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TDA Higher Education Benchmarking Study

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Early in 2016 TAFE Directors Australia commissioned Dr Anne Jones, to investigate potential futures for higher education delivery in TAFE to inform submissions to Federal Ministers and relevant Commonwealth Government Departments when proposals for reform are put before the new Parliament. This work included a benchmarking study of higher education in public non-university settings in five countries and has, inevitably, thrown up issues relating to higher education in TAFE and the future of qualifications at AQF levels 5-7 more generally.

The research set out to determine:

1. Policy settings including legislation, regulatory structures and standards, provider categories and types of students;
2. Funding structures for university and non-university providers including:
 - Student loans
 - Student subsidies
 - Grants/scholarships
 - Other funds (for example, infrastructure)
 - Research; and
3. Higher education E outcomes, innovations and challenges.

The five benchmark countries comprised Canada, New Zealand, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States. Data for this comparative report were collected through:

- A review of published information on policies, student outcomes and other data from sources such as academic literature, government reports and government websites;
- Interviews and feedback from selected experts in the identified countries.

It is important to realise that, while there are valuable lessons to be learned from each country, it is difficult to obtain comparable quantitative data. Factors such as the size of each country, its political system, history, and economic and social circumstances, all determine the structure of its higher education sector. The selected countries range from small, single jurisdiction nations, such as New Zealand, to complex federations, such as Canada and the United States. The information obtained from the published material and the interview notes was analysed to identify:

- Trends in higher education and in delivery by non-university providers;

- Policy and funding innovation which might be transferable to Australia;
- Models for innovative higher education delivery to inform future practice in Australia; and
- Ways in which Australian TAFE institutes might contribute to creating the workforce Australia needs to build an innovation economy.

Canada

Canada has a well-funded public college sector which, in the absence of a federal ministry of education, is governed by each province and territory with coordination provided through a Council of Ministers. Community Colleges delivering higher education in some provinces such as Ontario face similar issues of status and tight regulation as TAFE institutes in Australia, but their students enjoy funding support for higher education programs. Key lessons from Canada include:

- Community Colleges are funded through federal, provincial and municipal governments to undertake collaborative, applied research projects with industry. This innovative and strategic policy initiative has provided significant benefits for businesses, teachers and students and effectively contributed to improved productivity and competitiveness in local economies;
- Sub-baccalaureate and baccalaureate curriculum is developed by each college, in compliance with provincial standards and the needs of local employers, based on learning (or graduate) outcomes (as opposed to content);
- College degree programs have been built on existing diploma and advanced diploma programs and therefore provide comprehensive and concrete articulation pathways.

New Zealand

New Zealand has a single education act for all education from early childhood to postgraduate education. This produces extraordinary coherence in strategy, policy and funding for all higher education providers. As a result, New Zealand's public non-university providers, the polytechnics and institutes of education and Wānanga institutions, are able to access Government funding for higher education delivery and research in the same way that universities are. New Zealand's implementation of a single tertiary education policy and governance authority, the NZ Tertiary Education Commission, and careful use of the inclusive term *tertiary* for the whole sector, encourages parity of esteem for all higher education providers. Innovative ideas and successes from New Zealand's public non-university higher education providers include:

- Development of distinctive applied degree models emphasising practice based and work integrated learning, supported by strong applied research culture;
- Enrolment of higher numbers of Māori and Pasifika students;
- Achievement of strong student completion rates;
- Development of strong research cultures informing not only higher education delivery but practices in the institutes and polytechnics more generally.

Singapore

Singapore's tightly managed tertiary education system caters mainly for the nation's 3.9 million citizens. The system consists of the vocational, non-degree awarding Institute of Technical Education, five polytechnics, five public universities, one private university, two fine arts colleges, and two specialist academies offering a full range of vocational and higher education to the building and construction and aviation industries. Singapore has been careful to build the quality and reputation of

its university sector while providing opportunities for a wide range of people to undertake degree level study. Innovative ideas from Singapore include:

- The use of the inclusive term *tertiary education* to refer to all postsecondary provision leading to parity of esteem;
- Distinctive applied degree models in the polytechnics, colleges and academies;
- Provision of specific financial support for existing workers to undertake degree level study through continuing education and training;
- The recent announcement that Singapore, like the UK and Germany, will be piloting degree level apprenticeships.¹

The United Kingdom

The focus in England is currently on improving the quality of higher education teaching, strengthening links between teaching and research and improving the value students obtain from their financial investment in higher education. The UK Government's White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy*, released on the May 16 2016, proposes a single quality system and regulator for all higher education providers, increased availability of the title *University*, increased cap for fees funded under the state student loan scheme, and tougher accountability for outcomes for equity groups (Department of Business Innovation and skills, 2016). A 50-50 balance of public and private contributions is understood to achieve optimum economic efficiency, as opposed to the current 40-60 split in Australia, although proposed reforms aim for a 50-50 split. Non-subsidised Government fee loans in the UK are designed to expand new provider numbers and new types of provision without considerable cost to the public. Success in higher education in Further Education (FE) Colleges includes:

- Significant numbers of HE students in FE Colleges (10% of undergraduate delivery in England);
- Recognition of the role of non-university providers in the tertiary education system with new policy settings seeking to make it easier for quality higher education providers to enter and expand in the sector, and to award Foundation and higher degrees;
- Significant investment by the UK Government in developing scholarship in FE Colleges;
- Work based and other flexible delivery models such as Degree Apprenticeships.

The United States

Education is a state matter in the United States. Therefore, strategy, policy and funding for the nation's over 4,000 degree granting institutions vary among its 50 states. The community colleges, analogous to TAFE institutes, are considered to be higher education institutions along with the public and private four-year colleges and universities. Historically, community colleges have been committed to providing pathways into higher education through their two-year associate degrees; some, more recently, commenced to deliver their own bachelor degrees. American community college successes include:

- Very high numbers of students to transition into bachelor degrees;
- Strong applied research cultures;
- Access to education for very large numbers of low SES, Black and Hispanic students;

¹ <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/universities-to-launch-schemes-allowing-people-to-work-while-studying-for-degree>

- Development of a distinctive community college applied baccalaureate degree model, benefitting graduates, employers and industries.

General conclusions

It must be remembered that the information provided above varies from country to country. Within the resources available for our study it has not been possible to obtain all the comparative data we would have wished to access. Nevertheless, we have been able to observe a number of important trends which have influenced the development of a TDA position on higher education in TAFE. These include:

- Availability of funding for degree delivery by non-university providers in NZ and the US;
- Acknowledgement that students disadvantaged by physical and temporal space, SES or ethnicity/race often choose non-university higher education providers which therefore play a pivotal role in supporting access to education, better employment and extended citizenship experiences;
- The development of a culture of research and scholarship in non-university degree providers (US, Canada and NZ); and
- Funding for applied research in public non-university higher education providers leading to generalised transformative impact on the cultures of those institutions and outcomes for students.
- Inclusive language for the postsecondary sector which promotes coherent tertiary education policy and parity of esteem for all providers – for example, *higher education* in the United States, *tertiary education* in New Zealand and Singapore;
- Policy settings that demand consistent teaching and research standards for all higher education providers, as required in New Zealand and, soon, in the UK;
- Well thought out, systemic *Applied Degree* models that offer workplace-based learning experiences and other innovative learning and pedagogical practice to better meet the needs of non-traditional degree students;
- Qualifications pathways that provide worthwhile block credit from sub-degree qualifications, including diplomas, into degrees;
- Availability of higher level VET qualifications (UK and Singapore), which in the UK are designed to offer reciprocal pathways from higher education;
- Short cycle sub-degree qualifications that offer sound foundations for employment, such as the well-established Canadian and US associate degrees, and the two-year Foundation degrees and apprenticeship degrees in England;