

# **The Ladder System Works Well-enough (Student pathways in post-secondary education and training): Perspectives of policy and power elites in WA**

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## **Abstract**

Strategies to address changes in demand for post-secondary education and training, especially within the context of lifelong learning, tend to focus on articulated pathways and effective cross-sectoral links. These traditional linear pathways ‘*as conceived by policy-makers*’ (Schofield 2002; p.150) no longer apply, and changing patterns of student participation in post-secondary education and training have been the focus of significant attention both in Australia and internationally.

A significant body of literature argues that from a student perspective, institutional or sectoral boundaries have little meaning as students increasingly transfer in all directions. This includes patterns of reverse transfer (Golding 1995) and lateral transfer (Palmer 1999), and movement in and out of vocational and academic programs and institutions as students use tertiary institutions in their own ways to meet their needs as they gather the combinations of skills, knowledge and qualifications they need for career pathways.

Further to this, these changing patterns of student movement have also been described as ‘*churning and fluctuation*’ (Goldrick-Rab 2004; p. 6) and ‘*like leaves in the wind*’ (Townsend 2001; p. 5). This ‘*consumer-oriented approach to taking courses*’ (Johnstone *et al* 2002; p. 3) in what is described as ‘*the post-secondary shopping mall*’ (Schwartz 2004 as quoted in Goldrick-Rab 2004; p.10) has been the focus of significant attention in international and national literature. However, the policy focus in WA remains on uni-linear vertical pathways from TAFEWA to university.

This paper presents perspectives of policy and power elites about student pathways in post-secondary education and training in WA. It represents one of the findings from a research study that examined the perspectives of policy and power elites about degree-awarding status for TAFEWA.

## **1. Introduction**

This paper will argue that the existing policy and funding focus – at national level and in Western Australia – on uni-linear, vertical articulation and credit-transfer arrangements for student pathways from TAFE to university does not reflect the dynamic reality of a changing environment of post-secondary education and training. Neither does this current model support the changing student cohort, nor their multiple and complex patterns of learning and earning. Furthermore, the study indicates that entrenched perspectives, based on sectoral and institutional containment rather than flexible student development, offer limited hope for reform.

This argument is based on one of four findings (*Appendix 1*) from a research study that examined the perspectives of policy and power elites about degree-awarding status for TAFEWA.

## **2. The Literature**

There is a substantial body of national and international literature that examines the often contentious and controversial nature of issues related to higher level vocational qualifications, and to seamless pathways for learners between TAFE, university and work. Current models for post-secondary education and training policy, planning and funding in Australia are embedded in traditional and hierarchical models of articulation and credit-transfer (Duke 2001), and the promotion of seamless pathways from TAFE to university and work.

In reality, post-secondary education and training in Australia comprises two distinct sectors – the VET sector and the higher education sector. Each sector is funded by different levels of government, is accountable to different levels of government, and with different cultures and pedagogy (Wheelahan 2000).

There is little empirical evidence to support arguments that current models of articulation and credit transfer arrangements TAFE and universities reflect the expectations or meet the needs of the majority students. There is however, increasing evidence that students, and their patterns of participation in post-secondary education and training are changing, as is the complexity of the environment.

- ***The changing environment.***

There is general agreement in the literature that closer links between the sectors are essential to developing the diversity of learning pathways necessary to enable people to move easily between education and training and to manage a number of career changes over their lifetime (Sommerlad *et al* 1998; Wheelahan 2000; Parry and Thompson 2002). From this perspective, the rationale for collaborative cross-sectoral relationships is presented in the literature in terms of simplifying transitions and pathways to facilitate learning.

However, the literature also argues that in reality, there are significant barriers that inhibit collaborative and mutually beneficial relationships between the VET sector and the higher education sector (Watt and Paterson 2000; Wheelahan 2001). It is ‘the structural, political and philosophical mechanisms’ (Bragg and Reger 2000; p. 265) that remain insurmountable barriers to flexible student movement in and out of, and between post-secondary education and training sectors, institutions and the workplace. (*Slide 2: The Changing Environment*)

Competition for students to ensure funding profiles has been compounded by the emergence, at an increasing rate, of more providers in the post-secondary education and training market, including international organisations and private companies. A booming economy and labour shortages makes employment more attractive to some who, in a less dynamic economy, may otherwise pursue further education and/or training. Differences in regulatory, funding and accreditation arrangements inhibit

cross-sectoral delivery arrangements and make it difficult to respond to changing student demand in post-secondary education and training.

As a result of this ‘changing world, changing workplace and changing mindset ... new and more tailored approaches’ (Campus Review 2006; p. 13) are required not only from training providers and practitioners, but also from policy makers. Employers and students are increasingly demanding alternatives to time-based, uni-linear vertical pathways in post-secondary education and training. The policy focus remains however, on pathways models that support traditional differences and demarcations between TAFE and university

- ***Changing Students***

While the terms ‘learner-centred’ and ‘customer-focussed’ have been tossed around over the past decade or more, there seems to be little evidence of systemic and widespread change in approaches to recognition of prior learning (RPL), or to credit transfer and articulation policy and practices that reflect these values in practice.

Diverse literature (Frاند 2000; Hays Specialist Recruitment 2005) examines characteristics of current and future cohorts of post-school learners. This literature emphasises that these learners are very different in their behaviours, values, expectations and needs from those (the so-called Builder and the Boomer Generations) who are currently making the plans and policies that determine the how, when, where, how long and how much of post-secondary education and training. (*Slide 3: Changing Mindsets*)

These Generation X and Generation Y learners are generally familiar with technology as a tool of everyday life, and use it comfortably to locate and assimilate information. They habitually do numerous things at the same time. They have a strong sense of entitlement, and expect 24/7 service and immediate response to their requests. They expect there to be more than one way of doing something, of finding a solution, of achieving a goal, and expect to be able to choose and customise services to suit their needs. They expect to be able to try things out, and to change their minds, to express their opinions and to be listened to. They are highly mobile, and impatient ‘self esteem on steroids’ (Sheahan 2005; p.1). They believe they are special. They are described as ‘independently dependant’ (Sheahan 2005; p. 1), leading to the emergence of the phenomenon of the ‘helicopter parent’ (Schweitzer 2005; Schellenbarger 2005) - the Baby Boomer parents who hover over, run interference, and carefully map out every activity and decision for their children – regardless of their age. Some further education and higher education institutions in the UK and America have employed parent bouncers to address the issue of these hovering parents, who see the institution as a product and themselves as consumers who want to ensure their investment is being protected (Schellenbarger 2005).

There is also ample evidence that patterns of student participation in post-secondary education and training are changing significantly.

- ***Changing patterns of student participation***

A plethora of articulation arrangements between the VET sector and higher education sector in Australia aim to support student movement and progression from VET to university. Diverse institutional structures support delivery of post-secondary education and training across TAFE and universities. Further, there is a body of literature that examines a trend for university graduates to seek further qualifications in VET (OECD 2001; Golding 1995; Golding and Vallenge 1999; Moodie 2005; Wheelahan 2004).

As with the cries of ‘learner-centred’, the catch-phrase of ‘seamless pathways’ is familiar. According to the literature however, traditional linear pathways ‘as conceived by policy-makers’ (Schofield 2002; p. 150) no longer apply. Neither traditional institutional and sectoral boundaries, nor articulation and credit transfer arrangements aimed at providing these seamless pathways from TAFE to university have little meaning from a student perspective (Kinnick *et al* 1998; Bach *et al* 2000; Golding 1995; Goldrick-Rab 2004).

Since the early 1990’s the term ‘swirling’ has been used by researchers to describe student movement in post-secondary education and training (de los Santos and Wright 1990; Townsend and Dever 1999; Goldrick-Rab 2004). Further to this, these changing patterns of student movement have also been variously described, including ‘churning and fluctuation’ (Goldrick-Rab 2004; p. 6), ‘like leaves in the wind’ (Townsend and Dever 1999; p. 5). (*Slide 4: Changing Patterns of Learning and Earning*)

An emerging body of literature argues that students increasingly transfer in all directions. They want to move in and out of post-secondary education and training and work, and between institutions and programs, and across sectors. Students want to be able to use post-secondary education and training institutions, courses and programs in their own ways to meet their own needs, as they put together skills, knowledge and qualifications required for employment. These changing patterns of student participation and movement within and between VET, university and employment, across sectors and between institutions, have not however, been examined in depth (Goldrick-Rab 2004; Wheelahan 2004; Townsend and Dever 1999; de los Santos and Wright 1990).

The basis for my argument that traditional models of uni-linear, vertical pathways from TAFEWA to university do not meet the changing needs of the majority of learners is a research study, completed in 2005, that examined the perspectives of policy and power elites about degree-awarding status for TAFEWA. This paper uses one of the key findings to expand an argument that there is a significant gap between literature that examines changing patterns of student movement in post-secondary education and training, and the changing characteristics of learners, and the perspectives of policy and power elites in WA who make the policy and decisions that govern opportunities for this cohort of learners.

### **3. The Research Study**

The theoretical foundation for the study was qualitative research using a mixed-methods approach. Subsequent investigation of perspectives was underpinned by Interpretivism. A key element of this study was the decision to study up – to access influential people in relevant positions (policy and power elites) and examine their

perspectives. This strategy provided a framework for developing and refining the research question and guiding questions (*Appendix 2*), directed reading of literature for review, and shaped both the theoretical construct and the research methods.

This study was conducted in Western Australia, and involved forty three participants selected from amongst the senior ranks of the political, public, private, education, VET and higher education sectors. These participants, were selected on the basis of their expertise in, or responsibility for post-secondary education and training (*Appendix 3: Study Participants*). In seeking their perspectives, various methods were employed. These include a modified Delphi Technique, participant observation, and face-to-face semi-structured interviews. In addition, my personal professional networks and contacts were employed. This enabled me to use informal interviews, through telephone conversations and e-mail communications, to seek the perspectives of policy and power elites in other Australian States and Territories, and internationally (*Appendix 4: Data Collection*). The study took place during the period from July 2002 to April 2005.

The large amounts of data generated from multiple sources for this study needed systematic organisation to support the processes of categorising, sorting, storing and retrieval for analysis. With the focus on making sense of the data as it was collected, the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1998) was used.

#### **4. Analysis and Conclusions**

The post-secondary education and training policy process in WA, as with much public policy, involves a range of political actors, and sectoral and organisational factors that impact on decisions. The roles of these key players, all with disparate perspectives, influences decisions and affects outcomes.

This study found that the perspectives of participants (policy and power elites) reflect traditional institutional models of student participation in post-secondary education and training, emphasising uni-linear, vertical pathways from vocational to academic education and training. This policy view of VET as a stepping-stone or pathway to university, especially for disadvantaged students, is considered by the literature to be an important element of governments' expansion of higher education (Carnevale and Desrochers 2001; Walker 2001).

- *What the Bureaucrats Say*

The bureaucrats participating in this research study express support for articulation and credit transfer arrangements with universities on the basis that they are '*good for the students*' (B10; B2) and enhance the reputation of TAFEWA. However, they also argue that while these arrangements '*look good on paper for the Minister*' (B19) for Education and Training, they are '*in principle and not widely in practice*' (B19) because the universities '*don't give guaranteed articulation for TAFE students*' (B24).

In reality, according to the bureaucrats, developing pathways for students is '*too hard to bother with, too time consuming, and too much effort*' (B21) Relationships between the Department of Education and Training, and the

universities are *'acrimonious and arduous'* (B25), and considered by the bureaucrats to be adversely affected by the relationship between the Vice-Chancellor's and the Minister for Education and Training. As B11 states, *'the universities call the tune, and the Minister [for Education and Training] makes us dance to it'*. There was consensus amongst the bureaucrats that the universities exploit this relationship to influence VET policy and decisions in order to protect their own interests, which also include *'maintaining the status quo'* (B18).

The bureaucrats consider that any collaborative arrangements are *ad hoc* in nature, unplanned, not sustainable, and *'not as coordinated or cohesive as they should be'* (B2). On the whole, the bureaucrats express frustration with the universities, and argue that attempts at communication are *'like shouting into a vacuum'* (B25). From the perspective of the bureaucrats, the universities *'oppose anything that has TAFEWA on it'* (B11). This opposition is described in an internal WA Department of Education and Training Memo (5 May 2003) as having the potential to *'undermine the value of VET courses and VET qualifications'* and to *'undermine the principles of seamless education, lifelong learning, qualification linkages and articulation'*.

Further, the bureaucrats express frustration at what they perceive as university influence over policy directions and strategic decisions about TAFEWA, and both covert resistance and *'guerilla warfare'* (B ) by the universities not only to expansion of articulation and credit transfer arrangements, but also to expansion of TAFEWA market advantage.

The bureaucrats consider that *'the universities have got the trots over articulation'* (B16) and only seek arrangements with TAFEWA that will increase the numbers of potential students for university entrance, and as a means of perpetuating negative associations and perceptions of TAFEWA as inferior, less desirable and less demanding than university. On this however, eight bureaucrats discuss TAFEWA in terms such as *'mickey-mouse'* (B3), and describe the difference between TAFEWA and university in terms of *'building a great cathedral'* and *'simply laying bricks'* (B1).

On the other hand, the bureaucrats perceive the boundaries as being not only created by the universities, but aggressively protected, creating *'silos, discontinuity in learning, articulation problems'* (B8). Further to this, the bureaucrats argue that the universities are pushing those boundaries and encroaching on TAFEWA territory by taking over the lucrative market at the higher end of VET courses and qualifications. The resultant *'turf wars'* (B2; B6; B17) inhibit progress toward common understanding, effective relationships and thinking about flexible and innovative pathways for students.

- *What the Universities say*

On the part of university-based participants, there is extreme frustration at the bureaucrats' repeated *'resistance to input [into VET policy] from the universities'* (U12), and *'an anti-intellectualism in the Department [of Education and Training] that is a barrier to discussion and collaboration'* (U10) about student transitions and pathways. According to the university-based participants *'we [Vice-Chancellors] have gone out of our way to facilitate generic and much bigger linkages*

*and pathways*' (U6). However, the bureaucrats '*make it impossible to rationally discuss student transitions and pathways*' (U9), and it is always '*difficult to know where TAFE is coming from, what it is TAFE does, and what they expect*' (U2). To address this, the university-based participants discuss the necessity of avoiding discussions with bureaucrats, and instead describe how '*We [Vice-Chancellors] have breakfast with the Minister [Education and Training] and the Premier, and tell them what we want, and how we think it [articulation, student pathways] should work in WA*' (U12).

Articulation and credit transfer arrangements are discussed by the university-based participants in terms of a stepping-stone, or 'ladder' for academically able TAFEWA students to progress on to university and gain a degree. These participants use this concept of TAFEWA as a stepping-stone to argue against degree-awarding status for TAFEWA on the basis that '*there are already pathways from TAFE to degree programs*' that '*enable students to move on to a choice of universities*' (U2). Current models are seen as appropriate because they maintain the important tradition of elitism and status of universities, and their focus on '*the business of education, not teaching people how to flip hamburgers*' (U1). As U8 argues, '*articulation [from TAFEWA to university] is unlikely*' because it '*compromises the selection of the best entrants*'.

A significant number of university-based participants share a conviction that responsibility for poor TAFEWA-university relationships lies with the bureaucrats (U3; U23; U20; U2; U8; U9; U3). Further, the university-based participants express the opinion that the bureaucrats are responsible for the enduring traditional dichotomies that are located in VET sector implementation of and support for training packages, competency-based training and assessment, approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, funding mechanisms and the lack of graded assessment in TAFE. It is TAFEWA that is reluctant to '*bridge the gap*' (U10) or to seriously consider issues and suggestions raised by the universities. For U2, attempts by the universities to establish collaborative relationships with TAFEWA and to develop pathways have '*at all stages been knocked back, or delayed so significantly that we've found it almost not worth the effort*'.

It is a university-based participant who makes the single reference to different patterns of student movement, commenting that '*we [universities] know that as many students go from university to TAFE, and probably more these days*' (U2).

- *What Politicians and Employers Say*

The politicians and the industry representatives participating in this study perceive merit in maintaining traditional, uni-linear pathways from TAFEWA to university because the distinctive goals and complementary roles of TAFEWA and universities should be acknowledged and strengthened. These arrangements support the '*traditional and social value of university achievement*' (P6), and the '*higher levels of learning that occur in university*' (P1) and associated '*proper tertiary qualifications*' (P8).

Further to this, uni-linear vertical pathways also meet the expectations of the community and industry about a '*ladder system*' (P3) of learning and achievement

whereby TAFEWA *'is something people do if they can't do the academic'* (P1). As P1 states *'the ladder system[from TAFE to university] works well enough'*.

The politicians perceive that it is the universities that perpetuate differences and boundaries. As P1 comments, *'the barriers are in the universities'*. On the other hand, the emphasis of industry participants is on a need to *'recognise and encourage the distinctive roles and outcomes of VET and higher education'* (O3). Industry participants in this research study are unanimous that the *'distinctive roles and outcomes of VET and higher education'* (O3) that enable each to *'cater to different student types'* (O4) are critical and *'must be recognised and maintained'* (O3).

## 5. Implications

Participants in this research study present a view of the VET policy environment in WA as a battleground where bureaucrats and the universities (through the Vice-Chancellors) fight for legitimacy and domination in order to protect their sectoral interests. Interpretations of student pathways focus narrowly on uni-linear, vertical pathways between secondary schools, TAFE and universities. This current policy focus and structure is *'an artificial construct, one-dimensional, stop/start learning'* (Siemens 2003; p.2) that reflects neither the needs nor the expectations of a majority of contemporary learners.

It is evident that policy makers need to more fully acknowledge and support the diversity of demand and multiplicity of student attendance patterns in order to address the realities of the student cohort and how they want to go to TAFE, to university and to work. It is these realities that require policy and practice that is future-focussed, not embedded in historical precedence, or maintenance of the *status quo*.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that current models for articulation and credit transfer do not support contemporary learners, or their multiple and complex patterns of learning and earning. Furthermore, entrenched perspectives, based on sectoral and institutional containment rather than flexible student development, offer limited hope for innovative thinking about pathways beyond a *'ladder system [that] works well-enough'*.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Research Findings

There are four key findings from this research study: *TAFEWA-awarded Degrees*. The first finding is that policy, especially regarding degree - awarding authority in post - secondary education and training, is formed on an assumption of uni - linear, vertical pathways from TAFEWA to university that perpetuates traditions of a hierarchy of status and qualifications and the traditional higher standing and status of the universities. Secondly, symbolic connotations of degrees, professions, vocational education and training, disciplined knowledge and research are so tightly inter - connected that status associated with use of these terms preserves rather than breaks down differences in the roles of TAFEWA and the universities, and boundaries between them.

The third research finding is that TAFEWA aspires to, and desires the status, prestige and market advantage the universities enjoy by virtue of their ownership of the title 'degree' and their authority by law to award degree. This desire is described by Girard (1977) as triangulated, borrowed or mimetic desire. According to Girard (1977; quoted in Grote 2003), conflict is built into the structure of desire. Although flattered by the imitation, the model is protective of the object of desire. Further, structures or taboos are used by the model to manage the subject's access to the object of desire. It is widely acknowledged by participants in this research study that universities have ownership of, and monopoly over degree - awarding authority. This status will continue to be defended by the universities, which perceive no advantage to themselves in degree - awarding status for TAFEWA.

The fourth finding is that the complexity of post - secondary education and training is exacerbated by historical friction between TAFEWA and the universities. Interviews with different stakeholders involved with policy formation revealed conflicting perspectives on the status of trades and professions, academic and practical discourses, and university and TAFEWA lecturers.

### Appendix 2: Research Question and Guiding Questions

The determination and definition of the Research Question established a focus for the research, and provided a point of reference throughout the study. The question framing this study was *What are the perspectives of key influential people in relevant positions about degree awarding status for TAFEWA, and how do these perspectives impact on the policy process?*

The major sub-questions provided a framework for developing the interview questions for this study, for directing other methods of data collection used, including the Delphi Technique, document analysis and observations, as well as for discussion of the. These sub-questions are:

- i) Who are the key influential people in relevant positions in WA in relation to VET policy decisions?
- ii) What international, national and local socio-economic and political factors impact on VET policy and VET provision in WA?

- iii) What are the perspectives of influential people in relevant positions about how the role of TAFE colleges differs from the role of universities, and what are the understandings about the relationship between the sectors?
- iv) What are the perspectives of influential people in relevant positions about degree-awarding status for TAFEWA ?

### **Appendix 3: Study Participants**

- i) State politicians from Government and the Opposition, with responsibility for or involvement in education, VET, or higher education;
- ii) Representatives from Western Australian industry including Chief Executive Officers and employers;
- iii) Directors General and senior executives from public sector agencies with responsibility for or involvement in education, VET, and higher education;
- iv) Vice-Chancellors, Deans and Heads of Schools from the five Western Australian universities; and
- v) Managing Directors of TAFE colleges from the TAFEWA network.

### **Appendix 4: Data Collection methods**

- i) Eight face-to-face, semi-structured half hour interviews with policy and power elites in their offices (and 'on the run' in lifts and motor vehicles) in Perth WA between December 2002 and August 2003;
- ii) Three informal interviews with influential people in relevant positions in inter-state agencies. These informal interviews took place in their offices, and ranged from ninety minutes to two hours duration;
- iii) Telephone conversations and email correspondence with colleagues in public sector agencies and with influential people in relevant positions nationally and internationally during 2003/2004;
- iv) An adaptation of the Delphi Technique conducted with fifteen participants selected from influential people in relevant positions (other than those interviewed), consisting of two rounds over a three month period in 2003;
- v) Observations of six formal meetings (as participant observer with a formal role in the proceedings) between influential people in relevant positions during 2002/2003;
- vi) Observations of two public policy forums during 2003;
- vii) Document search and study of media and journal articles, formal Ministerial briefings, discussion papers, conference papers, archived material, official record files, internal memos, publications and unofficial records including notes, emails; and
- ix) Use of insider accounts