

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

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shaping tertiary education policy and practice

Project team



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The study

Investigated mixed-sector provision

- Single-sector universities that offer VET programs
- Private providers registered to deliver HEd and VET

Research questions:

- What VET do the public mixed-sector universities offer? Why and how?
- What do mixed-sector private providers look like, what is the nature of their provision and what impact is this having on the VET/HE sectoral divide?
- What are the general conclusions about the impact of mixed-sector provision on the sectoral divide in tertiary education, and what are the consequences for policy, institutions, teachers and students?

Enrolments in mixed-sector institutions

- 90 institutions offer both HEd and VET quals.
- 22 are self accrediting institutions
- 11 TAFEs are registered to offer HEd
- 57 private providers are registered to offer both HEd and VET quals.

Introduce a national register of tertiary education

At present, there is no single national register of tertiary education institutions or qualifications in Australia. The NTIS includes all VET providers, but it does not indicate if they are also higher education providers. There is no national register of higher education institutions, and each state has its own higher education register. The only state that includes an institution's higher education and VET status on the one institutional record is the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, but this does not include qualifications registered with the National Audit and Registration Agency nor does it include universities' higher education qualifications.

Australia needs a single national register of tertiary education providers and qualifications which reflects the new integrated Australian qualifications framework and prepares for the merging of the Australian Skills Quality Authority and the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. The absence of a national register makes it nearly impossible to gain a good understanding of the number and scope of mixed-sector and dual-sector institutions. This undermines attempts to develop coherent quality assurance requirements that consider the institution as a whole rather than their sectoral offerings independently.

Interviews

Table 1 Categories of interviewee and number interviewed in each category

Category of interviewee	No. interviewed
State VET registering bodies	3
Senior private sector stakeholders/representatives	4
Senior staff at 4 universities and 5 private providers	18
Teachers at 3 universities and 5 private providers	17
Students at 3 universities and 5 private providers	19
Total	61

Mixed sector provision

- Four universities involved in study
 - Variety of reasons
- Private providers
 - Expanding their markets 'delivering premium programs at the higher end' of VET
 - Business opportunities available
 - Contribute to diversity and choice
 - Provide programs for students who would otherwise not go to university
 - Meet industry needs

Variety of reasons:

As a historical legacy; as a result of a merger or acquisition; to broaden the institutions role and source of students; and as part of vertical integration – incorporating the sources of baccalaureate students such as preparatory colleges and senior secondary colleges as well as vocational education colleges.

Emphasise the market-driven rationales of the PPs that were not that obvious in the comments by the universities

PP - The reasons why private providers in this project wanted to offer provision from both sectors were complex and often overlapping. For some it was a way of growing beyond being a VET provider and expanding their market. One private sector representative explained that becoming a higher education provider was a natural progression for existing institutions which were 'delivering premium programs at the higher end' of VET. They were already offering VET diplomas and advanced diplomas and found they had more scope in offering these as higher education qualifications. Interviewees (including the state jurisdictions and private sector representatives) emphasised the business opportunities that were available because the service offered by private providers is different to universities and TAFEs. They also emphasised that developing their provision helped to contribute to diversity and choice. One teacher explained it was about giving people options. Several providers said that they were able to provide programs for students who otherwise would not have gone to universities but, at the same time, ensure high outcomes.

Sectoral divide

- Less important for VET in universities
 - Their students get a qualification in universities and not in TAFE
 - Indicated that they taught higher-level VET qualifications
 - Better facilities than PP or TAFE
- Private providers
 - Fill a current gap in the sector by offering practical courses for students which address the workforce demands
 - Closer links with industry and therefore relevant

University interviewees were asked to contrast their VET provision to that offered in TAFEs or other universities. Most focused on the difference with TAFE institutes. Their VET students got a qualification of the university and not TAFE – this was seen to be an advantage. University facilities are better than those at TAFEs. They generally taught higher level VET qualifications and their staff also tended to have higher qualifications (one deputy vice-chancellor said their VET teachers had to be higher education graduates, and staff would be encouraged to do the graduate certificate in higher education). Because they were in a university and because they emphasised pathways, they had stronger focus on educational content and were able to develop students' study skills to a greater extent. They are able to prepare students for university.

offered at universities or TAFEs were similar to the reasons given by participants in the HE in TAFE project as to why their provision was different from that in universities. The private providers said they could offer personalised, applied and experiential learning; student-centred pedagogy; smaller classes and more time in class; strong tutorial support; and, extensive industry contacts which helps students get jobs. Their qualifications were rigorous, and they offered graduates and employers a blend of the theoretical and practical. Their teachers are industry experts with their primary jobs in industry and one teacher said that this is 'much better than uni where people never get out of the classroom'.

- We are driven by clients and by industry. Higher education offers more theoretical knowledge and private providers offer more skilled based programs that address the skills shortage in Australia. We are very practical in orientation and prepare students for the workplace.

Private Provider Director

PP comparisons of universities

“... all about people. There is no room for brilliant academics with no people skills” (teacher)

“Lecturers here are young and full of energy – not 50+ like at some universities” (teacher)

“Universities don’t seem to be engaged with industry nor to employ teachers who have extensive experience in practice” (teacher)

Views of pp teachers support those of the directors regarding their positioning within the tertiary education sector – filling a particular gap for these students that gives them the edge within the market.

Universities offering VET

“The university’s vocational programs have much stronger educational preparation than those of single sector vocational education providers. They have stronger teaching methods, student learning and assessment. The university’s emphasis is on higher-level vocational programs in contrast to TAFEs, which have concentrated on Certificates I, II and III, apprenticeships and trainees”. (Manager of VET programs)

Universities offering VET

Teachers strongly identified as higher education teachers offering pathways for VET students to university study.

Curriculum incorporated both theory and practice

BUT...

Same as the TAFE teachers and the PP teachers

Distinctions made by PP teachers and students

- “we offer a fuller experience to students”
- “smaller class sizes and fewer large classes”
- “we know our students intimately”
- “we make our people job ready”

Distinctions made by PP students

- Strongly identified with their discipline and vocation
- Believed that their education was of high quality and that their program was preparing them for their industry
- Some glossed over whether they were studying at a VET of higher education program

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.

Conclusion

- One tertiary sector is emerging
- Broader and much more differentiated with different types of institutions
- BUT also hierarchical and stratified