

.Betwixt and between: Higher education teachers in TAFE

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Introduction

This paper reports on the views of 20 teachers who were involved in designing and delivering higher education programs in TAFE institutes. It is part of a broader National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation funded project that examined the growth of, and implications for, higher education in TAFE. The aim of the project was to understand the purposes of such programs, how they have been developed and implemented, the impact they are having on institutional partnerships, how they are perceived by participants, and whether they open opportunities for students. One set of project interviews explored teachers' views of the nature of higher education programs in TAFE. These interviews focused on whether they differed from VET programs and from those offered at universities; the way in which higher education programs in TAFE should be structured and supported; and the qualifications and expertise that are needed to teach in these programs. The arguments proposed by teachers to support higher education in TAFE centred on their distinctiveness and the opportunities they offer to students. However, their institutional frameworks, and the teachers' working and industrial conditions were perceived as serious impediments to the quality provision of such programs.

In this paper, issues associated with the identity, concerns and professional positioning of teachers who are responsible for delivering higher education programs in TAFE institutes are explored. It is argued that this identity is a bifurcated one. On the one hand, these teachers are situated in a VET environment, with its attendant physical, industrial and resource implications, and a mandate to liaise closely with industry. Yet, simultaneously, they are expected to have completed post-graduate qualifications, provide course content and assessment regimes that are current but more intellectually demanding than those in the VET sector and find time to engage in scholarship and research activities. That is, they face continual tensions of an epistemological,

pedagogical, industrial and institutional nature because they are required to be responsive to the requirements of two sectoral domains that are making different kinds of demands on them and also to tensions within their own institutions about the purposes and resourcing of programs.

The paper is divided into three sections. It begins with a brief literature review of the phenomena of higher education in Anglophone vocational or further education institutions. Next, the Griffith University project, *Higher Education in TAFE* is described. This is followed by a consideration of the four specific forms of tension, namely, epistemological, pedagogical, industrial and institutional, that were found to impact on the work and identity of the teachers who were interviewed in the study. The paper then concludes by considering the upshot of these tensions within the broader and changing landscape of higher and vocational education.

Higher education and VET sectors

While *higher* education and its counterpart, *vocational* education, might contemporarily be understood as two separate sectors of education, this is a relatively recent situation not only in Australia but also in other Anglophone countries. As Moodie, Wheelahan, Billett and Kelly (2009) have recently noted, the term *educational sectors* might more usefully be considered as ‘artefacts of history and government policy, and of government funding, in particular, rather than as being aligned to universally understood and practised conventions’ (p. 10). The boundaries between the higher education and vocational education sectors are becoming more permeable and are increasingly defined by the qualifications that are accredited in each and not by the type of institutions in which those qualifications are acquired, even though most institutions are still defined by their primary sectoral location. Schools now offer VET programs, universities are increasingly offering sub-degree programs, and VET institutions are offering higher education programs, even though this provision is still small and in early stages of development. Higher education provision in TAFE parallels the more established provision of mostly short-cycle two year higher education programs in community colleges in the United States (Dougherty, 2008; Grubb, 2006) and Canada (Jones, 2008), colleges of further education in the United Kingdom (Bathmaker, 2008; Bathmaker & Thomas, 2007;

Gallacher, 2008; Morgan-Klein, 2003) and polytechnics and institutes of technology in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2006).

With respect to teachers' experiences of higher education within these settings, research in England has shown that teaching higher education in further education colleges offers teachers possibilities as well as constraints as a consequence of their sectoral location, and this contributes to shaping their perceptions of their role. In her study, Young (2002, p.280) found that teachers were highly committed and that they would 'acutely feel the loss of this work' if the college were to stop offering higher education programs. Further, teachers defined themselves as *teachers* rather than *academics* and differentiated their pedagogic practices, both from that in universities and from other provision in colleges (Harwood & Harwood 2004, p.161; Young 2002, p.278). Burkill, Rodway and Dyer (2008) found that teachers had considerable flexibility in their teaching despite external constraints. However, they felt under enormous pressure to provide high quality provision because of the structure of their work and workloads. They found it difficult to 'switch registers and levels' in moving between higher education and other teaching, the culture of the college was not always conducive to higher education, and workloads made it impossible for teachers to adequately prepare classes or to engage in scholarship or research. This is because they had the same industrial conditions as other teachers and they were required to teach in excess of 20 hours week in direct teaching and, in many cases, upgrade their qualifications (Harwood & Harwood 2004; HECFE 2003; Young 2002). The findings were similar in research on United States community colleges that now offer full degrees as well as their traditional two year associate degrees. Teaching staff required more time for preparation, staff development and collaboration with colleagues in their own and other institutions, and better library resources and technology (Hrabak 2009). Many of these features characterised the perspectives of higher education teachers in our study which is described in the next two sections.

The Higher Education in TAFE study

This study was funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research and had two key aims. The first aim was to investigate the way in which, and the reasons why

TAFE institutes are offering higher education qualifications and the internal governance, institutional, administrative and policy arrangements they have developed to support this provision. The second aim was to investigate how student and staff VET and higher education identities are formed and shaped through the provision of higher education in TAFE and the way these boundaries are navigated within TAFE institutes. As of February 2009 there were ten TAFE institutes (five in Victoria) in five states that were registered to offer higher education programs¹. TAFE institutes in New South Wales, Tasmania and the Northern Territory do not offer such programs although a small but growing number are offering *vocational* graduate certificates and diplomas. This higher education provision covers a range of disciplinary areas. These comprise music and dance, film, bio-technology, forensic science, hospitality, tourism, business, engineering, construction, property, human services and nursing. Other programs are in the process of being accredited or have been accredited but are not yet offered. There are about 2,000 TAFE students studying within these programs. This cohort is very small, representing only 0.12% of the total student complement of 1.6 million TAFE students (NCVER, 2008).

There were two key methodological components of the *Higher Education in TAFE* study. The first involved examining multiple sources of information and data to gauge the scope and nature of provision and the policies that are influencing the growth of higher education in TAFE. An occasional paper, titled *Higher Education in TAFE*, has been developed from this first stage of the project. The second methodological component involved conducting and analysing interviews with stakeholders in TAFE institutes that offer higher education programs.

This paper focuses on interviews with teachers. These involved 27 participants, five of whom taught exclusively in VET programs and another two occupied heads of department roles with responsibility for VET and higher education programs in their area. The remaining 20 teachers who taught higher education courses comprised 9 who taught higher education courses exclusively, with the remaining 11 teaching across virtually the whole gamut of types of qualifications within the VET sector, including those within the school sector. A number of teachers also had experience teaching in universities, mainly as sessionals. In terms of qualifications of the total sample of teachers, 3 had completed

doctoral degrees, 13 had completed master degrees and 8 had completed an undergraduate degree². A further 8 teachers were currently engaged in further higher degree studies.

In the next section, the views of these teachers are discussed and, in some cases, cited to provide evidence that a continual state of tension is experienced by these teachers as they operate simultaneously in the quite divergent higher education and VET sectors.

Teachers and higher education in TAFE

Four key aspects of the identities of the teachers in our study that were reiterated across the sample were the epistemological, pedagogical, industrial and institutional conditions which they experienced in their work. Each of these is addressed in some detail below.

Epistemological and pedagogical conditions in TAFE institutes

A recurrent theme in the interviews is the importance of the relationship between theory and practice for these teachers. A number of synonyms were used to express this relationship (e.g. ‘applied leaning’, ‘head and hands’ approach). This industry-focussed learning is understood to mean developing close links with local industry personnel, seeking advice on curriculum content and generally understanding the current requirements of relevant occupational practices in addition to acquiring theoretical knowledge. This imperative was expressed by one teacher in the following manner:

While TAFE degrees still present theories and concepts, there is still that ‘show me how to do it’ feel to their degrees. There is no use being able to rattle off the history of a piece of music—from a performer’s perspective—you have to also be able to play it. . . . it is the same with IT and bio-technology.

This teacher continued that such relationships *allow students to be more employable with a better qualification. It is about employment.* As if taking stock of her position, she then noted that:

It is a bit stupid saying this coming from a music person, given the working conditions for musicians— but musicians keep working even if they don’t have an employer.

Several other reasons, in addition to a valuable employment outcome, were proffered by the teachers for such an orientation. These included that it would capitalise on the students' prior vocational experience and improve their engagement with their higher education studies. Other benefits were that the programs would be able

[to] draw on depth of work experience of teachers who also can invite their contacts in to present and draw on these contacts to provide opportunities for workplace visits. [In addition], assessments can be based on real work experiences.

This condition aligns very closely with VET principles but some reservations were noted with respect to how a close relationship might be maintained and whether such a goal was appropriate. A lack of available time that characterised these teachers would militate against continuing close relations with industry, even where such links had been established. As one teacher ruefully noted: *it is a necessity [for teachers] to volunteer a lot of time.* A second reservation was that the industry relationships that were established may not be sufficient or of the requisite type to ensure that students are educated for the future. One teacher suggests that there is

a danger that responding to industry might be the focus when there is a need to embrace sustainability and cultural imperatives as well. Industry is dynamic, technical innovation is rapid. We are educating practitioners for the future industry, they need to be adaptable and able to make their own ethical and strategic decisions.

Another feature of higher education teaching in TAFE was the pastoral care that the teachers needed, in some cases, to lavish on their students. On the one hand, because of the often small number of students in higher education programs, there was an opportunity to interact closely with students, in a familiar environment for those who had completed programs earlier in the TAFE institute and, in effect to *trust* their teachers develop a *family feel* to their relationships. These relationships are not always viewed as positive, though. One teacher drew attention to this difficulty in the following way:

Here[in contrast to working within a VET program] [there] is a lot more hard work involved in teaching higher education subjects. Students come from a

vocational and not an academic background, having already studied vocational subjects, so there is twice the effort involved in teaching them. After two years studying in VET, they become dependent on teachers who provide them with handbooks and very strong guidelines but they need to be independent to study higher education subjects. In contrast, students who come from Year 12 at school are often more independent. There is an understanding, though, that the students are working and that they come from industry. A lot depends on the lecturer's personality as to how much they give but the higher education lecturers give a lot. This may be a fault sometimes. Students stay because of this support and they want to milk this to the full before they go to uni.

Further,

Students who have done a diploma or advanced diploma get credit transfer and go into the 2nd year of the degree. They are not always happy because they don't get the same level of attention or as many contact hours or as many weeks. They are paying nearly \$11,000 and they don't get as much assistance and fewer hours. They find the different style of learning a bit difficult and they are happier with TAFE until they get to 3rd year— then they get used to the differences

Another contrast identified was between the domestic and international students.

The external students are a different calibre of student from the TAFE ones. They are not spoiled or contaminated by being supported. The TAFE students expect examples and notes and are not used to relying on textbooks. The majority of students, in contrast to other VET students, are mainly international students. These students don't want to fail.

There are exceptions in some programs, though, with respect to domestic students. For example, in specific programs, students are already enjoy successful careers and are in middle to senior management. They are perceived as working already at a level beyond the degree and their purpose is to gain recognition for their proficiency. These students were compared with students studying at a lower level (e.g. diploma or advanced diploma) who *aspire* to middle management, rather than occupying a position at this level already.

Generally, this necessity for a close industry relationship and a high level of pastoral care in TAFE's higher education programs was contrasted with the perceived more academic focus of university study. Paradoxically, though, the teachers interviewed were adamant that the acquisition of more abstract knowledge and skills that underpinned vocational practices were also vitally important for their students and were pitched at a higher level than what was expected within VET courses. Indeed, this was a defining feature that distinguished higher education programs from competency-based programs. In particular, critical and research skills and a high level of written expression were emphasised. Further, specific components were identified as being crucial to higher education assessment regimes to ensure that the epistemology and pedagogy were appropriately rigorous. For example, one respondent explained:

there is a commitment to higher levels of engagement, thinking and work output by students, to encouraging independent thinking, expectations of students being more self-directed, more in-depth and higher work ethic required of students.

This commitment was manifested in the assessment regime that needed to be implemented.

It is important to have exams and assignments because this is how students' conceptual and theoretical knowledge is tested. [Further], it enables more traditional ways of assessment to be used. . . . [that is] the pedagogical learning must meet all levels of Bloom's taxonomy

In order to support this higher level of teaching than was expected of their TAFE colleagues, the teachers noted that as they:

You are expected to know more about the subject—and to know it at a deeper level. You can't just teach a chapter from the text book. You have to draw on a wide range of literature and not just one designated textbook.

That is, they needed to research topics so that the information they presented would be comprehensive, current and appropriately pitched. Consequently, these teachers reported being required to give the time, effort and support that is required of teachers in all sectors, yet in addition, have high levels of knowledge themselves

and promote learning in their students that secured similar levels of development. Yet teachers argued that the institutional and industrial conditions that existed in their TAFE institutes did not always support this to occur. These conditions are addressed in the sub-section below.

Industrial and institutional conditions in TAFE institutes

Teachers of higher education in TAFE institutes confront an apparent paradox in that they operate under TAFE award conditions, yet essentially work in a higher education situation. Specifically, this means that the teaching load is excessive relative to their higher education colleagues in universities and as a result, there is little time available for class preparation, the development of online support, background reading of journals and other professional materials, attending conferences and engaging generally in professional discourse communities and liaising with industry. They are required to demonstrate in the institutes annual reports to the higher education regulatory body in their state that they engage in scholarly activity as a condition of accreditation of the institutes' higher education programs. Teachers are also generally required to possess a qualification at least one level higher than the one in which they were teaching, and in practice, this means a relevant master level qualifications. The data show that more than half the teachers in our sample had met this requirement and three had exceeded it, while others were studying towards their masters and in some cases, doctoral degree. There was also a tension experienced in recruiting staff who were both qualified to teach higher education and highly proficient in their particular field. One teacher lamented:

It is also hard finding qualified staff. If X [institute] is teaching song-writing there is no masters degree in that, or in media composition or in audio-technology. The best people to teach are practitioners, who are often so busy being employed that they have not done any formal qualifications. How can you get people to teach song-writing who are really good at it when you tell them they have to do the certificate IV in training and assessment and that you will pay them \$65 per hour? So it is a struggle to get staff who can teach the industry-specific stuff.

Another condition that interfered with good academic practice was the limited availability of appropriate and accessible resources within TAFE institutes. One teacher represented a general view that:

The library really isn't a higher education library. I have to go to [A university] and [B university] to get books —I am constantly borrowing from other libraries. She said she wasn't sure if [C Institute of TAFE] only gets funded for texts needed in the diploma and other VET programs, but higher education texts is really limited in the library.

Another problem that was encountered by those teaching higher education in TAFE which impacted on their ability to meet their perceived needs were the attitudes and practices of their managers. One teacher's description of how her manager impeded her attempts to offer a quality educational experience to her students was that her manager hadn't the insights into research, and neither did that person's manager. This has resulted in conflict around course content. In the process of rewriting the degree for re-accreditation, she and her colleagues are coming 'head-to-head' with those who don't value the same things, because they are not informed by or as interested by an understanding of the discipline. Another teacher concluded that what was needed was a *champion* of higher education in the Institute's management.

This issue was related to that of the organisational location of higher education teachers. One teacher articulated his location and its implication as follows:

At the moment the degrees are tucked into program areas within departments in TAFE, and this means that we have heads of department with effective control of degrees who don't have degrees and who don't understand what is involved. This is very frustrating because they don't understand much about higher education. I would like to see a specific program area in our department for higher education, but with strong integration with other areas.

Generally, there was no one preference expressed by the teachers with respect to the structural arrangements of higher education in TAFE. Some favoured being integrated with disciplinary colleagues, while others wanted to be identified as part of a separate sector. Benefits in separation for students and teachers are evident in the quote below, as

is the danger of being perceived as elitist by TAFE colleagues, a possible effect of separation noted by other respondents.

I change my mind on this. It is important that students and teachers understand that there is a difference. In some ways higher education should be separated to show that there is a genuine step in going from an advanced diploma to a degree. Students need to understand that there is a step. A problem with separate departments is that it may be seen as elitist and inaccessible and this defeats the purpose of having degrees in TAFE. However, given all this, it may be good to have some sort of separation at the departmental level, but it would be hard to get support for this. In a practical sense, it would be saying 'join the degree and step up'.

However, most teachers argued that higher education provision was different from other VET provision, and this needed recognition and support by management. In reflecting on their current situation, eleven of the 27 teachers interviewed (including one sessional teacher) concluded that they were happy teaching higher education in TAFE and saw themselves continuing to deliver higher education courses, although they too (for the most part) complained about unsustainable workloads. Five said they would leave unless they get the chance to pursue scholarship and research. Four were focused on retirement, even though this was some years away in their cases. The rationale for this decision was that their workloads were too difficult. Three were ambivalent, two were moving to new roles, and two did not address this issue.

Conclusion

Teachers' perspectives about higher education in TAFE will help to shape the way this provision develops within institutional and sectoral cultures and policies. It is clear that a tension is emerging over the nature of sectoral differences and how these differences should be managed within TAFE institutions. Emerging here are issues similar to those in dual-sector universities where the success or otherwise of the dual-sectors in trying to 'build bridges' between the higher education and TAFE divisions within the university is contested, fluid and controversial. This is because of their need to constantly renegotiate sectoral boundaries within the one institution. This indicates that

higher education in TAFE will not necessarily overcome problems associated with sectoral boundaries, so the issue is not whether such boundaries *should* exist, but how they can be navigated in order to create wider opportunities for students and also for teachers so they remain as higher education teachers in TAFE and provide opportunities for other teachers to take on this role.

The literature points to the importance of appropriate policies and resourcing and building capacity at national and institutional levels so that teachers are properly resourced and qualified and that they are not significantly impeded in effecting high quality education provision and student outcomes. There are helpful examples in England of how this might be achieved which include, among others, funding for the development of higher education learning partnerships such as that at the University of Plymouth which works with over 20 further education colleges in its region to support the development of higher education in these institutions.³ Of particular note is the HE in FE Enhancement Programme at the United Kingdom Higher Education Academy. One of the roles of this academy is to support the development of subject-specific disciplines within higher education as a whole, and the development of subject-specific support for higher education teachers in further education colleges is emphasised (HECFE 2003b, p.12).⁴ In this country, it may be useful to consider what role the Australian Learning and Teaching Council can play in supporting the development of higher education in TAFE institutes.

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¹ Source: State and territory registers of the institutes approved to issue accredited higher education qualifications

² Five teachers said they had a degree but a further three were included in this number because two were studying for PhD or an EdD and one was a former practising lawyer.

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- ⁴. See the University of Plymouth College network. It is supported by the Higher Education Learning Partnerships and the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, retrieved 11 february 2009 from <http://www.help-cetl.ac.uk/index.php?p=1>
- ⁵ FE in HE resources in subject Centres in the UK Higher Education Academy Retrieved 11 February 2009 from <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/institutions/heinfe/scwork> accessed

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