Pathways from VET to higher education and the selection process

Abstract

The TAFE/higher education interface is a growing interface in Australia and one that is expected to continue to grow. Even so, figures of VET to higher education articulation could be improved substantially in Victoria or, more specifically, at Victoria University (VU) – a dual sector institution. This project investigates how selection practices in higher education play a vital role in the selection or rejection of VET students applying for higher education places. The project team interviewed ten Selection Officers in higher education at VU to document their perceptions of the selection process and how they dealt with the various selection mechanisms, problems with the selection process and what TAFE applicants could do to enhance their prospects of selection. This paper makes a number of recommendations for both sectors to consider including the need for more cross-sectoral curriculum design. The study has informed a comprehensive review of admissions policy and procedures at Victoria University that began in 2004.

Introduction

Various efforts nationally, at state level and institutionally at Victoria University have lead to some interesting cross-sectoral collaborations in the last decade. Indeed, in some areas, VU has been exemplary in overcoming cultural and educational barriers between the sectors. The university has initiated a fast track accounting program, dozens of recognised Pathways with credit, the Paramedics program (an articulated TAFE and higher education program delivered in and by higher education), two dual award programs and creative partnerships between the School of Education and TAFE programs to name a few. However, despite the framework provided by the

AQF,[1] recommendations from the AVCC,[2] consistent calls at both State and Federal levels for more accessible pathways across educational sectors and institutional initiatives for VU to rethink its purpose and overcome the "power, status and 'tribalisms'" evident between VET and higher education as well as a more general invitation to "reconfigure the VET/HE relationship" (Harman, 2004), the numbers of TAFE to higher educational articulators at Victoria University could still be improved.

Anecdotally, there were suggestions in 2003 and 2004 that the TAFE/higher education interface at VU in some areas was in fact shrinking and that TAFE programs that had previously enjoyed excellent pathways arrangements with higher education were being asked to 'jump' extra hurdles (such as the STAT test) for selection purposes. Again anecdotally, there were suggestions that in some higher education areas, TAFE applicants were only considered if higher education numbers were down.

Considerable policy development has been underway at VU since 2004 and, in this new invigorating policy context, an articulation policy has been developed (to be used together with the new admissions policy). It is anticipated that these policies will encourage more robust TAFE and higher education cooperation.

The range of reasons offered for the perceived decrease in TAFE articulators into higher education include claims of the mismatch between Training Packages and

[1] "The AQF makes a specific commitment to flexible, transparent and systematic learning pathways and to the removal of boundaries between educational sectors." For more rhetoric on pathways, see the AQF website http://www.aqf.edu.au/learn_employ.htm (accessed 17/1/06)

[2] "The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) supports the development of closer connections between Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education", *National Policy Guidelines*, available at http://www.avcc.edu.au/documents/policies_programs/teaching_learning/credit_transfer/AVCC_Guidelines.pdf (accessed 17/1/06)

higher education curriculum, the lack of academic skills in TAFE graduates, increases in applications and decreases in higher education load. The effectiveness of pathways, despite policies and procedures, however, is determined largely by the (often lone) Selection Officer of each School who has to juggle several different streams of applicants, only one of which are would-be TAFE articulators. There are often no explicit procedures for prioritising these selection streams and current procedures still allow for much variation between individual officers. There is a need for improved transparency and consistency in the process. As a recent report shows, these problems exist in other Victorian universities as well.[3]

Victoria University has a diverse student population with a high proportion of students from one or more equity groups. As a dual sector institution, VU is ideally positioned to structure programs to facilitate movement between TAFE and higher education particularly to provide an accessible entry point for students from equity groups. In fact, pathways from TAFE to higher education and the cross-sectoral development of programs such as Gateway to Nursing and Preparation for Tertiary Studies have been a major way that the university has been able to meet its social justice obligations in the past. Threats to the effectiveness of Pathways, then, also threaten the achievement of these objectives (Williams, 2003).

Research method

In addition to document analysis and literature review, the project team interviewed ten Selection Officers to document their perceptions of the selection process and how

[3] The Victorian Qualifications Authority 2005 report *Current Policy and Practice in Higher Education Institutions on Assessment of VET Outcomes* notes that in all of the universities they surveyed "the faculties had autonomy over their selection criteria and processes as well as their credit arrangements for programs – as long as those requirements and processes were commensurate with the overarching legislations and policies and procedures of the university as well as that of those documented within the VTAC handbook"(5).

they dealt with the various selection mechanisms, problems with the selection process and what TAFE applicants could do to enhance their prospects of selection. Selection officers were asked to discuss selection criteria, the timing of decisions, 'reading' supplementary forms, the demands of Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) and how applicants from VET could enhance their prospects of selection.

We invited all Selection Officers in higher education to participate and, of these, ten Selection Officers who were experienced in selection and who represented each of the (then) four faculties were interviewed. Selection Officers at VU are all academic staff and many have over ten years experience in the selection process. The focus of the interviews was primarily selection into undergraduate programs and the questions and answers predominantly referred to onshore students and local students, although some Selection Officers made reference to international selection processes and off- to onshore Pathways.

Findings

From November to March, Selection Officers are involved in a complex round of VTAC offers, Portfolio Partnership Program (PPP) applications consisting of student portfolios, Internal Course Transfers and Direct Applications. Some of these application mechanisms are completed online. One respondent reported looking at every application at least once – that is, all Internal, Direct, PPP and VTAC. One respondent offered the following estimates of the numbers of applications assessed in 2005: VTAC 2,500, PPP 50, Internal 250, Direct 10. Given that PPP applications alone involve examining portfolios of 5 to 100 pages,[4] this task is considerable.

[4] There is a page limit for portfolios but students are allowed to additionally include certificates, references and pieces of work and the pages quickly accumulate.

VTAC

Selection of students into higher education is dominated by VTAC. Clearly, it is seen by Students Services, some Selection Officers and some faculties as the single most important selection process. Many current VU students are told to apply for other VU courses through VTAC (rather than Internal Course Transfer). Certainly, the dates, various rounds, rules and regulations of VTAC means that the process, while complicated, also has the most explicit expectations and guidelines of all of the selection processes – particularly on the business of prioritising this cohort. The number of students applying to VU through VTAC far surpasses that of the other entry channels. Respondents reported that they had 2,000-plus applicants for Footscray Park courses and that for that course on that campus they were only able to look at ENTER scores. This reminds us that, selection, like everything else, is limited by the resources available. With efficiency and cost foregrounded, then, many Selection Officers see ENTER scores and VTAC as the most efficient method.

Selection Officers stated also that assessment through VTAC is time consuming. As well as ENTER scores, VTAC might include educational history and supplementary forms. One respondent said that 'VTAC is just the start' and that VTAC could be demanding and problematic for newcomers. Several respondents mentioned the complexity of VTAC and the need to feel confident using it: "if you don't feel good with VTAC, you are gone."

Portfolio Partnership Program (PPP)

"The Portfolio Partnership Program (PPP) is an alternative entry program to Victoria University's most popular courses. It requires applicants to submit a portfolio of evidence about themselves and schools to provide ratings of the applicant's

achievements. The PPP is available only to students attending a Victorian University Partnership School. Applications are limited to 10% of Year 12 Students in each partnership school."[5] The PPP process, then, is only available for a few of VU's most popular courses and is not available at all campuses. PPP has established some precedents for selection processes, including set quotas in some courses, explicit selection criteria and the portfolio approach to providing evidence. However, there remain some difficulties with this process including its timing in relation to other selection streams. Some respondents expressed concern that because PPP decisions are made before ENTER scores are available, it is possible to select students who subsequently obtain low ENTER scores. However, if applicants have met the criteria by one means (PPP) it is not fair to judge them by another (ENTER).

Internal Course Transfer

Applicants using an Internal Course Transfer are not necessarily TAFE articulators; however, TAFE to higher education applications form a substantial proportion of these applications. A range of selections practices was reported for this steam: from the use of detailed criteria to the use of no explicit criteria.

Some respondents reported that they only looked at TAFE applicants applying through Internal Course Transfer if they needed the numbers (and the issue of demand recurred through the interviews). Some respondents considered Internal Course Transfers separately to VTAC and PPP and some areas had quotas for Internal Course Transfer for some campuses (and no intake via this means on more popular

[5] This information is from VU's Centre for Commencing Students website: http://www.vu.edu.au/Admissions/Centre_for_Commencing_Students/VU_Partnership_Schools_Programs/Portfolio_Partnerships_Program_PPP/ (accessed 17/1/06)

campuses). This was the only report of a quota system designed to ensure some success for internal, often TAFE, applicants.

One respondent said that in reading Internal Course Transfers it was necessary to 'read between the lines'. This Selection Officer also considered grades, date of birth, work experience and 'background'. While this respondent was anxious to be fair and "to be seen to be equitable"; without clearly stated criteria and links between the criteria and the course, this would be difficult.

Some Selection Officers explained that they used the recommendations of TAFE Program Managers for Internal Course Transfer selection. Program Managers were asked to identify informally the would-be TAFE articulators who had performed well in their TAFE studies and who they believed were likely to succeed in higher education. The Selection Officers explained that this was a long established practice and that, in their view, it had proven to be an effective means for selecting students who move from TAFE to study in higher education. This well-intentioned practice was reported to be common in a number of program areas but such a system is clearly not open to scrutiny. There is certainly potential for ambiguity when the criteria for selection are not transparent.

The grades of TAFE applicants were problematic. The predictive validity of the grades of the TAFE applicants was often questioned by Selection Officers – one respondent expressed little faith in what the grades signified. One participant noted that the grade set used for TAFE students was important, stating that TAFE applicants without grades were disadvantaged.[6] Another interviewee considered a 'grade point

[6] The competent/not yet competent binary outcomes generally awarded in competency-based training do not provide higher education providers with a basis for discriminating between students applying from TAFE.

average' of students' studies. How that might be calculated in a pure competency-based system is unclear. Although there has been discussion of mandating grading for all Certificate IV courses and above, this has not yet been included in any policy.

Direct Applications

Direct Applications were reportedly treated in a similar manner to Internal Course Transfer applicants. For some courses on some campuses, Direct Applications were not considered. However, some respondents stressed that they considered all applications. Direct Applications were reported to be most commonly considered in course/campus combinations with low demand.

Barriers to articulation

We asked the question: "How could VU's TAFE students enhance their prospects of selection into higher education?" and for some courses, the answer was 'go through VTAC'. Other respondents stated that TAFE applicants could enhance their prospects of selection by demonstrating an interest in their chosen field of study through work and community involvement. Another interviewee proposed that students need to enrol in subjects in TAFE that demonstrate *academic* ability. Some participants expressed a distrust of the ability of TAFE programs to develop the academic skills of students and of TAFE grades (when they were given[7]) to adequately reflect 'academic ability'. This is perhaps the most obvious of the barriers to articulation.

Other issues

What was evident throughout the interviews was the dedication Selection Officers brought to what is an arduous and demanding process. Several respondents wanted to

[7] While some TAFE programs grade students with Competent and Not Yet Competent, many TAFE programs provided students with such grades as 'Competent with Merit'. Several TAFE programs emulate the grading of higher education and award students with both alpha and numeric grades: P, C, D, HD which have corresponding percentage marks.

stress what an important job selection is. One respondent said that, despite the workload, he 'loved it' and wanted to continue in the role. The suggestion that the tasks could be performed by administrative staff implied a lack of understanding of the role and all respondents said that this should not happen. One interviewee said that administrative staff do not have the disciplinary background nor the drive to protect the standards of the profession that an academic in the role has. (The role of gatekeeper for their profession was often mentioned).

Discussion

Selection criteria

It is clear that explicit selection criteria are only consistently used for VTAC and PPP and that other selection processes lack such criteria. While conceding that the different streams make selection a complex process, what is clearly needed are consistent criteria for each course whatever their means of application. Grading of TAFE subjects is one mechanism used by Selection Officers to rank applicants. One respondent reported also considering failures and withdrawals as criteria. He also claimed that mere passes in TAFE were unacceptable for selection into higher education.

Pathways

Respondents emphasised that they considered some pathways as inappropriate for their courses. Indeed, they suggested that the process of identifying and formalising pathways was sometimes seen as removed from Selection Officers; some labelled Pathways as 'management' decisions rather than academic or educational ones. At an extreme, Selection Officers considered that the integrity of the university was threatened by inappropriate pathways and expressed their concern that their decisions

were challenged by people who did not understand their qualifications and who were pressuring them to take students who were not suitable. If Selection Officers do not have confidence in a pathway and are operating with implicit criteria and implicit stream priorities, they are likely to avoid students from these pathways. A recommendation from the study was that Selection Officers must be involved in developing and monitoring of TAFE to higher education Pathways.

Barriers to articulation

The most fundamental barrier identified is the perception of these ten Selection Officers of the lack of academic rigour in TAFE programs with the end result being a perceived lack of basic academic skills in the (potential) undergraduate. Indeed, some TAFE graduates were described as 'semi literate'. Concerns about the academic preparedness of TAFE students for higher education have had a long history. Bridging programs, short courses and additional resources have been developed in some areas but the strong perception remains that many students from TAFE are ill prepared for success in higher education. Pearce et al (2001), writing about the articulation of TAFE students at VU into the Bachelor of Business degree, argue that the difficulty in the transition from TAFE to Higher Education 'involves sudden changes in the depth and detail of subject knowledge, pedagogical approach and assessment…the level, genre and independent nature of academic research and writing'. Difference in assessment tasks is perhaps the most tangible of these.

Several respondents commented that for many TAFE students, academic writing, research skills, conceptual understanding and independent study skills are issues that had become particularly noticeable since the ENTER cut-off scores for higher education courses had increased. These comments highlight the differences in

academic discourse/s between the VET and Higher Education cultures. Until Selection Officers see evidence that students are adequately prepared (by understanding the TAFE grade sets, through collaboration on curriculum design, data on the success of articulating students, etc.), it is unlikely that these concerns will be allayed.

Some prejudices for particular cohorts clearly disadvantaged would-be TAFE articulators. One respondent was blatant: TAFE articulators were 'the weak link in the selection process'. This opinion was based on years of experience selecting and teaching in the undergraduate degree.

Gatekeepers for the professions

An issue raised by a number of respondents was their role in acting as gatekeepers for their professions. This could be interpreted as a dual role, acting for the University in selecting students that are likely to succeed and acting for their profession in selecting those who were likely to develop into acceptable members of the profession. There is therefore a risk that students may be selected or rejected on the basis of criteria other than those determined by the University, especially when priorities, processes and criteria remain somewhat fuzzy. A belief that a professional body regards qualifications partly achieved through TAFE study as lesser may, for example, lead to discrimination against TAFE applicants. Defined priorities, criteria and processes would help to address this potential role conflict. This finding also highlights the need for the University to work effectively with professional bodies if it wishes to be a leader in cross-sectoral articulation.

Conclusions

This report based on interviews with ten Selection Officers emphasises that the process that selects students for admission into higher education programs is a

complex and demanding exercise. Selection Officers must juggle several streams of applicants arriving at different times. They assess applications using limited evidence using mainly implicit criteria and ill-defined processes. Inevitably, selection is to some extent "subjective" because it is based on the professional judgement of Selection Officers. While there is often much internal logic to the selection process as it is understood and practised by each Selection Officer, the criteria for selection vary within a program in some instances and certainly between programs. Even where there is agreement on explicit criteria, there remain inconsistencies in the application of these criteria in the selection process. A number of recommendations emerged from this study, many of which have gone on to inform policy in articulation, selection and student assessment. Some of the more pertinent recommendations were that criteria for selection into higher education courses be explicitly defined and made available to TAFE teachers and students, that the same criteria be applied consistently to different cohorts and that guidelines be developed for the application of selection criteria to the different selection processes. On the meaningful development of Pathways, it was recommended that Selection Officers be represented on Admissions, Selection and Articulation Policy working groups and that Selection Officers be involved in developing and monitoring pathways. On the broader, cross-sectoral cultural issues that presented barriers to articulation, we recommended that strategies be developed to address concerns about the academic skills of TAFE students and that TAFE teachers and Program Managers be encouraged to design assessment tasks that allow students to develop and demonstrate appropriate academic skills. It was also seen as a matter of urgency that TAFE grading sets be made consistent and

appropriate for courses with pathways into higher education, not just to enhance their prospects of gaining a place at VU but also at other universities in Victoria.[8]

This report, while preliminary, reveals some consistent themes in the practices and concerns of Selection Officers. It confirms anecdotal reports that Selection Officers operate with limited guidelines and that some are guided by their personal preferences for particular cohorts and it is consistent with the key findings of a report commissioned by the Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA), *Current Policy and Practice in Higher Education Institutions on Assessment of VET Outcomes* released in May 2005.

While the process of selection must involve professional judgement it should also be defensible and transparent. The potential role conflict of the Selection Officer as selector for the University and as guardian of their profession needs further exploration so that the *practice* of selection will become as evident as the *results* of selection are now. Given the many new policies now operational at VU, some of which have been informed by this study, we anticipate that Selection will be more equitable for these different entry streams, more consistent across different program areas. The new Articulation Policy and the Admissions Policy and the very comprehensive procedures for those of those policies now provide guidelines and explicit criteria for Selection Officers. Selection Officers still have the responsibility to choose individual students from the eligible applicant pool through a number of entry modes, but they do so with clear criteria for each category, clear definitions of each category and stated factors for their consideration in what is a vital and

[8] The VQA report notes that "Some universities required graded/scored assessments for selection (eg. Monash University and the University of Melbourne)" (6).

demanding process. It is anticipated that TAFE articulators will experience improved outcomes in this new policy context.

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