a long term look" at industry they may not previously have considered through workplace based projects, industry experiences and industry placements.

"Industry placements allow work in real life work environments with mentor support.

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In most cases, if available at the school, students still have the option to complete their HSC alongside the P-TECH program. Degree units can also be introduced in Year

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However, not everyone is convinced the program is a good idea.

Public school advocate group, Save Our Schools, has said the introduction of P-TECH schools has been "proceeding without any evidence that they work and without any open discussion of their implications for the curriculum".

Seeking to allay such concerns, Federal Education Minister, Simon Birmingham, said the P-TECH model was not "a cut-and-paste" of the US model and that the Coalition was seeking to "take the best bits of that and adapt them to complement the Australian education and schooling context".

In terms of what the "best bits" are, Wyman said that in Australia, the project is focusing on its five core principles (see below).

"In the US, the word 'college' means something different. Two-year college is also known as 'community college' and four-year college is the equivalent of university. So that's an example of what we have left out of the Australian model," he said.

In the US, there is a greater disparity in high school education, with poor performing schools experiencing challenges not evident in Australia.

"The schools in the US have an extra layer of complexity with both security and students facing disadvantage to levels we do not really see in Australia," Wyman explained.

"What we have expanded on, however, is taking what's already great about a school, and seeing how the model and what it brings can supercharge it, as it were.

Below are the five core elements Australia has adopted:

- **Innovative curriculum:** A key aspect of designing the learning program includes the way existing Australian Curriculum and Australian Qualification Framework recognised education and training is sequenced (or ordered) to achieve the best outcomes for students.
- **Innovative approaches to learning:** Partnerships between schools and industry enable innovative approaches to the way learning is delivered; approaches that would not be possible if schools, or industry, acted in isolation.
- **Industry mentoring and support:** The mentor relationship between young people and industry personnel provides continuity of support for students to achieve a post-school qualification.
- **A post-school qualification:** In Australia, it is likely that the achievement of a diploma, advanced diploma or associate degree will involve schools partnering with other education providers (TAFEs/RTOs or universities) to deliver elements of the P-TECH learning programme (either on-site or off-site).
- **Links to employment:** Collaboration between the education and industry sectors strengthens the connection between student learning and the skills that employers need. It improves young people's prospects of

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employment, including opportunities for employment with industry partners.

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