

# **Deviating from the norm: promoting innovative student pathways**

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## **Abstract**

As a result of widened student participation, liberalisation and reform in the Australian tertiary education sector, provision of higher education qualifications is no longer solely the domain of Universities.

Traditionally, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions partnering with universities have provoked unease in the tertiary sector as vexed issues (including quality and access) emerge as significant barriers to seamless supported student pathways. Such arrangements only exist where there is a respectful collaboration between the higher education provider and TAFE and credit arrangements acknowledge previous scholarship. This paper explores the experiences and perceptions of seven TAFE program coordinators who have championed the widening participation agenda in conjunction with The Business School at Federation University (formerly the University of Ballarat). With an emphasis on applying theoretical constructs to practical work based experiences in a blended delivery mode, the richness and complexity of this non-traditional higher education delivery model was captured via a qualitative exploratory approach utilising semi-structured interviews. It became apparent that this emerging area of study could contribute to the developing discourse on participation-widening success stories. The findings presented seek to strengthen the understanding of the characteristics of environments that best support non-traditional students transitioning into higher education.

This research project provides insights that have the potential to act as levers in the quest for successful widening of participation in higher education for a broader range of students. Organisational collaboration, flexibility, responsiveness and adaptation to the changing tertiary landscape are important ingredients in a non-traditional partner model seeking to promote opportunities for students to access higher education.

Key words- Widened participation, organisational collaboration, pathways, transition

## **Introduction**

A more flexible and responsive tertiary education and training sector was a key recommendation of the Review of Australian Higher Education, the 'Bradley Report' (DEEWR, 2008). The promotion of greater collaboration between the sectors to facilitate pathways for students who may not have previously considered university was a key recommendation. The relationship that has been established between a regional university and a number of TAFE institutes within Australia is but one example of greater inter-sectoral collaboration. In providing the opportunity for students to experience higher education scholarship in a TAFE setting, the importance of establishing meaningful and respectful relationships which focus on the seamless transition from vocational to higher education is highlighted.

Traditional philosophical and ideological views about pathways have not served the needs of the students well, instead firmly amplifying the differences between the sectors (For

example; Walls & Pardy, 2010; Milne, Keating & Holden, 2006). Bourdieu's (1996) claim that universities are powerful contributors to the maintenance and reproduction of social inequality can be witnessed in the varying credit arrangements for students transitioning from a vocational qualification into a higher education qualification. Barrington's (2004) study reinforces the belief that Western higher education institutions still privilege certain ways of knowing that focuses on a narrow view of the intellect.

In 2011, the Business School at the Federation University Australia commenced a series of partnerships arrangements in order to deliver undergraduate qualifications within TAFE institutions. The educational vehicle chosen was the 'applied degree', an undergraduate bachelor degree that 'Provides a mix of theory and analytical skills with career-oriented, practical education' (World Education News & Reviews, 2008). This type of program appeared to be congruent with both the strong vocational needs of the student cohort, and the educational culture of the TAFE environment. This paper explores the experiences and perceptions of TAFE program coordinators who have been instrumental in the establishment of undergraduate applied degrees within vocational institutions. Consequently, the research question asks 'What are the characteristics of the TAFE educational environment that promote successful transition into a higher education program for non-traditional students?' Being responsible for the implementation of these programs, the coordinators occupy a unique vantage point as they act as a conduit between students, the hosting organisations (TAFEs) and the university itself.

It is anticipated that these insights have the potential to act as levers in the quest to successfully widen participation in higher education in the Australian context. Whilst it can be argued that this paper presents the phenomena in question from a single viewpoint (i.e. no student or higher education views have been canvassed), the insights of the coordinators contribute an important initial view of the benefits and challenges of this newly established pathway into higher education scholarship.

This paper first reviews the extant literature concerning the widening of participation in higher education, focussing specifically on student pathways between TAFE and University qualifications and the challenges encountered by students during times of educational transition. Using a Grounded Theory methodology, this research project identifies significant themes which characterise the transition of students from a vocational qualification into higher education within the TAFE environment. It concludes by describing how this innovative learning model may facilitate the reduction of 'transitional shock' amongst students encountering bachelor-level scholarship for the first time, thus encouraging the widening of participation in higher education.

### **Literature Review**

Historically, the relationship between the higher education sector and the TAFE sector has been one of unease. Traditionally held beliefs about the unsuitability of graduates from the TAFE sector entering higher education programs have reinforced barriers and ensured that the cultural and institutional gaps are maintained. The Bradley Report (DEEWR, 2008) presents the argument that enhanced pathways between TAFE and higher education are not about the subsuming of one sector over another, but an opportunity for a more harmonised approach between the sectors focusing on the needs of the students. The introduction of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF, 2013) supports the development and maintenance of pathways which provide access to qualifications and assist people to move easily between different education and training

sectors and between those sectors and the labour market (p.8). Its recommendations include the provision of a register of credit transfer agreements that is to be publicly available (AQF, 2013, p.80). It can be argued that institutional and cultural barriers need to be re-examined in light of the widening participation agenda of the Government.

A review of the literature on widening participation indicates that research studies which qualitatively examine transitional experiences of students moving between the VET and higher education sectors in Australia are limited (O'Shea, Lysaght & Tanner, 2012). In many Australian higher education institutions there appears to have been an unwillingness to engage in respectful conversations about pathways for such students. Grubb (2003) describes Australian TAFEs as having the weakest link to universities in comparison to other OECD countries, thus adding weight to the traditional position of privileging one form of knowledge over another. Gordon (2007) claims that in order to transform higher educational cultures and practices, there needs to be redressing of historical misrecognitions that places one type of learning above another. This study acknowledges that too little attention has been paid to the various higher education cultures and practices that generate exclusions. Gordon (2007) defends the argument that such transformation is not about lowering standards but about redistributing and transforming knowledge through the recognition of vocational qualifications such as though awarded in TAFEs.

Increasingly, the blurring of the boundaries through the Governments participation-widening policies has forced both higher education and TAFE to reposition their respective institutions in the market. The literature suggests that there is evidence of an increasing degree of confluence (DEST, 2006) between the two sectors and suggests that this convergence provides the potential for increased cross sectoral collaboration (thus, 'deviating from the norm'). A strong enabler for the inclusion of students from diverse learning experiences in those institutions that embrace credit transfer arrangements was the strength of mutual respect and commitment shared by both Vocational and Technical Education (now referred to as VET) and higher education partners (DEST, 2006).

With a smaller market reach, universities have sought innovative ways to capture the attention of students including the strengthening of the relationship with TAFE institutions. Both the Bradley Report (2008) and the study undertaken by DEST (2006) identify a number of examples of successful (but small) cross sectoral pathway initiatives evidenced by the increase in the proportion of students 'pathwaying' from VET to higher education (5.8% in 1994 to 10.1% in 2006). Whilst there has been a gradual increase in the number of TAFE students accessing higher education over the past 25 years, what is evident is that the pathways accessible to TAFE students are generally treated more respectfully (via credit arrangements) in a lower ranked university thus adding to the stratification of widened participation. 62% of commencing students in 2007 in the Australian Group of Eight (Go8) universities were high school graduates and only 2.7 % from TAFE, whereas, in other universities, approximately 41.7% of commencing students were high school graduates and 12.6 % had VET qualifications (Wheelahan, 2009, p 14).

Whilst the uncapping of higher education places has heightened the competition for the student dollar, the widening participation agenda has also been associated with redressing the under-representation of certain social groups in higher education (Burke, 2008). Raising student aspirations is a key theme in the widening participation movement and is one that highlights the deficit view, communicated through the labyrinth of language used

in communication from higher education providers. The culture of exclusion that privileges certain ways of knowing and focusses on a narrow view of intellect does not allow for socio-cultural differences (Barrington, 2004). It highlights the advantage that cultural capital plays in providing passports to privilege, often unavailable to students from environments devoid of the higher education experience. Wheelahan (2009) argues that there is a lack of sufficient access to higher education for students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds who are coming from a VET background.

Maclennan, Musselbrook & Dundas (2000) add another dimension to the discourse of access to higher education by low SES students by distinguishing between ‘selecting’ universities and ‘recruiting’ universities. ‘Selecting’ universities are the universities with entrance requirements that privilege students from families who understand and promote tertiary education. ‘Recruiting’ universities are those who actively seek enrolments and generally do not attract the higher achieving student. In order for there to be a respectful relationship between higher education providers and TAFE partners the emphasis needs to be on ‘recruiting’ with an emphasis not on lowering standards but about redistributing and transforming knowledge (Burke, 2013). Improved pathways for students and, particularly, for students who are first in their family to undertake tertiary studies need to be a focus of respectful conversations between the sectors.

The review of the literature highlighted a number of factors that tended to exclude TAFE students from higher education experiences. These included:

- Higher education not being accessible to students from low socio-economic status backgrounds
- Higher education institutes privileging one form of knowledge over another
- Institutional and cultural barriers that exist within higher education providers
- Substandard relationships between traditional higher education providers and TAFE institutes

Thus, a review of the literature underscores existing theory but, alone, does not provide a framework (Urquhart, 2006). The four emerging concepts above provide a context to better understand the transitional changes faced by non-traditional students through the eyes of the TAFE coordinators.

## **Method**

Adopting a qualitative exploratory approach, this research explores a non-traditional learning model which has been shown to encourage a positive transition of non-traditional students into a higher education environment: that of Federation University Australia/TAFE partnerships delivering undergraduate applied degrees within the TAFE learning environment. The Federation University Australia Business School has eight active TAFE partner institutions delivering its undergraduate applied degree courses in Australia. These partners are located in two Australian states and reflect both regional and urban TAFE locations. Authorised ethics approval from Federation University Australia was obtained for this project and separate institutional permission was sought from each of the TAFE institutions to allow participation of the higher education coordinators. Seven of the eight TAFE institutes allowed their program coordinators to participate in this study. This yielded seven interview transcripts in total (n=7), all of which were used in the development of this paper.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study and its constructivist focus (Charmaz, 1995b) face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen as the principle method for collecting data. Eight open-ended questions (guided by the research question, literature reviewed and study objectives) were developed initially although, in the traditions of Grounded Theory, these questions evolved as the emerging theory began to take shape. Where possible, interviews were undertaken at the TAFE location, with only one interview requiring off-site facilitation due to the limitation of distance. The interviews, each of approximately one hour duration, were recorded and transcribed. As coding from data is the fundamental analytic tool in unearthing emerging themes, interview transcripts were coded using Grounded Theory principles (Glaser, 1992). Participants were informed of the confidentiality of their contribution and assured that they could not be identified.

In the first review of the transcripts, open coding fragmented the data through line-by-line analysis to identify a universe of largely unfocussed codes. A second pass through the data using constant comparison techniques supported axial coding where questions were asked relating to ‘Causes and consequences, conditions and interactions, strategies and processes and...concepts that cluster together’ (Neuman, 2006, p.463).

Under the canons of Grounded Theory, other data sources were not disqualified from use, and a number of coordinators voluntarily provided additional written reflective comments post-interview. Program brochures and websites were also interrogated for relevant data to construct the picture of the experience of TAFE students as they transition into higher education.

## **Findings**

The process of constant comparison of the data revealed eight significant themes which, from the perspective of the TAFE program coordinators, characterise transition from a TAFE environment into higher education. The themes are presented and discussed in detail in the paragraphs that follow.

### ***Delivery mode and program type contribute to successful transition***

In the minds of the program coordinators interviewed, there is little doubt that the blended learning model employed in this partnership arrangement contributes to the likelihood of successful student progression. It was widely believed the blended structure of this program (12 hours of online delivery of subject materials, 12 hours of online activities and 12 hours of face to face workshops per course) was a key factor in student retention. One of the coordinators (C7) stated they were “not sure students would survive in a traditional university environment”. Specifically, the applied degree program delivered via ‘blended’ learning mode, appeared to make the program more accessible to the cohort of students from a TAFE pathway. Coordinators commented that students responded positively to the combination of workshop-style face-to-face delivery, self-directed learning and on-line components of the program. One coordinator (C3) believed that the applied degree teaching mode was effective with the TAFE students because it offers a middle ground between the competency-based TAFE content and the more conceptual higher education programs. Another coordinator (C1) suggested that the blended teaching mode enabled them (the students) to feel secure, because they know what is expected of them. Whilst the coordinators we interviewed indicated that the blended delivery style favoured the students transitioning from a competency based learning into outcome based learning, it was interesting to note the observation of one coordinator (C4), who felt that the teaching staff at their TAFE struggled with the blended delivery and, having been

appointed to a lecturing role on behalf of a university, reverted to a traditional didactic lecturing style “because this is university and I’m now a university lecturer and this is what a university lecturer must do”. Interviewing TAFE teachers was not within the scope of this research project but it emerged as an important facet for the success of the program.

### ***Predominance of barriers to traditional university participation***

The coordinators identified a range of barriers to traditional university participation exhibited by the student cohorts within the applied degree program; poor previous educational experiences; no family tradition of university attendance; educational discontinuity; competing demands on time (often mature-aged students); low socio-economic status and low academic self-efficacy. Indeed, one coordinator (C3) indicated that, for some students, entry into this program represented a ‘last chance’ to access higher education. For others, a university degree had never previously been considered, and they were excited at the prospects that this program offered. Many of the coordinators reported that most students displayed a strong internal motivation but suffered significant initial anxiety. One coordinator observed that “it [the transition to higher education] is not easy for students – they are vulnerable to negativity and we land up just trying to coax (her) over the line”.

### ***Student challenges***

At the classroom level, the diverse nature of the TAFE cohorts posed a number of pedagogic difficulties. As reported by one coordinator (C2) “mature age students almost squash the younger students” and the mixture of students can negatively influence class discussions and academic risk-taking. More rigorous student induction to the new academic requirements is seen as highly desirable by TAFE program coordinators and improved communication of assessment expectations, in particular, would be expected to reap both psychological and performance benefits in transitioning students.

### ***Academic challenges***

Coordinators also highlighted a range of academically-oriented difficulties that their students faced in the transition from TAFE to Higher Education. Foremost was the adjustment required from a competency-based environment to that described as requiring ‘self-directed knowledge acquisition’. As one coordinator (C3) reported “learning at a conceptual level (in higher education) is not always readily accessible for our students”. Coordinators consistently referred to the prescriptive and homogenous nature of competency-based learning in contrast to the self-direction called for in degree-level assessment tasks as problematic.

One coordinator (C1) spoke candidly about the difficulties of the students in grasping the difference between TAFE and higher education:

Yeah, for me it’s a frustration at the disconnect between the higher ed expectations and the Vocational Education and Training expectations so it’s a very big paradigm shift to move from VET where it’s about competency based learning, where it’s about doing, to a higher ed paradigm where it’s about knowledge, knowing and that knowledge is not something concrete.

The coordinators described a range of skill-based challenges for transitioning students; the rigorous research skills required are demanding for students, the expectations regarding academic writing style pose significant difficulties, and the focus on

referencing integrity demands that new skills are acquired. Coordinators reported a high level of student concern regarding mastering critical academic skills. A number of the TAFE coordinators championed the concept of embedding greater academic rigor in Diploma and Advanced Diploma studies as a prelude for a degree pathway.

### *‘Transitional shock’*

In summarising student attitudes towards the transitional from TAFE to Higher Education, one coordinator (C1) discussed the experience that she has had with the students and described the student’s transition to higher education as a “scary jump”, “a shock to their system” and “challenging” for the students. However, coordinators unanimously agreed that the maintenance of a consistent educational environment for TAFE students had provided them the security they need to address the significant academic challenges that higher education poses for this particular cohort.

### *The TAFE effect*

It would appear that certain aspects of the TAFE teaching environment enhance the prospect of a successful transition into higher education scholarship. Coordinators reported that the smaller TAFE class sizes allow “academic intimacy, accessibility and engagement”. Believing that support impacts success for this particular cohort type, scaffolding, guidance and nurturing were seen as a vital role in the teaching staff appointed: “[we] need to give psychological and academic support to allow academia to flourish”.

Two of the coordinators (C6 & C2) suggested that TAFE had successfully engendered a customer-centric view across the organisation, and saw students as clients. One coordinator (C4) expressed the view that TAFEs had been successful in becoming a “lifelong learning partner” with the student which, in turn, encourages loyalty and ‘repeat buy’ during the educational journey. It was suggested that this ethos was evidence that TAFE organisations with a commercial focus tended to nurture students for enrolment longevity but a positive by-product was satisfied students.

The beneficial effects of both security and sense of community provided by a familiar and nurturing environment emerged as a significant theme. Coordinators commented on the desire of students to stay within the ‘safety’ of the environment they had become familiar with whilst undertaking their TAFE qualifications. Many of the coordinators believed that “the environment [at TAFE] is as good as if they were at the university”. One Coordinator (C2) felt that they “knew their students well” and as a result could retain the “tight knit cohort” experience that seemed to benefit the students.

Teaching staff selection appears to be a crucial factor in the ‘TAFE effect’ according to the participants of this study. An ability to build rapport and provide academic and psychological nurturing to students is seen as desirable attributes amongst TAFE staff. One respondent (C4) indicated that the usual subservient relationship between academic and students within a university context contrasted sharply with the ‘learning partner’ role of educators within this program. Furthermore, it was maintained that TAFE staff teaching into the applied degree program were admired and respected due to their business pedigree, a characteristic that provided aspirational motivation for students “[We] hire staff with commercial experience – grounded in real world – hero: transferable admiration”

### ***Staff Challenges***

As this program represents a transition for staff as well as students, the majority of critical comments from participants coalesce around the topic of inadequate instruction and training of teaching and administration personnel: “TAFE staff feel as though they need to have their hand held, as well as the students”. Furthermore, the model appears to face resistance from two quarters with some TAFE staff feeling philosophically uncomfortable with the adopting of higher education programs within their organisation and some university staff adopting an elitist demeanour in the belief that TAFE delivery of undergraduate degrees compromises academic standards. Many of the TAFE coordinators commented on the ease of communication with the university staff generally but felt that many academic staff did not convey a positive understanding of the purpose of the TAFE institution. It was felt that there was “inconsistency between lecturers and their relationship building capacity”.

Improved communication and internal marketing efforts were seen by coordinators as potential solutions to this resistance: “we know how we do our communications through to the university and I think that part of it works really well” (C2). Another coordinator (C1) stressed the different mindset to teaching between VET and higher education with a greater focus on professional development/scholarly activities needed for staff teaching into this program in the future. One coordinator (C3) believed the higher education teaching experience positively influenced their pedagogical approach to delivery of VET programs.

### ***Productive TAFE-university partnerships***

Respectfulness of the relationship between the university and a TAFE partner was a recurring theme throughout the coordinator interviews. Universities were generally perceived as displaying an attitude towards TAFE institutions that was not always respectful and, consequently, universities within the same region may not be a “fit for organisational objectives” due to an unwillingness to form a productive inter-organisational dialogue. Two reasons were given for the strength of the partnership with Federation University. The dual-sector nature of the university appeared to instil empathy for the TAFE sector within the organisation, and a long history of partnerships with a variety of higher education providers both onshore and internationally (spanning some fifteen years) has forged the development of a partner focus within the university at large. It was noted that appropriate credit arrangements for previous study and regular visits to the partner provider also serve to enhance the relationship, and a number of TAFE coordinators referred to the Centre for University Partnerships (CUP) as a vital facilitation mechanism for responsive partnership operations.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The innovative nature of the learning model under consideration is one that has broken new ground in the tertiary space and represents a relatively recent addition to the multiplicity of ways in which higher education programs are being delivered. Boasting a high student retention rate in the applied degree program, this model is but one initiative proffered to overcome some of the transitional challenges faced by a diverse student cohort. Findings from this project indicate that TAFE students may be amongst the most vulnerable as they transition into higher education due to a predominance of risk factors including; poor previous educational experiences; no family tradition of university attendance; educational discontinuity; time competition; low socio-economic status and low academic self-efficacy.

It would appear that the greater academic challenges that confront non-traditional students from TAFE institutions seeking a higher education qualification may be offset by an environmental *status quo* which provides security and support thus enabling success. While not devised to describe an educational environment *per se*, Maslow's (1954) 'hierarchy of needs' was evident in the consistency of comments the coordinators expressed about the TAFE environment. With the lower needs of the Maslow (1954) model ('Safety' and 'Belonging') being met by the familiar TAFE environment, students appeared free to turn their attention to higher educational academic scholarship and benefit from the more personalised academic attention on offer. The importance of environmental familiarity is a crucial factor in easing transition for the non-traditional student. It is pertinent to note that while it would appear that the TAFE environment is the antithesis of an elite university, it is somewhat ironic that *all* partner organisations have sought to establish a higher education space within their campus. Students enrolled in the degree program in each of the TAFEs were provided with a 'university' style space but with the benefits of a more intimate learning experience. Whilst it was perceived that a space removed from access by other students with tea and coffee facilities would facilitate a feeling of being a higher education student more interesting was the observation by one coordinator (C7) "But the one thing we've noticed is that [they] have higher expectations because they're paying a higher fee. They don't like it, they wouldn't like a classroom that wasn't, you know, suitable in their eyes and they certainly have an expectation, even though they may not have sat very formal exams in their VET course, they have a very high expectation about the exams and the atmosphere". Despite not having had a traditional university experience, it was evident that the students had an understanding of what they should be experiencing. It is not within the scope of this paper to explore student perceptions but it sets the scene for further investigation.

However, it is not only the consistency of the environment that is important to successful transition into higher education but the *nature* of that environment. Smaller class sizes and the nurturing culture of TAFE institutions allow an academic intimacy and accessibility to staff not usually found within higher education. This was supported by the attributes and pedagogy of the staff employed to deliver the applied degree courses within the TAFE institution who were able to provide both psychological and academic support to allow academic endeavour to flourish in these student cohorts.

Delivery mode and the program type also appear to play a significant role in the academic engagement of these non-traditional groups embarking on higher education. A traditional degree, further encouraged by the ethos of the Australian Qualifications Framework (2013), builds academic skills progressively over a structured three year program. With the application of credits for prior learning, TAFE Advanced Diploma graduates find themselves thrown in to the third year of a Level 7 qualification without the benefit of higher education academic skills. For many students, the result is stress and 'transitional shock' as they attempt to navigate their way through the academic demands that is foreign to them.

The variety of teaching modes employed within this program (online, self-directed and face-to-face) may better meet the needs of students who exhibit non-homogenous learning preferences. Furthermore, the program type, itself, appeared to be strongly endorsed by the participants; the strong vocational needs of the student and the competencies of the TAFE institution demonstrated a good fit with the characteristics of

the applied degree program offered. Heirdsfield, Walker, & Walsh (2005) observed that some of the transition issues faced by students can, in part, be explained by the contrast between the competency-based curriculum of TAFE and the theoretical focus of the university. Applied degrees appear to bridge the gap between these two competing philosophies.

Respectful relationships between higher education and TAFE institutes can result in positive outcomes for the non-traditional student as verified by the coordinators. Explicit pathways that are inclusive of different traditions of knowledge and skill acquisition are possible where mutual understanding can be engendered between the two sectors. This research demonstrates the positive outcomes for teaching staff as trustful relationships build between the sectors. Increasing confidence in TAFE staff who deliver the higher education programs has resulted in constructive communication with higher education teaching staff. One positive outcome for the relationship was a more enlightened view of the ability of TAFE students to master higher education culture and learning, albeit within the safety of a non-traditional environment. Verification of these findings from a student point of view suggests a desirable direction for future research.

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