

TAFE Today – a review of the role of TAFE and its closer ties with Universities

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Introduction

I very much welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important Australian Higher Education Congress and talk about TAFE today – and its role in the context of the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education.

I head up TAFE NSW – Sydney Institute, Australia’s oldest and one of its largest vocational education and training institutions based nearby here in Ultimo. So for those overseas and interstate guests - as a Sydney sider - can I also extend a very warm welcome to our city of Sydney.

But today I am wearing another hat. I am speaking today as a member of the Board of TAFE Directors Australia and head of its tertiary education policy committee.

As some of you are probably aware - TAFE Directors Australia - or TDA as I shall refer to it from here - is the peak body representing Australia’s 59 TAFE Institutes and divisions of the five dual sector universities. It was on this basis that TDA was honoured to be asked to address this important Australian Higher Education Congress.

I might at this point make a comment on the important distinction between TAFE and the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. Australia’s Technical and Further Education or TAFE network enrolls some 1.3 million students a year. This represents around 79% market share of the nation’s public VET sector.

TDA is of the view that the Bradley Review - in its examination of the broad based tertiary education sector - did not fully recognise the complexity of the VET sector in Australia nor adequately consider the special role of TAFE as the public VET provider.

TAFE Institutes themselves vary in size and orientation enormously from community based institutions primarily serving their local communities to large institutes with numerous campuses engaged in domestic and international markets, some operating within dual sector universities and some offering degrees in their own rights.

History of relationship between TAFE and universities

TAFE Institutes and universities have had a long and varied history of relationships with each other. Some of you may be aware that my own Sydney Institute, or as it was then called Sydney Technical College has given birth to two of Australia's most esteemed universities – the University of NSW and UTS.

The University of NSW was formed in 1949 when the diploma courses in the areas of civil electrical, mechanical and mining engineering were separated to be delivered by the NSW University of Technology, later called the University of NSW. Later the University of Technology Sydney or UTS was formed as the NSW Institute of Technology in 1965 to take responsibility for other diploma courses such as science, architecture and business studies.

Over the past two decades or so, relationships across the sectors have expanded to include a growing number of private providers both in the higher education and VET sectors. The number of private providers in the VET sector however is considerably larger with over 4,500 registered training organisations.

On the whole, higher education and VET have been largely regarded as two quite separate education systems, with different policy, funding, pedagogical, curriculum and regulatory approaches.

Links between the sectors might have been seen as desirable, but not in any way essential to achieve their respective missions, or to satisfy the education and career aspirations of their individual students.

In the light of recent developments - most notably the Bradley Review and the Government's response to its recommendations - universities and TAFE Institutes are being challenged to re-consider their respective roles and relationships. TDA supports the idea of a tertiary sector with universities and TAFE institutes having equal value and yet distinctive missions.

It is in this context that this paper will:

- consider the distinctive role of TAFE in contributing to a broader and more connected tertiary education sector - envisaged by Bradley
- explore some possibilities for strengthening and maturing the connections between TAFE Institutes and universities.

Australian Government's education goals

Following the Bradley recommendations, the Australian Government has adopted expansionary targets for the number of higher education graduates and for participation by equity groups.

The target for the proportion of 25-34 year olds with at least a bachelor level qualification increases from a current base of 32% to 40% and the proportion of higher education students from low SES backgrounds increases from a base of 16% to 20% by 2025.

In announcing these targets the Deputy Prime Minister emphasized that these targets needed to be understood as part of an overall set of goals and targets for Australia's post secondary education.

The COAG targets of:

- doubling the number of people with VET Diploma qualifications
- halving the proportion of working aged Australians without Certificate III level qualifications
- significantly increasing adult literacy and numeracy levels; and achieving
- 90% of school aged students completing a year 12 certificate

together with the higher education targets - are critical if the Australian economy and society is to keep pace with technological change, climate change, global competition and recovery from the current global financial crisis.

Taken together, these targets envisage a system of universal tertiary education with some form of engagement occurring at least once at some point in every adult's working life.

Achieving these targets will require both TAFE and universities to substantially improve completion rates and significantly increase participation from equity groups.

During the debate over the Bradley review, some called for reforms which included structural integration of the university and TAFE sectors.

TDA is of the view that TAFE institutes as public providers of VET are well positioned to make a significant contribution to achieving these ambitious targets - but in doing so, it is essential for TAFE to retain, clarify and articulate a mission which is quite distinct from that of universities.

At the recent Big Skills Conference here at Darling Harbour, the Deputy Prime Minister endorsed the value of retaining distinct higher education and VET systems.

She said: *'two great systems of education, equal in value, driven by separate missions but with a common purpose of preparing Australia for a new age of human capital development.'*¹

Distinctive characteristics and mission of TAFE

So what are the characteristics of TAFE that define its distinctive mission?

Often the differences between universities and TAFE are identified as those of funding, governance, regulation and the multiplicity of different accountability and reporting obligations. My colleagues working in the dual sector universities are certainly conscious of workload, and the anomalies and duplication involved in two different reporting and regulatory systems.

Overcoming these differences would no doubt facilitate efficient resource management and smoother student movement between courses. This may be the main consideration leading some institutional leaders recently to canvas various 'hub and spokes' or community college models as the basis for the university / TAFE relationship in the new Australian tertiary environment.

Certainly these models might be appropriate in a few, very particular situations. However as a systemic solution TDA believes it is undesirable because it conceives of TAFE principally as a 'feeder' to universities and ignores the diverse role and characteristics of TAFE. These are fundamentally different from universities and equally - if not more vital - to enhancing the education and skill level of Australia's working age population.

Characteristics of learners in TAFE and VET

Firstly let's look at some of the fundamental differences in the profile of learners across TAFE and universities.

While the majority of university entrants are school leavers, TAFE students are characterized by a much wider range of ages and are in different stages of their careers and have different educational requirements.

The average age of a TAFE student in 2007 was 31.4 years² whereas the average age of a university bachelor student was under 21 years.³

¹ Speech by the Hon Julia Gillard MP, Big Skills Conference, Sydney 5 March 2009, http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_090305_093449.aspx

² NCVER data cube, 2007 (draft), <http://www.ncver.edu.au/index.html>

³ DEEWR, Selected Higher Education Statistics

Despite surprisingly common misconceptions, not all TAFE students are apprentices. Only about 20% of Australian VET students are apprentices and trainees who study as part of their contracts of training with employers.

This table shows that only 10% of VET students are currently studying at Diploma and above level.⁴

Another misconception is that TAFE students are undertaking courses and qualifications required by or directly related to their current employment. In fact fewer than 20% give this as the main reason for studying.⁵

Over 20% of VET students are jobseekers and in the current economic climate this figure is likely to rise. Only 5.5% of students surveyed said the main reason for undertaking VET studies was to get into another course of study.

TAFE students often return for 'top up training' throughout their working life. Almost three times as many TAFE graduates enrol for a second or subsequent TAFE qualification as the number who enrol at a university.⁶

It is more difficult to compare the reciprocal flows of students between TAFE and university because of the differences in the national data collections for each sector. However it is useful to note that in 2006 domestic students admitted to higher education on the basis of TAFE studies accounted for 9.6% of commencing students⁷ and that 7.1% of VET enrolments in 2007 were university graduates.⁸

These indicators suggest that the flow of students between TAFE and university occurs much more equally in both directions than is usually implied by the proponents of models to support a feeder relationship between TAFE and universities.

This final table compares characteristics of students in TAFE and higher education and clearly illustrates socioeconomic status as another distinguishing feature.

Research undertaken by Paul Foley for NCVET in 2007 shows that there is an over representation of students from low socio economic areas in VET. This over representation is partly driven by the relatively high participation by students from

⁴ NCVET, National VET Provider Collection, 2007

⁵ NCVET Graduate Satisfaction Outcomes, December 2007.

⁶ NCVET Student Outcomes, Graduates, December 2007,

<http://www.ncvet.edu.au/statistics/surveys/sos07/sos07data.xls#Table1>

⁷ DEEWR *Higher Education Statistics*, full year 2006, Commencing Students series, Table

11 [http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/E7179405-1570-4F63-8D25-](http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/E7179405-1570-4F63-8D25-11D2DB32D679/21421/3_1Commencingstudents1.xls#!A1)

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regions outside capital cities, which on average tend to be lower socio economic areas. The same research shows that people from low socio economic areas tend to undertake lower level qualifications.⁹

TAFE has a greater footprint in remote and regional communities and therefore an important role to play. Students from these regions often experience difficulty at school and have requirements for literacy and numeracy support which would prevent their direct admission to university. TAFE has developed expertise in engaging with these students, especially those from indigenous backgrounds.

Research has demonstrated that VET and TAFE significantly outperform the higher education sector in terms of disadvantaged students accessing post-secondary education.¹⁰ Given this, TAFE Institutes are well placed to contribute to raising participation of disadvantaged students and have a critical role in meeting the lifelong learning needs of the population.

I might point out at this stage that every effort has been made in this paper to verify the accuracy of the data provided and comparisons made. However the differences between data collections and the inability to track the educational pathways for individual students pose serious difficulties in fully understanding patterns of student movement. These difficulties have been documented in a number of studies and it is hoped that the new Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education will commission a review of data collections and student identifiers as a matter of priority.

Applied knowledge and competency based education and training

One of the most distinguishing features of the Australian VET system is its core mission of meeting the skill needs of industry and its applied or 'practice based' approach to learning and assessment.

TAFE prides itself on being the major provider in a national industry-led system which is widely benchmarked across the OECD, and highly regarded across our region. VET qualifications certify students against real skills and standards endorsed by industry for specific occupations.

While universities are closely aligned with the professions and monitor the views of employers, in contrast they have greater academic freedom and independence from government and industry agendas.

However here too, it is necessary to dispel a few myths and misconceptions.

⁹ Foley, P., The socio-economic status of vocational education and training students in Australia, 2007

¹⁰ Western, J., McMillan, J. & Durrington, D. Differential Access to Higher Education: The measurement of socioeconomic status, rurality and isolation. Canberra: AusInfo 1998

- Competency based education and training does not ignore the knowledge based required for sustained professional performance. This is evident in the form of assessment used by the majority of TAFE Institutes.
- Competency based education and training does not preclude graded assessment providing the grades are awarded on the basis of criteria which are external and independent of the relative achievement of any particular cohort of students.

Despite some of the problems identified with national training packages, there is nothing inherent in the design of VET qualifications that prevents us from improving connections between the merit based approach of universities and the competency based approach of VET.

I do acknowledge that the knowledge and personal attributes can sometimes become hidden in the way VET qualifications are documented. TDA has recently provided feedback to the National Quality Council on the need to report more clearly on the cognitive and conceptual skills of students and graduates of VET qualifications.

Notwithstanding these reservations, long gone are the days when pure academic knowledge can be considered as superior or of intrinsically greater worth than applied or practical knowledge.

Speaking at the Big Skills Conference earlier this month, John Buchanan, head of the University of Sydney's Workplace Research Centre, posed a series of solutions to the big skill challenges of sustainability and social inclusion.

In doing so he reflected on the two words etched on the main entrance doors of Sydney Institute back in 1891 – 'industry and literature'. He said an important solution to the big skill challenges is in fact the fusion of industry and literature, what he described as the need for more 'practical intellectuals'.¹¹

In fact the original motto of Sydney Technical College also neatly encapsulates this approach – '*manu et mente*' – by hand and mind, or by doing and thinking.

While Sydney Institute has now modernized its tag line, for us, practice-based learning is fundamental to meeting the needs of our students, employers and the industries we serve.

¹¹ John Buchanan, Speech to the Big Skills Conference, Sydney 5 March 2009

Building stronger connections

TDA supports the Bradley Review's recommendation for clearer and stronger pathways between the higher education and VET sectors in both directions.

TDA is of the view that greater social mobility is achieved through education and training programs that have multiple modes of entry and transfer. While Bradley acknowledges that VET should not be seen primarily as a pathway to universities, TDA agrees that there is certainly scope for strengthening this pathway.

In her speech to the Big Skills Conference earlier this month, the Deputy Prime Minister challenged the VET sector to fundamentally rethink separate systems and institutions to create better connected learning for millions of individual students – one that developed easier pathways for students – one that moves beyond individual agreement and recognition to systemic reform.¹²

There are currently a multiple array of individual credit arrangements currently in place - some excellent models of collaboration but others not necessarily conducive to students with TAFE qualifications upgrading to degree level qualifications.

The most common arrangements involve the granting of credit or advanced standing for TAFE graduates enrolling in universities.

- West Coast TAFE students who complete the Diploma of Information Technology receive credit for their studies and can enter directly into second year of a Bachelor of Science at Edith Cowan University.
- TAFE NSW and the University of Newcastle have negotiated an agreement for an articulation arrangement from the Advanced Diploma of Product Design into the Bachelor of Industrial Design.
- Credit transfer arrangements cover approximately 50 separate vocational qualifications into relevant Swinburne University of Technology bachelor awards in disciplines including business, accounting, finance and human services, liberal arts, environmental management, hospitality, tourism, IT and multimedia, laboratory operations, sport and recreation and applied languages.
- Deakin University in Victoria provides pathways for students into higher education from across education sectors and in collaboration with three TAFE institutes is offering a two year Associate Degree leading to employment or further study for people underrepresented in higher education.

¹² Speech by the Hon Julia Gillard MP, Big Skills Conference, Sydney 5 March 2009

While these and many other similar articulation arrangements have been effective in strengthening pathways across VET and higher education, they are in general, resource intensive to establish, often difficult to negotiate. Despite being agreed at an institution level, they may not always be honoured at a faculty level. Added to this - the record from some universities of establishing and promoting credit transfer for TAFE students has been generally poor.

So why has creating stronger pathways across the sectors been so difficult?

When the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) was first established some 15 years ago, it promised seamless pathways and cross sector linkages for schools, VET and higher education. At the time we thought the boundaries of qualifications across these three sectors were fairly clear and the common framework promised opportunities for cross sector collaboration and cooperation.

Despite this promise, cross sector collaboration continues to be problematic and is often cited as a key driver for TAFE institutes offering higher qualifications in their own right.

The introduction of Associate Degrees and Vocational Graduate Certificates and Diplomas to the AQF were in part a response to the need for higher order applied skills but there was much debate about who owned these new qualifications and the space is still highly contested.

As discussed earlier, competency based education and the adoption of national training packages has been seen by some to be a major barrier to negotiating credit arrangements with universities for many years.

However - when I recently asked my national TAFE Director colleagues how they felt about negotiating credit arrangements with universities - a strong common theme soon emerged. The responses included: – ‘you never feel like an equal partner’ - ‘you feel like the ‘poor cousin’ – ‘it feels like a master/servant relationship’ - and even ‘academic snobbery is alive and well’.

While some TAFE Institutes are now offering degrees and associate degrees - some delivered in their own right and others under license and quality assured by universities – TDA believes these arrangements will only augment but never replace or supersede the need for better and more articulation across the sectors.

TDA welcomes the Deputy Prime Minister’s announcement that the AQF Council has been commissioned, under the chairmanship of John Dawkins AO, to undertake further serious work on strengthening the role of the AQF in developing and assuring credit and recognition systems.

However to fully address this issue, universities and TAFE Institutes need to work as equal partners and engage in productive collaboration across cultures to achieve successful and stronger pathways for all students.

Workforce development, research and innovation

While strengthening pathways for individuals across the sectors is a high priority at least in the short term, there are other areas of collaboration between TAFE and universities that should be explored.

As TAFE Institutes respond to the need to up skill the existing workforce, increasingly TAFE clients are not individuals, but enterprises and workplaces.

TAFE is increasingly delivering strategic and integrated workforce development programs in partnership with industry. Recent research undertaken by John Mitchell on behalf of TAFE NSW has demonstrated the way these strategies can lift productivity and competitiveness of enterprises.¹³

In some cases these workforce development initiatives have been combined with research input from university staff and post graduate students, leading to an exponential increase in both innovative products and processes.

On the basis of this evidence, TDA has submitted a case to the Australian Minister for Innovation, Senator the Hon. Kim Carr, for support for innovative TAFE – business collaborative projects.

I want to emphasise these initiatives because there is still too sharp a divide between the national system for research and innovation and its adaptation and application to real workplaces and workforce practices.

I suggest this is another area where we need greater collaboration across universities and TAFE particularly in the areas of green jobs and green skills.

Structural adjustment

While the changes suggested here might seem to be largely ones of degree rather than substance, there is no doubt that to achieve them will require significant cultural and structural change in both universities and TAFE.

The Bradley Review recognises this with the recommendation for funds for universities to assist them in adjusting to a more demand driven system.

TDA believes there is an equally strong case for structural adjustment assistance to TAFE – and that this should be extended to TAFE Institutes as part of the Budget in May 2009.

¹³ Mitchell, J., Improving the Bottom Line, 2008

Primarily this would provide the resources which allow TAFE Institutes to continue to meet industry and government priorities, but also collaborate as full partners with universities in building a more coherent Australian tertiary education system.

Conclusion

The demand for higher skills and knowledge is impacting across our economy and society and is critical for future growth and sustainability in the context of the current global financial crisis. TDA welcomes the vision for VET to be an equal partner in the national reforms to the tertiary education sector in Australia.

One in two firms and over 1.65 million students access the VET system annually, illustrating the important role of VET and TAFE to support the Government's education and skilling agenda.

The debate has now moved well beyond whether TAFE should be a feeder for universities. The Deputy Prime Minister in her response to the Bradley Review has endorsed separate missions of equal value for higher education and VET but within a common purpose of building Australia's human capital.

It is time we moved beyond the 'poor cousin' relationship between TAFE and universities into meaningful and productive partnerships that deliver real outcomes for institutions and students across the two sectors.

TDA supports the need for an integrated and diverse tertiary sector that supports and encourages cooperation and collaboration and recognizes and builds on the strengths of both sectors.

Australian Governments have set ambitious targets for strengthening human capital to ensure our country's future economic, social and environmental sustainability.

TDA welcomes the opportunity to work more closely with the university sector to achieve these targets and enhance pathways and life long learning opportunities for all Australians.

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