

Transforming vision into reality: the Integrated Articulation and Credit Transfer Project

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Abstract

The paper reports on the major findings to date in a project addressing issues of articulation and credit transfer between the Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) sectors in Queensland, with broader significance to Australia. The *Integrated Articulation and Credit Transfer* (IACT) project is taking an action research approach to developing a range of sustainable and transferable seamless articulation frameworks that are relevant to both education providers and industry.

Introduction

Considerable interest in articulation and credit transfer between the VET and HE sectors has been expressed for some 25 years (Centre for the Study of Higher Education 2008, p. 9) arising from issues about access and equity, efficiency, the roles of the different sectors, and providing pathways between them (PhillipsKPA 2006a, p. 54). Governments have created policies to promote articulation and credit transfer between the sectors over the same time period. Implementing articulation and credit transfer, however, has proved to be more difficult. As the Bradley Review noted there has been 'limited success, due to structural rigidities as well as to differences in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment' (Bradley et al. 2008, p. 179). The Federal Government responded to the Bradley Review with the policy *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*. One of the ten key reforms in the policy is 'Improving Tertiary Pathways: building stronger connectivity between the higher education and vocational education and training sectors' (Australian Government 2009a, p. 9).

The *Integrated Articulation and Credit Transfer* (IACT) project is taking an action research approach to developing a range of sustainable and transferable seamless cross-sectoral articulation frameworks that are industry relevant and achievable. The project is funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and lead by the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) in partnership with the Queensland Department of Education and Training, the Australian Council of Private Education Providers (ACPET) and Careers Australia Group.

The first phase of the project was research, including a literature review and consultation with key stakeholders including industry, education providers and students. During October and November 2009, in depth interviews were conducted with education and training providers in both the VET and HE sectors in Queensland. The aim of the interviews was to investigate the *current state* of practice in articulation and credit transfer across both sectors in Queensland. The interviews drew on findings of the literature review, particularly the findings by PhillipsKPA (2006c) and explored attitudes that Queensland VET and HE education providers have to working across sectors, what factors are required for cross-sectoral partnerships to be successful, and the VET-HE transition, including whether

transition strategies are being used and how effective they are. The interviews also gathered information about articulation models in use, but that part of the research is not addressed in this paper. This paper reports the results of these interviews, and summarises work underway or planned for the project as a result of this research.

Methodology

All Queensland universities, including two interstate universities which have campuses in Queensland, all TAFE Queensland institutes, and a representative sample of ACPET-nominated VET private providers were invited to participate in the interviews. The education providers were asked to nominate an appropriate person to participate in an interview at a time suitable to them. As almost all agreed to be involved in the interviews, 10 universities, 12 TAFE institutes and 10 VET private providers were included in the final consultation; a total of 32 institutions across Queensland. Nominated interviewees were usually in middle to upper management roles in a position which gave them a broad perspective on their institution's articulation arrangements and processes.

A structured interview schedule and process was developed. Interview questions were a mixture of quantitative and qualitative open-ended questions which allowed the opportunity to explore themes and new ideas. Interview questions were piloted with two stakeholders (HE and VET) and submitted to the USQ Ethics Committee for approval prior to commencing the interview process. Interviews were conducted face to face and audio recorded with the interviewees' permission. A copy of the interview questions, and/or the full report of results of the interviews are available from researchers upon request.

Findings and discussion

Partnerships

Questions about partnerships were grouped around a selection of themes including:

- How partnerships initiate and evolve;
- What influences organisations to pursue partnerships with other institutions;
- What factors are imperative for forming successful articulation partnerships;
- Principles or rules for forming articulation partnerships; and
- Benefits of articulation partnerships for the participating organisations.

The findings indicate that, on the whole, there is a desire to collaborate between the sectors in Queensland, and that often this has been formalised in some way such as a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The majority of respondents (90% of HE, 75% VET private providers and 70% of TAFEs) indicated that they had a cross-sectoral MOU in place. Smaller institutions were less likely to have an MOU than larger institutions.

Organisational agreements differ in the degree of detail and formality, due to different needs. Specific agreements outline detailed credit transfer arrangements based on a mapping process while generic agreements are based on an underlying principle of collaboration but with no specific details, leaving flexibility in the amount of credit given. With respect to institutions having arrangements that provide VET/HE students with credit for their VET qualification, approximately 41% of all respondents reported having specific agreements. The remainder

reported either generic or no agreements. One respondent commented: "specific agreements are out of date the moment they are signed".

A high percentage of all respondents said that they actively sought partnerships, and all respondents stated that they were keen to develop articulation pathways. In HE, however, this is often 'ad hoc' or initiated by individuals within faculties, rather than by the university as an organisation. Metropolitan universities/campuses were more interested in VET partnerships than regional ones due to the demand for pathways between VET and HE by international students. It was apparent from TAFE comments that proactively developing partnerships was for most a relatively recent development, partly due to leadership, partly due to government priorities, and in part a reflection of the interest of the universities they deal with. Whilst VET private providers were keen to develop partnerships, there was an indication that the response from universities had been variable, and in some cases negative.

PhillipsKPA (2006c) stated that it would be beneficial if employer and industry groups had a stronger role in the development of articulation arrangements with VET and HE providers, in order to produce graduates with the skills that employers need. Respondents were asked whether they include industry or employers in the development of articulation arrangements with HE/VET providers. Whilst both sectors see the importance of industry in curriculum development and delivery, the research results indicate that industry involvement in the development of *articulation arrangements* is low in both sectors.

When asked about the job roles in each organisation which have responsibility for the formation of partnerships, responses indicate that, whilst distinct areas of an organisation were tasked with the formation of partnerships, these were not necessarily linked to each other. It is the middle management level, rather than the higher level, that has the responsibility for negotiating and developing partnerships and agreements, especially in HE. An institution may have a policy promulgated by upper management, but it is the middle level that actually facilitates the arrangements. In HE the responsibility for developing partnerships and agreements mainly falls to faculty teaching staff, and in the VET sector the reverse is true: it is not a teaching role but an administrative/middle management role.

Respondents were asked whether they had a method of coordinating the way articulation is managed. Of the HE respondents, 70% answered there was no method of co-ordinating articulation. Of the 30% of HE respondents who said there *was* a method of co-ordinating articulation, 20% said co-ordination was ad hoc and poorly structured. Of the TAFE respondents, 73% responded that there was a method of co-ordination and this was usually the Product Manager or Director of Education and Training for the institute, but could also include TAFE Queensland (as a system through the Lead Institute model). The VET private provider respondents were fairly evenly divided on the question and, similarly to the other providers, where there *was* co-ordination the process reported varied from national co-ordination to 'ad hoc'.

In terms of the administrative implementation of agreements such as enrolments and fees, most universities experience complexity as processes do not currently allow for credit transfer on a precedent database or automated basis which can be accessed at the point of enrolment. One respondent commented:

We are trying to centralise some of the roles into Student Administration as many of the processes are done in the faculties and are done differently between faculties. We are looking at the transfer of some resources into Student Administration. The faculties are reluctant to give it up so the process is a bit difficult at the moment.

Some questions were asked about their institution's primary and secondary motivations for being involved in a partnership agreement. On the whole, all respondents' primary motivation can be summarised as the need to meet the demand for pathways between VET and HE.

Secondary motivations cited include the following:

- Assist students from low SES groups;
- VET students are good quality students with industry experience who tend to have good retention rates;
- Increase profile/strengthen our position in the market place/enhance our reputation;
- Allow us to branch into disciplines we can't offer ourselves;
- More efficient use of resources and facilities;
- To value-add to our qualification; and
- Professional development, staff mobility and research opportunities.

Following PhillipsKPA (2006c) on the importance of attitude and culture in successful articulation and credit transfer, respondents were asked to indicate aspects of the culture of their organisation that were either for or against partnership development. The first question was about the respondent's own organisational culture. HE responses indicated that a positive aspect of their culture in partnership development was simply recognising and valuing the fact that VET qualifications are about industry outcomes and HE qualifications are about knowledge. HE culture which was negative to partnership development included:

- Lack of communication/co-ordination about VET agreements across the university which impacts on students, particularly in terms of students getting different information in different places, or not feeling welcomed;
- Perception of too much of a gap between VET and HE; and
- Tradition and dislike of change.

A TAFE positive factor was that 'Most of our staff are uni graduates and so we understand [HE] culture better than they understand ours'. Negative factors included:

- Different fee structures.
- Competency-based versus curriculum-based learning.

VET private providers cited no positive factors but the following negative cultural factors:

- Entrenched beliefs, for example, traditional trade thinking can be an impediment.
- The reputation of other private providers can impact on the relationship with universities and regulatory bodies.

Respondents were also asked about the culture of the HE/VET organisations they deal with, in terms of what works for or against the formation of partnerships. There has been an assumption that HE considers VET qualifications and students not good enough for HE. Findings indicate there is some truth to this attitude, but in fact there is far more willingness to work together for a good outcome for both than was expected. Most difficulties occur in

the implementation of agreements in terms of process: 'Administrative culture is very different and can make it quite difficult to implement these agreements. It is a challenge on both sides depending on which approach you take'. Other illustrative comments are as follows.

- A TAFE: 'The lack of understanding of a training package and the outcomes of a VET qualification, which requires an education process when engaging with each new partner'.
- A VET private provider: 'University engagement philosophies play a big part in ensuring these partnerships develop from the initial conversations. Trust also plays a big part'.
- A university: 'Biggest frustration is some of our TAFE partners being incredibly precious around credit for reverse articulation'.

Respondents were asked about the level of trust they have for articulation partners or potential partners, because where significant differences exist between organisations, trust is an important ingredient in overcoming barriers. The research results indicate that, among respondents, the level of trust was lowest toward VET private providers as a sector.

When asked to indicate their principles for forming successful articulation and credit transfer partnerships, responses from all were very similar and can be summarised as:

- Mutual benefit, both from a commercial and from a teaching and learning perspective;
- Relationship building as a key element;
- Quality assurance – maintaining quality outcomes, ethical practice and integrity, and understanding each other's operations;
- Working collaboratively to achieve successful outcomes that are the best possible outcome for the student, including credit transfer arrangements that are system-wide rather than individual.

With the current climate of change in tertiary education arrangements in mind, as well as findings of the literature review (PhillipsKPA 2006b, 2006c; Wheelahan & Moodie 2009) respondents were asked what the government can do, other than providing additional funding, to assist the formulation of optimum partnerships between the education and training sectors. Most responses concerned the idea that the government should work to make the education sector more nationally consistent and transparent including models, systems, equal treatment of all players (including rural and regional), stated expectations, providing clear guidelines, regulation of quality assurance, resolving the confusion between CBT and merit-based systems and clarifying the issue of graded assessment. One suggestion was that credit transfer should be determined at the stage of developing VET training packages and thereafter applied uniformly by all institutions. Marketing and promotion was also a theme with the suggestion made that there should be one 'tertiary sector' as opposed to VET and HE as separate sectors, and more promotion of the concept of life long and articulated learning at the high school level, rather than a 'choose your career now' model.

Respondents were asked their view of whether the work being done on a common terminology for the new 'tertiary' sector and the review of the AQF will assist in the formation of partnerships between the two sectors. All sectors were highly synchronous in their response to this question, with an overall result of 81% 'yes' and 19% 'no'. This indicates that respondents are optimistic about the implications of the proposed changes for VET-HE partnership development.

Student Transitions

Questions about transition issues were grouped around a selection of themes including:

- issues for articulating VET students compared to other students;
- strategies used by organisations to address transition issues; and
- suggestions for better addressing identified transition issues.

It was claimed by a number of respondents that success in transition depended very much on the student's previous study and circumstances. For example, domestic students were better prepared than international students, who often had significant problems with both the language and scholarship requirements of HE. Another theme which emerged was that the level of preparedness for study had more to do with maturity and being self-directed than the origin of the student, for example:

I think VET students are better than students coming straight from high school. It means they have had an opportunity to experience a learning environment that isn't lock step to the same extent. We actually find that most of our students that come from the VET sector into university on the whole do better than straight from high school students because they've grown up a bit.

Some credit arrangements mean that VET students are exempt from the first year of HE study. The literature review indicated there may be problems with this approach in that students do not receive the necessary academic scaffolding (or base training in academic skills) which all first year university students receive (Watson 2006; Whittington et al. 2009). Respondents were asked what issues were faced by VET students articulating directly into second year university. Approximately half of all respondents stated that adjusting to study at this level straight from VET was the main issue, particularly in academic scholarship requirements and critical thinking. Issues such as adjusting to the amount of work required, or forming social groups and alliances normally formed during first year uni, were considered significant but less of a problem by most respondents. Other transition issues identified by respondents included the following.

- 'Transition shock' due to the fact that 'culturally and administratively the sectors are quite different and can be difficult for students transitioning from one sector to another'.
- English language proficiency issues, which are not only a problem for international students.
- Issues about finances and the cost of HE study.
- The lack of commonality in fees between HE and VET.

The majority of HE respondents cited a diverse array of programs that they are using to address transition issues, including bridging programs, counselling, one on one support, workshops targeted at transitioning students, or help being available only if sought by students. However 30% of HE respondents indicated that they had no transition programs or strategies. Some were monitoring the impact of these programs on student attrition rates, and 50% of respondents said they believed the strategies had improved their attrition rates. 50% of respondents believed they were doing enough to assist students with transition, whilst 30% did not, and 20% did not know. One respondent commented that more dual study programs would help with transition.

Approximately half of TAFE and VET private providers were providing some form of transition program to HE, such as learning support officers, scaffolded study skills or bridging programs, although for the most part these supports were up to the students to access, that is, they were not programmed into study regimes. One commented 'This is probably one of our weakest areas'. Smaller institutions had less transition support programs than larger institutions. Of those who had transition programs, only 18% believed the programs were successful, and this was based on HE or anecdotal feedback. Only 27% of respondents felt they were doing enough to assist with student transition to HE. Overall there seems to be a movement toward more transition programs, but at this stage it is fragmentary, ad hoc and limited in scope.

Respondents were asked what else should be done to address student transition issues. HE responses mainly concerned having VET and HE staff cross over roles for a period, having student ambassadors, and more outreach and introductory programs. TAFE responses included proposals to have their articulating students visit university campuses, developing transition skills programs which are embedded in training programs, and developing transition guides. VET private providers had a number of suggestions similar to TAFE respondents', but the following comment was made.

We would like to be able to have more time to spend with the students on transition, however there are restrictions on the number of hours we can provide to any one qualification. This can impact on the standard of service we are able to provide.

On the whole TAFE, HE and VET private providers believed that it was a joint or shared responsibility to ensure transition support programs were available for students between VET and HE. Some illustrative comments included the following.

I would like to see specific support officers put into both institutions who support these students.

There should be reinforcement of career paths using higher education as a pathway.... Pathways are not really well articulated to students. The Pathways to University booklet helps but not enough people are aware of this publication.

I think each university needs to have an articulation reference group which has VET providers in it. This would then address transition and articulation issues as they arise.

Credit Transfer in General

Respondents were asked whether the credit transfer arrangements they have in place are dependent on content mapping from the VET qualification to the higher education qualification. Most VET and HE respondents replied 'yes' to this question (80% average). This confirms the high value placed on the mapping process by institutions.

Respondents were then asked whether unspecified credit was given in order to avoid content mapping. The underlying assumption to this question was that universities prefer to give

unspecified credit, but this assumption appears to be not supported by responses. All respondents fairly uniformly (80% HE respondents, 73% TAFE, 82% VET private providers) replied 'no' to this question. One HE respondent commented:

I don't think we walk in with a mindset of saying we will give you only unspecified credit. If you can see a student with a diploma has something equivalent then you would be trying to do that. We are not trying to diddle the student.

When asked whether there was potential to increase the level of specified credit to students who have completed a VET qualification, respondents were positive (80.3% average). From the HE respondents' perspective, to do so would require a greater knowledge and possible collaboration with regard to delivery at the VET level. A comment was:

The best way to move credit transfer forward is to develop [a] good precedent which could be used in future negotiations. This would rely on a centralised system to manage this. To do this successfully you would need to get over the [lack of] trust issues.

For VET institutes, a higher level of engagement and recognition by HE was a factor, but respondents also acknowledged the requirement for more guidance in training packages at a national level as well as the need for ongoing monitoring of changes in both programs by the two stakeholder groups. A comment from a VET private provider indicated that this could be achieved by both sectors looking at reducing the amount of flexibility in the VET qualification, thereby allowing more equivalence once it is mapped to the HE qualification.

Conclusions

Both HE and VET providers in Queensland are clearly willing in principle to embrace articulation and credit transfer and to find ways to implement seamless pathways for students, including innovative approaches. Most already have some cross-sectoral partnership agreements in place. The barriers to seamless articulation and credit transfer however remain considerable and include the following.

- the faculty-driven 'silo' structure of universities, with concomitant individualised rather than centralised or precedent-based credit transfer mechanisms on the whole;
- the employment focus of VET training packages which are not designed to facilitate credit transfer to HE;
- lack of planning/allowance by senior management for the considerable time and cost involved in developing new articulation and credit transfer arrangements;
- lack of dedicated articulation and credit transfer roles or facilitation/coordination units in most Queensland tertiary institutions, particularly in HE where this work falls mostly on the shoulders of teaching staff who have little incentive other than goodwill to undertake it;

- inertia and conservative organisational culture which is antithetical to change even when the leadership promotes it;
- paucity of industry representation in articulation arrangements or agreements;
- administrative arrangements which make innovative approaches such as concurrent enrolment in HE and VET almost impossible in many institutions;
- differences in fee structures between the sectors; and
- lack of co-ordinated, specific and purposive transition strategies to assist VET students to comfortably make the transition to the HE environment.

As a result of these findings, the IACT Project plans in 2010 to undertake a range of action research activities including case studies, student surveys, the development of pilot programs, documentation of models and processes, and development of guideline resources. Further information is available on the IACT website at www.usq.edu.au/iactproject including the full research report, questions used, literature review, as well as information about the project as a whole and planned activities.

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