Day 2 Friday 11 September 2015, 11.00am - Concurrent session B3

Future higher education diversity

Associate Professor Peter Whitley, Associate Professor Vocational Education and Training, and Deputy Director - National Centre Ports and Shipping at Australian Maritime College, University of Tasmania

Speaker Panel:
Andrew Norton – Higher Education Program – Grattan Institute
Dr David Ross – President and CEO – South Alberta Institute of Technology – USA
A/Professor Peter Whitley – University of Tasmania

Issues
What will be the role of TAFE Institutions and other Higher Education Providers in a future higher education market?
Will we see a growth in low cost “Baccalaureate/degrees” in private education and TAFE institutes?

What is the current state of play?

We have been asked to address two questions, namely what will be the role of TAFE Institutions and higher education providers in a future higher education market and will we see a growth in low cost Baccalaureate/degrees in private education and TAFE Institutes? To best understand what the future might bring we must first try and understand the present so we are able to put some context around our foresight to the future. I am going to couch my response to these questions from the perspective of the University of Tasmania and more particularly the Australian Maritime College.

As everyone at this conference would know the marketisation of both vocational education and higher education is well underway and regardless of whether the results of such marketisation is good or perhaps not so good these changes are bringing about significant change. However we can be assured that these changes will continue as the policy environment in which we work, further transforms itself.

Education in the maritime industry is dominated by simulators ... at the Australian Maritime College (AMC) we have some of the largest and most sophisticated simulators in Australia. The simulator mimics the bridge of a large super carrier and we are able to re-create any harbor in Australia to allow our seafaring students to practice docking and berthing maneuvers in safety. The digitisation of learning – ship simulators, truck driving simulators, safety induction simulators, welding simulators is increasing and with each day digitised learning aides play an ever-greater role in the pedagogical process. In the world of maritime
studies research and trials are occurring around autonomous underwater vessels and automated shipping, all of which brings closer together the interaction between man and machine (i.e. human factors). The point I make is that educational relevance must be closely linked to the world of digitisation and mobile devices.

The second point I would like to share with you is the role of industry certification. As we move further toward a global student cohort that will find employment within transnational industries, industry certification plays an ever-greater role. To give you an appreciation of the internationalisation of certification just last month I was meeting with representatives from a European regulatory authority for offshore drilling rig safety. This regulatory authority had been involved in discussions with South East Asian companies about utilising the same regulations deployed in Europe in an Asian context. What does this mean? It means that as we educate and train students for a global marketplace we must be mindful of our students’ employment destinations. Increasingly the industry certification is becoming more prevalent and pertinent.

The third point I would suggest that provides context is the linkage and interplay between the educational sectors. The notion of applied learning, vocational and employment outcomes, blended delivery, work integrated learning, workplace delivery, workplace assessment apply equally to all the educational sectors regardless of whether it is university, TAFE, private and/or public. We are moving to a point where the boundaries between learning in a higher education environment and vocational learning are very similar if not the same. However, where there is a clear distinction is at the institutional level between universities, TAFE’s, private VET providers and private universities. This is clearly a dichotomy between those being educated and those who are educators. In a recent survey a renowned consulting company found that:

> Traditional boundaries between educational sectors are blurring – learners are distinguishing less between types of providers and expect to move seamlessly between the sectors

There are many other factors, which both impact and influence the post secondary environment but we do not have the time to identify all those factors in this presentation.

**What do educational institutions want?**

In Australia there are in excess of 5000 registered training providers including both public and private; currently there are 172 higher education providers (universities and other). For the most part these are organisations which have at their heart a need to run a sustainable business: a business that provides services in the form of education, which must be able to generate sufficient financial activity that will provide both resources and generate surpluses. As a result our institutions, particularly our TAFEs and universities, must attract students in ever-increasing numbers for future sustainability,

> Educational institutions are nowadays-large bureaucratic organisations with assets and aspirations that require regular and sustained revenue streams.
As we understand our university and TAFE business we also begin to appreciate the philosophy that drives our organisation’s need for increased students, the repetition of student recruitment campaigns, the rise of popular courses and a corresponding decrease of less-popular courses, and an increasing pursuit of other forms of educational sustainability, (i.e. international students, student recruitment through on-line and blended delivery, recruitment from beyond national geographic boundaries), and lastly the demise of less financially robust courses.

What is the demand?

If we consider the emerging market demand we need to look at the constituents of the market, which is made up of students, industry, community and governments. Each of these segments has their own unique needs and demands some of which intersect with other players but some of which compete with others.

If we look at the many student surveys and commentaries that have been carried out over the last five years we might conclude that students want an educational experience that leads to employment; qualifications that interest, inspire and are tailored to their needs; and students want educational experiences that are “real” educational pathways - not pathways that are filled with obstacles and not pathways where repetitious learning is required.

While students have demands and expectations employers have also commented that “there must be a concerted and global move towards new learning models – we must move away from replicating face-to-face pedagogy and make full use of the new digital media AND our move must be toward the use of mobile learning.” Employers want graduates with defined and industry specific skills, they need skilled graduates who are able to undertake their respective roles and can therefore contribute productively to the success of the business.

Industry would most likely also reiterate their demand for new and deeper collaborations and a broadening/customising of training. These are expectations that are reasonable given that education and training is primarily the instrument by which individuals find their niche in society through employment. Of course this raises an interesting question as our workforce becomes more global and that is: just who is providing the necessary skills for these new participants entering the global workplace? As recently as last weekend Andrew Robb, the Australian Trade Minister made the point that the Free Trade Agreements with China and India would provide significant employment opportunities for Australians offshore. If this is really the case we must ask ourselves whether the knowledge and skills transferred through learning, which currently takes place in our TAFEs and universities, will meet these future opportunities.

What will our TAFEs and universities be doing in the future?

Let me first say that the future will belong to the nimble and to the risk takers of our TAFEs and universities. Further, and In keeping with the notion of being nimble and taking risks, I believe the smart, slick and thinking providers will fill the gaps that bring together vocational education and higher education.
For potential students choosing educational institutions and courses to study, price and cost will always be a consideration and value-for-money will be determined not by the institution but by the purchaser/student. It will be incumbent upon institutions to put together “study packages” that match or attract students of the future. The understanding of our markets and the individuals who inhabit them will be crucial. Too often at present it is more of a “one size fits all” approach in respect to our marketing to prospective students. I also believe that as the market develops and providers become more skilled, we will see the emergence of institutional specialisations around particular educational concepts, where institutions will realise and build on their strengths.

My own institution is at the moment engaged in deliberations around the development of new degree structures, which will link together vocational studies and undergraduate studies. We are exploring Associate Degrees that could be created by the student by enabling them to pick and choose to suit themselves and their future aspirations. Amid the choice of subjects on offer would not only be higher education units but also vocational units with vocational outcomes. In this way students would be able to structure their learning experience in such a manner as to achieve both a vocational and academic outcome.

If we believe this is a new initiative, let me say it is not. The current Bachelor of Applied Science (Maritime Operations) delivered through the University of Tasmania has embedded within it a vocational Diploma level qualification, which is linked to the maritime industry regulatory framework. The import of this point is that universities have demonstrated when necessary the capability of embracing the vocational aspects of learning: all to the benefit of the student. It is equally fair to say the opportunity for expanding operations into that diploma, advanced diploma and degree space is increasingly attractive.

The prospect and attractiveness of degree programs with embedded vocational outcomes is tantalising but a more evident intrusiveness into the traditional TAFE market is seen through the changing treatment of ATAR scores. Many institutions are lowering ATAR scores to attract more students: or in some cases promoting particular entrance requirements only to offer enrolment through means other than the published ATAR score.

The TAFE institutions have an enviable reputation in terms of quality and high levels of credibility in the areas of high-level skills training. In the space where diplomas and advanced diplomas are positioned there are two major competitors. Firstly there are the industries which were once served by diplomas and advanced diplomas that are now choosing degree level graduates. The stated sophistication and decision-making required in these new occupations has seen employers choosing degree graduates as their candidates of choice. The consequence of these employer choices has seen university providers operating in this space to the exclusion of TAFE. I see this trend increasing in the years to come.

I equally believe that the TAFE environment must reform itself to take advantage of its role as a highly capable operator in the skills acquisition space. However to achieve this requires substantial change in being able to compete and differentiate itself from private vocational education providers and more particularly industry sponsored providers.
Will TAFEs be consigned to lower level instruction? I believe not because already we are seeing signs in the marketplace where institutions (TAFE and university) are linking together through substantial articulation and advanced standing arrangements to be able to offer a fully integrated suite of vocational education and degree programs to future students.

The successful TAFEs will be characterised as those institutions able to assist students to build upon previous knowledge without having to take a backward step in their learning. A further characteristic of the successful institution will be its adoption of digitised learning on mobile platforms, to undertake comprehensive work integrated learning and finally its capacity to embrace and recognise the educational experiences students gain outside their own institutions.

Conclusion

In the modern world of work students need skills and knowledge in self-awareness, adaptability, collaboration, strategic thinking, and cognitive complexity. As educators we have a responsibility to students to build their skills in thinking, entrepreneurship, and innovation.

Notes

2 Australian Skills Quality Authority, September 2015.
3 Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, National Register of higher education providers, August 2015.