

Implications for learning and teaching in higher education delivered by private providers and TAFE and the role of university partners

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Abstract

Government ideology, funding and regulatory policies at the national and state levels, growth in technologies and a market-driven culture are having a significant impact on the tertiary education landscape in Australia. This is particularly evident in the blurring of the boundaries between universities and vocational education and training (VET) providers, including TAFE (technical and further education) institutes. It is also evident in the growth of private providers offering VET and/or higher education (HE) programs. Partnerships and collaborations across the sector are emerging in response to changing cultural and government policies, priorities and incentives. An important question for those interested in the learning experience and learning outcomes at the tertiary education level is: 'what are the implications for learning and teaching of this changing landscape?' To shed light on this question this paper examines the findings from three external reviews of private providers offering higher education programs. It also draws on initial feedback from TAFE institutes offering higher education programs through a partnership arrangement with a university. The paper identifies areas of strength and areas where improvement is required in the private provider programs. With respect to university partnerships with private providers and TAFE institutes, the paper discusses some positive aspects of these collaborations and suggests ways by which these partnerships could be strengthened to have a more positive impact on the learning experience and outcomes for students.

Introduction

Tertiary education in the twenty-first century has already undergone substantial transformation, with further change predicted. The transformation is being driven by a number of factors, including economic pressures; political ideology and policies; social influences; advances in technology and

online learning systems; market forces; and student demand. The boundaries between the higher education and the VET sectors are becoming blurred and another significant outcome of the change is the entry of a range of external private providers into both sectors.

The private providers have arisen from not-for-profit service and community organisations as well as from business and industry. According to the former Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), in 2011 there were 194 registered higher education providers in Australia, made up of 150 private providers, 42 self-accreditation institutions, and two overseas universities (Australian Universities Quality Agency 2011). At a 2013 presentation at Victoria University to members of the Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD), the Chief Commissioner of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) indicated that the 2013 figures are: 170 registered higher education providers, made up of 129 private providers, 40 universities and one university of specialisation; and, in addition two overseas universities.

The proliferation of providers, competition for students and a focus on alternative pathways have resulted in many Australian universities forming partnership arrangements with TAFE institutes, with private providers and with other universities throughout Australia and overseas. The agenda underpinning the partnership arrangements is framed by a desire to expand the university's sphere of influence and offerings, to reach a wider pool of potential students, to increase participation in tertiary education and in particular higher education, and in many cases to maintain the viability of the institutions (Commonwealth of Australia 2009; Shah & Nair 2013).

Partnership arrangements across the sector are quite diverse (Wheelahan et al. 2012). They include co-teaching models, licensing models, moderation models, pathway models and recognition of prior learning (RPL) models, to name just a few. The impact on learning and teaching of these arrangements is substantial. The challenge of supporting the academic needs of diverse cohorts of learners, developing flexible and contextualised curriculum, providing engaging and sustainable delivery modes across disparate locations, creating positive learning environments, ensuring the appropriate professional development of partner staff and overseeing the quality assurance of programs and assessment are just a few of the areas for consideration and monitoring. This paper primarily draws upon a case study of three external quality reviews of higher education private providers to illuminate the diversity and complexity of the issues that should influence the negotiation and management of partnerships between universities and private higher education providers.

Approach and methodology

The discussion in this paper is informed by three external quality reviews, undertaken by the authors, of private providers that offer higher education programs. Two of the private providers are based in Sydney and one in Melbourne. Each of the institutions offers VET programs as well as higher education programs and has arrangements with universities which include articulation and pathways into higher degree programs. None of the institutions had partnership arrangements that involved teaching university-badged programs. The purpose of the reviews was to examine the systems, processes and structures in place to monitor and ensure the quality of the learning and teaching of the higher education programs in the respective institutes. The reviews were framed by the priority areas in the Australian Universities Quality Agency's quality audit factors nominated by the institutions for review and focused on governance and management; learning and teaching; enabling support; and quality assurance and enhancements.

The reviews included an analysis of a self-review portfolio prepared by each of the institutes. The self-review contained details on: governance structure; staff profiles; course materials; and, where available, the quality assurance processes for collecting and monitoring student and staff evaluation and feedback. A two-day visit to each of the institutes enabled the panel members to meet and interview academic board members, senior management, teaching staff, support and administration staff, and employers of graduates as well as past and current students, and to examine teaching spaces, study spaces and other learning support resources. The findings from these reviews were used to inform the discussion in this paper.

In terms of the private providers investigated, the questions of interest in this paper were:

- What did the external reviews of higher education programs reveal about the quality of learning and teaching at these institutions?
- Which aspects of learning and teaching were handled well by the private providers and what areas for improvement were identified?

The second source of data referred to in this paper is from a partnership between a regional university and six rural and regional TAFE institutes in Victoria. The underlying aim of the project is to increase participation opportunities for rural and regional students for undertaking university studies close to where they live and work. The focus of the project is to provide professional development to TAFE staff through a Graduate Certificate in Education (Tertiary Teaching) (GCETT) to enable them to better understand the higher education environment and to build their capacity to deliver applied degree and undergraduate degree programs locally. The project is underwritten by a \$3 million grant from the Victorian Government

The Graduate Certificate in Education (Tertiary Teaching) is a four-course program and the participants undertake one course per semester over a two-year period. The program utilises a blended-learning approach, with six days of compulsory face-to-face participation and a choice of either face-to-face or online modules on topics relevant to learning and teaching in the higher education sector. The program is collaborative, contextualised and customised to provide flexibility and choice, which enables participants to select study areas of interest or address gaps in their knowledge and skill base.

The TAFE partners in this project were currently delivering or preparing to deliver university-badged higher education programs. The data used in the discussion in this paper were primarily captured in participant reflections, course feedback surveys and ePortfolio postings.

In terms of this paper, the questions of interest were:

- What are the skills, knowledge and values that TAFE teachers already demonstrate?
- What are the gaps or areas that need to be developed and supported in order for TAFE teachers to operate effectively in a higher education environment?
- How valuable is professional development delivered through the Graduate Certificate in Education (Tertiary Education) in preparing TAFE staff to teach in higher education programs?

A subset of questions related to university and non-university partnerships were also considered. These questions were:

- What can universities do to support partnerships with non-university providers to ensure the delivery of quality higher education programs?

- What risk management strategies are universities putting in place to ensure that the quality and standards of higher education programs being delivered through partnership arrangements are monitored and maintained?
- Should universities be concerned about the proliferation of non-university private providers in the higher education sector?

Findings and discussion

Private provider reviews

The external reviews of the higher education programs revealed a number of strengths with respect to the provision of quality learning and teaching at the three private provider institutes. Feedback from students indicated strong satisfaction with the calibre of the teaching staff. This was due to the fact that most of the teaching staff were practising professionals who were employed at the institutes on a sessional basis. Student comments frequently referred to the benefit of being exposed to current, authentic industry issues and practices. They felt motivated and inspired by the real-life, timely case studies, scenarios and situations with which they could readily identify. Several students also referred to the value of the industry connections made through their placements and through their teachers' contacts and networks.

Students also spoke of the value of small class sizes. Some students had previously attended large universities and found them to be impersonal and overwhelming. A sense of connectivity and greater engagement and ready access to staff were cited as factors contributing to a positive learning experience. Other students indicated that they were not able to access university education due to demanding entry requirements and that the private provider option had given them a second chance. Staff reported that many of the second-chance students were highly motivated and achieved positive results when their learning was scaffolded with personalised and incremental learning. This was particularly evident among late developers.

Many of the students also endorsed the interactive and practical-oriented approaches used by the teaching staff. They were appreciative of the fact that they were being exposed to data, systems, tools and processes currently being implemented in industry. They felt that studying with the private provider had made them 'work ready' and some employers even described them as 'the graduates of choice'.

The staff at the three institutions expressed their satisfaction with teaching part-time. They indicated that it gave them a chance to give back to their industry and they welcomed the opportunity to inspire and mentor the next generation of practising professionals. Teaching staff also referred to the value of the administrative support they received from the provider, which freed them to concentrate on their teaching. The administrative support was significant and ranged from routine communication with students, to reproduction of course resources and materials.

While the review found evidence of good learning and teaching practice across the three providers, it also identified some areas for improvement. The review noted that the providers were lagging behind the higher education sector with respect to the development and implementation of systematic quality assurance frameworks and processes. Although there were examples of ad hoc student surveys, overall the 'student voice' was not routinely being heard and acknowledged in any of the providers reviewed.

Support for the students' academic skill development was patchy. The small classes meant that the teaching staff were often able to provide additional assistance to students but convincing evidence of

well-resourced and readily accessible student learning support was minimal. This was an area that the panel recommended for attention and action in all three private provider institutes. Full-time academic leadership to direct curriculum renewal, assessments, and improvement in overall pedagogy was another area needing improvement. Clarity on who is responsible to find host employers to undertake placements was also inconsistent. The need to define expectations with students at the beginning of placements was also identified as an area for improvement. An issue common to all providers was a lack of planning for growth. In all cases, the rapid growth of students did not align with the adequacy of resources, for example, library materials.

There was also minimal evidence of systematic staff professional development amongst the providers reviewed. While most of the teaching staff were practising professionals, the link between practice and learning and teaching principles was not overtly supported or demonstrated. More attention to systematically building staff capacity through professional development activities and building a research agenda was recommended by the panel. A lack of attention to ongoing professional development, underpinned by research activities, for teaching staff was viewed as a significant missing element in the private provider culture, structures and processes examined. Performance in these areas is below expectation for a higher education provider. It was recommended that these areas be addressed in order to meet the current threshold standards monitored by the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency. These findings are consistent with the thematic analysis of audit reports by the Australian Universities Quality Agency undertaken by Winchester (2010), as well as analyses undertaken by Shah and Nair (2012), Shah and Lewis (2010) and Shah and Nair (2011).

TAFE staff capacity building project

In the first 12 months of the delivery of the Graduate Certificate in Education (Tertiary Teaching) to TAFE staff a number of trends have emerged that help to inform the initial questions raised in this paper. With respect to the question: 'what are the skills, knowledge and values that the TAFE teachers already demonstrate?', it is clear that the TAFE staff engaged in the program already bring significant expertise to a higher education learning and teaching environment. For example, the well-established focus on the learner and the learning-centred teaching practised in VET settings mean that TAFE staff already acknowledge the need to start with what the learner brings to the learning environment. This demonstrates that TAFE teachers operate within a recognition of prior learning framework, in which industry skills and experience are acknowledged. Further, TAFE teachers are familiar with individual learning plans, which allow students to progress through their studies according to their needs and abilities.

Most traditional TAFE courses have a vocational focus and as a consequence TAFE staff are more connected to and aware of employability skills and industry trends than their counterparts in higher education. TAFE staff approach learning and teaching from a practical perspective. They regularly engage in activity-based learning and teaching and are aware of and in many cases utilise approaches to learning such as the 'flipped classroom' and the 'jigsaw' strategy, which have only recently gained traction in universities.

From the professional development work undertaken with the TAFE staff to date, it is apparent that, while many TAFE staff engage in innovative and learner-centred teaching, they sometimes lack the theoretical underpinnings to describe and report on their teaching approaches, in terms of the scholarship of learning and teaching. This is an issue more of unfamiliarity with the nomenclature and discourse of academia and an inability to describe their practice using academic language than a deficit in their teaching. At a recent learning and teaching conference, which was part of the TAFE