

The Hebrew revolution

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THE year 11 and 12 students who sat the VCE Hebrew exam last Tuesday were less than half in number than the cohort 10 years ago in 2005.

But rather than indicating that VCE Hebrew is on the decline, Jewish day schools are seeing a strong uptake of alternative options such as that of VET Hebrew.

This year, 54 students across Victoria did Hebrew units 3 & 4, compared to 112 students in 2005. Furthermore, VCE enrolments in classical Hebrew were 16 in 2007, and for the first time since it's been offered, no students undertook the subject this year.

The director of the Alter Family School of Jewish Studies and Ivrit at Mount Scopus College, Avi Cohen, said these figures were due to a number of factors, including less students in the VCE cohort in total, a general decline in the study of languages for VCE, and the fact that Hebrew is not an easy subject.

"It's akin to the drop in the study of languages across the board. We're not different to other languages," Cohen explained.

In this climate, he said VET Hebrew is a great alternative. Available to year 11 and 12 students at the school, the VET (vocational education and training) course focuses on more practical applications of the

language, like informal conversation.

"One of the reasons why we were so keen on VET is it's given kids the opportunity to continue with Hebrew at an easier level," he said.

"We've now gone from 20-25 per cent of our students doing Hebrew in year 11 and 12, to 70-75 per cent ... The fact that these kids are doing Hebrew is incredible."

Debbie Garber, head of Hebrew at Leibler Yavneh College, noted that VET is assessed internally, so it doesn't carry the same pressure as a VCE subject. Moreover, it can count towards a student's ATAR in the form of a block credit.

"It enables those who have done [Hebrew] for many years at school to get recognition for their studies. It's a non-academic alternative," Garber said.

Having said that, she doesn't believe VET Hebrew is the answer for all students. "We still want to encourage our students to continue and do VCE Hebrew," she said.

Dan Sztrajt, head of Jewish Life at Bialik College, described the VET program as "brilliant", though not a "catch-all".

"I'm really proud of where Bialik is in terms of Hebrew ... Hebrew is expanding at the school; we're not going backwards," he said.

VET Hebrew is also offered at Yeshivah and Beth Rivkah Colleges, as well as at the King David School.