GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE

VET PROVIDERS PLANNING TO DELIVER DEGREES

INTRODUCTION

This good practice guide is intended to assist public and private registered training organisations (RTOs) planning to commence higher education (HE) delivery. The guide is based on research undertaken by Victor Callan and Kaye Bowman, who completed case studies with six providers currently delivering higher education qualifications in addition to their vocational education and training (VET) offerings. They investigated the strategic reasons traditional VET providers decide to make this shift to deliver higher education qualifications, as well as the associated capability and operational issues.

WHY DO VET PROVIDERS DECIDE TO DELIVER DEGREES?

VET providers choose to deliver degrees for a number of strategic reasons, foremost among which is to enable better access to higher education for their VET students. Previous research (Wheelahan et al. 2012) has highlighted a reduction in labour market opportunities for VET diploma and advanced diploma graduates. By delivering their own associate and bachelor degrees, VET providers may improve credit transfer arrangements into degrees for their VET students. VET providers also have the capacity to deliver more student-focused and applied pedagogies, which may better suit the learning styles and more practical job interests of these students.

These providers seek to complement rather than compete with major universities. For example, they often choose to deliver in the niche areas where they already have existing strengths, such as fashion, forensics, computer gaming, and building and construction. VET providers may also decide to move into higher education to improve their distinctiveness from other VET providers.

This good practice guide is based on the report, *Lessons from VET providers delivering degrees*, by Victor Callan and Kaye Bowman, and is available from the NCVER Portal at www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2791.html.

NCVER

Australian Government

Department of Education and Training

ADVICE FOR VET PROVIDERS CONSIDERING DELIVERING DEGREES

Through their case studies of public and private VET providers delivering degrees, Callan and Bowman (2015) developed the following best practice principles to assist other VET providers to transition into higher education delivery.

Build on existing skills and relationships

VET providers are in a good position to develop higher education qualifications that meet industry needs. Through their current VET offerings, providers have already established relationships with industry which they can build upon when developing their higher education capability. Involving industry from the conceptual stage through to implementation is vital in developing the applied professional-level qualifications that will best meet the needs of potential graduates.

Best practice includes involving industry experts in the development of the business plan and in the design and delivery of higher education courses, as well as providing placements and industry projects for students once the degrees are in place.

In addition to their advantage in leveraging off existing industry relationships, VET providers can build upon existing capabilities in areas that create further points of difference to traditional higher education providers. These include:

- designing more flexible delivery and a wider range of assessment options
- establishing effective articulation and credit transfer arrangements
- emphasising the immediate industry relevance of their degrees through the use of industry experts in the planning and delivery of courses, such as extensive use of student placements and collaborative projects with industry, and employment services that place graduates in local businesses
- engaging and supporting students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Develop a business case

The research highlights the importance of VET institutions developing a strong business case for any new higher education qualification. Elements to consider include:

- potential impacts upon revenue
- experiences in managing a fee-for-service regime
- ability to leverage off existing experience in delivering higher education qualifications in partnerships with local universities
- level of higher education qualifications of existing teaching staff
- roll-on effects to building the profiles of and enrolments in other qualifications and in enhancing the institute brand
- costs in setting up the required internal governance structures
- costs and experience in accreditation and re-accreditation processes
- use of existing student services, but also the need for additional supports for higher education students (tutorials, skills in critical thinking and writing, one-on-one support, monitoring of student progress).

Work up to delivering higher education in your own right

Providers should not jump into the deep end when beginning their higher education journey. The report suggests that adopting a step-by-step approach better allows an institution to build solid organisational and staff capability.

Figure 1 shows the pathway taken by one technical and further education (TAFE) provider to the delivery of its own higher education qualifications.

Figure 1 Continuum of higher education engagement strategies adopted by a TAFE provider

| VET–HE credit articulation arrangements | Dual offers VET/HE qualifications | Contracted HE delivery | HE delivery in own right as a HE provider |

Taking a gradual approach, such as the one illustrated above, allows staff time to develop the ideas, confidence and strategies relevant to the delivery of a higher education portfolio in their own institution. This incremental approach produces staff who are better prepared for higher education programs. Following a continuum approach also allows providers to gradually learn about the associated governance and regulatory costs of higher education delivery while gaining practical experience of the requirements of a higher education provider.

Develop appropriate academic governance arrangements

In the initial stages of delivery, VET providers should include external higher education experts early on in their governance arrangements. These experts can add a depth of understanding to higher education issues including accreditation. As time progresses, most VET providers move to providing separate support units, governance structures, policies and procedures for their higher education delivery. A key step is the recruitment of a higher education support leader and the establishment of a higher education unit.

Promote scholarship

Academic scholarship is an important feature in the delivery of degrees in universities. VET providers moving into the delivery of higher education qualifications need to develop their own appropriate model for scholarship. This model will underpin their higher education provision and should add value to teaching and learning in their institution. One strategy is to leverage off partnerships with local universities and other VET providers offering higher education, the aim being to access networks, communities of practice, forums and shared professional development opportunities for staff. Box 1 offers additional suggestions to support scholarship.

BOX 1: SUPPORTING SCHOLARSHIP IN MIXED-SECTOR INSTITUTIONS

Williams, Goulding and Seddon (2013, p.39) identified a number of specific strategies for mixed-sector institutions to support scholarship in their organisations:

- initiating organisation-wide real and virtual conversations between all levels of staff to generate a common language, understanding and expectation about quality scholarly practice and its role in the longer-term goals of the institution

- ensuring that the appropriate governance structures, such as an ethics review committee, are in place to support quality scholarly practice

- building on existing practice in ways that both enhance the scholarly quality of that practice and produce a scholarly outcome, in terms of knowledge that can be shared, refined and built upon

- using a combination of formal qualifications, continuing professional development and informal mechanisms to address the short- and long-term development of skills in knowledge building

- repurposing existing shared time to capitalise on opportunities for scholarly discourse and knowledge sharing and reconfiguring individualised ways of working to create more flexible opportunities for scholarly collaboration

- scaffolding existing links with industry and the community and strengthening participation in university networks and other collaborative and knowledge-sharing activities.

Provide additional student support

Student engagement and attrition are issues that require constant management by VET providers delivering degrees; students may require extra supports to help them to adapt to the different features of higher education courses. Supports such as these are additional to those already in place for VET students and include:

- smaller classes
- easy access to lecturers
- extra tutorial support
- literacy, numeracy and computer skills support programs
- individual learning plans for at-risk students
- an applied orientation in the degree courses
- multiple mechanisms for testing the readiness of VET students for higher education study
- extra support for more gifted students who choose an accelerated pathway of study.

MOVING FORWARD

Significantly, education and training markets are susceptible to economic uncertainty, high levels of competition and changes in government policy. VET providers should expect their higher education operations to evolve over time and with experience. Capability in higher education requires ongoing attention and effort and can only be built by adopting approaches based on continuous improvement.

The case studies reveal that the first step for organisations planning to commence higher education provision is gaining experience in other VET-to-higher education arrangements. These experiences, either through partnerships with universities or other arrangements, develop the higher education knowledge and capability of staff.

REFERENCES

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