

Promises but not guarantees – movement from TAFE to Higher Education in a dual sector university

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Abstract

Many TAFE programs at Victoria University have developed articulation pathways that allow students to qualify for entry into a degree course on the basis of studies undertaken at TAFE level and gain credit for their TAFE studies in their destination course. The evidence for the success or otherwise of these pathways and the degree of transparency of the articulation arrangements is largely anecdotal. This paper will discuss the initial outcomes of a longitudinal project being conducted at Victoria University in 2005 to 2006 on the aspirations and experiences of TAFE students travelling along these pathways to higher education.

The project involved individual interviews with 118 TAFE students and 20 teachers across seven disciplines in the second semester of 2005 to determine both students' and teachers' understanding and experience of the articulation process. This year, in first semester, the same students will be interviewed to determine their experience of the articulation process.

This paper will provide an analysis of the processes that facilitate or hinder articulation and the success or otherwise of the articulation pathways developed within the university. It will discuss the aspirations of students and the "promise" of a pathway in a dual sector university.

Introduction

Victoria University (VU) is one of five dual sector universities in Australia. VU has directed much effort toward establishing formal pathways, which students interested in articulating from our TAFE sector into our higher education programmes can follow. To make articulation work in a dual sector university, we need to monitor and evaluate how well these pathways serve our students. This effort requires close collaboration between TAFE departments and higher education faculties, of the kind already developing in some cases where dual awards, articulation agreements and credit arrangements have been negotiated and mapped out between the sectors. The strength of these pathways can perhaps best be assessed by tracking rates of articulation between our sectors and the progress of articulating students in higher education. TAFE students' access to the higher education sector should at least be on par with that of external applicants.

The project aims to explore the extent to which our current pathways have achieved the equity aims inhering in the policies that guide their use. The literature on articulation suggests that articulating students may face both access issues and specific difficulties in managing the transition to higher education successfully, which impacts on success and retention rates. This project seeks to map the access and

transition experiences of a sample of TAFE articulators from eight pathways within the articulation framework at VU.

Data gathering for this project is not yet complete. In the interim report we presented findings from interviews with TAFE students (prior to articulation) and from interviews with TAFE teachers. The interviews were designed to provide data on TAFE articulators ease of access to higher education and their transitions experiences should they be selected for higher education. We gathered information on; how many TAFE students want to articulate into higher education; when students make the decision to articulate and for what purposes; what resources students rely on to think through decisions about articulation; what students expectation of higher education are, and what challenges they expect to face in the transition to higher education; how prepared they feel for higher education study; students understandings and experiences of applying for higher education; and if articulating students prefer to remain at VU. The next phase of this project will 'track' these students and provide data on their rates of access to higher education places, as well as their early transition experiences in higher education. It will also seek to gain higher education lecturers' perspectives on articulation and pathways, to add to our understanding of how well articulation is 'working' at VU.

The first stage of this study comprises an analysis of data from qualitative interviews with 118 students' and 20 staff, from a range of pathway course within departments in our TAFE sector. The second stage of this research consists of follow up interviews with our original student cohort and interviews with lecturers in higher education to gain their perspective on articulation. The follow up interviews with students will track the progress of this cohort, many of whom applied to enter higher education at VU in 2006. The findings in this paper are based *solely* on stage one of the project.

Data suggests that many TAFE students in pathway courses hope to articulate into higher education and to stay on at VU. It further suggests that articulation pathways work best where our two sectors have closer and mutually beneficial relationships, but indicates considerable variety in the ease with which our TAFE students' can negotiate these pathways at present. While some 'best practice' examples of cross-sectoral collaboration are in evidence at VU, there is more work to be done on closing the 'cultural gap' between staff and improving informational flow between the sectors. While policy development in this area has continued apace, there is a lag in adoption of these policies by staff. Furthermore, the question of where institutional responsibility lies for 'bridging' teaching and learning differences across the sectors remains unresolved at a policy level. Current credit arrangements also appear problematic. Further attention to both of these concerns may do much to ease students' passage along articulation pathways.

Methods

We selected eight TAFE departments in which formal and informal 'pathways' to higher education exist, in consultation with the articulation officer. We also sought to ensure that a range of broad fields of study within TAFE were represented in the sample:

Pathways	Number of Interviews	
	TAFE Teachers	TAFE Students
Pathway 1	4	24
Pathway 2	2	15
Pathway 3	2	10
Pathway 4	2	19
Pathway 5	3	16
Pathway 6	2	17
Pathway 7	2	8
Pathway 8	3	9
Totals	20	118

We conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with teachers and students from each department. We recruited students during their classes at TAFE and approach teachers personally to invite their participation. The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed in full where possible. Analysis of the data was facilitated by use of the Nvivo software program and guided by the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Anselm and Corbin, 1990). The quotes appearing in the interim report are anonymous to protect the identity of participants.

Definitions and demographics

Articulating students include both external and internal students who move from a course in TAFE to a course in higher education. Internal students who are articulating can progress through one of VU's standard pathways or undertake a dual sector ward. A pathway refers to a formally acknowledged link between courses in the TAFE and higher education sectors, or within the same sector. Pathways negotiations between the sectors define the criteria for ranking internal students seeking to articulate (Victoria University Admissions Policy, 2005).

Victoria University has a high proportion of low SES background students (Sheehan and Wiseman 2004) and a high proportion of students from NESB backgrounds (Teaching and Learning Statistics, Victoria University, 2004:86). Our sample is reasonable representative in these terms. Around half of our participants were from NESB backgrounds and the majority were low SES students. In line with Borland Pierce (1999), students were defined as NESB if both parents spoke a language other than English, if they indicated a language other than English as their first language, or if they had been born in a Non-English speaking country and had been living in Australia for less than three years. Students SES status was determined by using the Australian Bureau of Statistics Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (2001) software package to rank the SES standing of students home suburbs, relative to those of Victoria as a whole.

Key findings from interviews with teachers – a synopsis

Numbers of students' wanting to articulate into higher education

Most teachers stated that about two thirds of their students consistently aimed at a higher education pathway, but this was reported as high as 90% of students in several areas. By contrast, in a few others it ranged from 40% to as low as 10% of students. Obviously, such differences can reflect the existence, or not, of degree courses that are clearly related to students' TAFE studies. Further, many teachers' drew on anecdotal knowledge to suggest that the number of students' articulating within two or three years *after* completion of a TAFE course might be higher than these estimates.

Some teachers noted that different student cohorts, such as part-time students, were less likely to want to articulate as compared to others, such as school leavers. Similarly, others suggested that mature age students, while often keen to articulate, may decide on this pathway later in their courses than do younger students. While only a small number of teachers discussed such differences, their claims are supported by the students' comments in later sections of this report.

Numbers of students actually articulating into higher education

Teachers' remarks suggest that, despite the high levels of interest in articulation amongst TAFE students, there is perhaps also considerable variability in the number of TAFE students' articulating into higher education from various broad fields of study. However, only a few TAFE teachers' reported being provided with adequate feedback from higher education counterparts on this score, despite an interest in this information.

In some cases, teachers estimated that demand to go on amongst TAFE students is catered for by our higher education sector, while others teachers' comments suggest unmet, or inconsistently met demand. Many teachers' reported relying on anecdotal information, dependent on their informal relationships with other staff, or fortuitous encounters with ex-students, in estimating the proportion of their students successfully articulating into higher education. A roughly equal proportion of teachers' reported having little to no access, to this information.

The majority of teachers interviewed expressed a strong interest in having access to this information, with some teachers noting its usefulness in helping them plan to better meet their students' needs. A lack of consistency and transparency regarding selection criteria and processes, combined with this lack of feedback, had some teachers questioning what the 'magic formula' for articulation into higher education might be. This theme was also figures prominently in the following section, which discusses teachers' comments the selection process.

TAFE teachers' comments on the higher education selection process

The theme of variability again pervades TAFE teachers' comments on their knowledge of and attitudes to selection. However, marks were understood to be a key criterion and a number of considerations *external* to selection criteria were widely

held to be influential in selection. When selection process and criteria are made clear to staff and students this feedback is both useful and much appreciated, but relationships between the sectors once more seemed influential in such practices occurring or not.

Teachers in many departments were unsure what selection criteria their students may be judged against, but assumed that grades were important. A few teachers questioned whether this should be the only/key criteria for selection. Some teachers suggested that certain higher education disciplines concern to fill quotas results in students' from incomplete or lower level TAFE courses (i.e. Certificate IV) being selected into degree courses, for which these qualifications are inadequate. Conversely, other teachers commented on the 'disincentive' for higher education departments to accept students' with credit for degrees, when these students take fewer subjects than do school leavers and are thus less 'lucrative' students.

By contrast, other teachers reported a reasonable knowledge of selection processes and guidelines, which could be shared with students. Again though, this was often dependent on 'ad hoc' arrangements and/or the quality of existing relationships between TAFE and higher education staff. For example, selection officers visit some TAFE courses through out the year to present selection and course information in person, but not others.

Promoting articulation into higher education within TAFE

As with most of the interview data presented here, teachers' comments suggest 'patchiness' in the promotion of articulation within particular TAFE departments and by individual teachers within them. Teachers are generally more likely to promote articulation when their students have high chances of success and in areas where they are aware that many students have this goal in mind. The quality of formal and informal cross-sectoral relationships, between both departments and staff, was again influential here. However, tensions around the vagaries of selection and TAFE's traditional charter of vocational training make promoting articulation problematic for many TAFE teachers. Students can be negatively impacted by this state of affairs.

Another key issue teachers identified in promoting articulation to TAFE students is the risk that students may be disappointed. As one teacher aptly put it, there are problems in 'selling what you don't own'. The foregoing analysis has highlighted TAFE teachers' uncertainty around students' chances of selection. When students' chances of articulating are low, or unpredictable, it is seen as problematic to encourage students in pursuing degree entry. Many teachers further stressed a need to correct many students' implicit assumptions of automatic entry into degree's and to emphasise that pathways can't be guaranteed, being based on competitive entry. Students' own comments confirm TAFE teachers' concerns here. Conversely, other teachers noted that a strong history of successful pathways between TAFE and higher education is a 'selling point' for courses where most students hope to articulate.

TAFE Teachers' perceptions of key challenges faced by students articulating into higher education

Many of the challenges teachers anticipate their students facing at entry to higher education were similar to those anticipated by the students themselves. TAFE teachers

identified adapting to a different teaching and learning environment as a major challenge for articulating students, especially given the lower levels of academic and social support they see higher education as offering students. They also noted other 'challenges' engendered by students' personal circumstances, and by a dearth of accessible and accurate information on articulation pathways and processes.

Course content, workload, learning skills and assessment methods

Many TAFE teachers saw challenges for students in adjusting to higher workloads with shorter timeframes for completion. The greater volume of reading expected in higher education was widely cited here. The specific content teachers anticipated their students having difficulties with adjusting to often varied students broad field of study, for example, where students may articulate into those degree courses where mathematics skills feature heavily, or where the theoretical content requires high level language skills. Some teachers were very confident as to their students' chances of success in meeting these challenges, while others were less so. Again this was heavily dependent on the students' field of study and learning practices within it.

More generally, concerns about the greater emphasis on self-directed learning in higher education emerged in many teachers' comments, as did concerns about mastery of specifically 'academic' skills. Expectations that students do most of their learning outside of class in higher education was seen as very different to learning and teaching practices within TAFE. Academic skills including referencing, information literacy, essay writing, critical and analytical skills, along with coming to grips with a theoretical rather than a practical knowledge base in higher education, were discussed by many teachers. All of these issues impact on assessment, but the shift to a more 'formal' system of exams, essays and graded work was seen as a challenge in its own right, in some cases

Relationships between higher education and TAFE

Much of the analysis so far has highlighted the importance of cross-sectoral *relationships*, formal and informal, and between departments and between individual staff members, in 'making articulation work'. Teachers' comments on how well they know their higher education counterparts, and staffs mutual familiarity with each others courses help to further illuminate the nature of existing cross-sectoral relationships. In some cases, these relationships seem to be based on mutual communication, formal and informal processes of feedback and discussion and mutual responsiveness. In others, relationships appear to be non-existent to adversarial, can be exploitative and provide little scope for productive two-way exchanges. Knowledge of higher education courses amongst TAFE teachers varied, but many teachers assumed low knowledge of TAFE courses amongst higher education staff.

TAFE teachers' knowledge of articulating students' performance in higher education

Very few TAFE teachers reported ready access to comprehensive information on the performance of their ex students, but many of them would like this information to be passed on to them. In rare cases, information on ex-students performance *is* fed back to TAFE areas from higher education staff, but again via informal relationships between staff. Most commonly, teachers gleaned this information from 'hallway talk'

with staff from either sector, or from serendipitous meetings with ex-students. Many teachers estimated their ex-students' higher education performance to be good, while others identified some negative influences on ex-students' progress through degrees. These accounts suggest that greater flow of information between the sectors on performance would be desirable.

How well does VU support students wanting to articulate?

The analysis suggests that support for articulating students may be patchily distributed and dependent on the quality of cross-sectoral relationships. The issue of how well we support our students is indeed no exception. In terms of supporting students *prior* to articulation, teachers' accounts stress a need for more easily accessible, up-to-date information on what is and isn't possible in terms of student pathways. TAFE teachers had limited knowledge of what supports were available to students in higher education *post* articulation.

Do articulating students want to remain at VU?

We were also interested in whether students wanting to articulate apply for higher education at VU, and if so for what reasons. Across the board, teachers' comments indicate that the majority do, as do the students' comments. The reasons for this, according to teachers, include; familiarity with our institution, assumptions that pathways will be 'easier' in a dual sector university, the geographical proximity of campuses near to students' homes; particularly attractive or unique courses or course arrangements (ie co-op years, courses or TAFE-HE pathways not available elsewhere); and comparatively good credit arrangements.

Teachers also commented on why a minority of students may wish to articulate into other institutions. Most of them suggest that students may accept offers from universities seen to have greater 'prestige' than ours, as well as those offering more credit for prior study, or who simply offer more desirable courses. Sometimes the attraction is a campus closer to home, or conversely one offering a 'new' environment. In a few cases, it seems our students go primarily because other universities offer them a place or have, at least in the past, more actively recruited TAFE students on our campuses.

Key findings from interviews with students

How many students want to articulate?

In accordance with teacher perceptions of high numbers of students seeking to articulate, the majority of the students we interviewed had applied or were considering applying for a place in HE. Of the 118 students who participated, only six were definitely not intending to articulate, while eleven students were undecided about their future plans. That said, the proportions of students hoping to articulate again seemed to vary by broad field of study, as was suggested by their teachers in the foregoing section. Further, a reasonable proportion of students discussed wanting to articulate in alternative degree courses from those mapped out on the pathways agreements relevant to their current TAFE course.

When do students decide they want to articulate?

The majority of the students hoping to articulate had entered their TAFE courses with the goal of articulation into a particular degree course already in mind. Most of the recent school leavers who did so sought direct entry into higher education after high-school, but had received a lower ENTER score than they had hoped. These students had often taken the advice of high-school careers counsellors in using TAFE as a 'pathway' into higher education. Some mature aged students had also held onto aspirations for higher education that school grades and life circumstances had blocked them from pursuing until now. Approximately one third of the students keen on articulating had made their decision during the final year, and in some cases weeks, of their TAFE course.

Why do students decide to articulate?

Students' comments on why they wanted to articulate fell into two broad categories. A large proportion of students were hoping for improved vocational outcomes in completing a degree. A similarly large group of students' interest in articulating was driven by their enjoyment of previous learning in a subject and a desire to 'go on' in higher education. Many students' responses indicated that a mixture of these two aims informed their interest in articulation. In all cases though, students' comments support claims that a process of 'weighing up' the personal gains and sacrifices further study is seen to incorporate is critical in the development of educational aspirations.

Students who are unsure about articulating or who decide not to articulate

The data gathered for this project includes the comments of only a very small group of students who were unsure, or not intending to articulate into degrees at present. The common thread across these students' narratives is the flexibility of their future plans. They were also clustered in a particular field of study. Most of these students did not reject the possibility of applying for entry into a degree at some future point, but rather emphasised the current appeal of other alternatives, or noted the constraints on their study plans due to their current circumstances. Quite a few of these students mentioned plans to perhaps return to study within two years time.

What resources are students using to inform their decision to articulate and which are the most useful for them?

The majority of the students we interviewed listed clear goals associated with their decision to articulate. These students' comments on the resources they accessed to make this decision indicate that they compare the information and advice they get from a variety of sources, using it for multiple purposes. Many students considering articulation seek information on whether doing a degree is advantageous for them personally and which degree will best suit their various purposes. A minority of students were less sure about their options and sometimes their goals. Many of these students had access to a narrower range of resources, both personally and institutionally. Presumably too, these students may have had greater difficulty in knowing 'where to start'. It is clear though that some students are far more proactive in seeking out resources for themselves than are others.

The list of resources which students reported using to help them think through the decision to articulate is considerable. These include informal discussions with various key people such as; teachers; friends and family; and work mates. More formal resources accessed by students include; presentations by staff and students from higher education; sessions with centre link staff or careers counsellors; university open days; and in class information sessions in TAFE. Finally, students used various media to find information including; the websites of various universities; VTAC and career advice websites, including our own; university handbooks and course outlines; and telephoning university departments or careers centres.

What do students see as the main differences between TAFE and higher education?

A large proportion of students stated that the major difference between TAFE and higher education courses would be larger workloads and more challenging course content in degree courses. In terms of the content of courses at TAFE and in higher education, many students contrasted the practical/technical focus of TAFE courses with the theoretical content of degree courses, expecting to do less 'hands on work' and more reading and theory based work. Similarly, many students were aware that different assessment methods, like exams and essays, are used in higher education. Students characterised TAFE as generally a more 'relaxed' learning experience by contrast. Worryingly though, around 10% of the students we spoke to had no idea of what to expect should they be accepted into a degree course.

Another key theme in students' responses was the challenges of a shift to more independent learning in higher education. Many students commented on perceptions that both collaborative group work with peers and teachers input into their work would be lesser in higher education. Students discussed the differences in teaching and learning formats across the two sectors, contrasting TAFE experiences of small classes with the same friends and teacher, over years perhaps, with large lecture groups and tutorials and a changing group of teachers and peers. A great many participants discussed being 'spoon fed' information at TAFE and not expecting this to continue in higher education. They also foresaw having far less opportunity to ask questions and interact with lecturers than had been the case at TAFE. Students further described TAFE as more like 'high school', with teachers following up on students' progress, attendance and the like, but again assumed this would not occur in higher education. For these reasons, among others, many students felt that they would have less peer and teacher support after articulation.

How did students apply to higher education and was the application process explained to them?

Students' comments on the process of applying to higher education again suggest a need for more easily accessible and accurate information on pathways, in some cases. They further suggest that our status as a dual sector university fosters inaccurate perceptions that our TAFE student's are 'shielded' from competition when they apply internally to articulate and are given preferential treatment, relative to outside applicants, when they apply through VTAC.

Around 33% of the students' we interviewed had only lodged internal applications, 20% of the group had only lodged an application through VTAC and just over 20% of students had applied through both methods. The remainder of the student group had

not as yet lodged an application for a higher education place and were in the process of working out which of these options to take, or were international students who had applied through the international students' office.

Do students understand the selection process and are they confident of being selected?

Many students had little firm understanding of the selection process, but could make reasonable suggestions as to which factors would be likely to figure in the selection process. However, it is also clear that students rely heavily on their teachers to access this kind of information. As earlier sections of this report noted, teachers own understanding of the selection process is limited by a lack of feedback on selection from higher education and the lack of transparency in this process. Most students assumed that their TAFE results would be used rather than their ENTER score and that high average marks are a key selection criteria. Many of them further commented that interviews, statements, work experience and other supplementary material would figure in the selection process. Some students noted their interest in being given a clearer indication of their chances of selection, along with more information on the selection process.

What do students see as the biggest challenges over the first six months of higher education?

Unsurprisingly, many of the differences students anticipated encountering as they shift between our two sectors were also seen as challenges to be faced. Consequently, the majority of students' responses here covered similar ground to that in this previous section.

Students listed adjustments to bigger workloads, more demanding, or simply 'new' course content, and a different assessment system as key challenges for them to meet. Their comments again touched on the reduced academic and social support they presumed the higher education environment would offer, which some students felt would make these challenges more daunting. For the majority of students, adjusting to 'learning on your own' and 'finding new friends' were the overarching concerns. Anxieties about negotiating the independent learning model operating in higher education surfaced in many students' comments on how they planned to meet these challenges. A large proportion of students discussed various strategies for 'motivating' themselves to 'stay on top' in this new environment. Students talked about their plans to organise their own study timetables, 'discipline' themselves to attend classes, and develop a 'routine' for higher education study. Indeed, a minority of students commented that maintaining this 'self-motivation' and 'commitment' would be their biggest challenge in adjusting to higher education.

How prepared for higher education do students feel?

The majority of students indicated feeling prepared for higher education study, but there was again much variation by broad field of study on this score. Further, students' comments indicate variations in the amount of class time and resources devoted to clarifying the differences between the sectors and to developing 'academic' skills and competencies in TAFE. Students who reported feeling unsure or unprepared for a transition into higher education had less often had such experiences

in TAFE. Interestingly, a substantial group of students from across these ‘categories’ indicated that their own ‘motivation’ to study and willingness to put in extra effort was the key to whether they felt prepared or not. The majority of students’ comments again invoked the theme of personal contacts being harder to form in higher education and they voiced anxieties about their readiness for a shift to ‘independent’ learning, given this context of lower levels of support.

Around two thirds of the student we interviewed reported feeling prepared to undertake a degree. Most of these students saw specific skills their TAFE courses had provided as informing this sense of readiness for degree studies. These included referencing and essay writing skills, academic terminology, foundational knowledge in a subject and the like. Again though, growing self-confidence as learners emerged in students’ responses here. Students commented that their years at TAFE had provided a necessary ‘stepping stone’ into further tertiary study. Some of these students further saw their employment as having helped to equip them for a degree. Most of the students who were very confident in this regard had a reasonable understanding of the skills and knowledge that degrees in their field would require.

Do students want to articulate into higher education at VU?

Over 85% of those students planning to articulate stated they had either chosen VU as a first preference or only applied internally for a degree place. The single most common reason offered by students for this choice was the proximity of campuses to their homes. Most often though proximity was only *one* ‘factor’ of several key ‘drawcards’ VU is seen to offer. Other very frequently cited reasons for preferring to remain here include; a strong perception that both students chances of acceptance and the ease of transitioning into degree courses is thus enhanced; that there will be key continuities between their TAFE experiences and higher education; and that our courses offer a ‘good deal’ in various ways.

Discussion

In the introduction to this paper, we specified an aim of considering how well current practice in regards to articulation conforms to the aims and content of the policies developed to guide them. We noted that policy development in this case was specifically designed to reduce inconsistent and inequitable treatment of students, arising from variations in selection and admission processes across the university. As such, the discussion below is organised into three sections. The first of these deals with the implications of our analysis as to how well pathways are ensuring TAFE students’ access to higher education. The second section focuses on issues pertaining to how effectively our pathway arrangements may be providing a ‘smooth’ transition experience for articulating students. The final section identifies cross-sectoral differences in teaching and learning models as an issue that impacts both transition experiences and access to higher education for articulating students.

Access

It is clear that many of our TAFE students seek access to higher education at VU, via the pathways laid down for articulation. It is also clear that many students assume that following such pathways in a dual sector institution provides a ‘guarantee’ of a place in higher education. This is not the case and every effort should be made to clearly

communicate information on selection criteria and the fact of competitive entry to higher education during the selection process to our TAFE students. Additionally, past internal research has suggested biases against TAFE articulators in the selection process, rather than the advantage over other applicants that many of these students assumed (Woodley et al, 2005). TAFE students certainly appear to be ‘loyal’ VU clients and we should endeavour to reward this loyalty as far as possible, not least by correcting such assumptions. The final report on this project will comment on the number of higher education places offered to the students we interviewed and in what round these offers were made. Taking into account these students performance in TAFE, this will give us further indication of the ‘health’ of current pathways.

Much of the analysis presented here does imply some blockages in TAFE articulators’ access to higher education courses. Firstly, students and teachers face difficulties in securing accurate and accessible information about selection criteria and selection chances for higher education courses, as well as the process of applying to higher education. Far better cross-sectoral information sharing is needed when high proportions of TAFE teachers and students assume that internal applicants must apply for higher education via VTAC, but only *one* higher education course (Graduate Entry to Teaching) actually requires VU TAFE students to apply externally (Admission Policy, 2005:18). Secondly, uncertainty about these issues seems to prevent some teachers from promoting articulation to TAFE students, which may reduce their awareness of higher education options. Finally, better information sharing between the sectors may help to improve internal students’ access to higher education, if data on rates of articulation and the performance of articulating students were used to inform development of curriculum and student support services in both sectors.

Transition

The analysis detailed earlier suggests that students articulating from TAFE courses into higher education may face similar transition issues to other commencing students, but also some less common difficulties. Students’ personal circumstances can further disrupt progression along pathways. Commentary on the support available to students in higher education to help ease these difficulties and on their actual transition experiences must be deferred to the final report on the project.

The first year of higher education studies makes considerable demands on all beginning students. These interviewees’ comments on higher education workloads, assessment practices, the challenges of independent learning and fears about not making friends in a large and unfamiliar environment touch on very similar themes to those raised in many studies of broader student populations’ transition into higher education. This research has suggested changes in practice within the higher education sector to better support students through to degree completion. Most crucially it suggests that greater effort be made in higher education in ensuring the *early* social and academic integration of commencing students (see Gabb, Milne and Cao, 2006). The reports of successful articulators early transition experiences at VU will be informative in this context.

Some more personal barriers to effective transition into higher education were suggested in the foregoing analysis. These include; students’ finances, particularly given the relatively high cost of degree courses and students concerns about ‘juggling’ study, paid work, social and family commitments; and NESB students anxieties about

adjusting to academic discourse and terminology in higher education. Again, the second phase of this project may provide further insights into how these issues affect articulating students' progress in higher education.

The less common transition difficulties encountered by articulating TAFE students arise from credit arrangements between the sectors. Firstly, some of our interviewees comments suggest that articulating students difficulties in adjusting to a new teaching and learning context may be exacerbated by 'skipping' the first year of higher education. In the final report for this project we will be able to comment on whether some of our students' fears about being disadvantaged by 'missing out' on first year turned out to be justified. Secondly, it will be interesting to see if teachers' reports of credit arrangements precluding students from taking subjects central to their interests, and thus becoming disillusioned with higher education study, are confirmed by students themselves.

No mans land: Between access and transition

A number of issues raised in this report indicate that there is a key 'gap' in our articulation pathways at present. Differences in the teaching and learning formats and the curricula adopted in each of our sectors are clearly held to be a challenge for many articulating students, in terms of being selected for higher education and in influencing their transition into higher education study. It seems that 'bridging' this divide is currently being tackled, or not, on an ad hoc basis, in a manner dependent on the quality of relationships between particular staff, departments and faculty's. Considerable tensions exist around the TAFE sectors primary responsibility for delivering training packages and a 'preparatory' higher education function being added to TAFE courses. Responsibility for ensuring that such differences do not adversely affect students' access to higher education, or their transition into higher education learning is not currently allocated to either sector of the university. Whether responsibility for closing this 'gap' should a university wide initiative is an open question. However, wider acknowledgement of this problem and cross-sectoral input into how it may be resolved would be fruitful.

A related issue is that of 'academic skills' and TAFE students' mastery of these. Several internal reports have suggested that higher education perceptions of TAFE students' as being deficient in core 'academic skills' help to maintain inequities in access to degree places (Woodley et al, 2005: Pearce et al, 2001). This paper suggests that many TAFE courses do develop these skills and that others are increasingly motivated to integrate skills like informational literacy, analytical skills and language skills into existing curricula. In some cases, this is driven by a desire to cater to the needs of articulating students'. In others, this driven by changing workplace demands. In any case, our interviewees' questions as to the relative mastery of academic skills amongst school-leavers, as opposed to TAFE students, seem pertinent. So far, this project is in line with earlier internal research in suggesting that inequity in access to higher education places for TAFE articulators may be reduced through fostering an ongoing and productive cross sectoral dialogue about curriculum (Wheelahan, 2001:6).

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