

VET in higher education: rethought pathways, pedagogy or pragmatism?

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Abstract

This paper reports on the preliminary findings from a project funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research to investigate the provision of vocational education and training by higher education institutions. The project involved a review of the literature, an analysis of the sketchy statistics available on enrolments in Australian mixed sector tertiary institutions and interviews with 61 people. The study found that higher education institutions offer vocational education for a variety of reasons: as a historical legacy, as a result of a merger or acquisition, to broaden the institution's role and source of students, and as a part of vertical integration – incorporating the sources of baccalaureate students such as preparatory colleges and senior secondary colleges as well as vocational education colleges. The study also found that while sectoral designation was very important for TAFE institutes offering higher education programs, it was of far less importance to mainly higher education institutions offering vocational programs. Of far greater importance for public and private providers of vocational education were the different funding arrangements from governments. The findings from the study seem to indicate that Australian mixed sector institutes of tertiary education are developing partly for pragmatic reasons and partly to improve student pathways from vocational to higher education and to desirable occupations. Distinctions in pedagogy develop from differences in curriculum, field, industry orientation and teachers' response to students, which seem to be indirectly related to sector.

Introduction

This paper will report on a study, funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, which investigated mixed-sector provision in single-sector universities that offer VET programs, and in private providers that are registered to deliver both higher education and vocational education and training (VET) programs. Mixed-sector institutions are emerging as an important new type of institution in tertiary education in Australia, yet they are relatively under-researched. This gap needs to be addressed because they are becoming increasingly important and they are likely to grow as a consequence of broader social and economic pressures on the sectoral divide, but also as a consequence of government policies designed to develop tertiary education markets and to diversify institutional types. They are also likely to grow as a response to government education participation targets. Moreover, the basis for the growth of mixed-sector institutions is already in place. Karmel (2009) reports that most universities are registered to offer VET programs, 12 of Australia's 59 TAFEs offer higher education (Moodie, 2010) and Watson (2000) reports that most private HE providers offer qualifications from both sectors. The growth of mixed sector institutions has led Karmel and Nguyen (2003: 2) to argue that 'the level of the award defines the sectors rather than the provider.' This research thus attempts to fill a gap in the literature in Australia. It complements the NCVET funded Higher

Education (HE) in TAFE project that was conducted in 2008/2009 (Wheelahan, Moodie, Billet and Kelly, 2009), which was the first of its kind in Australia. There has been no research that explores VET in single-sector universities, and mixed-sector provision was not the focus Watson's (2000) research on private HE providers.

Most research in Australia reflects existing sectoral, institutional and policy frameworks. Until recently, the focus of government tertiary education policy has been on constructing institutional and administrative arrangements that maintain sectoral differentiation of qualifications and institutions, while supporting student pathways between the VET and HE sectors. The different arrangements between the sectors have reflected this approach, which includes partnerships between single sector institutions and co-located university and TAFE campuses (and sometimes a secondary school or adult and community education campus). The dual-sector universities have integrated their administration and student support despite different external sectoral requirements, and in recent years they have successfully emphasised their dual-sector character and increased the percentage of VET students admitted to their higher education programs (Wheelahan 2009). Australian and state governments have also sought to support student pathways based on sectorally differentiated institutions and programs, such as the MCEETYA credit transfer principles, the AQF RPL principles, the Victorian Government Credit Matrix, and various arrangements at the state level between universities and TAFEs (PhillipsKPA 2006).

The development and operation of dual-sector universities with substantial enrolments in both vocational and higher education, a distinctively Australian development, has been analysed by Wheelahan (2000), Moodie (2009) and by several authors in Garrod and Macfarlane (2009). In the United Kingdom the emergence of higher education in colleges of further education was studied in depth in the Further Higher project (University of Sheffield 2010) led by Parry and is the subject of several papers (Parry and Thompson 2002; Bathmaker et al. 2008; Parry 2009) that discussed mixed-sector development. The authors have not yet found any previous work that examines vocational education offered by mostly higher education institutions. The study reported in this paper extends the analysis of mixed-sector institutions by examining private providers that offer VET and higher education, and universities that offer VET studies. The project involved a review of the literature, an analysis of the sketchy statistics available on enrolments in Australian mixed sector tertiary institutions and interviews with 61 people.

Statistics on enrolments in mixed sector institutions

We found 96 institutions which are accredited to offer both vocational and higher education programs. Of these, 22 are self accrediting institutions, including the 5 dual sector universities. There are 73 other tertiary education institutions accredited to offer both vocational and higher education including 12 TAFE institutes.

Self accrediting higher education institutions

There are 5 dual sector universities with substantial load in both vocational and higher education. The Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education is also a dual sector self accrediting tertiary education institution. The other 16 universities with a registered training organisation are: Australian Catholic University, Charles

Sturt University, Curtin University of Technology, Deakin University, Edith Cowan University, Griffith University, La Trobe University, Monash University, University of Adelaide, University of Canberra, University of New England, University of Notre Dame Australia, University of Queensland, University of Tasmania, University of Western Sydney and University of Wollongong.

The current data sharing protocols for vocational education and training do not allow publishing of enrolments, full year training equivalents, hours of delivery or qualification completions of publicly funded vocational education for each registered training organisation. Neither do governments collect data on enrolments in privately funded vocational education, even though much is subsidised by the Australian government. It is therefore not possible to say how substantial universities' vocational education may be. However, the team found the number of vocational education programs each university has accredited to give a partial indication of the size of their vocational education effort. It seems likely that many universities with a registered training organisation offer small amounts of vocational education, probably less than 5% of their total student load.

Other mixed sector institutions

There are 73 other tertiary education institutions accredited to offer both vocational and higher education including 12 TAFE institutes. NSW TAFE has been registered as one higher education provider, which incorporates all 10 institutes. Several institutions have accredited higher education programs without apparently enrolling any students in them so the colleges which are accredited to offer both vocational and higher education probably overstates the number of cross sectoral colleges. Conversely, it is likely that at least some institutions enrol students in accredited higher education programs without reporting those enrolments to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) because they find reporting requirements onerous and without any direct contribution to their immediate interests. However, they are now required to report their higher education enrolments so we should expect greater compliance in the future. We examined colleges that are both registered training organisations and report higher education enrolments to DEEWR. This probably understates the number of colleges offering higher education but is likely to reflect more accurately the colleges which have substantial higher education enrolments and thus are more likely to be mixed sector institutions.

Seven of the institutions examined have most of their higher education load in the creative arts. Most creative arts colleges have small higher education student load, and together they are 20% of the higher education load of cross sectoral colleges. Only 2 colleges have most of their higher education load in health, but the Australian College of Natural Medicine which has changed its name to Endeavour College of Natural Health is relatively big, with 9% of cross sectoral college higher education load. The biggest group of cross sectoral colleges consists of 12 colleges that have most of their higher education student load in management and commerce, which is half of total load reported by the cross sectoral institutions examined. There are 6 religious colleges, most of them small, which have 8% of total load. All of the 5 TAFE institutes which reported higher education load are in Victoria, which was 6% of the total, and primarily in the creative arts or management and commerce.

Interview data collection

This research was designed to provide preliminary insights into mixed-sector provision in universities and private providers. This was done to keep the project within manageable bounds. The project's scope and purpose is therefore designed to identify issues as the basis for further research. Interviews were used to gain insights into VET in universities and mixed-sector provision in private providers.

The project team interviewed senior managers, program heads, teachers and students at 2 public universities which are registered training organisations, 2 public universities which have a registered training organisation as a wholly owned subsidiary, 2 private health colleges, a private religious college, a private creative arts college, and a private hospitality college. Interviews were also held with one private conglomerate, a coordinating body, 3 government accrediting bodies and a leading researcher in the private sector. A total of 61 interviews was conducted for the study. All interviews were written up using a pre-prepared template for consistency and ease of analysis and were analysed thematically with the aid of NVivo software.

Discussion of findings

This section will present some of the preliminary findings from the study. These are presented under the groupings of the key stakeholders interviewed from the different institutions. This is done to present some of the narratives collected in the interviews conducted that inform our preliminary findings.

Senior managers

The registered training organisation at one university was on a campus that specialised in one industry and the campus' overwhelming identification was with that industry. The university's vocational education was funded from contracts and tuition fees and the main determination of its character was not its sectoral designation but from obtaining its income from private sources. At one university the senior manager had difficulty explaining the requirements of training packages and the Australian quality training framework to their dean and to faculty and university committees. It also seemed that faculty and university curriculum committees prevented the unit from offering lower level vocational programs that would provide good pathways to the higher level vocational programs offered by the university. Faculty and university curriculum committees apparently required the unit to include in vocational programs subjects that were not in the training package and were of only indirect relevance to the vocational program.

One university reported a high level policy commitment to student pathways as the main reason for offering vocational education, yet it appeared that strong student pathways had not yet been developed. Two universities were registered as registered training organisations, while the other two were part of a separate organisational unit, which in one university was its commercialisation company. In these universities, too, the vocational unit's character was determined not so much by its sectoral designation but by its financial status as a private unit within a publicly funded university. All universities' managers reported what they believed were heavy and onerous

requirements for approving vocational programs and meeting the requirements of the Australian quality training framework. University managers may find these requirements irksome because as self accrediting higher education institutions they are not required to gain external accreditation of their higher education programs.

No private college participating in the project identified mainly as a vocational or as a higher education provider. Most colleges specialised in one industry, identified overwhelmingly with that industry and offered the range of programs to prepare graduates for specific roles within that industry. One private college participating in the project was religious and it saw its role as promoting its religion and supporting affiliated religious organisations rather than as mainly a vocational or higher education institution. The private colleges which offered programs in several fields identified with the character and distinctive approach that the college developed for itself which was not related to the sectoral designation of its programs. For all private colleges their financial position as a private college was far more important than the sector of most of their programs. One of the main issues for senior managers of private colleges, as it was for the coordinator of the university campus which specialised in one industry, was governments' different funding of public and private providers, which was said to be unfair to private providers.

Two of the three senior managers of government accrediting bodies broadly supported the division of tertiary education into sectors as promoting different institutions to serve different needs in society. The other focused on the policy constraints that prevented the sectors from working together as effectively as they might. One hoped that universities' offering vocational education would not lessen their emphasis on theoretical programs based on research. They considered higher education institutions good providers of vocational education likely to provide good teaching and facilities and maintain appropriate standards although less closely involved with employers. One head of a state vocational accrediting body suspected that university providers of vocational education may base their vocational programs more on the curriculum familiar in higher education than on workplace competencies, but considered this acceptable in view of the educational quality of its programs, its attractiveness to students and its apparent support by employers.

Program heads

The heads of vocational units and programs interviewed in universities were responsible for winning training contracts, attracting students, engaging and scheduling teachers and other staff, ensuring that programs met regulatory and other quality assurance requirements and managing their programs and units. Their biggest concern was maintaining the financial viability of their programs and units and so their biggest issue was governments' different financial treatment of public and private providers of vocational education. Program heads commented on the anomaly of a private vocational education unit within a public university, which complicated their job. Some university vocational education program heads also commented on the relations between vocational and higher education in their university, believing that vocational education is not valued as highly in their institution. Neither is vocational education well understood within their university, making program approval, staffing arrangements, class timetabling and in some cases students' work experience more difficult to arrange than for higher education students. Programs

heads did not report that vocational programs were compromised by being in a university, but that they were more difficult to organise. It seemed that program heads had to adapt the university's academic calendar, student administration and other systems that were established to serve only higher education to incorporate the needs of vocational education. However, in one university's registered training organisation, vocational students were not enrolled on the university's computerised administration system and enrolment and other student information was handled in paper form, creating many frustrations. In the higher education in TAFE project we reported that where an institution had only a tiny proportion of load in one sector with the majority of its load in the major sector, the institution lacked the institutionalised frameworks to support the reporting and accountability requirements of the smaller sector. This finding was reinforced in this project.

Most of the heads of vocational programs interviewed in private colleges were responsible for supervising teachers, ensuring that training packages were delivered properly, that assessment was conducted appropriately and that the program met the audit requirements of the Australian quality training framework. While they were aware of the need for their program and unit to be financially viable, this was within a college that had marketing, student recruitment and staffing systems that shared responsibility for maintaining the program's viability. In addition some of the bigger colleges had one middle manager who was responsible for the accreditation and credit transfer and pathways agreements for all their programs, and perhaps another who was responsible for ensuring that all programs met regulatory requirements. Again, this spread the responsibility for ensuring that programs met regulatory requirements. Program heads in private colleges emphasised the distinctive character of their college and said this gave its programs a distinctive quality. Many program heads, teachers and students in private colleges also claimed that the private nature of the provision meant that the colleges were more responsive to students' needs and cared more about students' educational and personal welfare.

Teachers

Most of the vocational teachers interviewed at universities were employed casually or on annual contracts. They had extensive industry experience, often as a sole contractor or as an independent trainer. Some maintained a consultancy practice concurrently with their casual employment with the university. The teachers interviewed were happy to teach in a program that they believed was of high quality in an institution that had good resources and standing. They perceived some lower esteem within their university than their colleagues teaching higher education programs. One teacher was qualified to teach in higher as well as vocational education but taught in the vocational program because they couldn't meet the research expectations of a higher education academic. One teacher taught vocational subjects that were incorporated within a higher education program and found this very rewarding because the higher education students valued highly the practical orientation of the vocational subject they taught. Another teacher taught a higher education subject in a higher education program and vocational subjects within a vocational program. This teacher perceived substantial differences between vocational and higher education curriculum and pedagogy and believed that these were appropriate in view of the different aims of the programs and the different backgrounds and interests of the students. Vocational teachers in universities reported

adequate staff support and development opportunities, but didn't always have the time or inclination to take much advantage of these.

Most vocational teachers interviewed at private colleges were employed casually or on contracts of 1 year or longer, although one private college had recently made a concerted effort to shift as much staff load as possible to continuing forms of employment (not coincidentally, the senior manager at this institution had recently moved into that position from a university). They had extensive industry experience and maintained close links with their industry in attending industry meetings, organising placements for their students and helping their graduates get jobs. Most teachers identified strongly with their occupation and with their college. They were happy with the organisation of their program, the college's facilities and the resources available to their program. Most teachers taught only in their program and had little interaction with higher education programs offered by their college. Their pedagogy was shaped by the industry, training package, field, and by the college's ethos. Teachers in private colleges seemed to have high teaching loads. While many were aware of opportunities for support and development, some provided by their college, they would have had to take the initiative and find the funding and time for pursuing these opportunities which most felt they couldn't manage within their teaching load and other commitments.

Students

Vocational students interviewed at universities identified strongly with the industry they were preparing to enter and with their university or campus. They identified as 'business' or 'university' students rather than as vocational education students. Out of formal class, vocational students interacted most with other students in their class and with their teachers and most interacted only incidentally with students of other programs. Vocational students who knew higher education students said they did not think of them as different types of students. Most vocational students were broadly aware of higher education programs offered by their university and were vaguely aware of opportunities to transfer or progress to those programs. Some students were enrolled in a vocational program that had a strong pathway to a cognate higher education program and these students were aware of the opportunity to progress to the higher education program. While that prospect seemed remote for first-year students, students closer to completion of their program were very aware of pathway opportunities.

One student enrolled in a vocational program offered by a university said that they were asked by their fellow students to report to the research team their dissatisfaction with their program. The student reported that the timetable was changed frequently, often at short notice. Teachers didn't turn up at scheduled times. Some classes covered material that had been covered previously. Other subjects or perhaps classes seemed irrelevant to the vocational program. Moreover, the student complained that their program was disorganised. However, the student said that teaching facilities and resources were excellent and that most of their teachers were very good.

Vocational students interviewed at private colleges also identified strongly with their industry and college. They had a clear idea of the occupation they were preparing for and many identified with that occupation. They were more aware of opportunities to

progress within their occupation than with opportunities to progress educationally. All students interviewed believed that their college was of high quality and that their program was giving them a very good preparation for their industry. They identified strongly with their vocation. They particularly valued their program's links with and relevance to industry. Most students expressed favourably their college's distinctive approach.

There were, however, some indications that students glossed over whether they were studying a VET or higher education program, or whether they were studying in a private institution or a 'university' when explaining their studies to others. This may reflect their very strong identification with the industry they were preparing to enter, but it could also indicate some uncertainty about their identities as students. In the HE in TAFE project students' identities were strongly shaped by their sectoral designation; they were *higher education* students. In this project, only one student unambiguously said they told people they were studying at XXX institution first, and then named their qualification. Others named their qualification or their intended occupation or said they were going to university or explained the activities they were engaged in. One student at a private institution said "I refer to the content rather than where I am studying". This could reflect some concerns with the status of their sector or their institution, particularly when compared to universities.

Conclusions

While the project has not yet been completed some interim conclusions emerge from the data collected.

Reasons for offering vocational education

Australian universities with a registered training organisation offer vocational education for a variety of reasons. Some, such as the University of Adelaide, offer vocational education programs as a legacy of the time when most universities offered sub-graduate diplomas and some offered sub-graduate certificates. Others such as the University of Queensland offer vocational education programs as a result of their amalgamation with a college, typically an agricultural college. Others such as the Australian Catholic University (St Patrick's campus) offer vocational education as part of their vertical integration – offering programs which supply their baccalaureate programs with students. Some vertically integrated universities route their domestic and international students through the same pathways, while at other universities the pathways are starkly separate for domestic and international students. Yet other universities such as Deakin University offer vocational education mainly to broaden their role. Private colleges offer vocational and higher education to serve their industry and perhaps also to broaden the range of prospective students they may attract. Some mixed sector institutions offer vocational education for pragmatic reasons such as increasing revenue. These different reasons for offering vocational education may affect the organisation of vocational education within the institution but it doesn't seem to affect the way the program is taught nor students' experiences of vocational education in mixed sector tertiary institutions.

Relevance of sectoral designation

The higher education in TAFE project found that sectoral designations were salient for TAFE senior managers, program coordinators, teachers and students. TAFE institutes offered higher education programs to reposition their institute and program coordinators had to balance pressures for maintaining the separateness of higher education with being part of a vocational institute and usually subsidised by vocational programs. Higher education in TAFE teachers and students had an ambivalent or uneasy identification with their sector. In contrast, sectoral designation was far less important for vocational education in universities, while it still seemed to play some role in students' identification of their status as students. The distinction between VET and higher education in private institutions was less important than the public/private distinction. Teaching methods were acknowledged as broadly different for vocational and higher education programs in response to differences in curriculum, field, industry orientation and students' backgrounds and interests that are related to sector.

Status

While issues of status were not as strongly expressed in this research as were in the higher education in TAFE project, there were still a number of teachers who commented directly about status. Some of the VET teachers distinguished between themselves and the 'degree people'. Given that ten of the 17 teachers interviewed were teaching both VET and higher education, further analysis is required comparing status issues from VET only teachers and those teaching in both sectors. The students interviewed appeared to be slightly more ambivalent about status issues, compared with the comments from the higher education in TAFE project. For some students there was no difference between VET and higher education. For them "it was all university'. This could also reflect concerns about status with students identifying with the higher status sector or it may be due to the institution's marketing of programs to students and the emphasis of pathways to university study. Yet other students identify by their profession, such as musician.

Importance of government funding arrangements

Governments' funding arrangements were far more important than sectoral designations, both to the universities and to the private colleges participating in the project. Vocational units which sourced most of their funds from private sources found their position anomalous within publicly funded universities. Both these units and private colleges believed that governments funded public and private vocational providers inconsistently and without a strong rationale. They also believed that there was unequal competition between public and private vocational providers. Both universities and private colleges found the different governance, quality assurance and accreditation requirements of vocational and higher education to be an onerous imposition that limited the way they could develop their programs. This view was expressed very strongly by almost all participants.

Sectoral experience

The higher education in TAFE project found that higher education students and staff in some TAFE institutes were not yet part of a higher education community of scholars and that this affected students' education and teachers' scholarship. This issue didn't arise with vocational students and staff in mainly higher education institutions. Vocational staff and most students felt their program was appropriately practical and related to their industry. The higher education in TAFE project also found that some higher education teachers in TAFE did not have the time, resources or other support to engage in scholarship as is expected of most higher education teachers. Again, there was no corresponding feeling reported by vocational teachers in mainly higher education institutions. One possible explanation for this may be that most of the teachers interviewed for the higher education in TAFE project were employed as full-time teachers and had a range of responsibilities other than direct teaching. In contrast, most of the teachers interviewed for this project were employed as sessionals. These teachers maintained close links with their industry, although some apparently did so as part of their private practice.

However, some senior managers reported difficulties getting their vocational programs approved and accepted within a mainly higher education institution. One manager of a government approval authority also suggested that vocational programs offered by universities may not be based as fully on workplace competencies as they should be and feared that the blurring of the sectoral boundaries may undermine the different contributions of each sector and its institutions. However, these were marginal concerns compared to the concerns raised in the higher education in TAFE project.

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