Introduction

Like other service and knowledge based economies around the world, Australia is implementing significant reforms to its tertiary and higher education sectors in an attempt to expand educational opportunities and grow a more highly skilled, productive and globally competitive workforce. Reforms and increased competition are driving greater diversification of institutions across the sector and there is ongoing debate about the number, nature and type of institutions needed.

This paper will examine why the boundaries are blurring and what some of the factors are that are driving the changes. TAFE NSW is highlighted as a case study of a new higher education institution with a unique place and capability in the emerging tertiary landscape.

Binary education system

Debates about the structure of tertiary education in Australia are not new. I was privileged to participate in a roundtable hosted by the NCVER earlier this year with some of our past legends in the Australian tertiary education sector. Our task was to reflect on what had been achieved in the Australian tertiary sector since the Martin Report published 50 years ago.

The Martin Report introduced a binary system of higher education where universities were deemed to have responsibility for higher learning and research and colleges of advanced education were primarily to offer vocationally oriented programs and to serve the community’s social and economic needs.

The roundtable had a robust discussion of the issues confronting the tertiary sector in the past and today. Even an emergency fire evacuation didn’t stop the group continuing to engage in debate about the issues while standing in a paddock near the emergency assembly area for some time after the evacuation was over. The group concluded that the issues for tertiary education have continued to be problematic, despite the various changes to the education system over the past 50 years. Some of those issues included:

- how to effectively combine general and technical education
- parity of esteem and status issues
- the balance of research verses teaching
- issues of regulation and level of autonomy
- curriculum approaches
- funding levels and student fees.

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1 Beddie, Francesca, NCVER Research Program, A differentiated model for tertiary education: past ideas, contemporary policy and future possibilities, Australian Government 2014
New imperatives to reform

Today, reforms across the broader tertiary and higher education sectors continue, although now with an even greater urgency and a focus on deregulation. But the terrain is not uncontested and new entrants such as TAFEs haven’t found the passage easy.

The debates about parity of esteem, pathways, fees and funding models continue and although there are perhaps new more urgent policy objectives and in some cases ideologies at play, the diversification of the sector is becoming a reality and different forms of institutions are emerging.

Over recent weeks we have seen the debate play out in the media with comments from university and business circles about the value of ‘uni graduates’ over ‘tradies’ in meeting the skill needs of our economy. Now that all tertiary and higher education institutions are facing greater competition, particularly with the introduction of demand driven and contestable funding models, new tensions and behaviours are emerging and traditional divisions across the sector are blurring. We are now seeing:

- more and more universities offering Diploma and Associate Degree level qualifications or ‘vocational’ degrees in areas previously the domain of VET
- TAFEs and private higher education providers growing their degree programs and looking to access Government funding, previously reserved for universities
- partnerships between tertiary institutions increasing, mostly driven by competitive forces to increase student load or access government funding
- contestability of public funding blurring the line between public and private institutions, particularly in the VET sector
- many universities seeking to align their programs more closely with industry and employers, along the lines previously the domain of TAFEs
- competition in the international student market increasing with all institutions trying to diversify and grow revenue sources
- fees likely to go up in universities and up or down in VET depending on whether fees are deregulated within the State or not
- universities investing heavily in new infrastructure while TAFEs have had their capital funding cut
- and everyone going on line and competing to innovate in this space.

TAFE NSW as a higher education provider

TAFE has a unique place and capability as a tertiary education institution in today’s diversified higher education system and is increasingly being recognised by Governments, industry and students as having a valuable place in a more diversified higher education sector.

TAFE NSW is an organisation with a history of over 120 years. Established in the 1890s, we are proud of our track record of responding to the skill needs of the economy through wars, depressions and even the recent global financial crisis. Over our history we have seen many changes in the structures of tertiary education. We
have even had two NSW universities born out of our Diploma market: UNSW in 1949 and UTS in the 1970s.

Our decision to establish ourselves as a higher education provider in 2011 was motivated by wanting to establish our own unique brand of higher education which built on our strengths, rather than a desire to become a university or compete with them. The need for better pathways, greater industry involvement, more employment focus and greater participation from low SES all led us to reflecting on our own unique capabilities. These include:

- being a state-wide provider, with campuses in communities with limited access to universities
- our strong tradition of practice-based or applied learning
- having strong capability in developing skills in foundation and academic learning needed for successful transition to higher education
- being able to offer a diverse range of courses, aligned to the skill priorities of our economy and in areas of jobs growth
- having highly capable teachers with both tertiary qualifications and strong links to industry
- having a fertile ground for scholarly activity and action based research
- our very strong links with industry and employer partners willing to support us in developing new higher education products
- having university partners who were willing to work with us to develop new and innovative pathway degree programs and willing to help us to benchmark our higher education courses
- and having over half a million enrolments in vocational courses annually, with many thousands of these students aspiring to gain a higher education qualification.

Tertiary pathways

As well as offering full bachelor degree programs, TAFE NSW has developed a new tertiary pathway model designed to provide students with an alternative pathway to university. Students undertake the first two years of study in an Associate Degree program at a TAFE NSW campus which is recognised and provides direct entry to the final year of a Bachelor Degree program at a partnering university.

The model is a true three way partnership between TAFE, partnering universities and employer bodies. It acknowledges that people facing disadvantage do not transition to university as successfully as others and provides ongoing support throughout the pathway.

One of our university partners agreed that the pathway gives students ‘the best of both worlds’ and said: “TAFE has the expertise to offer the sort of support and training in academic skills that some students will need – in fact, they’ll probably do it better than we would.”

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Conclusion

Our growth as a higher education provider to date has been modest but we are proud of our achievements over the past three years. Our enrolments have grown steadily to around 800 and our students come from all walks of life, generally not representative of traditional university cohorts.

All of our nine degree programs are vocationally focused in areas of jobs growth including design, finance, accounting, ICT, early childhood education and engineering. Study programs include opportunities for students to build academic skills as well as work integrated learning. Our students are taught by teachers who have recent industry experience equipping graduates with the skills needed to be job ready, immediately after completing their degree program.

Our student course satisfaction rates are above 70%

Our student satisfaction rates with teacher quality are above 80%

Our student pass rates are above 80%

Our network of 10 TAFE Institutes allows us to innovate, share our learning and build capability across the organisation. We will continue to focus on our strengths and work with our university and industry partners to grow our higher education capability in the future.

If we can replicate our success as a vocational education and training provider, TAFE NSW Higher Education will be the provider to watch in the future in a more diversified higher education sector.