Cross-sectoral policy, research and practice: where to next for University and TAFE collaboration?

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Abstract

This paper will explore new learning and credential-building practices being shaped as part of national and global cross-sectoral reforms. While harnessing the talent and skills of people in a way that advantages themselves, their community and the nation is a complex and difficult task, the history so far of TAFE-University institutions/partnerships appears to suggest that they are well-suited to these reforms. The premise has been that multi-sector partnerships represent an opportunity for people to move through education and training with fewer constraints, at a faster pace, and with reduced costs. However, policies and mechanisms to drive these initiatives have not always been compatible with existing practices. This is especially so around qualification frameworks, assessment practices and human resource management. While qualifications policy is pushing further and higher education together, broader policies related to the resourcing of education may be forcing TAFE and University collaboration apart. In this paper we consider why and how there has been increasing cross-sectoral cooperation and the potential effects this may have on the future qualifications frameworks and local practices.

Introduction

This paper explores how and why new cross-sectoral arrangements in post-compulsory education are reframing collaboration between further and higher education in Australia, especially in the context of tertiary qualifications. This context poses new challenges for educational policy and practice in Australia. It also provides new opportunities for better positioning Australian institutions in what are *ad hoc* and ill-formed competitive markets. The question we pose is whether these partnerships involve institutional shifts so that existing paradigms of delivery, pedagogy and assessment are altered in favour of better outcomes for students, staff and their communities.

We posit there is an urgent need to better identify how far (if at all) the boundaries between education levels, sectors and providers are being broken down through the formation of enhanced and flexible credentialling and qualifications pathways, especially within multi and dual sector arrangements. Policy and practice in Australia is now marked by a tension between the push towards vocational education and training in higher education. This policy approach is changing the face of its clientele and the accompanying "credential creep" throughout secondary and tertiary education. As early as 1998 the OECD (p. 35) reported:

> The once clear boundary between secondary and higher education is gradually blurring and even losing its relevance. The term 'higher education' itself, which in the past was associated with a specific set of institutions, now covers a much wider variety of courses and programs ...'.

There is little considered debate and information about what this means for the future, let alone for people negotiating their way through the maze of practices emerging from constant and not always coherent policy reforms especially given the number of stakeholders. It could be argued that while qualifications policy is pushing further and higher education together, broader policies related to the resourcing of education could be forcing TAFE and University collaboration apart. This is a complex policy dilemma.

The national qualifications framework [Australian Quality Framework] and elements of a national school curriculum in each state and territory developed during the 1990s were key outcomes that sought to create new opportunities for the community to achieve greater access to

education and training, and deliver better continuity between levels, sectors and providers. Both these are currently being revitalised.

The AQF and the emergence of 'pathways' through school credentials is encouraged. Similarly curriculum pathways linking the different sectors through credit transfer. These developments led to the formation of dual awards shared between institutions as well as within the emerging multi-sector, co-located institutional partnerships. The spatial context of schooling, further and higher education and training thus shifted for students as they began to move between school, TAFE and university campuses, or to move across these levels / sectors on a shared location. Movement for teaching staff was less common, hampered by industrial relations matters and systemic idiosyncrasies.

Since the OECD report, much of the ground has shifted, but it is fair to ask whether we have bridged the sectoral gaps or are we still left with structures that disrupt policy advances because we continue to discriminate between the two sectors in ways that retard the realisation of seamless and adventurous articulations and pathways?

Structural Discrimination or Cross-Structural Networking?

There has been a lot of policy and evaluation work undertaken in the areas of reframing university and TAFE collaboration and tertiary qualifications. As discussed later in our paper, a timely report was "Bridging the Divide" (2000) by Leesa Doughney. In her report Doughney focussed on institutional structures that most effectively deliver cross-sectoral education and training. A more recent report in the NCVER series, "Crazy Paving or Stepping Stones" (Roger Harris, Linda Rainey and Robert Sumner, 2007), develops a typology of how and why students move between sectors and providers to chase qualifications for careers, professional development and/or personal interest. The report found learning pathways between VET, private providers and higher education are complex and non-linear. While sometimes it is by choice, often students encounter a range of barriers along their 'learning journey' that makes progression less than seamless.

Under current national policy imperatives, highlighted by the Ministerial Committee for Vocational Education (MCVTE), States and Territories have committed to increase qualification completion in courses at diploma level and above by an average of 2% per annum over the next 10 years. This is to the extent possible within existing funding contributions. Here is one example of how policy is being steered by the state to drive reforms through outdated and ill-fitting educational structures. The aim is to free

up the means and locations at which people can further their education and training requirements without incurring too much expense and within shorten timeframes. This decision reflects priority areas determined at a political level.

A number of other publications are shaping policy and practice on collaboration between further and higher education. These include: Jane Carnegie's *Pathways to Partnerships*; ANTA/AVCC report and the associated policy guidelines (1999); *Student Traffic: two-way movement between VET and higher education* (Harris, Sumner and Rainey, 2005); A joint report by PhillipsKPA and DEST *Giving credit where credit is due*: *A National Study to improve outcomes in credit transfer and articulation from vocational and technical education to higher education* (2006). In this report – our multi-sector campus at Ourimbah on the Central Coast of NSW is featured as a case study.

Other examples include - the Australian Government *Human Capital Enhance by VET* Report (2007); the NSW government strategy: *Our 15-19 Year Olds – Opportunities and Choice* (2006); and the NSW *Co-operation between Schools, TAFE and Universities* guide to good practice (2005). This was followed by the NSW Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal *Review of the skills base and future challenges for VET*. There was also the Victorian report *Credit Matrix* (2004) for building bridges between qualifications, the ALP Opposition's *Job Ready Certificate* policy proposal and the TDA "*Triple A*" *Strategy* outlined in "Investing in Productivity" (2007).

While the list is extensive, the general points raised in these and other reports remain similar.

- there remains an overwhelming need to reduce attrition rates in VET;
- enhance completion rates of higher level certificate and diploma qualifications;
- identify new and emerging industry and qualification areas to met market requirements; and
- expand and refocus relationships between public higher education providers.

The MCEETYA (2005) *Good Practice Principles for Credit Transfer and Articulation from VET to Higher Education* efficiently summarises what is needed. The basis for these principles is recognition that effective credit transfer and articulation is a key component in making lifelong learning a reality. In addition, students need reasonable assurances that they will be

able to take educational pathways which recognise previous areas of learning, skill development and qualifications to facilitate the desired end by a more efficient means. The eight MCEETYA Principles provide clear support for:

- formal vertical and lateral pathways;
- equivalence of learning outcomes;
- general applicability;
- transparent rules and procedures;
- agreed measures for evaluation of effectiveness of credit transfer; and
- improved mobility of students between VET and higher education.

One of the strengths of the MCEETYA Principles is that is bridges VET and higher education by acknowledging the integrity of general and technical knowledge in a way that is both productive and fulfilling for individuals. Furthermore it serves the economic agenda of the state. Such recognition opens up a form and level of dialogue about qualifications and credentials that Australia has not seriously engaged before. Thus education systems and sectors can be freed from many of the constraints of current structures and regulations.

We believe the goal of future collaboration should be to ensure and enable all citizens to access relevant and appropriate education and training options throughout their working and personal lives. It is our premise that cross-sectoral arrangements are the best way forward for achieving this goal. We offer immediate advice from more than a decade of experience working within the framework of a successful multi-sector campus partnership embracing University and TAFE collaboration.

The Cross-Sector Phenomenon and Qualifications Reform

The initial move towards cross-sectoral partnerships involving secondary and other providers of post-compulsory education in Australia and world-wide was based on the concept of taking a small, regional satellite campus of a university and reshaping it into a multi-disciplinary, cross-sectoral campus.

These satellite campuses were often the consequence of an earlier rationalisation of tertiary education. For example the Dawkins' 1989 'unified system' for Australia – a rationalisation influenced itself by rationalisations that occurred elsewhere, such as in Europe in the 1980s (Harman and Meek, 1988). In these cases, the university typically initiates collaboration with senior secondary education and with technical and

further education providers. However local factors conducive to such a move need to be present for any courting to be successful. Alternatively, cross-sectoral partnerships can arise from the search for an identity within a "new university", previously a VET college or polytechnic.

These reshaped identities were represented as a response to demands for greater choice and flexibility from clients – students, families, employers and governments. While moves in this direction have been accelerating within existing institutions, they are now most visible in new cross-sector institutions. The development of a portfolio of awards, with portability through linked organisations and cross accreditation, has not depended on whether these organisational links are co-located locally, virtually and/or globally. Both types of cross-sector institutional partnerships have emerged and generally thrived.

'Reshaping' can mean a totally new institution, or existing institutions co-locating on one site. The set of partners share students and costs and may link across locations and communities. Whatever the identity chosen, the intended outcomes are represented as a new opportunity for students to move through education and training with fewer constraints, often at a faster pace and for reduced costs. But what happens at the points of transition between partners? What do we know about student's choice of institution, how the new identity shapes curriculum for each partner, and whether reformulated curriculum is synchronised to new organisational flexibility or otherwise?

There is very little evidence-based research on choice and flexibility in higher education compared to a wealth of research about school choice undertaken worldwide over the 1990s. Generally, it is believed that, being non-compulsory, the option of choice beyond schooling is self-evident (Crump, 2000). It is well documented that geographical, class, gender, race and cultural variables are at play in choosing post-compulsory education (Dwyer and Wyn, 1998). Yet, there is this new phenomenon of multi-sector partnerships that is recasting these variables. A need now exists for new types of document analysis and conceptualisation of this expression as part of a market ideology for education.

It is commonly accepted that general education options are taken by more privileged students and VET courses more by disadvantaged students. Historically, these have been segmented on class and gender lines. OECD research shows that for increased job chances, the most significant stage is upper secondary education, its graduates a third less likely to be unemployed in their early 20s than non-completers (OECD, 1998, p.8). For Australia, Anderson, Clemens and Seddon (1997) have

shown that students in VET have different learning styles to those in higher education, a difference that may well exist earlier between senior high school students.

Such was the pace of development in the early 1990s, brought about by further and higher education amalgamations (mirrored in the UK by the redefinition of Polytechnics), that the National Board of Employment, Education and Training initiated a review of practices for credit transfer on behalf of the Commonwealth government (NBEET, 1992). As early as this, the dual concerns of efficiency and equity were expressed. Principles were realised that have been adopted by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. The general point in the NBEET Report was that credit transfer had been conservative and *ad hoc*. This needed to change if post-compulsory education was going to be more flexible around accreditation, assessment and qualification procedures, and to provide broader choice options for potential students from all age groups and the wider community. In 2007 most of this remains unsystematic and undertaken on a student-by-student basis.

More recent work was undertaken by Doughney (2000) who wrote a report for the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research Ltd. on "Bridging the Divide". Her report looked at developing the institutional structures that most effectively deliver cross-sectoral education and training. Her conclusions were significant: she provided an overview of tertiary education in Australia; with a mapping of VET; and an exploration of the policy challenges facing 'boundary spanners' such as multi-sectoral arrangements. Multi-partner campuses were studied by Shoemaker, Allison, Gum, Harmoni, Lindfield and Nolan (2000) at this time. Jones, Yonezawa, Ballesteros and Mehan (2002) looked more generally at shaping pathways to higher education.

Of direct significance for understanding the current policy footprint in Australia is a cumulative and extensive body of work on educational choice, "16+" options and trajectories, youth studies and policy activism in the UK. This work is most recently portrayed in a study of access to higher education (Ball, Davies, David and Reay, 2002) that investigated internal status differences through students' positive and negative choices in further and higher education. This work is based on well-founded theoretical precepts taken from Bourdieu's typology of 'classification' and 'judgement'. Other work supporting this position has been undertaken by the same group of authors: *Internal Marketing* (Maguire, Ball and Macrae, 2001), *The refusal of Adulthood* (Maguire, Ball and Macrae, 2001b), *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16* (Ball, Maguire and Macrae,

2000) and *Parents, Privilege and the Education Market-place* (Bowe, Ball and Gewirtz, 1994).

The findings suggest that choices are made through differently determined 'opportunity structures' that relate to socio-economic and socio-cultural factors. Thus "choice" about what qualification one might pursue, at which institution, in which sector, is now seen as better understood as related to individual biographies with institutional identities. Much of this is trapped within stereotypes, class and gender factors, along with attitudes to work and study. It could be argued that multi-sector campuses provide a safeguard to this dilemma in that students can easily change course without having to start again at a new location and often gain credit for the work they have already completed.

A re-thinking and re-framing of the collaboration between further and higher education in Australia, especially associated with the intersection between tertiary qualifications, is required. This will aid in determining whether organisational, management and curriculum changes impact on the traditional groupings of students in a distinct manner and open up access to non-traditional clients to higher education. New expectations provide the springboard for the numerous sectoral partners to engage in shaping these initiatives. The opportunity exists to collect data necessary to enable a study on whether cross-sectoral multi-partner institutions have or have not delivered on the human and financial outcomes upon which their formation was predicated.

The notion of flexibility has been the key to these contradictions, with the consequent opportunity for post-compulsory education to be more responsive to needs of existing policy stakeholders and accessible to a wider range of voices from the community and employers. While collaboration between further and higher education is a commendable policy initiative, is this happening in practice?

International research and theory has recognised how the institutional functioning of schools, the cultural content of curriculum, and the pattern of relations between families and schools, are important sources of educational outcomes. What is occurring now, we suggest, is a reverse articulation of this process. It is made up of new flows of students between sectors to serve lifelong learning objectives, regardless of the structures and functions of the original institutions. It is important to understand whether, and to what extent, multi-partner campuses achieve improved outcomes and to examine if they achieve them more efficiently than traditional institutional structures. Also worthwhile to explore is whether the changed arrangements are available more broadly to the

community, given the human and capital costs involved in establishing new ways of post-compulsory provision.

As mentioned earlier, one of the primary aims of multi-sector institutions is to narrow the gap between success and failure by improving student retention and completion rates across all levels. While this is a matter of institutional self-interest, it potentially has advantages for social cohesion and educational equity in a country as large and diversely populated as Australia as well as improved educational participation rates and outcomes.

Our joint campus at Ourimbah on the Central Coast of NSW demonstrates some of these benefits, as well as the potential for even better synergies and outcomes. Currently there are 205 TAFE courses and subjects offered by the TAFE NSW – Hunter Institute with credit transfer arrangements. For 2007, 1.093 students with a TAFE qualification were offered a place at the University of Newcastle [UoN] – 24.6% of all offers – and 839 offers were accepted (about 300 at Ourimbah).

TAFE students get guaranteed entry into the UoN on the basis of Certificate III, IV or Diploma into 11 degree programs, with the highest cohorts of students entering a broad range of university programs: business / commerce / management, nursing, education, engineering, fine arts, information technology, social science, podiatry and oral health. Whilst there is a 'cost' to the Hunter Institute from loosing these TAFE articulants, the UoN gains a high value cohort in that there is very little attrition of students with a TAFE qualification from university courses. The Hunter Institute gains through attracting students on the basis of these pathway options, as well as students with a university qualification then taking TAFE courses to broaden their credential portfolio.

Challenges for the future of further and higher education collaboration, not only at Ourimbah, include the need to achieve curricular outcomes and assessment practices that cater for the development and learning needs of all students. This requires merging a competitive environment with a supportive and pastoral role so that institutions set high standards while protecting those who are vulnerable to failure through dislocation, poverty or other 'at risk' factors.

What is needed is new empirical information and discipline knowledge about the rationale, practice and future of flexibility and choice in further and higher education in Australia. A number of the outcomes that research could provide includes:

1. new knowledge about the formation and practices of multi-sector institutions;
2. unique conceptual development about the processes of change in curriculum and management occurring in post-compulsory education; and
3. better theoretical understandings of the way policy works through expanding the knowledge base about institutional identities achieved in multi-sector partnerships.

Conclusions

In recent times, many reports have argued for educational providers across the sectors to think creatively about how to best meet the learning needs of students from all age groups. These developments aimed to cater for the education and training needs of the full spectrum of students. They also lead to increasing the variety of vocational and professional education pathways; an improved mode of career support; and greater access to different sectors for qualifications and accreditation.

Changes to public funding for the various levels and sectors have been used as a leverage for many of the structural reforms noted above over the last decade. Many of these interventions were aimed at making education responsive as an industry to local and regional aspirations and economies. These levers were particularly influential in further and higher education. However, some aspects of reform were driven by educators who saw the need to restructure schooling so that the artificial barriers between primary, secondary and tertiary education - constructed post-WW2 - could be partially demolished. This allowed for greater access to education by the broader community. It also facilitated linking the educational experience to workplace and employer expectations. In turn, it changed the perspectives on the value and quality of credentials and the competencies expected of the workforce that was required to function productively in the competitive global economies of the 21st century.

In 2007, education in Australia is a national undertaking with a clear and distinctive character unknown a decade earlier. Internationally, shifts in thinking have led to a plethora of educational practice and recognition in Australia: 'lifelong learning', 'flexible / alternate modes of course delivery', 'the knowledge economy', 'e-learning', 'the learning community / city / region', 'the global education village', 'education precinct', 'school of the future', 'brokerage', 'the engaged educational institution', 'cyber high school', 'workplace learning' and 'recognition of prior learning'.

Given these changes, there has been a range of drivers and barriers to TAFE-University linkages, with teaching, assessment and the role of practice central concerns on both sides. As noted earlier, in 1993 the AVCC established a set of credit transfer principles. This was subsumed by the 1998 Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board recommendations. Both documents indicate the goodwill with which universities and TAFE have approached some of the dilemmas arising from cross-sector linkages. Constructive strategies for improving TAFE-university links involve including universities in the training package development process so that perceived barriers are eliminated at the source (within the curriculum) rather than encountered in practice (within the classroom).

Understanding the preferences and choices of students from Yrs 10-12 is another strategy to assist determining whether TAFE, university and/or work provision will meet changing educational participation in Australia. Demographic shifts - as well as those for gender, ethnicity, race and socio-economic background - are radically transforming underlying attitudes and goals in young people about when, where and how they learn. Is our ability and willingness to reframe this environment up to this challenge?

The co-operation of all sectors and providers is crucial to the potential success of these innovations. There is an increasing impetus to seek closer relationships with communities and clients beyond traditional boundaries. While whole-of-organisation responses are rare, policy and practice in education increasingly reflects new roles in responding to private and public demands. These networks include universities, institutes / colleges of TAFE, private and community providers of VET, and schools. Whatever the nature of these new networks, educational institutions no longer operate in isolation from the influences and practices of each other, their local and international competitors, local communities and feeder institutions.

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