

**AVETRA Conference 2011**

**Pedagogical practices across the  
Tertiary sector: summarising the  
literature on the pedagogical support  
for students moving from VET into  
Universities**

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# Introduction

This paper summaries issues and identifies gaps that have arisen from the initial review of literature associated with the *'Transition from VET to University: What are the pedagogical issues?'* research project.

This study explores the pedagogical practices encountered by vocational education and training (VET) graduates making the transition into university programs. The research is looking to provide an evidence base for the development of strategies that will enhance the student's experience of cross-sectoral transition.

The aims of this project are in line with the recommendations of the Bradley Review and subsequent moves by Australian Universities to attract VET graduates into undergraduate university programs.

Amongst the gaps identified are, the need for direct findings devised from speaking with VET students going into Higher education; evaluating the adaptability of VET students transitioning to the pedagogical practices utilized in higher education; and exploring whether the use of authentic learning tasks and assessment might be appropriate within first year higher education programs.

# The current context: the tertiary sector

Three of the solutions identified by the Bradley Review panel have a direct bearing on student transitions from VET to university.

These are:

- The number of young Australians with a higher education qualification must be markedly increased.
- Groups currently under-represented in the system must significantly contribute to this growth.
- A more flexible tertiary education and training system is critical

# Education Review: 28<sup>th</sup> April 2011

- **Higher education on the up**
- [28 April, 2011](#) | [Send this story to a friend](#)
- **Government figures show student enrolments at universities grew by 10 per cent in two years**
- An estimated 50,000 additional undergraduate students enrolled at Australian universities in the last two years, new figures released by government show.
- Minister for Tertiary Education, Senator Chris Evans, said the data showed more students than ever before had the opportunity of a university education as a result of the government's reforms in higher education.
- "In 2011, more than 480,000 undergraduate places are being funded – an increase of 10 per cent since 2009. Regional universities taken together also have 10 per cent more student places than in 2009," Evans said in a statement on Saturday.
- As a result of this growth, more than 200,000 students are estimated to have commenced undergraduate studies in public universities this year.
- "This is great news for our economy. It means that more Australians will have the chance to gain the qualifications they need to access the high skilled jobs of the future," Evans said.
- "Skills Australia has forecast that by 2025 a third of all jobs will require a minimum of a bachelor's degree qualification. To meet that demand for highly skilled workers, Labor is ensuring everyone who is eligible can access a place at Australian universities, he said.
- Evans said that the move to a demand-driven system for domestic undergraduate student places, to be implemented from 2012, would allow universities to enjoy further growth.
- "Increases in university enrolments will make a major contribution to the Government's national target that by 2025, 40 per cent of all 25 to 34-year-olds will hold a qualification at bachelor's degree level or above. In 2010, 34.2 per cent of this age group held such qualifications.
- "To reach the target, universities will need to reach out to a broader range of prospective students. In this next generation of students, there will be many people who will be the first in their family to have the opportunities that a university education can offer," he said.

## The current context: the tertiary sector

Exploring some of the differences between the VET and HE sector . .

The VET sector is . . .

- Competency-based Training Packages (Smith and Blake, 2009) focused on workplace-specific outcomes and standards (Wheelahan, 2008). Industry is heavily involved in the development of training packages that formally specify national standards and qualifications for performing effectively in the workplace (Down 2003; ANTA, 2004; Down 2006). The industry partners and representatives identify desired outcomes but they do not prescribe the learning, teaching and assessment processes to achieve those outcomes (Down 2003 & 2007);
- an emphasis on 'know how' (Gabb and Glaisher, 2006) and tacit knowledge (TAFE and Community Education, Policy and Support Unit, 2004);
- a history of adaptation and flexibility (Rushbrook, 1997);
- a pedagogy which is learner-focused, collaborative and constructivist (Brennan-Kemmis et al, 2009).
- Tensions exist over its multiple roles and between its multiple stakeholders (Sutcliffe 2008; Brennan-Kemmis et al, 2009)

## The current context: the tertiary sector

Exploring some of the differences between the VET and HE sector .

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The role of the HE sector is . . .

- to pursue truth and inform political decision-making to achieve social ends (Brubacher, 1982);
- to pursue knowledge and further the pursuit of knowledge through development of future graduates (Hamlyn, 1996);
- to ask questions of our place in the world; to develop and critique frameworks to understand our place in the world; and to equip us with skills and approaches to deal with the super-complexity of the world (Barnett, 2004).

# VET pedagogy: a selection of ideas and themes from the literature

VET pedagogy is . . .

- historically associated with the teaching and learning of a trade
  - with teachers, demonstrating, modelling and observing; and
  - with learners, observing, imitating and undertaking degrees of guided practice.
- considered practical
  - Reflecting authentic work practices
  - Competency-based
- Different when the teaching and learning is . . .
  - leading to qualifications above and below AQF level 4,
    - at level 2 & 3 to what it is at level 6?
  - on or off-the job

# VET pedagogy: a selection of ideas and themes from the literature

VET pedagogy is . . .

- student-centred
- aimed at the learning of a job and therefore associated with adult learning;
- multi-contextual . . . .

# VET pedagogy is . . . continuing to develop

. . . .

Figgis (2009) six trends in innovative VET practice

- Use of authentic learning tasks,
- the encouragement of peer learning,
- the application of e-learning,
- utilisation of workplace settings,
- personalising learning experiences and programs, and devolving the support and responsibility for teaching and learning so that it was closer to the influence of the practitioner

Teachers most likely to be looking to improve and change . .

- Tended to be reflective; respectful of learners; and networked with local enterprises and other practitioners

# Pedagogies in Higher Education (HE)

- Barnett (1997) critiques the idea that universities are for critical thinking alone and instead extends HE's role, arguing that universities are for developing 'critical being'. This he describes as being about students continuing *“to reflect critically on knowledge but also developing their powers of critical self reflection and critical action”*, (Brockbank and McGill 1999: 50). With this fostering of criticality come expectations about autonomy and self-direction. In turn this gives rise to a form of student-centredness that interestingly is somewhat different to that which occurs within the VET sector.

# Pedagogies in Higher Education (HE)

- Entwistle (2009) argues that it has now become generally accepted that each subject area or discipline has its own 'inner logic'. This logic is based on a structuring of knowledge and key ideas and concepts. Pedagogy in a specific discipline is guided by this inner logic.
- The notion of the inner logic of a subject (Entwistle, Nisbet and Bromage 2006) is related to the notion of signature pedagogies of the professions that was developed by Shulman (2005). Teaching and learning within a discipline or profession usually reflects the key practices of that discipline or profession.
- Becher and Trowler (2001) suggest that different disciplinary knowledge can be clustered or arranged according to the classification of what constitutes academic knowledge in a discipline.
- Meyer and Land (2005) have argued that each discipline or area of study has a number of threshold concepts. These are the key ideas, concepts or processes in a discipline that must be understood by learners in those fields. They argue that students need to grasp these threshold concepts so that they can enter and study in that field.

# Pedagogies in Higher Education (HE)

- Learning within HE is based on a diversity of theories.
- Differentiation between surface and deep learning and the advocacy for deep learning is very common (Marton and Saljo 1976).
- Similarly the teaching in HE covers a range of diverse practices (Fry et al 2009; Biggs and Tang 2007). At one end of the continuum lectures still get 'delivered' to huge classes of up to 300 students on a regular basis. While at the other end of the continuum are approaches that utilise discovery methods such as problem-based and project-based learning. But even each of these contrasting arrangements harbors a range of approaches. Methods of teaching and learning using more flexible approaches are also common as are online and web-based approaches to teaching and learning.

# Pedagogies in Higher Education (HE)

- Regardless of the discipline studies, most universities now acknowledge that many learners experience difficulties in making the jump to the kinds of autonomy, self direction and expectations about disciplinary specific knowledge in higher education and have put effort into making these more explicit to students, particularly in the early and initial sections of the learning programs. Adjustment to the expectations placed on learners in HE is not always straightforward and accordingly, there is a significant literature examining this transition to university which has evolved and is broadly referred to as the 'first year experience'

# The first year university experience

- the first year experience for new entrants has a significant impact upon whether the student stays on (Wilcox et al, 2005; Krause et al, 2005) and their subsequent academic success or failure (Peat et al, 2001).
- Young (2007) argues that in HE, students are expected to develop as self-directed researchers, able to independently carry out research and critically evaluate a range of material as well as organising themselves, directing and managing their own learning.
- Lack of awareness of the standards they are expected to perform at can pose a major challenge to students' ability to act autonomously. Expectations of students are often implicit rather than explicit (Pearce et al, 2000): standards, skills and disciplinary 'rules' such as referencing styles often remain hidden from students, embedded in tacit disciplinary norms.

# ***First year experience for students transitioning from VET***

Differences around forms of . . .

- self-direction
- curriculum
- Knowledge
- Learning outcomes

# ***First year experience for students transitioning from VET***

- Cram and Watson (2008) found that highly articulated pathways, characterised by joint planning of curriculum; joint teaching activities; and joint student projects resulted in most effective transition.
- Whilst formal transition arrangements imply a straightforward, linear path for students from VET to university, the reality as experienced and understood by learners themselves may be very different.
- Research conducted by Harris et al (2006) found that in contrast to the claim of seamless linearity many learners actually perceived their educational experiences to be like zigzags, lurches and stepping stones. Barriers to seamless transition included lack of information or inaccurate information and complex personal circumstances

# ***Transitioning from VET to HE***

- Christie (2010) used the example of the VET Diploma in Children's Services to demonstrate the variation in recognition for credit into a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education that exists between four different universities. At 'University A', a student coming in with this VET Diploma receives 80 credit points towards a total of 240 that are needed for this Bachelors degree. This is credit for one third of the degree program. At 'University B', a student receives 48 credit points towards the 192 needed for the degree. This is credit for one quarter of the degree program. At 'University C' the student articulating with the VET Diploma receives credit for 9 credit points out of a 90 required for the degree. This represents one tenth of the degree program. At 'University D' a student with the Diploma and 12 months work experience gains direct entry into the third year of the degree. This is equivalent to receiving credit for two thirds of the degree program. These articulation arrangements represent credit for the same VET Diploma qualification into degree programs which have the same title and which should by all accounts be considered comparable.

# Identifying some gaps in the evidence base

The literature on transition into HE is derived from studies on either the transition of secondary students into HE or the general experiences of first year students, without identification of their educational background therefore there is a need to confirm whether they apply equally for students transitioning from VET to HE.

Some commentators suggest that learning through a competency based approach results in gaps in student understanding and knowledge (see Wheelahan, 2008). This finding will need to be explored further and may be important where credit transfer occurs across the two systems.

A key gap in this literature is the voice of the students. Many of the gaps and issues identified could be clarified if we knew, for example, more about transitioning students':

- actual experience of learning in VET and HE;
- motivation, confidence, expectations and readiness for study in HE;
- use of supports such as peer and/or disciplinary groups;
- perceptions of access to lecturers;
- perceptions of the clarity of standards and course expectations;
- perception of special issues for older learners.

A need to explore the evidence for different . . . .

- forms of 'self-direction' arising between VET and HE and whether such differences are relevant for Diploma, Advanced Diploma and Degree level programs.
- in the kinds and levels of support students perceive between the two sectors – and whether they are accessed
- in assessment, particularly the use of authentic assessment.

# Conclusion

- This paper summarises the literature review and begins to identify some of the issues and gaps in the existing evidence base.
- Much of the existing research is derived from studies of students transitioning from secondary schools into HE and therefore should be read as indicative and in need of further exploration with VET students.
- Missing from much of the research is the data from VET students.
- The review confirmed that teaching, learning, program design, and assessment practices are significantly different between VET and HE programs.
- Specific to VET is the use of the competency-based approach to training and its strong and direct connection to industry. Accordingly, the teaching, learning and assessment practices often utilise authentic tasks and authentic assessment.
- Learning in HE is regarded as knowledge based and teaching is commonly provided through lectures, with follow up tutorial based discussions.
- HE study is believed to require analysis, autonomy and self-direction, and learning often assessed through examinations and essay writing based on personal research and assignments.
- Clearly it would be a significant breakthrough to build on the strengths of the two different systems.