

# What's it like for students? Enhancing the student experience from VET to University

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## Abstract

Credit transfer and articulation arrangements present valuable opportunities for students with VET sector experience and qualifications to access higher education in Australia and overseas. However, as the MCEETYA *Good Practice Principles* suggest, ad hoc articulation programs are often characterised by inconsistency or lack of transparency and do not always serve students well.

The Collaborative Development Program between Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) and the University of Canberra (UC) has monitored the difficulties students encounter when transitioning from CIT to UC and designed a longitudinal program to improve the student experience. The achievements of the project, acknowledged in 2006 through both a Carrick Citation and a three-year Collaborative and Structural Reform (CASR) grant, arise not only from the alignment of governance, process and infrastructure support but also from a shared focus on students.

This research analyses the achievements of the UC-CIT Collaborative Development Program from the student perspective, focusing on cross-institutional programs to improve: the management and granting of credit for completed VET studies; presentation and accessibility of information to students and stakeholders; and support for articulating students during both vocational and university studies.

The analysis suggests that the cross-sectoral Collaborative Development Program, which is continually reviewed and revised to address student concerns, has enhanced the overall experiences of CIT graduates who are studying at UC. Evidence of outcomes includes greater participation in campus services, improved student satisfaction ratings and high success and retention rates for target students. The extent to which the model described in this study could be extended to other institutions is considered.

## Introduction

A national study sponsored by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) in 2006 concluded that credit transfer and articulation arrangements from vocational studies to higher education can present advantages to students. When arrangements are structured and highly collaborative, students benefit from consistency of information, reduction in costs, expanded career and employment opportunities and flexible entry and exit options (PhillipsKPA Pty Ltd 2006a pp.16-17).

Credit transfer arrangements between the University of Canberra (UC) and Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) have operated within a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) since 1989. The MOU describes the kinds of arrangements the institutions will pursue, including the ideal levels of advanced standing UC will grant to students completing CIT qualifications. Management of policy issues and the articulation arrangements that have arisen under the MOU are undertaken by a Joint Management Committee (JMC) with membership of senior staff from both institutions. The governance structure has circumvented the individualism and ad hoc decision-making described by Wheelahan (2000 pp.17-18) that typify many institutional arrangements when articulation is managed at the faculty or school level.

However, commitment from senior management at both institutions has not automatically solved the “significant practical issues students and staff involved in credit transfer arrangements, applications, and approvals actually face” (PhillipsKPA Pty Ltd 2006b). The breadth and number of the credit transfer arrangements, as well as ever-changing curriculum at both institutions, has made it difficult to keep these arrangements up-to-date. In the initial years of the project, the complexity of credit transfer arrangements inhibited the development of automatic processes, and students were required to submit individual credit applications to academic staff post-admission.

A longitudinal project to streamline the design, development and implementation of articulation and credit transfer arrangements was initiated in 2003, with mutual involvement of Secretariat Services, web teams and Student and Academic Services at UC and CIT. The University’s policy framework was revised and an oracle database developed to track the approval stages, history and detail of the arrangements. Finally, policy and technology were combined to facilitate the automatic award of credit to students on admission. This is supported by a specially designed Orientation and support program for CIT articulating students. In recognition of the achievements of this project, a Carrick Citation was awarded in 2006 for “innovation, and collaboration across three work units, in enhancing student learning by supporting articulation pathways between University of Canberra and Canberra Institute of Technology” (Carrick 2006).

To further advance cross-institutional development of curriculum, course structures, joint teaching opportunities and student support programs, the UC-CIT *Beyond Articulation* program was launched in 2006. The program is supported by a three-year Collaborative and Structural Reform grant from DEST.

## **Research Method**

This paper synthesises and reports on the outcomes of cross-sectoral projects designed to streamline UC-CIT credit transfer arrangements in response to feedback from target students. Quantitative and qualitative data was gathered from four sources: the *UC Commencing Student Questionnaire*; focus groups with CIT graduates enrolled at UC; and the UC and CIT statistics offices. Quantitative data collected since 2004 was disaggregated to identify patterns of participation, experience, success and retention for students admitted to UC on the basis of a CIT qualification. Qualitative feedback from

the student cohort was analysed to reveal three major areas of concern for students: how articulation is managed and credit granted to students; how information is presented and made available; and how articulating students are supported through their transition from vocational to university studies. These concerns are consistent with the recommendations of the PhillipsKPA Pty Ltd report ‘Giving credit where credit is due’ (2006b).

### **Terminology**

While a variety of definitions exist for “articulation arrangements” and “credit transfer arrangements” between VET and higher education providers, the definitions provided in the PhillipsKPA Pty Ltd national study (2006a) have been adopted for this project. *Credit transfer arrangements* are described as “processes used by institutions or faculties/schools/ departments to determine the type and amount of credit to be granted to a student on the basis of relevant prior or concurrent studies” (PhillipsKPA 2006a p.10). Credit transfer arrangements may be structured or unstructured. *Articulation arrangements* are regarded as an extension of structured credit transfer arrangements, as they involve the explicit design of pathways by staff from both sectors to create concurrent, sequential or nested awards (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Credit transfer and articulation arrangements between UC and CIT**

Term and Definitions	Pathways	
Credit Transfer arrangements  Processes to determine the type and amount of credit to be granted on the basis of relevant prior or concurrent studies	Structured Advertised at course level	
	Unstructured Negotiated at student level	
Articulation arrangements  A process of collaborative curriculum development and/or course design negotiated by staff from institutions in each sector	Dual sector award	Sequential
		Concurrent
	Linked single sector awards	
	Nested awards	

The University of Canberra and CIT have been developing both credit transfer and articulation arrangements since 2002. Since collaborative articulation arrangements leading to dual-sector awards or linked single sector awards are considered to provide the best opportunities for students, the current focus of the *Beyond Articulation* project is on the development of full articulation arrangements for students.

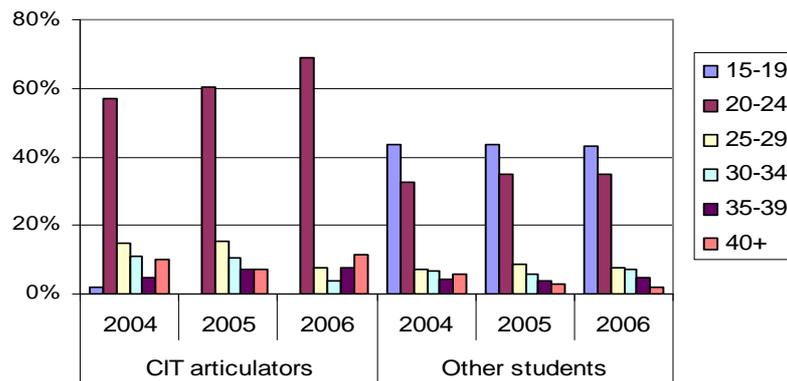
This paper analyses the impact of the UC-CIT Collaborative Development Program. The authors describe the evolution of cross-institutional governance, management processes and information provision and discuss the nature and impact of student feedback from CIT students at UC. Finally, the authors present trends in student participation and achievement and consider the generalisation of the model to other institutions.

### **Findings and discussion**

Before considering the findings, it is useful to describe the demographics of the approximately 250 students who are enrolled at UC annually on the basis of a CIT award.

Students with a CIT qualification tend to be older than the average, with the majority aged 20 to 24 (see Figure 2). Females make up around two-thirds of articulating students, slightly higher than the university average. These findings align with the age and gender distributions reported by Harris et al. (2005). Around eighty per cent of articulating students study full-time, a figure slightly lower than the UC average. The relatively high proportion of students with a part-time load reflects the likelihood of CIT graduates to engage in employment as well as university studies (Ryan, 2000 pp.12-13).

**Figure 2 Age of students enrolling at UC**



Nationally, the percentage of TAFE graduates who continue to university studies has increased from around 7 percent in 1998 to over 9 percent in 2004 (Harris et al. 2005, Ryan 2000 p.30, Macey et al. 2006 p.9). Such movement may occur 'during, immediately following or some considerable time after VTE studies' (PhillipsKPA Pty Ltd 2006a p.9). At UC, a significant number of VET graduates begin university studies within a year or two of completing their VET course. While longitudinal data on student movement between CIT and UC has only recently been assembled, Table 1 suggests that the percentage of articulators from CIT to UC alone achieves the national average.

**Table 1 Percentage of CIT graduates enrolling at UC, 2004-2007**

	2004	2005	2006	2007
CIT Dip Graduates	989	742	937	839
CIT Adv Dip Graduates	383	363	325	359
Total CIT Graduates	1372	1105	1262	1198
No enrolled at UC within 1 yr	86	112	117	n/a
% enrolled at UC in 1 yr	6.27%	10.14%	9.27%	
No enrolled at UC within 2 yrs	106	136		
% enrolled at UC in 2 yrs	7.73%	12.31%		
No enrolled at UC within 3 yrs	123			
% enrolled at UC in 2 yrs	8.9%			

### **Research Outcomes**

The following sections describe the outcomes and impact of major initiatives designed to improve articulation and credit transfer arrangements between CIT and UC.

### The development of governance, policy and information systems

The University's policy on the granting of credit was initially created in 2002 and was further enhanced in 2007. The document aligns articulation and credit transfer policy with current national guidelines and sets out the procedures for determining and granting credit. In particular, the new policy attempts to fulfil the expectations described in the report 'Credit where credit is due', which argues: 'that all students who undertake VTE studies at the diploma and advanced diploma levels and some certificate IV studies should have opportunities for credit towards their higher education studies ...' (PhillipsKPA Pty Ltd , 2006b p.16).

Importantly, the policy establishes that credit transfer arrangements should be *structured* and that credit granted for a completed CIT qualification should be *specified*. The recasting of the policy and the comprehensive revision of all of the UC-CIT articulation agreements has opened the way for articulation to be managed centrally and more efficiently. A part-time Articulation Officer in each institution supports staff and students with the establishment, revision and uploading of articulation and credit transfer agreements on a database. The Joint Status Committee (JSC) meets twice a year to review and update agreements, ensuring that articulation agreements are current, consistent with policy and readily available to prospective students.

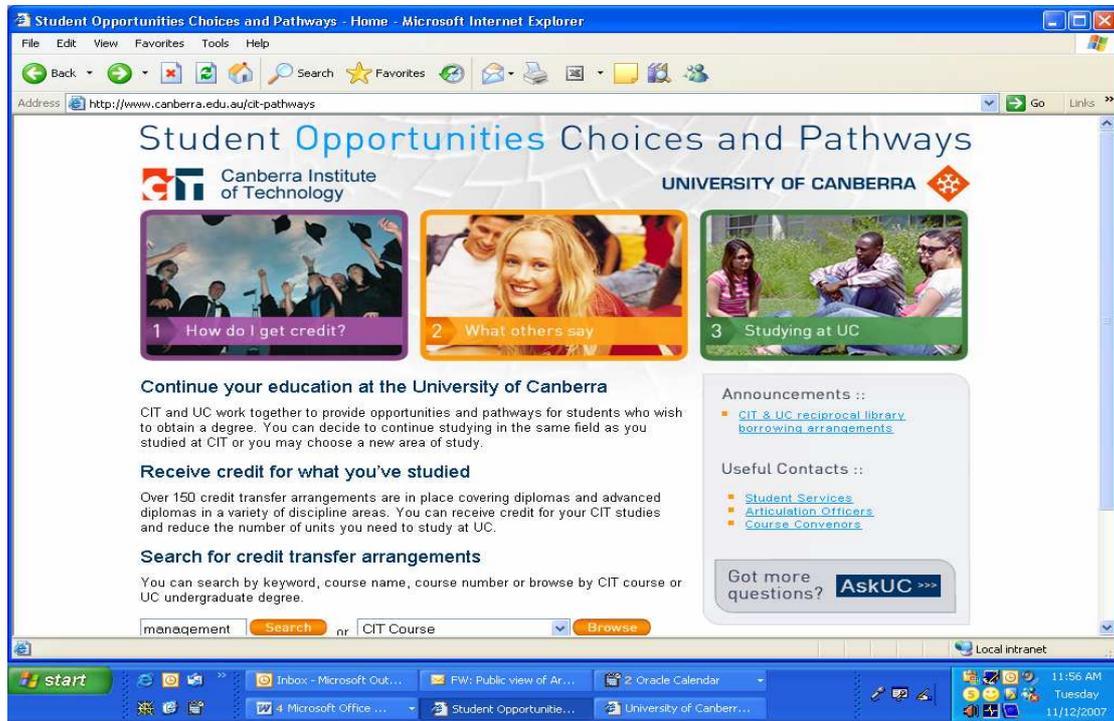
Access to adequate and accurate information is of major importance to students. Harris et al. (2005 p.37) report that 23% of students moving from VET to higher education experience difficulty getting advice from university staff. In response to UC student feedback, a database created specifically for managing articulation agreements between CIT and UC was created in 2005. The database currently contains over 170 articulation arrangements (University of Canberra 2008). The back-end of the database allows the Articulation Officer to record details of MOUs and other contracts and the articulation agreements attached to them. The database also allows for steps in the approval process to be recorded by date and for revisions to be archived. The public view provides both a summary and a link to each arrangement (Figure 3).

**Figure 3** Extract from the UC Articulation database

32	<b>UC Course:</b>	795AA - Bachelor of Communication in Media/Multimedia Production
	<b>External Course:</b>	AD2C54 - Advanced Diploma of Media Production
	<b>External Institution:</b>	Canberra Institute of Technology
	<b>Credit Points:</b>	30 credit points of advanced standing
		<a href="#">View Credit Transfer Arrangement</a>
33	<b>UC Course:</b>	885AA - Bachelor of Nursing
	<b>External Course:</b>	AD2J33 - Advanced Diploma of Naturopathy
	<b>External Institution:</b>	Canberra Institute of Technology
	<b>Credit Points:</b>	27 credit points of advanced standing
		<a href="#">View Credit Transfer Arrangement</a>

A specialised interface to the database, named the *Pathways* website, was created in late 2006 (University of Canberra 2008). The web interface filters information held in the database so that only UC-CIT arrangements are displayed (Figure 4).

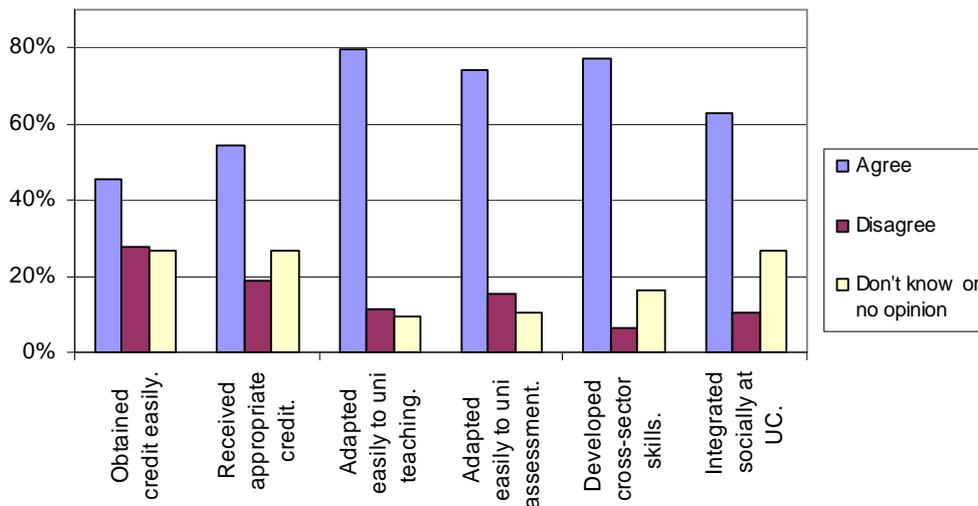
**Figure 4 The Pathways website**



**2. Student centeredness in admission and credit transfer**

Feedback collected from articulating students in 2006 suggested that while students felt they had adapted well to university life in general, they were dissatisfied with the processes for receiving credit at that time. Figure 5 shows student feedback *before* the *Pathways* website was launched, and it is expected that satisfaction with the credit process will show an improvement in subsequent data.

**Figure 5 Feedback from articulating students, 2006**



Students attending focus groups in 2006 and 2007 noted that their transition to University studies had been eased through:

- provision of information about articulation and credit transfer while at CIT
- informed course convenors in both institutions
- preparation for university studies while a CIT student
- support and advice from Student and Academic Services staff
- opportunities for workplace practice during their studies.

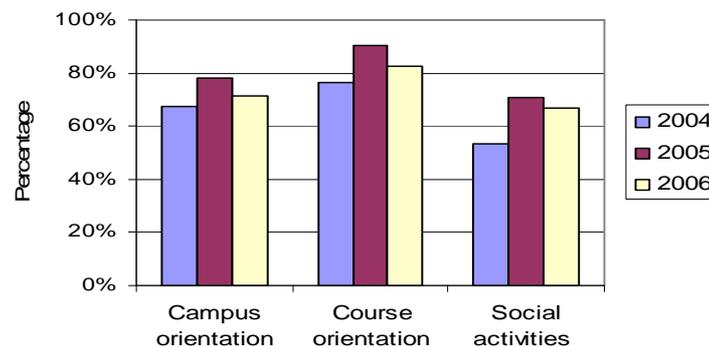
From late 2007, an “Associate Student” card offering access to electronic library resources at UC has been offered to CIT students in their final semester of an articulating program. This initiative aims to further ease the transition of articulating students by providing them with guided experience in the search, retrieval, analysis and citation of relevant library resources.

### 3. A dedicated Orientation Program for this cohort of students

The students’ ability to adapt to university teaching, as demonstrated in Figure 5, is supported through a customised Orientation Program for articulating students at UC. Students identified as CIT graduates are invited individually to a two-hour O-Week session, which is designed to provide the cohort with the best possible start to their higher education career. In addition to general advice, the orientation session includes talks by the University’s Academic Skills Program (ASP) and library staff. Specialised enrolment support is provided by Course Convenors of the most popular courses and a recent CIT articulator is invited to provide a personal perspective on the cross-sectoral experience. From 2008, the ASP is offering additional customised workshops in Semester 1 to address the learning needs of articulating students who enter into the later stages of their programs (often 2nd Year).

The Orientation Program is being improved continuously in response to student feedback. Figure 6 shows trends in articulating students’ engagement with orientation activities during the period 2004 to 2006.

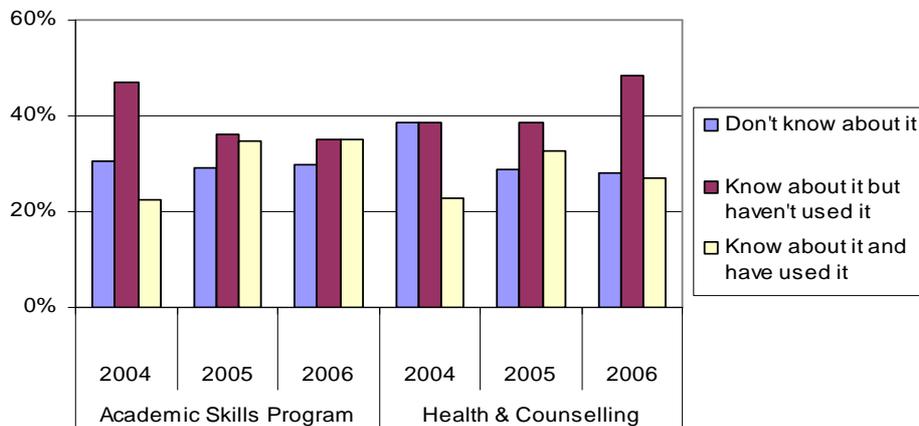
**Figure 6 Attendance at Orientation Week activities by CIT articulators, 2004-2006**



Customised orientation and other student-focused activities are raising the awareness of CIT graduates in a range of services across the UC campus. In the period 2004 to 2006, this group increased their use of library online material (journals & databases) from 86%

to 92 % and those using library support services (training & assistance) increased from 78% to 87%. The CIT cohort also increased their use of Health and Counselling and the ASP, as shown in Figure 7.

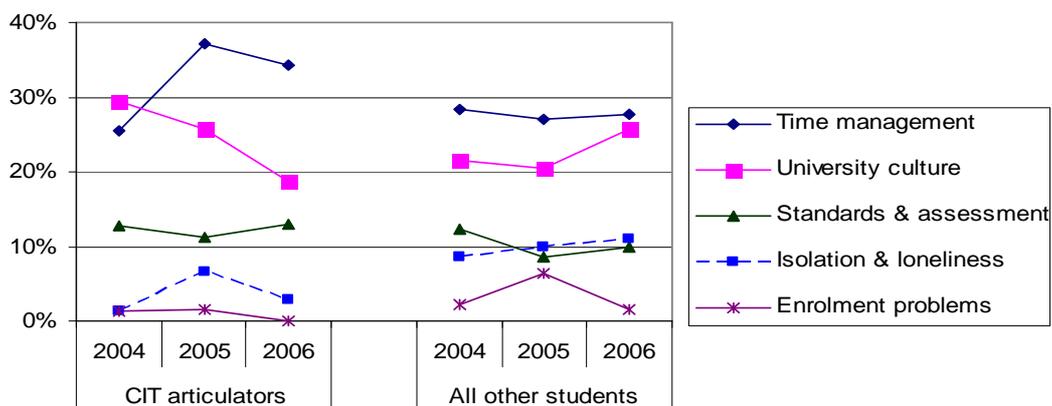
**Figure 7 Knowledge and use of services at UC: CIT articulators, 2004-2006**



## Conclusions

Articulating students in their first year of study at UC report declining difficulties with adjustment to campus life and study and increasing awareness of campus support services. In many cases, articulating students adjust more easily than other students, including school leavers. Over 95 per cent of articulating students say they enjoy their time at the University and the same proportion are satisfied with the quality of their experience. Figure 8 compares the views of articulating students with other students in relation to five major reported problems. While time management remains the main problem for many CIT articulators, this group expresses less concern than other students with enrolment processes and isolation/loneliness and are adapting well to university life.

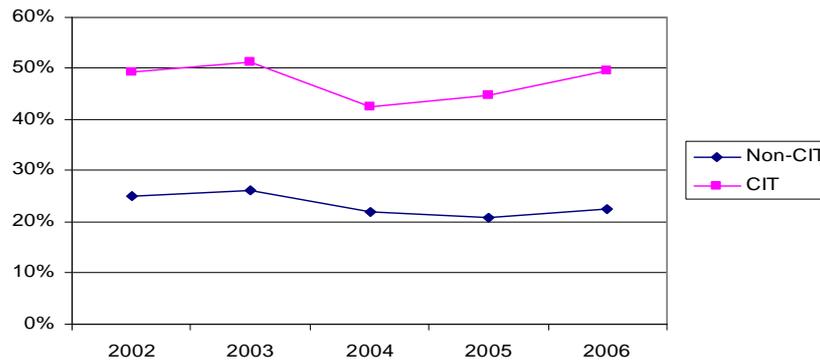
**Figure 8 Main problems reported by students at UC, 2004-2006**



The strategies implemented to support articulation programs between CIT and UC are also streamlining the enrolment process. Conversion rates from application for CIT

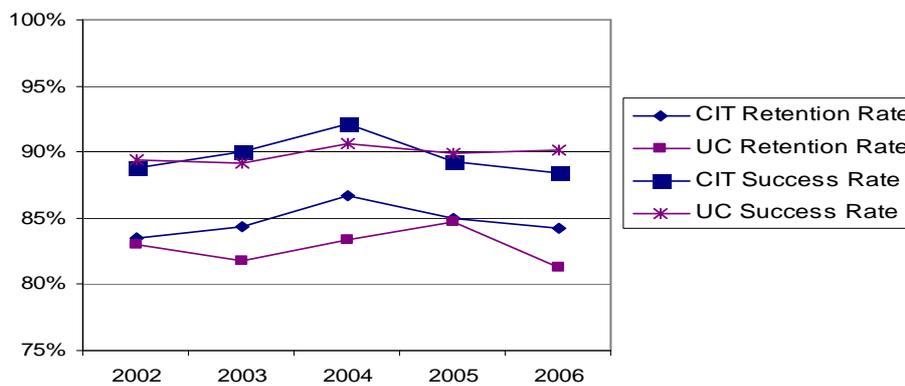
graduates are considerably higher than for other groups of applicants, and remain at around fifty percent (Figure 9). The granting of guaranteed admission for CIT graduates into articulating courses is considered to aid conversion rates. High levels of conversion are important in the current competitive market for university students and represent considerable cost savings for the institution.

**Figure 9 Conversion rates from application at UC, 2002-2006**



The outcome of continuous improvement in articulation and credit transfer arrangements between CIT and UC is ultimately demonstrated through the success and retention rates of the student cohort. As Figure 10 illustrates, students who enrol at UC on the basis of a CIT qualification – whether this qualification is at Diploma level or below – show no disadvantage compared with other students at the University. On the contrary, success rates since 2002 have been consistently higher for students with a CIT qualification than those for other students.

**Figure 10 Success and retention rates for students with a CIT qualification, 2002-2006**



The cross-sectoral development of the governance structures, systematic processes and structured information provision described in this paper has brought positive experiences and high rates of achievement for students who articulate from CIT to UC. The success of the collaboration, however, has relied on the commitment and support of management and staff in both institutions for over a decade. The unique partnership forged between CIT and UC has been aided by close geographical existence and support from competitive national grants. However, both institutions agree that the development of

infrastructure, governance, admission systems, joint course development, review processes and information systems has created a sustainable model for the future. This model not only creates positive student experiences but also proves to be cost-effective.

The model developed through the UC-CIT Collaborative Development program should form a sound basis for the management of articulation and credit transfer arrangements between vocational and higher education institutions across Australia.

## Acknowledgements

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