

Strategies for promoting an integrated tertiary education sector

Brian Knight

Principal Research Consultant

National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd

Overview

- Integration, or pathways & connections?
- An integrated tertiary sector: how might it look?
- Strategy element 1: funding & governance arrangements
- Strategy element 2: institutional arrangements
- Strategy element 3: learning programs
- Strategy element 4: other things
- Rationale for the strategy
- Concluding comments.

An integrated tertiary sector: how might it look?

- VET & HEEd must continue to service existing markets
- Common funding, governance, institutional arrangements etc.
- More institutions servicing a wide range of qualification levels
- More programs designed with articulation options built in
- More developed & accessible mutual recognition options
- More apprenticeships & traineeships at higher levels
- Better connections with upper secondary schooling
- Arrangements that allow general education to continue
- Teachers delivering learning programs in both sectors
- More efficient administrative arrangements, including a unique student identifier (as foreshadowed by COAG)
- Sub-degree programs held in higher regard (as in Switzerland).

Strategy element 1: funding & governance

Funding & governance arrangements provide powerful levers for achieving greater integration. Options include:

- common funding frameworks across both sectors
- a funding framework that recognises ‘connectedness’
- research funding that can apply in both sectors
- common accountability arrangements
- the same or equivalent quality standards in both sectors
- the same or equivalent quality assurance systems
- common data standards & collections wherever possible
- removing the need for separate VET & HEd reporting by dual-sector institutions.

Strategy element 2: institutional arrangements

Existing institutional arrangements operate against a more integrated tertiary sector. Alternative approaches:

- replace the existing management model involving DEEWR (HEd) & state training authorities (VET)
- the VET/HEd divide in dual sector institutions needs to be eliminated (in some it is a brick wall)
- in regional areas particularly, benefits may flow from fully merging VET & HEd institutions
- providers in the private HEd & VET sectors are also subject to different arrangements – avoid this
- have a single agency servicing the statistical & research information needs of the tertiary education sector.

Strategy element 3: learning programs

Existing arrangements for developing learning programs do not foster integration. How can this be addressed?

- In the design stage, training package developers or RTOs could explore HEd connection possibilities for VET qualifications.
- To facilitate ‘reverse flows’, VET RTOs could do more to recognise subjects completed in HEd.
- Develop learning program measures that facilitate common funding & accountability models.
- Where appropriate, extend connections to other sectors -schooling, adult & community education (as in Finland).
- Would greater uniformity of subjects in HEd help? (self-accreditation tends to operate against this).

Strategy element 4: other things

In a number of areas alternatives to existing arrangements could foster greater integration:

- Teachers delivering learning programs in both HEd & VET, & teaching workforce strategies that span both
- Single enterprise agreements for dual sector institutions (e.g. Charles Darwin University)
- More local cooperation between HEd & VET on pathways & articulation arrangements
- More cooperation between VET & HEd in meeting the needs of specific industries
- Broadening the scope of operation of bodies such as industry skills councils (their current focus is VET).

Rationale 1

1. Neither VET nor HEd is well-defined ('clear as mud'):
 - many HEd programs use a practical or competency-based approach to learning
 - many VET programs have a substantial theoretical part, particularly at diploma or advanced diploma level
 - a number of providers already operate in both sectors (the so-called 'dual-sector' institutions)
 - most universities are also VET registered training organisations (RTOs) & deliver diplomas etc.
 - a few VET programs have been designed with articulation to HEd in mind & tend to work well, but ...
 - the pathways approach more generally requires a lot of effort & is costly.

Rationale 2

2. The weak connections between VET & HEd are as much structural as theoretical & stem from:
- different funding & accountability arrangements
 - ownership & responsibility for institutions & their operations
 - government policy & administrative arrangements
 - the fact that the two sectors service different, though overlapping, markets
 - the greater cognitive demands (i.e. level) of most HEd programs relative to VET (competency-based training is not the issue)
 - different culture, traditions & practices arising from these factors.

Course & subject consistency: how important?

- Better VET/HEd mutual recognition arrangements require some consistency in level, content & outputs.
- VET has invested heavily in developing nationally consistent qualifications & units of competency;
- however, variation does occur in response to local factors (e.g. community care courses in NSW cf. NT).
- HEd is self-accrediting & variation can occur (e.g. in programs tailored to a given industry, creative arts ...).
- NCVER suggests that consistency is desirable in generic subjects (e.g. maths 1, economics 1) & very specific areas (e.g. 19th century European philosophy) but not across the board.

Concluding comments

- Achieving a more integrated tertiary education sector will be neither quick nor easy, & needs political will
- There are many entrenched interests in the existing arrangements that will be slow to change
- Allowing the ‘tail to wag the dog’, particularly via funding & accountability arrangements, will have most impact
- The development of a national VET system over the last two decades shows that significant change is possible
- Any new arrangements need to ensure that access & equity & lower-level VET programs continue
- A more integrated tertiary education system may facilitate much-needed reforms to apprenticeships & traineeships.