

Articulation in a dual sector university: changing contexts, changing relationships

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Abstract

This paper will discuss findings from a longitudinal project conducted at Victoria University on the experiences of TAFE students articulating into university courses, in terms of the tensions that increased student movement along articulation pathways invokes for TAFE staff in a dual sector institution. We situate our research in relation to an emerging literature on the new challenges facing Australian TAFE teachers and trace how some of these tensions are playing out at our own institution. We conclude that university level guidance on the management of articulation needs to be put in place. However, building good cross sectoral relationships also helps to enhance TAFE staff's ability to negotiate what are considerable tensions around TAFE to HE articulation and to produce better outcomes for those TAFE students who seek to articulate into degrees.

Introduction

Encouragement of 'seamless' student movement within the tertiary educational sector is a mainstay of recent government policy statements. Consequently, many Australian tertiary institutions, including Victoria University are investigating articulation arrangements, credit transfer, recognition of prior learning and possibilities for greater cross sectoral collaboration. A concern with ensuring 'smooth' TAFE-HE pathways is reflected in policy development at Victoria University, which also aims to ensure greater consistency and equity in the treatment of students in selection processes (Lister, 2003:16). The project reported on here sought to map the extent to which the pathways courses we examined achieved these equity aims. Our results tallied with other Australian research, in suggesting that progress has been made, yet substantial barriers to 'seamless' cross-sectoral movement remain (Harris, Rainey and Sumner, 2006). Current articulation practices also present challenges for TAFE staff. One barrier to 'seamless' cross sectoral transfers at Victoria University is a lack of guidelines on how TAFE staff should manage increased levels of TAFE to HE articulation. In particular, there is a need for clear allocation of institutional responsibility for 'bridging' learning gaps across the sectors. Articulation pathways were in practice most functional where TAFE and HE staff, departments, and faculties had strong, mutually beneficial relationships. There was though variety in the quality of cross sectoral relationships in the pathways courses we examined and thus also in the quality of staff and student's experiences.

Literature review

The rapid pace of change in Australia's tertiary education sector in recent years has been driven by global, interrelated trends like growth in knowledge economies,

‘credentialism’, and policies that promote both ‘life long’ learning and ‘seamless’ education systems. These developments have influenced both youth and adult educational aspirations and patterns of educational transitions. VET students now undertake multiple courses as a strategy to maintain, as well as gain, viable employment and thus ‘life long learning’ is already their reality (Anderson, 2005). The precise figures are contested (see Curtis, 2006) but TAFE to HE articulation has also increased since the early 1990’s. The proportion of university applicants with TAFE qualifications has risen, many school leavers who are unsuccessful degree applicants see TAFE as offering a ‘second chance’, and interest in later university study amongst TAFE graduates is high (Cohen, Lewis, Stone and Wood, 1997). In the LSAY sample, one in every eight students beginning a non-apprenticeship VET course later transferred to a degree (Curtis, 2006).

These broad trends are also implicated in *some* convergences in desired learning outcomes in VET and in HE, and in the differing modes of teaching and learning adopted in each of these sectors (Harris, Rainey and Sumner, 2006:17; Harris, Symons and Clayton, 2005). The role of TAFE teaching staff has changed in response to an increased emphasis on developing ‘independent learners’, assessment, and on producing demonstrable learning outcomes, rather than on content delivery. These trends closely mirror current expectations of higher education staff (Harris, Symons and Clayton 2005:66-67; NCVET, 2004:5). Absorption of ANTA by DEST has increased the pressures on the VET system to meet such policy demands (Caven, 2005) as well might claims by the business council of Australia that the ‘increasingly complex skill development needs’ of business are not being met within VET (Harris, Rainey and Sumner, 2006:15). Higher education providers are being urged to employ work based learning and to offer more vocationally oriented content and skills, as reflected in curriculum changes (Smith and Bush, 2006). Such convergences may presumably help to ease student movement between VET and HE.

However, entrenched differences between modes of teaching and learning in these two sectors, along with other changes in VET teaching practice, *add* to the challenges students face in negotiating cross sectoral transfers. Collaboration on cross sectoral curricula has been stymied by the introduction of training packages, the industry based competency focus of which has problematised attempts to ‘map’ VET curricula to higher education (See Moodie, 2003). The more persistent differences in modes of teaching and learning in HE and in VET revolve around the fact that:

University learning and assessment places much more emphasis on...cognitive development and the development of critical thinking than does competency based training, which is focused primarily on skill development (Smith and Bush, 2006:391-392).

These authors also note that differences in the generic skills that each of these sectors seeks to develop in their students reflect these approaches to teaching and learning and assessment practices. This state of affairs helps to illuminate the particular adjustment difficulties students routinely report in moving between the two educational environments (See Milne, Glaisher and Keating, 2006; Cameron, 2004; Conroy, Pearce and Murphy, 2001).

Research documenting the experiences of *students* who transfer from VET to HE has grown as their numbers have increased, but exploration of how tertiary educators are contending with this shifting landscape remains scant. Preliminary studies indicate

that VET practitioners are finding this host of new and often conflicting demands quite stressful. How, for example, should they balance the requirements of training packages and of adherence to the AQTF with provision of consistent student outcomes (NCVER, 2004). A 'narrowing' of educational aims within the training packages framework seems to reduce possibilities for inculcating the very 'life long' learning skills prioritised in policy texts and to do little to facilitate the 'seamless' educational system desired by government and industry alike. Furthermore, many TAFE students have been enabled to see themselves as 'clients', entitled to negotiate with their educators about the educational 'product' they get (Harris et al, 2005). Finally, working in an increasingly competitive tertiary sector is perceived as a major challenge by VET practitioners (NCVER, 2004).

Methods

In this study, articulating students were defined as internal students who moved from a departure course in TAFE to a destination course in HE. Internal students who are articulating can progress through one of Victoria University's standard pathways, which are negotiated by sectoral stakeholders, or undertake a dual sector award. We use the term pathway to refer to a formally acknowledged link between qualifications in the TAFE and HE sectors. In 2005, we selected eight TAFE courses that act as the starting point for formal and informal 'pathways' to HE, from a range of broad fields of study. We conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with twenty TAFE teachers and one hundred and fourteen students from these courses. In 2006 we conducted follow up interviews with most of these students, many of whom had enrolled in degree courses, and with twenty nine of their lecturers. The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed in full.

Results

Increased student demand for TAFE to HE articulation

Victoria University policies that aim to increase 'traffic' on articulation pathways seem to have been effective (see also Wheelahan, 2001). Many TAFE teachers we interviewed perceived increases in interest in 'going on' to degree studies in recent years amongst students in upper level qualifications, with some variations by field of study. Estimates of the proportions of students interested in articulation ranged from 10% to up to 90% of students. Most teachers suggested that around two thirds of students in their courses were interested in articulating. Some speculated that that the number of students articulating two or three years *after* completion of a TAFE course might increase these estimates.

Oh between ninety and the lot...over the last three years...most students want to go over to higher ed.

Anecdotally? About sixty percent, thirty percent on completion and thirty percent within two years.

Exit VCE without a doubt aspire to articulate. Adult learners don't necessarily plan to in the beginning.

These perceptions of high levels of interest in articulation were supported in the student interviews. Of the one hundred and fourteen students who participated, only six were definitely not intending to articulate, while eleven students were undecided

about their future plans¹. A majority of students had entered their TAFE courses with the intention of articulating to HE, although this varied by field of study. Many students saw their TAFE course as a valuable 'stepping stone' to further study. Interest in articulation was informed by hopes for improved vocational outcomes, views that employers look favourably on degrees, enjoying the learning process itself, and having developed a 'taste' for a field.

I did want to get...straight into the bachelor...I found it more beneficial, I'm actually happier I didn't get the higher marks.

I'm just keen to keep going with everything that I've learnt...as a profession...and for personal knowledge, I enjoy the course.

You really need just the piece of paper to start with to get your foot in the door...if you have got the degree then they will look at you seriously.

Hard to go straight from high school to a degree...need such a high enter...after a year of studying something...it either encourages you or it dissuades you...the majority of us it has encouraged us...want to carry on.

A high proportion of these students were enrolled in a degree by 2006. Eighty five of them applied for degree studies, and sixty eight accepted HE places at VU, most often the only university they had applied to. Ten students entered HE elsewhere. Eighteen students reported not applying for university places and seven reported applying unsuccessfully. A national picture of steady gains in the level of articulation is supported by these results, although our 'dual sector' status seems particularly appealing to those students seeking pathways to HE.

I could have applied to higher education directly...but being middle aged I thought I would start here as a bridge.

I applied for VU and I actually didn't get in and then I filled out a student compact and they told me to go through TAFE system.

(Why is VU your first preference?) Basically, cause this is where I'm doing TAFE and this is where I feel I've got a chance, that's it.

Having established that there are high levels of interest in and traffic along articulation pathways at Victoria University, but that this is perhaps related to the dual sector nature of our institution, we can now explore some of the issues this situation has raised for the TAFE staff we interviewed.

Promotion of articulation options to TAFE students

Despite university policy goals of promoting articulation options to TAFE students, no guidelines exist as to when or how this should be done. Teacher comments implied that in practice, discussion of articulation options is embedded in some TAFE courses and almost absent from others. Promotion of articulation was most likely in areas where students have a high chance of success and where staff are aware that many students have this goal in mind. While most teachers voiced support for students who aimed to later undertake degrees, they were uneasy about encouraging students to pursue pathways in cases when outcomes could be unpredictable, or chances of success were low.

¹ When recruiting students we did indicate wanting to speak to both students interested in articulation and those who weren't. We also asked for a 'show of hands' as to who wanted to articulate in each class we recruited from. Those students not keen to articulate less often chose to participate in interviews and so they are less well represented in our sample.

The problem is...we have a problem selling something we don't own...I am reluctant to say what they are going to get in, because they can change it at a moments notice...that is dangerous for us to be misleading students.

I'd hate to think they've put in so much work and then they're disappointed cause they don't get in...they do work hard, especially in their final year they get so stressed about getting these marks for higher ed that they don't relax and try and understand what they're learning.

At the moment it would appear that most students who are applying...are being picked up by higher ed...their numbers are a bit lower and they are very keen to get our students...the issue becomes whether there are enough second year places...there has been times when there hasn't.

This uncertainty about student's chances of HE selection and thus also about the desirability of promoting articulation options results in 'ad hoc' practices developing which may have negative outcomes for some students. For example, within one TAFE course two different teachers discussed taking totally different approaches to these issues. Interviews with students from this course indicate the confusion this engenders for students given different information by various teachers, a point raised by other TAFE teachers as well.

'Preparing' students for articulation, ensuring good vocational outcomes

A second tension around articulation commonly described by teachers was that of reconciling demands to meet the needs of all of their students by covering required content in the classroom, while also providing 'add ons' that are particularly useful for those students hoping to transfer to higher education. There are no official guidelines for TAFE staff to consult on where responsibility lies for equipping students with the skills necessary to make successful transitions from TAFE to HE. To complicate matters further, student uptake of 'add ons' was reportedly low, due to perceptions of 'irrelevance' at the time.

A lot of criticism...about their literacy skills, when they go to higher ed, that's not directly our problem in a sense...we're not here to teach them how to write, read and add up, nevertheless...we would like to help them.

We still nurture them...get them to do some stuff that prepares them...didn't work out, they couldn't see the relevance. Not everyone wants to go on to higher ed...it is not our business to prepare students, we do that as a value-add...depends on what your program is.

Most of them say they want to go to higher ed...obviously we're trying to equip them for the workplace, that's our charter at TAFE, but in the same breath we're trying to also equip them for higher ed...advanced diploma we really push responsibility for their own learning.

As these comments indicate, TAFE teachers tended to see supporting student's aims to articulate as congruent with a traditional emphasis in TAFE on a 'nurturing' and 'enabling' approach to teaching and learning. In courses in which many students want to 'go on', introducing practices which foster academic skills development was less problematic. In other cases, teachers had difficulty striking the right balance between catering to the needs of students seeking to 'go on' and students not interested in further studies at that time.

We have to watch ourselves...that we are not too higher ed oriented as the ultimate destination...it is a fine line between enabling students to feel as

though they are actually doing a great course in of itself...not that it is kind of second best to doing a...degree.

Articulation and focus on the bachelor program...diminishes in some ways, the [TAFE course]...leaves people with the sense that I am here as a way into the bachelor program...they need to value themselves not see this just as an opportunity for higher education. The industry needs [TAFE qualified workers] but with all the talk about articulation...it sort of devalues the [occupation].

TAFE staff working in certain fields of study also commented on *convergences* in the skills that they must develop in students to produce 'work ready' TAFE graduates and the skills which equip students for higher education. Other staff explained their efforts to promote articulation, or to adapt TAFE courses to reflect changing student needs, as in part based on shifts in the level of qualifications required for particular occupations.

Love to be able to get them more analytical and we're trying very hard to do that...(Is that why you're thinking about...more of a focus on language and analytical skills, because so many of them want to use it as a pathway?) both reasons, they can't get a job without it either...so we've...put more language into each subject.

Talk to them a lot about it as they're progressing through the Diploma year because we think that that actually opens more doors if they have got the degree...allows them to get a foot in the door with employers.

We run [subject stream] courses...they go straight out into industry. That is a real vocational course...our [subject stream]...really aren't vocational courses...They would need to be seriously thinking about articulation if they wanted to go on into the [industry].

(Do you encourage students to develop individual learning skills?) Yes (So it's an individual teacher may be doing it but it is not a philosophy of the course?) No, not at this point although I suspect that will be changing shortly...I think that will be ingrained within the curriculum.

Student's interest in and uptake of articulation options, as well as labour market changes, seem to have had implications for how some TAFE courses are taught, particularly in terms of curriculum development. As in the previous section, an ad hoc approach to managing these tensions currently obtains in the absence of overarching guidelines. Student commentary implied that many of them were aware of these tensions, but that those who went on to articulate very much appreciated 'preparation' for higher education studies were this was provided.

Articulation and intra-institutional competition for students

Sharpening intra-institutional competition for students was a further tension around pathways courses identified by TAFE staff. Both the HE and TAFE systems are under considerable pressure to attract and to retain students. While teachers acknowledged that articulation was a viable option for those TAFE students keen to take advantage of the opening up of university studies to a more diverse group of

entrants over time, the ramifications of this for the viability of their *own* higher level courses and for the broader ‘identity’ of TAFE was a concern for some ².

Do you think the students use the Diploma as an alternative entry into university a lot? I think they use that and I think university backfills...I don't know where the role of TAFE is anymore. Is it to backfill university places? Or is it a separate entity designed to give clear vocational outcomes?

We had a significant number who leave after Certificate IV and it really questions how viable our Diploma class can be...if half of those apply because...they want to do degree studies...we lose them out of the Diploma...we have got a class under about fifteen.

Being a dual sector institution...students can leave at any point to try and successfully get in degree studies which obviously has a serious impact on the viability of our classes...we want students to move up, but it...can really make it very difficult for us...wondering...whether we will lose more and more of the Certificate students.

This year...the first time we have ever under delivered...we receive a lot of applications...couple of weeks into starting the course our students started getting...offers for the Bachelors program. They then withdraw.

We have noted that many students entered their TAFE courses to increase their chances of later acceptance into degree courses, and others sought to gain credit for part of a degree course at TAFE, to reduce the cost of a degree. Yet these comments raise questions as to whether increased ‘traffic’ along articulation pathways might jeopardise the viability of some TAFE courses if it is not well managed. Teachers also questioned whether it serves students well to encourage transfers prior to completion of higher level TAFE studies. Indeed, most of the student participants had gone on to be reasonably ‘successful’ at university, but those who were inadequately prepared for this shift suffered blows to their self esteem as well as financial costs. Unsurprisingly, internal ‘competition’ for students also had rather negative effects on cross sectoral relationships, an issue we take up in more depth in the next section.

Good cross sectoral relationships, better outcomes for students and staff?

This paper has presented evidence that greater university level steering of articulation processes and practices may help to ease some of the tensions that increased levels of articulation have raised for Victoria University TAFE staff, whilst also enhancing student outcomes. In the absence of such guidance, the most functional of the pathways we examined in these terms were those where staff in each of the sectors had actively forged good working relationships. For example, we noted that uncertainty about student chances of HE selection induced tensions around the promotion of articulation options to TAFE students. Teachers comments implied that there is much variability and lack of transparency in selection, but also that the quality of cross sectoral relationships had a strong impact on how well these tensions can be managed.

They [1st HE department] want...our kids, selection is based on our recommendation when spots are available...[2nd HE department]...it is so

² The authors could find little mention of this issue in the research literature, save for a recently commissioned NCVET project which examines many of the issues that are raised in this paper (See ‘Higher level VET: Relevant alternative or outmoded qualification level’, NCVET website).

complicated, it changes every year, we have no control of it...I couldn't ring up the head of school and say, I have this great kid...done two years here, she would make a great [occupation]...It wouldn't make any difference.

[HE staff] has indicated that he expects the high distinctions or above for our TAFE graduates (What about for [degree course]?) I believe it is a credit average although they can sort of relax that as long as they see consistency.

We really need to have a bit more formality as far as information is concerned...maybe the relevant admissions officers to physically attend our campus.

Those staff with better information on student chances of 'success' were more comfortable in making students aware of articulation options. Many of these teacher's comments support the results of prior reports on selection processes and pathways at Victoria University, which indicate that selection criteria can be inconsistently applied and selection officers often operate with inadequate guidelines (Woodley, Henderson, De Sensi and Gabb, 2005).

Teachers' also stressed a need for more easily accessible, up-to-date information on student pathways courses, and the value of messages that TAFE students are 'welcome' in HE. Sharing of information about the content of HE destination courses was also valued, not least because this helped to reduce tensions around pressures to 'prepare' articulating students. Students interested in articulating thus more often gained appropriate support for their goals in areas where productive cross sectoral relationships obtained.

I would see a really big advantage in having representatives of these courses coming to speak to our students and I don't think that that has actually happened...adds credibility even though we are TAFE we have some relevance to higher ed.

Always been fantastic [HE dept.] they love our students and they have always given us strong support...that's in great part due to [HE head of school] is very proactive, has a strong relationship to TAFE, just knows the way we operate, can work to our timelines.

We've had a lot of changes in TAFE, in terms of our curriculum and our training package...we always meet with them and let them know what's happening...because we wanted to make sure that students had the maximum...(Is that fostered by some sort of university arrangement or process?) we just did it...most of our students want to go to higher ed, so we have to.

We've introduced an integrated assessment...was a group based project and we also use TAFE CT...in discussions with higher ed, were a feature of their delivery so we just felt that to have those experiences here at TAFE would hopefully be one less new concept once they go to higher ed

Most of the communication between TAFE and HE *teaching* staff relied on personal networks and happenstance, but it often led to discussions about curriculum, a better understanding of student needs, and less negative perceptions of TAFE students amongst HE staff when it occurred. Where there was little such contact between staff, these opportunities were lacking.

The most important thing is just keeping the communication lines open between us and higher ed...it's good at the moment because there are two people involved in those departments...who know about TAFE and have strong ties with TAFE and that should be something to build on.

I don't know them at all. No contact at all. My view and it is only my view, is that there is a lot of territoriality in such arrangements and they do not meet the learners' needs.

In some cases, mutual adaptation of pathways courses was being considered as a means of 'smoothing' articulation pathways. In others, experimentation with cross sectoral collaboration on course design seemed to offer some possibilities for reducing intra-institutional competition for students. In both cases, these strategies seemed likely to increase the support offered to articulating students.

Made a bit of a decision, because we're getting so many TAFE articulators, to trim down our [degree] course in the area that was covered by TAFE.

The change of the course which I am envisaging...there would be some subjects from TAFE taught in the Bachelor...a common first year, then TAFE students can articulate into the second year on a common path...our [HE] students go to TAFE to do four units...when they come into the second year they move together as a cohort

(Is some of that communication about making sure that there's a suitable lead in from the TAFE to the higher ed courses?)...Our objective is always to give what we can to students and to give them as many opportunities as possible...one of those is going to be around students options to get into higher ed.

Findings from the broader study that this paper is based on emphasised the centrality of good cross-sectoral relationships at all levels, but especially at the level of the teachers directly involved, in making aspects of the articulation process work effectively for staff and students. It also noted the degree to which the quality of these relationships varied across the University. In some cases, these relationships seem to be based on two-way communication, formal and informal processes of feedback and discussion and mutual responsiveness. In others, relationships appear to be non-existent to adversarial and provide little scope for productive two-way exchanges.

Conclusions

Many of the challenges for VET staff nationally were mirrored in the commentary of these Victoria University TAFE staff. Increasing levels of TAFE to HE articulation are producing particular tensions in their everyday practice. The most common issues included; If TAFE teachers should promote articulation options to students when outcomes are uncertain; a need for a re-examination of course content and delivery in light of both rising levels of articulation and shifts in the skills 'work ready' TAFE graduates need; and the impact of intra-institutional competition on the viability of some TAFE courses. There is a clear need for more explicit institutional guidance on how TAFE teachers should manage these matters. Supporting dual sector university staff to build stronger cross sectoral communication channels and to devise collaborative solutions to common problems around TAFE to HE articulation would also seem wise. The current 'piecemeal' and 'ad hoc' approach has inequitable effects for students and makes TAFE teachers roles unnecessarily burdensome.

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