

Improving the experience of TAFE award-holders in higher education

Louise Watson

Abstract

Although their rate of admission to university appears to be improving, the academic success of former TAFE students depends on the extent to which universities are prepared to meet their need for support in developing academic literacy skills. Australian universities' traditional reliance on schools to deliver students who are academically literate appears to disadvantage many students admitted to university on the basis of TAFE awards. This paper highlights the different rates of admission of TAFE award holders between universities and examines the experience of TAFE award holders in their first year of higher education. The author concludes that higher admission rates to university for TAFE award holders will not translate into improved completion rates for this group unless universities are willing to change their course delivery to cater for a more diverse student population.

Introduction

Federal and state governments in Australia are committed to improving the opportunities for TAFE award holders to make a successful transition to higher education. In 2005, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) endorsed a set of "Good Practice Principles for Credit Transfer and Articulation" and commissioned a national study of the practices in credit transfer and articulation from vocational to higher education, mapped against these principles. The Council has also established a working party to improve data collection on credit transfer and articulation and has asked the Australian Universities Quality Agency and the new vocational education and training quality agency to take a more active role in auditing credit transfer and articulation practice against the principles (MCEETYA 2007).

Between 2001 and 2005, the number of students admitted to university on the basis of a TAFE award increased by 46 per cent (DEST 2007). Ten per cent of

higher education students now come from Technical and Further Education (TAFE), compared to seven per cent in 2001 (DEST 2007). If all students entering higher education who have TAFE qualifications were taken into account (ie. not only those admitted on the basis of a TAFE award), the number of vocational graduates in university programs would be even higher. But the fact that more students are being admitted to universities on the basis of a TAFE award does not necessarily mean they will successfully complete a degree. The recent study commissioned by MCEETYA concluded that in spite of recent evidence of increased efforts to maximise opportunities for credit transfer between vocational and higher education, “there is still much more that could be done”(PhillipsKPA 2006 p ii).

This study examines the experience of TAFE award holders in their first year of university, particularly in terms of their preparedness to enter the discourse of academic disciplines. We discuss how perceptions about academic literacy influence both the rate of admission to university for TAFE award holders and the likelihood of TAFE award holders completing an undergraduate degree. The paper concludes that should universities take concrete steps to embed academic literacy training within the first year of undergraduate study, to ensure that their courses meet the academic literacy needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

TAFE award holders’ admission rates to university

The likelihood of TAFE award holders gaining admission to university has improved. In 2005, some 18,825 students were admitted to university on the basis of TAFE studies compared to only 12,916 in 2001 (DEST 2007). Having remained steady for the last four years of the 20th Century, the proportion of higher education students admitted on the basis of TAFE qualifications rose sharply after 2000. The most popular fields of study for students admitted on the basis of TAFE awards are business, administration, economics, arts, humanities and the social sciences, science and education (Harris, Sumner and Rainey 2006 p 23).

One reason for the increase in admission rates for TAFE award holders could be the gradual decline in the number of places taken by school leavers (Phillips KPA 2006). Between 2001 and 2005, the number of school leavers admitted to first year undergraduate courses fell by 4,173 (5 per cent). Enrolling an extra 5,904 TAFE award holders enabled the universities to fill their commencing student load and contributed to a four per cent increase in total commencements over the period, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Commencing undergraduates by basis for admission,

Australia 2001 - 2005

	Year 12	HE course	TAFE award	Other	Total
2001	83,388	41,785	12,916	43,555	181,644
	46%	23%	7%	24%	100%
2005	79,215	47,688	18,820	43,086	188,809
	42%	25%	10%	23%	100%
Change	-4,173	5,903	5,904	-469	7,165
	-5%	14%	46%	-1%	4%

Source: DEST Higher education statistics

Notes: Table reports domestic students commencing a course at Bachelor level or below. The "Other" column refers to students admitted on the basis of mature age, special entry, professional qualification and any other basis.

While admission rates for TAFE award holders have increased nationally, there is significant variation in admission rates between universities. Overall, ten percent of commencing undergraduates are admitted on the basis of a TAFE award. But in five universities, the admission rate is twice the national level: Charles Sturt University (21 per cent); The University of Western Sydney (23 per cent); RMIT University (21 per cent); Swinburne University (25 per cent); and the Australian Maritime College (21 per cent). In contrast, the majority of Australian universities admit TAFE award holders at less than half the national rate. The Group of Eight institutions admit a mere three per cent of their total undergraduate students on the basis of a TAFE award. The report commissioned by MCEETYA reported that TAFE award holders were not treated consistently across institutions or across states in terms of how their qualifications were assessed within the admissions process (Phillips KPA 2006 p 29).

Competition from Year 12 applicants with high TER scores affects the rate at which universities accept applications from TAFE award holders. As demand for undergraduate courses varies between fields and institutions, the rate at which TAFE award holders are accepted also varies. A recent study on transition issues in Early Childhood Education reported a perception among many TAFE lecturers that university places in Early Childhood Education courses had become scarce for applicants with TAFE Diplomas because demand for teacher education among school leavers had increased (Watson 2006). In most cases, articulation agreements do not guarantee entry to undergraduate courses for applicants with a TAFE Diploma in a relevant field. Applicants with TAFE Diplomas must still compete against school leavers on the basis of 'merit' so when demand from school leavers strengthens, the promised 'pathways' from vocational into higher education can quickly evaporate (White, 2007).

Universities' enrolment data support the assumption that a TAFE award

holders' admission rates to university is influenced by competition from Year 12 graduates. Higher education institutions enrolling the highest proportion of Year 12 graduates accept the smallest proportion of TAFE students. Within the Group of Eight universities, for example, 60 per cent of commencing students are Year 12 graduates and only three per cent are from TAFE. The remaining universities enrol a much smaller proportion of school leavers (36 per cent) and 12 per cent of their total commencements come from TAFE (DEST 2007). It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that the recent growth in university admissions of students holding TAFE awards is related to a softening of demand from school leavers, rather than an explicit intention on the part of universities to enrol more students from the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

Factors influencing TAFE award holders' graduation rates

A study of completion rates among undergraduate students conducted by the Commonwealth government in the late 1990s concluded that the method of entry to university significantly affects a student's completion rate (Urban et al. 1999). The authors also concluded that TAFE qualifications were more significant in determining completion rates for women than for men. Fifty-three per cent of women and 49 per cent of men entering on the basis of TAFE qualifications complete a degree compared to 72 per cent of females and 64 per cent of males who enter with a Tertiary Entrance Score (TER). Mode of study is a significant influence on completion rates: one quarter of the students enrolled externally complete their course; less than half of part-time students complete their course; whereas around 70 per cent of full-time students complete their course. Age is also a significant factor influencing completion rates. Among students admitted without a TER, the completion rate for women declines significantly between the ages of 19 and 39 years. For men without a TER, age has little impact once the data are adjusted for other factors (Urban et al. 1999).

Some universities appear to meet the needs of TAFE award holders better than others, leading to differences in attrition rates between institutions. The vice-chancellor of Swinburne University, for example, claims that the 'success rate' for TAFE award holders in his institution 'is the same as for Year 12 school leavers with a score above 85' (White, 2007 p 11). However, a recent study of student attrition in another institution found that TAFE award holders dropped out at almost double the rate for all students. The survey conducted in 2005 revealed that 24.4 per cent of students with an apprenticeship, trade, vocational, or other qualification dropped out in first year, compared to 13.7 per cent for all students (Long, Ferrier and Heagney 2006 p 30).

It could be argued that many of the obstacles faced by students admitted to

university on the basis of a TAFE award are outside the power of the university to influence. For example, TAFE award holders are more likely to be older, to be working full-time and to have family responsibilities. In general, first year attrition rates are higher among students who are over 25 years of age and students who are in full-time paid work and studying part-time (Long, Ferrier and Heagney 2006). The fact that these characteristics are typical of many TAFE award holders means that as a group, they are at greater risk of attrition than school leavers in their first year of undergraduate study. But while some universities could assume that these factors are beyond their jurisdiction, others appear capable of changing their program delivery to take these factors into account.

The limited data available on former TAFE students' transition through higher education suggest that the quality of TAFE award holders' experience varies between institutions and that this influences their retention rate. In the context of a rapid increase in the number of students admitted to universities on the basis of a TAFE award over recent years, there is now an urgent need for policies at the institutional level to improve the outcomes for students admitted on the basis of TAFE qualifications. We need to identify the main obstacles to former TAFE students completing their higher education studies and to discuss the ways in which institutions should be addressing them. This is necessary to ensure that the trend of an increasing number of TAFE students admitted to universities does not simply result in higher levels of attrition in their first year of undergraduate study. The rest of this paper draws together recent research findings to identify the main difficulties faced by TAFE award holders when they enter university and the strategies implemented by some institutions to address their needs.

Expectations of academic literacy in higher education

The transition from vocational to higher education is not an easy pathway for some students. Those admitted on the basis of a TAFE award often struggle to meet university expectations regarding academic literacy. Literacy needs are highly context-specific. While the traditional definition of literacy is simply the ability to read and write, contemporary definitions argue that literacy is also 'the ability to comprehend, interpret, analyse, respond, and interact with. . . complex sources of information' (Sensborough 1990, pp7-8, cited in DEST 2004). As effective literacy involves interacting with complex sources of information, different literacies are required to perform in different environments, such as the workplace, a social context, or a university (Wickert 1989). Academic literacy – or 'tertiary literacy' – places a heavy emphasis on writing as a tool for developing skills of critical thinking and analysis. In addition to writing well, university students are expected to be able to develop arguments, conduct self-

directed critical reflection, undertake research and use theoretical concepts to inform their practice. Although research suggests that academic literacy evolves during the course of university studies (Taylor *et al.* 1988), most universities expect students to arrive at university with a grasp of academic literacy and lecturers do not see it as their role to teach these skills (Fiocco 1996).

Students who make the transition from TAFE to higher education report that university teachers' expectations regarding academic literacy are different to the expectations of VET teachers (Dickson, Fleet and Watt 2000, Long, 1994, McLelland and Kruger 1993). Tasks that require high level writing skills, the development of arguments, self-directed critical reflection, research skills and the application of theoretical concepts can be challenging for TAFE graduates in their first year of study. A TAFE Diploma graduate interviewed for a recent study on transitions in Early Childhood Education and Care said she was shocked by university expectations about professional writing, reporting that, "work that received good marks at TAFE was failed at uni" (Watson 2006 p 28).

In Australia, the bases for assessing student learning outcomes in vocational and higher education are very different. In the process of obtaining TAFE qualifications, students are assessed on their performance in work-related competencies. All assessment of competencies under training packages must be in the workplace, or in a simulated workplace environment. The training and assessment is heavily task-oriented, in the sense that students need to demonstrate that they can perform specific tasks, rather than demonstrate an understanding of why it is necessary to perform those tasks in a particular way. In contrast, although many university courses involve work placements, the demonstration of knowledge and understanding through written assignments and presentations remains the predominant assessment tool. Thus assessment for all higher education courses requires higher levels of academic literacy.

Higher education institutions have considerable discretion over the way in which courses are delivered and assessed. But university teachers' expectations about academic literacy are based on traditional expectations about the role of secondary schooling in preparing students for university. For over a century, Australian universities have relied on schools to prepare students for university and their influence over senior secondary curriculum and assessment has ensured that schools perform this role (Teese 2000). Thus Year 12 completers are expected to arrive at university with a repertoire of academic literacy skills that provide them with an entrée into academic discourse. This preparation gives school leavers a competitive advantage over students with TAFE qualifications, both in obtaining an undergraduate place and in coping with the first year of university study.

The expectation that universities should grant credit for vocational qualifications can exacerbate the difficulties that TAFE award holders face with academic

literacy. Credit is typically granted by exemptions from the first-year units of an undergraduate degree. In practice, this often means that a TAFE Diploma student with a year's credit will be enrolled in units designed for second year students. The TAFE award holder thus misses out on any introductory aspects of the course delivered in its first year. Tasks that require high level writing skills, the development of arguments, self-directed critical reflection, research skills and the application of theoretical concepts can be challenging for all students in their first year of study, particularly those who have not completed Year 12. The granting of exemptions from first year units to provide advanced standing for TAFE award holders can therefore be counterproductive in terms of academic literacy development (Dickson, Fleet and Watt, 2000).

Challenges for teaching and learning in universities

There are many ways in which universities are able to support the development of academic literacy skills. The most common approach is to provide generic Academic Study Skills support services alongside mainstream discipline-based course provision. Students are usually referred to these services by lecturers or attend voluntarily. While Academic Skills support programs are provided on every campus, these services are usually offered during standard working hours, inhibiting the access of students with full-time day jobs. Stakeholders interviewed by Watson (2006) for a study of transition and pathways in the field of early childhood education suggested that even if part-time students could find time to access these support services, the prospect of taking on additional work would be 'the final straw' for someone already stretched between full-time work, family responsibilities and part-time study. However while Watson's (2006) study found that TAFE diploma holders making the transition to higher education in the early childhood education field appeared to be older and busier than other university entrants, this may not hold for all students admitted to university on the basis of a TAFE award. Increasingly, younger students with TAFE qualifications are proceeding directly from their VET qualification into a higher education course through formal articulation arrangements.

External students enrolled in mainstream courses appear particularly disadvantaged in terms of their access to support services on campus. Studying externally is related to lower academic achievement and higher failure rates among university students in general (McLelland and Kruger 1993, Long 1994). An Australian study of TAFE graduates' experience of a core second-year unit in an early childhood degree concluded that external students were disadvantaged by limited interaction with other students and program convenors, as well as limited access to library facilities (Dickson, Fleet and Watt 2000).

A second approach to supporting academic literacy is to establish pre-

university courses (or bridging programs) in academic skills for students who are likely to have difficulty with academic literacy. At the University of Notre Dame, students seeking entry to the university through non-Year 12 pathways are tested on literacy and numeracy skills and if they fail, are required to undertake a Tertiary Enabling Program of one semester's duration. In this program, students are taught learning skills, literacy competencies, academic writing, research skills and information literacy, mathematical competencies, information technology for academic purposes and applied learning skills. The Program gives students a taste of academic study and a chance to experiment with academic discourse, prior to undertaking tertiary study. However Watson (2006) found that although many university teachers spoke in favour of this approach, they would often cite cost as a barrier to the provision of academic skills programs in addition to regular course provision.

A third approach is to provide academic literacy support within discipline-based courses of study, as part of the core, assessable curriculum content. Fiocco (1996) argues that as literacy is context-specific, university teachers should take responsibility for the development of academic literacy in their students and should be adequately supported in the role.

With the ever-increasing diversity in class, gender and culture on our campuses, it can no longer be taken for granted that students arrive with the necessary skills and readily adapt to the social cultural environment of tertiary institutions. Because of this diversity, the needs of tertiary students have changed over the last twenty years and therefore teaching practice must reflect these changes (Fiocco 1996 p 7).

Embedding academic literacy skills within discipline-based courses of study is becoming more common. While this approach began within courses designed specifically for TAFE-award holders, as the student population has become more diverse, academic literacy programs are increasingly embedded in courses that enrol both school leavers and students admitted on another basis. One of the first year units in the early childhood education degree at Notre Dame University is 'Presentation Skills in Early Childhood Education'. At the University of Canberra, all students in the early childhood education degree undertake a compulsory unit of literacy and a unit of numeracy in their first year focused on personal skill development. At Charles Darwin University (CDU), all commencing students in Bachelor's Degree programs in the Humanities or Social Sciences are required to complete an Academic communication unit entitled 'Academic Literacies' during their first year of study (see Watson, 2006, Appendix).

A comprehensive model developed at Curtin University of Technology involves a range of compulsory first-year units in academic communication embedded in most undergraduate courses, and shaped to meet the needs of particular

disciplines. The units aim to develop discipline-based learning skills in research and written and oral communication among first-year students, and some of them are delivered jointly by discipline-based staff and communications skills staff. The strength of the Curtin approach is that the academic literacy units are embedded in the undergraduate degree. This means that the unit does not demand additional work for students beyond their course load. Students' assessment results for their particular communications unit count towards the degree, so it is not considered a 'soft' subject (ie. one that is not assessed), nor a form of 'remedial' education. Coordinator Jane Grellier says the units are achieving their objective of supporting students' transition to university by embedding academic literacy teaching into discipline-based courses. The communication unit is valued by discipline-based staff because it 'improves the quality of the students' written and oral assignments' (Grellier 2007 p 7).

Although many students' competence in academic literacy, particularly their writing skills, improves during the course of their university studies, it is clearly not sufficient to rely on this outcome for students admitted on the basis of a TAFE award. Northedge (2003) argues that the challenges of teaching students from diverse backgrounds calls for a more radical shift in teaching than simply offering remedial support to students enrolled in conventional courses of study. Many students admitted to university on the basis of TAFE qualifications are time-poor as a result of managing full-time work, family responsibilities and part-time study. For students in these circumstances, the expectation that they should undertake additional work to improve their academic literacy could easily trigger their withdrawal from an undergraduate degree. If, on the other hand, all students receive academic literacy training within their discipline-based course of study, as in the Curtin model, students suffering time pressures are more likely to be retained in higher education.

The delivery of explicit academic literacy training in undergraduate courses of study is likely to be met with some resistance by discipline-based teaching staff. Fiocco (1996) found that the majority of university teachers in her study did not think supporting students' literacy development was part of their job. The majority of teaching staff expected students to possess adequate skills in academic literacy when they entered the university and blamed high schools for 'not doing their job' when students' literacy was inadequate. However Grellier reports that the ongoing collaboration between discipline-based staff and communications skills staff at Curtin University of Technology is changing these attitudes. The discipline-based delivery of communication units has served to increase university teachers' understanding of first-year students' language development, which has led to some restructuring of other units in the courses (Grellier 2007).

One-third of students now entering university have had no experience of formal learning in senior secondary school or higher education (DEST 2007).

This suggests that universities should be taking more responsibility for providing explicit training in academic literacy within undergraduate courses. The success of such training for TAFE award holders will depend on the extent to which it can be accessed by students who are enrolled part-time or externally, as well as the amount of work required in addition to their normal course load. Given the multiple demands on their time, TAFE award holders are more likely to succeed in courses which are structured to enable diverse groups of students to progress together in learning how to participate in academic discourse.

Bridging the divide between vocational and higher education

The difficulties faced by TAFE award holders making the transition to higher education are attributable in part to the wide gulf between the two sectors in terms of pedagogy and assessment (Watson, Wheelahan and Chapman 2002). Although some TAFE institutes provide students with academic literacy skills, industry influence over the development of training packages ensures that vocational learning outcomes are explicitly targeted to meet the immediate need of industry. Not only does this narrow approach fail to equip students with the skills to succeed in higher education, it does not necessarily develop the trainee's capacity for reflective practice which could contribute to improved workplace productivity in the longer term (Smith 2002). Wheelahan argues that the effect of competency-based training in the VET sector denies vocational students access to the powerful knowledge and styles of reasoning represented by academic disciplines. On this premise, she argues for the re-introduction of discipline-based knowledge as a component of VET qualifications and rejects competency-based training as the mandated model of curriculum for vocational awards (Wheelahan 2007).

Although some measures have been taken to bridge the divide between vocational and higher education in recent years, successful cross-sectoral transitions still depend heavily on a high level of personal effort and commitment by teaching staff in both sectors. These efforts have demonstrated that competency-based training and higher education are not necessarily inconsistent. Several dual-sector institutions, in particular, have successfully integrated vocational and higher education delivery (Down and Stewart, 2001, Smith and Bush 2006). However, most institutions providing vocational courses in Australia are funded only for the competencies they deliver under training packages, offering little or no flexibility for vocational providers to extend the scope of their curriculum in a way that would facilitate a student's transition to higher education (Wheelahan 2000, 2003). The report by PhillipsKPA (2007, p 30) recommends that the higher education sector should be more involved in the development of training packages to maximise opportunities for developing productive credit transfer arrangements between the vocational

and higher education sectors. However given the continuing depth of the structural divide between the vocational and higher education sectors, cross-sectoral collaboration on the development of national VET curriculum appears unlikely.

Offering graded assessments within vocational awards is also suggested as a means of facilitating the transfer of students from vocational to higher education. There is no agreed national policy on graded assessment in the VET sector yet many providers and some states have implemented graded assessment practices (Schofield and McDonald 2004, Williams and Bateman 2002, Learning Australia 2005, VQA/GTA 2005). These practices are inconsistent and may disadvantage TAFE award holders who have not received gradings. The report commissioned by MCEETYA recommended that the National Quality Council for the VET sector give priority to developing and implementing process of graded reporting of assessment of student outcomes at least at the Certificate IV and Diploma level (PhillipsKPA 2006 p 30).

Conclusion

Students admitted to university on the basis of TAFE awards often struggle to meet higher education institutions' expectations regarding academic literacy. Yet the traditional forms of academic support offered by universities are inadequate for students who are not Year 12 school leavers. TAFE award holders admitted to higher education are much more likely to be part-time students who are working full-time and have family responsibilities. These characteristics make it difficult for TAFE award holders to access remedial programs of educational support commonly offered to undergraduates at university. This paper argues that as the higher education student population becomes more diverse, universities should stop assuming that senior secondary schools will do their preparatory work and should provide more explicit academic literacy training for all students during their first year of undergraduate study. Traditional models of teaching and learning in higher education will need to change to ensure that undergraduate courses actively assist students from diverse backgrounds to participate in the academic discourse of their discipline. These reforms are necessary to ensure that all students have a chance to succeed during the first year of an undergraduate degree. If universities fail to provide more explicit support for academic literacy within undergraduate courses, the recent rise in higher education participation among TAFE award holders is unlikely to translate into academic success for these students over the long term.

Dr Louise Watson is Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Canberra ACT 2601. Tel: 02 6201 5357. Email: louise.watson@canberra.edu.au

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