The Flinders University/TAFE SA Bachelor of Creative Arts dual award model: A case study

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Abstract

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the Bachelor of Creative Arts (BCA), a dual award degree offered jointly by Flinders University and TAFE SA. It first sets the rationale for the award while placing it in the Australian educational context, comparing it to equivalent programs offered at other institutions. It then provides an insight into the characteristics of a cohort of students. To achieve this, the study analyses a range of key quantitative metrics including demographics, enrolment numbers, attrition, student experience surveys and grade distributions to determine the cohort's profile. Additionally, the study seeks information from recent graduates already in the workforce to establish if the BCA provides the skills leading to successful employment. This study reveals a mixed picture of the BCA's success. While degree completion and student satisfaction are high, alumni are not all convinced that having a university degree provides a significant advantage for the job market as opposed to only having a TAFE qualification. Finally, the study offers recommendations to address these issues and improve the overall student experience as well as enhance their employment prospects.

Practitioner Notes

1. This paper presents a case study of an innovative HE/VET dual award.
2. Work-Integrated Learning should be included as core in the BCA dual award.
3. Networking and/or mentoring opportunities with industry experts should be provided to students.
4. Students should be taught entrepreneurial skills to help them start-up their own businesses.
5. Additional support should be provided in the first-year in the context of creative practice.

Keywords

higher education, vocational education, creative arts, student success, student satisfaction, case study

Introduction

In Australia, there has been an increased effort to remove barriers between vocational education and higher education. While a number of innovative models connecting the two sectors have emerged, there is still a scarcity of scholarly literature critically assessing the efficacy and success of integrative approaches. This article endeavours to bridge an important gap in the literature by examining the connections between the vocational sector and higher education in Australia. In doing so, it investigates and analyses student as well as alumni first-hand experiences of the Bachelor of Creative Arts (BCA), a program offered at Flinders University and TAFE SA (Australia), that integrates vocational education with higher education. Finally, the article appraises the success of the program, identifies problematic areas and proposes recommendations for further improvement and development.

Most advanced economies have split their post-compulsory education in two: vocational education and training (VET), and higher education (HE). Traditionally, these two types of provision are legislated, funded, and regulated differently. Vocational education and training is argued to be instrumental, used as a way for countries to meet specific skill demands as predicted through skills forecasts and for a higher proportion of people to become tertiary educated (Bathmaker, 2006). Increasing and widening participation in tertiary education has been an assumed policy goal for more than 40 years in many countries. For example, in a European context, Dunkel, Mouillour and Teichler (2009: 249) noted that 'by 2010 almost half of the net additional jobs will require people with tertiary-level qualifications; just under 40% will require upper secondary level and only 15% basic schooling'. In the US, Autor (2010: 42) noted that US employment growth is polarising, with job opportunities concentrated in relatively high-skill, high-wage jobs and low-skill, low-wage jobs'. Vocational education and training is conceived in mostly productivist terms as the labour market needs skills-based jobs, and VET courses can be used to increase human capital to deliver these skills and meet any skills gaps identified, thereby increasing productivity and economic growth (Bonvin, 2019). Compare this to Newman's concept of a university in 1852, based on the argument that university should be considered as a place of liberal education, that is, that the knowledge imparted should be for its own end and aimed at a philosophical acquisition of knowledge. Even as far back as the 1850s, Newman was attempting to keep emerging industry needs at bay and argued that HE should be about more than being useful, and that universities should teach all branches of knowledge (Barnett, 1990). Arguably, that grand idea of a university has been lost in part, as universities have grappled with policy changes to deliver increased managerial efficiency supported by strong executive leadership, cost effectiveness, institutional responsiveness to socio-economic demands, technological transfer and commercialisation of research, effective utilisation of resources (academic staff in particular), funding diversification (particularly in relation to non-government sources of funds (Meek, 2014)), and the move to significantly higher student contribution fees for arts and humanities degrees in Australia. Recent impacts of these various policy drivers, including the impact of Covid-19 and the lack of support from the government of the day, have included the discontinuation of creative arts, and other courses and the closing down of departments at several universities in Australia (Ross, 2020).

In Australia, the 2008 Bradley Review of HE (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) recommended targets for widening participation to include more students from

low socio-economic backgrounds and forging seamless pathways between post-school educational institutions. In Australia in 2021, 601,901 students were enrolled in a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institute or a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) institution, and 1.2 million students in universities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Universities have had some success in creating pathways for VET students to enter HE through advanced standing and credit transfer, but this is still seen as progressive – there is a lingering 'hierarchy of learning' which places HE above VET in terms of prestige, status, and rigour (Billett et al., 2020). Indeed, although there are arguments for and against either sector, dependent on the points being made, in general, the two systems are trying to accomplish different aims, and society requires both educational types to be working well. The Australian Universities Accord Interim Report has emphasised widening participation, attainment and equity (Australian Government, 2023). Bridging the gap between further and higher education may be one response to these drivers.

Research from Australia, Spain and the US shows that there is an increasing gap between generations where earnings increase for those with HE qualifications. HE graduates earn more than those with VET qualifications, but those with VET qualifications do not necessarily earn more than those with high school qualifications (Billett et al, 2020; Escalonilla, 2022; Torpey, 2021). To create opportunities for underrepresented groups to benefit from HE, a more permeable system between VET and HE has been mooted for many years (e.g., Bathmaker, 2016). However, in many countries, including Australia and the UK, VET funding streams are ever-changing, and dependent on government ideology, leading to a lack of integration. This is not helped by HE funding models, where HEIs are in direct competition with RTOs for government funding. There are now multiple organisations that offer both types of qualification, known as dual-sector providers and including institutions such as RMIT University and Charles Darwin University in Australia, and the Institutes of Technology and other colleges in the UK, that are legislated and funded to teach both VET and HE courses. This cross-sectoral collaboration remains at the forefront of current thinking around tertiary education policy. However, this is still a stepped approach, with students starting in VET and transitioning to HE. Steven Marshall, the South Australian State Premier (2018–2022), heralded the new New South Wales Institute of Applied Technology as a 'third way', proposing that '[m]aybe in 20 or 30 years' time people won't be going to TAFE or uni. We have to remove those distinctions that currently separate people, because the disciplines are all merging' (Ryan, 2021).

These different types of VET and HE models have been conceptualised by Hodge and Knight (2021) who identified four models of integrated VET and HE qualifications. From lower to higher levels of integration, these are 1) the *Endorsed* model, based on unspecified credit toward the HE institution; 2) the *Consecutive* model which offers a 'linked' or 'guaranteed' pathway to HE; 3) the *Concurrent* model which requires dual enrolments in both VET and HE programs; and the 4) *Embedded* model, for which both courses are taught together and both qualifications are awarded on completion of the program (see Figure 1).
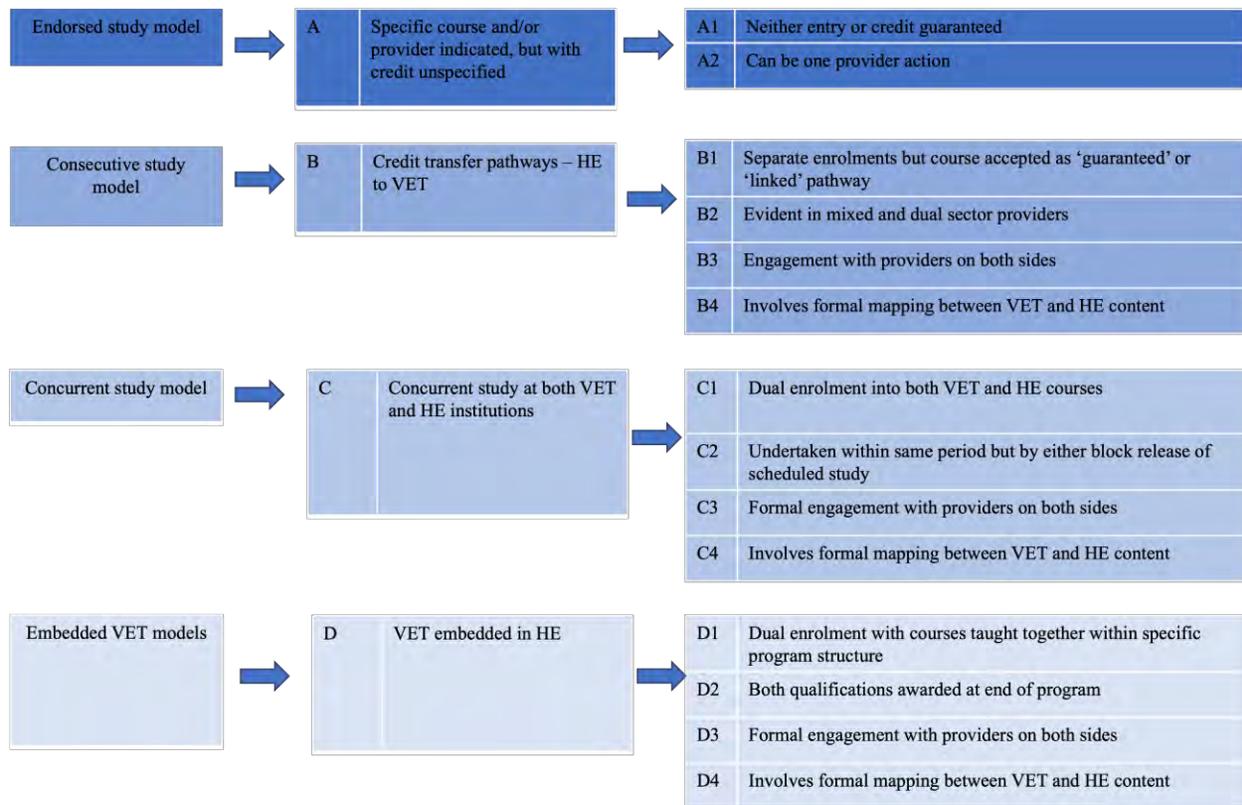
| Endorsed study model | | A | Specific course and/or provider indicated, but with credit unspecified | | A1 | Neither entry or credit guaranteed |
| | | | | | A2 | Can be one provider action |

Consecutive study model		B	Credit transfer pathways – HE to VET		B1	Separate enrolments but course accepted as 'guaranteed' or 'linked' pathway
					B2	Evident in mixed and dual sector providers
					B3	Engagement with providers on both sides
					B4	Involves formal mapping between VET and HE content

Concurrent study model		C	Concurrent study at both VET and HE institutions		C1	Dual enrolment into both VET and HE courses
					C2	Undertaken within same period but by either block release of scheduled study
					C3	Formal engagement with providers on both sides
					C4	Involves formal mapping between VET and HE content

Embedded VET models		D	VET embedded in HE		D1	Dual enrolment with courses taught together within specific program structure
					D2	Both qualifications awarded at end of program
					D3	Formal engagement with providers on both sides
					D4	Involves formal mapping between VET and HE content

Figure 1

VET / HE articulation models (adapted from Hodge and Knight [2021])

VET to HE: What Do We Know?

As noted above, students who successfully complete a VET course can generally enrol in a university course. This has led to scholarly studies examining the transition process of VET students moving into a university setting. Ambrose and Cunnington (2013) found that some students struggled with the more theory-laden units of study, higher standards of academic writing, increased independence of learning, an unfamiliar learning management system, and not knowing where to find support when they needed it. For students with advanced standing, this challenge was compounded as their lecturers expected them to have already acquired higher level academic capabilities. Barber et al. (2015) found that students identified the main issues of adjustment to university from TAFE were lower levels of individual support, larger learning environments, and increased workloads. Barber and Netherton (2018) found that some TAFE students felt they had not developed academic skills, such as essay writing, referencing, sophisticated language use, and critical thinking. Some students also perceived that at university, they were merely anonymous students, and were largely unknown to staff, unlike at TAFE, where lecturers were more hands-on in supporting them through their educational journey. Catterell et al. (2014) found that students reported struggling with both the amount of work that was expected at university and the greater depth expected, often leading to much lower grades than they were used to. These students also indicated that at TAFE, students had much more contact time with their lecturers than they did at university; whereas, at university, there was an expectation that they were more responsible for their own learning. The participants in Catterell et al.'s (2014) study also raised the fact that, although they were told they would be ready for university, they did not feel ready in relation to the needs of academic writing, online learning, and types of

assessment, and that they struggled with a work-life balance. Millman (2013) noted that some students faced challenges such as the demands to manage their own learning and adapting to different workload requirements.

These studies recommend several strategies for improving the transition experience of students such as sharing the experiences of those who have already made that transition (Barber & Netherton, 2018), the creation of bridging, articulation and pre-commencement induction options (Dawson et al., 2013; Millman, 2013), the development of a shared academic culture between sectors (O'Shea et al., 2012), and accessible information on differences between learning environments, learner expectations, and learning and teaching practices (Catterall et al., 2014). Despite obstacles such as 'structural rigidities, differences in curriculum, and differences in pedagogy and assessment' (Bandias et al., 2011, p. 590), as well as significant pressures on staff time and resources (Wheelahan, 2016), there has been a strong case made for a blended approach across the sectors: 'What is required, is improved connections across tertiary education and training to meet economic and social needs which are dynamic and not readily defined by sectoral boundaries" (Bradley et al., 2008 cited in Bandias et al., 2011, p. 591). However, to date, there has been no real blending of VET and HE. This may be to the detriment of students who would do well with a more scaffolded blended approach to education to increase not only their particular industry skillset but also the acquisition of frameworks for deeper critical enquiry. Indeed, a key finding of an Advance HE report into how universities were responding to the UK's Industrial Strategy was that further 'research [into] the impact of separating academic, technical and vocational routes at secondary level and in further/higher education, with particular regard to the successful realisation of the Industrial Strategy' was needed (Coonan & Pratt-Adams, 2018, p. 6).

Employability

Many governments are becoming increasingly concerned about upskilling young people to have 'work-ready' skills, and the re-training of adults into growing job sectors and away from declining industries. This context has led governments in many countries, including in Australia and the UK, to drive the behaviours of VET institutions and HEIs to do more to ensure that graduates have the skills and competencies to be 'work-ready'. This type of activity has become known as the employability agenda. However, there has been critique of the way that employability has been reduced to a list of tasks or attributes that students need to acquire, and which reduces the importance of an ability to consider and appraise disciplinary knowledge (Maloney, 2019; Wheelahan, 2015). Vocational education and training institutions and HEIs have traditionally taken a skills-based approach to the employability agenda, based on increasing human capital through upskilling in transferable skills, either directly through certain units of study such as communication or project management, or indirectly, by embedding skills in units of study, for example, teamwork has been taught through the use of group assignment activities. Work-integrated learning units of study have also become popular and have often been made compulsory in qualifications. However, when UK students were asked to assess the development of career skills in their university programs, only 49% said these were actively developed (a figure that has been stable over the last four years; Coonan & Pratt-Adams, 2018). The Chartered Management Institute (2018) noted the importance of universities in helping students reflect on and maximise the skills they have acquired through their courses, part-time work, and other activities, but it is clear from the statistics above that many students have often not been able to identify the core employability skills being taught or have not been able to express them adequately to potential employers (Daubney, 2020). It is not only students who do not, or cannot, translate their skills development into an employment pitch, only 27% were confident that they could demonstrate this and nearly 80% of employers believe that graduates lack skills and are not work-ready (Chartered Management Institute, 2018). This is at odds with evidence over multiple decades, that HE transforms students into highly

employable individuals, but that students need support to help employers articulate what that transformation is, particularly in non-professional courses (Daubney, 2020).

The Creative Turn

Prior to the Dawkins reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, with the exception of music, the creative arts were, mainly taught in TAFEs and Colleges of Advanced Education. The reforms were put in place to unify the universities and technical colleges, increase Commonwealth-supported student places, and explicitly embed vocational considerations into higher education. One outcome was that the creative arts migrated from VET to HE. Creative arts courses have been a fast-growing area and in the period 2001 to 2013, there was a 72% increase in HE equivalent full-time student load in the creative arts (Brook, 2016). In 2012, there were 51,958 students enrolled in VET in the field of creative arts and 86,547 students enrolled in HE in the field of creative arts (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). In 2020, there was almost a 100% increase in enrolments in creative arts. Considering that approximately 18,500 students transition from creative arts VET courses into creative art higher education courses (based on a 35.5% general transition rate [NCVER, 2021]), there is little published scholarship on creative arts students transitioning from VET to HE.

In Australia, the number of workers in the cultural and creative sectors was approximately 645,000 on a 2016 Census basis (Bureau of Communications and Arts Research, 2020). Of these workers, 40% were engaged on casual or fixed-term contracts. Most businesses in the cultural and creative sectors are classified as 'small' (The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines a small business as a business employing fewer than 20 people) and primarily constituted as owners/managers/sole traders, with 62.6% of businesses having a turnover less than $200k per year. The definition utilised above includes the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) sector and masks some of the precarity associated with the creative industry sector, although there is little consensus on the definition of the 'creative industries'. The UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport defines the creative industries as 'those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skills and talent, and which have a potential for wealth and job creation', which is the definition used by the South Australian government (Government of South Australia, 2020). Employability in the creative industries has been shown to require an entrepreneurial mindset (Maloney, 2019), as individual creative practitioners often balance a creative portfolio career with short-term contracts, gig work, and non-specialist roles for remuneration purposes (Maloney, 2019). Duening (2010) identified five requirements that individuals must meet for entrepreneurial employability: opportunity recognition, design thinking, risk management, resilience, and action orientation. However, studies show that most creative arts students take an instrumental approach to employability with a focus on particular practices, performances and identity work (see for example Ashton, 2011).

The Bachelor of Creative Arts is a flagship course for Flinders University (located in Adelaide) and is an integral part of the South Australian education ecosystem. South Australia has a thriving creative arts sector and is known as 'The Festival State', and in 2019 had a creative industries sector worth $1.2 billion GVA (gross value added; Government of South Australia, 2020). The previous South Australian government created a Creative Industries Strategy which called for 'a state where creative businesses can thrive, a holistic and collaborative approach should be taken to developing and strengthening key elements, from education through to export.' (Government of South Australia, 2020). In 2014, in response to the desire to try a new type of pathway from VET to HE, Flinders University and TAFE SA, created a dual award Bachelor of Creative Arts (BCA) course, utilising the embedded model described in Figure 1. The course has been part of Flinders' offerings for nearly a decade. As hundreds of graduates have now gone on to make contributions to the Creative Arts industries, it is now opportune to assess the course's efficacy and impact. Consequently, this article will establish the profile of the dual award's student cohort, as well as provide an evaluation of the course's performance as measured by student success data and by feedback from course

alumni about the merits of a dual award relative to employment opportunities. This article will outline the impact of the dual award BCA on students through an evaluation of attrition, retention and student satisfaction data. This article aims to answer four questions: 1) Who are our students? 2) What are their experiences of the course? 3) Are our students successful? 4) What can be done to improve the overall experience and success of our student cohort?

Method

The researchers gained ethics approval from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee before the study commenced (project 5346, approved 10 June 2022). This study adopts a case study approach, a research method commonly employed in qualitative research (Yazan, 2015). Case studies are able to provide insights into a phenomenon within a particular context, through various data sources, revealing the various facets of that phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In the context of this study, various data sources have been mined in order to create a rich case study. Firstly, quantitative data on the student cohort including demographics, enrolment numbers, attrition, student experience surveys, and grade distributions has been extracted from Flinders University's analytics (Flinders Intelligence Portal). Secondly, qualitative data from Course Coordinators via personal communication has been included. This set of data is gathered through questions emailed to Course Coordinators seeking their perspective on dual-award students' performance and outcomes, as opposed to single-award students. Thirdly, 302 graduates (2016-2019) of the program were contacted by email and sent an online survey that collected both quantitative and qualitative data about graduate employability.

Braun et al. (2020) argue that the data gathered through this type of survey may offer a more diverse range of experiences than other methods. The quantitative data obtained was analysed through simple descriptive statistics, whereas qualitative data was subjected to an inductive thematic analysis, as outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006), to identify recurring themes through coding. The graduate employability survey included 10 questions. The survey asked about the participants' past and current employment situation (i.e., how many jobs they had after graduation, in which industry, and whether respondents were self-employed or not). Participants were also asked if they thought the BCA program provided them with the right generic and practical skills that allowed them to transition into the workplace; if the degree built enough industry connections; and what added value having a university degree brought in addition to TAFE training. Furthermore, participants were invited to identify their current field of employment as well as their level of income. Therefore, although the case study approach is considered a qualitative research method, this study will result in a more positivist stance being taken within an overarching qualitative methodology. As the authors are mixed methods researchers with a pragmatic worldview (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2011), this blending of qualitative and quantitative approaches ensures that the best approach is chosen to answer the research questions detailed above and develop a rich case study.

Case Study: Bachelor of Creative Arts Dual Award

The case study presented in this paper outlines a dual-award Bachelor of Creative Arts which has run for nine years where students are concurrently enrolled at Flinders University and TAFE SA (Figure 1). This dual award program model has been named an 'embedded study' model of a VET/HE course (Fig. 1). The BCA VET/HE has enrolled approximately 350 students every year between 2014 and 2022 in four specialisations: Costume Design, Dance, Fashion, and Visual Arts. Anchored in practice and skills-based training, the dual award concurrent study model embeds TAFE SA training package awards (Diploma or Advanced Diploma) within a Bachelor level course.

Defining the student cohort

This section reviews Key Accountability Measures (KAMs) and Operational Performance Measures (OPMS) available at Flinders University for the four VET specialisations of the BCA. This data aims to define the specificities of the student cohort. More specifically, it will provide information on student demographics, enrolment trends, attrition, success, teaching quality and student evaluation of teaching, graduate employment, and grade distribution. The data has been supplied by the Planning and Analytical Services function of Flinders University.

Enrolment and demographics across the VET specialisations

In 2022, the BCA (all specialisations) had 811 enrolments. The degree intake has an upward trajectory and in the last five years enrolments have increased by 13%. The larger specialisation in terms of enrolment was the BCA (Visual Effects and Entertainment Design) with 312 enrolments, accounting for 38.5% of the degree's total load. The four VET specialisations had an enrolment totalling 329 in 2022, slightly less than in 2021, which counted 338 enrolments, with Dance having the lowest enrolment levels (35 in 2022).

In 2022, commencing students accounted for 34% of the cohort. Females constituted 85% of the group, of which 99% of students were Australian. One drawback of the dual award course is that, as students are concurrently enrolled with two institutions, international students are ineligible to enrol. Students enrolled in the VET specialisations were generally school leavers: 72% of them were aged 24 and under, 23% of the cohort were aged 25 to 40, and 11% were over 40. Only 1% of students declared an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity. Except for the gender category, for which there is a higher representation of TAFE SA female students, demographic information was consistent with that of the BCA (all specialisations) demographics as well as College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences demographics more broadly. The gender difference is more pronounced when the BCA dual award specialisations are compared with the BCA non-dual award specialisations for which males and females account for 50%, mostly due to the higher number of male enrolments in the Visual Effects and Entertainment Design specialisation.

In terms of their location, the cohort was predominantly urban as 86% of students declared residing in cities. The near entirety of the student population was local to the state as 96% of students indicated South Australia to be their state of residence. The cohort's postcode distribution suggests that 44% of students were classified as having medium Social Economic Status, 33% high SES and 24% low SES.

Globally, enrolments have been fluctuating across the four specialisations in the last five years, though Dance and Fashion have tended to be more stable than Costume Design and Visual Arts. In the last five-year period to 2022, enrolments in Costume Design peaked in 2020 with 57 students. Similarly, Visual Arts' enrolments peaked in 2020 with 110 enrolments. It should be noted that 2020 was an unusual year for HE enrolments in Australia, with the effect of Covid-19 increasing enrolments as employment opportunities were scarce. All four specialisations have had significantly higher attrition rates compared with the University's average rate of 11%.

Table 1

Demographics comparison between BCA VET Pathway specialisations and BCA all specialisations (2021)

	BCA all (%)	BCA dual award only (%)
Gender		
Females	65	87
Males	35	12
Citizenship		
Australian	97	99
Other	3	1
Age		
<20	39	32
20-24	46	42
25-39	11	12
30-39	9	10
40+	5	9
Indigenous Status		
Non-indigenous	97	99
Indigenous	2	1
Home Location		
Cities	81	83
Regional	17	15
Remote	1	2
State of residence		
South Australia	92	95
Interstate	8	5
Home location postcode (SES)		
High	33	31
Medium	46	45
Low	21	24

Historically, such a discrepancy has been observed across the creative and performing arts, especially in terms of commencing attrition. 2020 attrition data indicates that Visual Arts had the highest commencing attrition with 41.2% (15.3% Continuing), while Dance had the lowest Commencing attrition with 9.1%. Fashion had Commencing attrition rates of slightly above 25%. With the exception of Dance which had a Continuing attrition rate of the 25%, all other specialisations had Continuing attrition rates around or below 15%, which stands "above expectation" by Flinders University's standards. It is interesting to note that Dance with a low commencing attrition rate and a high continuing attrition rate curbs the trend of the other three

specialisations. This anomaly could be explained by the typically low enrolments in the Dance program. An analysis of attrition in relation to postcodes indicates that in 2021 the Low Socio-Economic Status category had the lowest Attrition rate at 16% compared with the Medium and High groups (both at 23%). Similarly, the success rate was higher for Low SES (90%) than it was for the other two groups. When attrition is measured over a longer period of time, the difference between categories tends to fade.

Success rates

2020 Success rates (success rate measures academic performance by comparing the equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL) of units passed to the EFTSL of units attempted) for all specialisations were above 81% and all deemed "above expectations" by Flinders University. This means that the vast majority of students who have attempted their units of study, tend to complete the BCA. The highest success rate in the VET Pathway cohort was achieved by Costume Design with 91.9%.

Overall quality of education experience

This measure is provided through the Student Experience Survey. In this category, Visual Arts far outperformed the other specialisations with a score of 84.6%. However, Dance scored 50% and Fashion 60%, which stands below the University's benchmark for meeting expectations. The data was not available for Costume Design. This is possible that, due to the low number of enrolments in this specialisation, no student completed the survey.

Student evaluations of teaching

Students Evaluations of Teaching scores are obtained by surveying students' opinions on the quality of teaching in the unit of studies in which they are enrolled. The scores obtained for the units of study/lectures taught in the dual award in the last four years (excluding Semester 2, 2022) are higher compared to that of the University (except for 2019). They were 84% positive in 2020, and 85% positive in 2021 (compared to 80% for both years for the University). Interestingly, it must be noted that VET specialisation students' rating of the statement asking about the statement "I developed my ability to think critically and analytically" was significantly lower than the average score for the University. In 2021, for example, it was only 61% positive compared to 83% for the University.

Grade distribution

An analysis of the grades obtained by first year VET specialisation students has been carried out based on *COMS1001 Academic and Professional Communication*, a first-year core unit of study, with a strong emphasis on academic skills and in which BCA students must enrol. The aim of this analysis was to identify any differences in academic performance (refer to Figures 2 and 3). This unit of study was chosen as the basis for our analysis as it introduces students to critical thinking, reading and writing, presentation skills, as well as argument development. Table 2 shows the distribution of grades in COMS1001 in percentages for semester 1 2022 and semester 1 2021. The grade distribution is compared to the whole COMS1001 cohort and to the average grade distribution across all Flinders University's topics. Distribution data indicates that a higher proportion of VET specialisation students fail COMS1001 compared to the whole cohort (nearly twice as much in 2021). Conversely, a significantly smaller proportion of the VET cohort obtained High Distinction grades in the topic in both 2021 and 2022 (less than half in both cases). For 2021, the proportion of VET cohort obtaining a Pass was twice as high as for the total COMS1001 cohort.

In comparison, Figures 4 and 5 provides the grade distribution of the two cohorts from a core creative arts units of study*CREA1001 Introduction to the Creative Arts*. This unit of study introduces BCA students to oral and written communication 'necessary for active creative artists in contemporary Australia' (2023, Flinders Handbook). For the VET/HE students enrolled in this unit of study, again there are more Fails compared with the cohort more broadly, but the difference is less pronounced compared to COMS1001. The VET/HE students also obtained appreciably more Distinctions and High Distinctions compared with the general cohort.
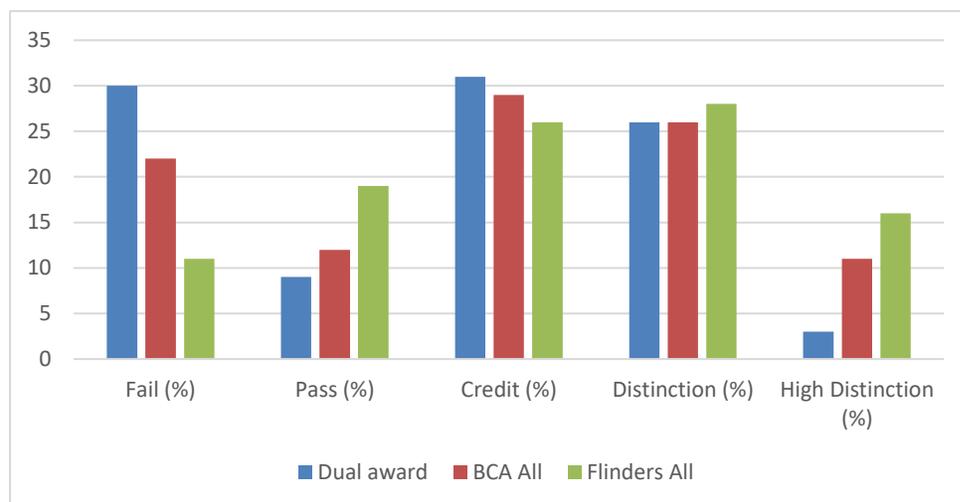

Figure 2

Grade distribution data of the VET/HE students versus the overall cohort of a core first-year communications unit of study (COMS1001 Semester 1 2022).
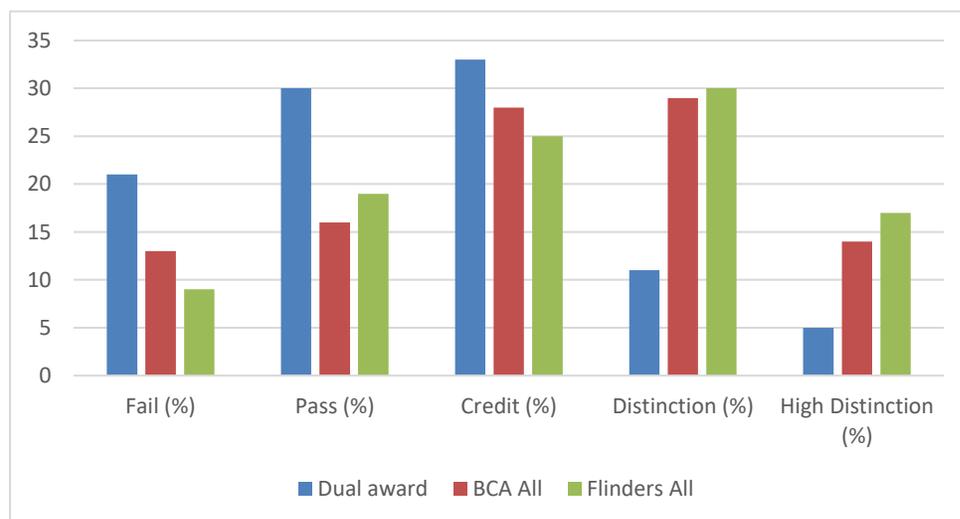

Figure 3

Grade distribution data of the VET/HE students versus the overall cohort of a core first-year communications unit of study (COMS1001 Semester 2 2022).
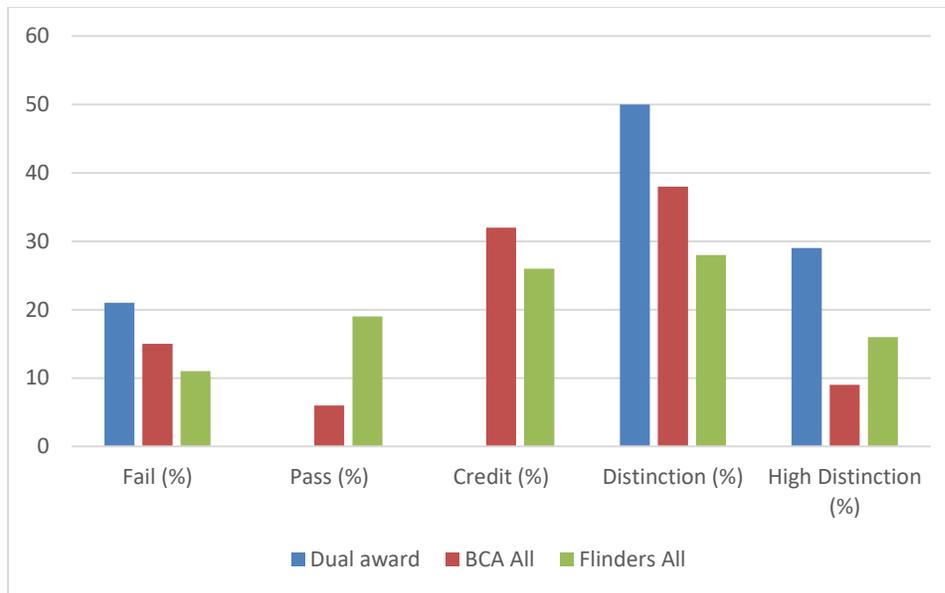
Figure 4

Grade distribution data of the VET/HE students versus the overall cohort, of a core first-year creative arts unit of study (CREA1001, Semester 1 2022).
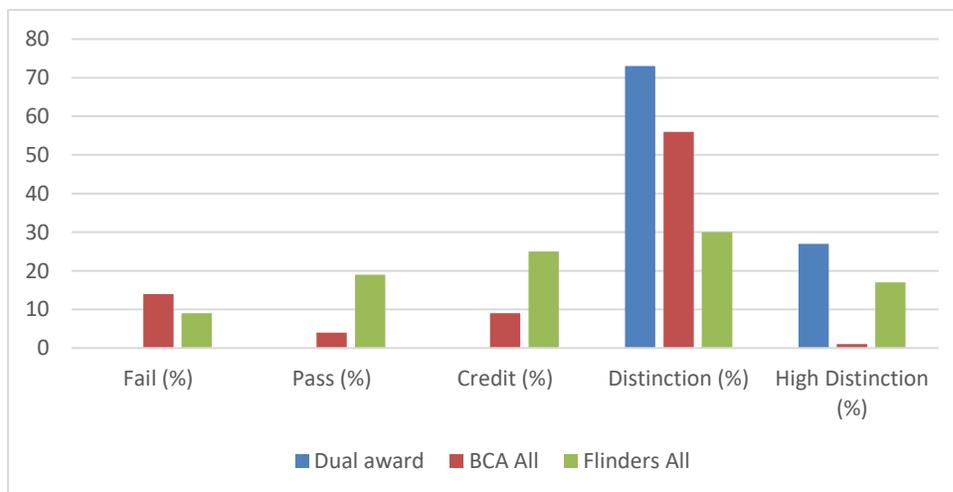

Figure 5

Grade distribution data of the VET/HE students versus the overall cohort, of a core first-year creative arts unit of study (CREA1001, Semester 2 2022). Further to the grade distribution data, we obtained comments from the COMS1001 and CREA1001 coordinators, which provided qualitative insights into the difference between the VET/HE cohorts. The COMS1001 Coordinator was very aware of the difference between both cohorts highlighting that VET students tended to be theory-adverse and more practically oriented than their HE counterparts. VET students sometimes didn't see the point of having to complete COMS1001, and absenteeism in the cohort was common as a result. Within the dual-award student group, Fashion students were deemed to be particularly at risk of failing the unit of study. They were described by the Coordinator as not being interested in developing academic skills, and what they were most focused on was to be able

to create products. The COMS1001 Coordinator reported that approximately 30% of VET students didn't complete the unit of study and that he was considering designing a special version of the unit of study that would include more practically oriented tasks and adapted materials more relevant to creative arts students to improve retention.

Graduates' perceptions of the usefulness of the dual degree

Twenty-one alumni responded to the online survey seeking information about the personal benefits derived from obtaining a university degree in terms of employment prospects. In terms of their professional outlook, the alumni surveyed indicated that they all had had several jobs since graduating. Sixty-two % of the cohort declared having had more than two different jobs. However, these jobs have not necessarily been in the creative arts. When asked to identify their current job title, over 50% of the respondents indicated they had jobs in sectors that did not relate to their field of study and/or were entry-level positions such as 'retail assistant', 'consumer finance', 'high school teacher', 'buying assistant' and 'nursing assistant'. This points to the challenges graduates experienced in terms of finding or retaining employment in the artistic discipline studied at TAFE and university. Those who mentioned employment in creative arts disciplines, listed professions such as 'seamstress', 'jewellery designer', 'dressmaker', and 'freelance artist', which are professions that may not necessarily require a university degree. None of the respondents indicated that they were business owners. Concerning the level of income, 76% of the respondents reported that they earned no more than $50,000. Only one respondent stated to earn more than $85,000. It should be noted that the Australian median personal income was $52,338 for the 2019-20 financial year (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

When asked whether the dual award course provided enough practical and transferable skills to transition into work, only 50% of the cohort responded positively. Similarly, in terms of the acquisition of useful transferable skills, 57% responded positively. Broadly, these results indicate that respondents were not overly positive about the usefulness of skills they acquired during the studies. These results were corroborated by the comments respondents made in relation to how the course could have been improved, in their opinion. Indeed, the majority of comments point to a lack of opportunity in the course for industry placements and work experience, which made the transition to employment challenging. One of the respondents noted:

> *I studied fashion, we weren't even taught how to put a portfolio together let alone a chance for anything to help us get into the field. We weren't offered an opportunity for placement, I met no one from the industry through that degree, I wouldn't even know who to approach regarding getting a job.*

Another related thematic strand in the responses provided by participants was the lack of connections with industry and the need for more networking opportunities. One respondent stated:

> *Once the degree finishes it's all up to you to try and work and meet industry people. Job placement and more training in how to network and build those connections.*

The respondents were also asked about the added value of having a university degree. On the positive side, respondents thought that having a degree provided better employment prospects. It provided a number of broad skills not necessarily acquired at TAFE SA (such as self-presentation and research, in particular) and it gave them a deeper understanding of their field from a theoretical and practical point of view. It also provided the opportunity for further study. In their comments, a participant summed up the benefits drawn from completing a degree:

> *Maybe it was initially my personal academic ambitions to take an advantage of the offer to study at university, but I've gained far beyond; to know my work value and foster new way [sic] of presenting myself for the start, then desire for further study - it completely open up [sic] and expanded the whole new world with its opportunities and worldview, if it is a correct way to describe this short experience with study at the university.*

However, many comments indicated that having a degree was not necessarily perceived as an advantage in the job market. Some respondents stated that having a degree did not help them at all. Other respondents indicated that their university degree had allowed them to transition to non-creative arts professions. Summarising negative sentiments, one respondent wrote:

> *I can't really see much of an advantage, other than it was more time to develop skills further. The theoretical knowledge was quite superficial, and only marginally related to practical applications.*

Discussion

This research study has answered four questions. Who are our students? We now know that the dual award specialisations have significantly more female students, due in large part to the size of the Fashion intake, which is predominantly female. The dual-award specialisations also have slightly more low SES students which may be attributed to the slightly different intake that the partnership with TAFE SA attracts, and more part-time students than average. However, as most of the specialisations can only be studied at degree level through this course in South Australia (with some exceptions), these students could not have chosen to attend any other university. Furthermore, we aimed to answer the question 'what are our students' experiences of the course like'? For this analysis, we did a deep dive into university data and made some interesting discoveries.

Firstly, the attrition rate of commencing students is concerning as it is much higher than the University's average. These findings do align with other studies' findings; for example, a Gratton Institute report on attrition found that students in the creative arts were less likely than non-creative arts students to leave without finishing their course (Cherastidtham & Norton, 2018). Completion rates are influenced by student characteristics (gender, age, part-time status [Cherastidtham & Norton, 2018]) and once these are controlled for, creative arts students still had a higher risk than would be expected of leaving their course. A Victoria University report noted that 'students were more likely to be retained if they were enrolled in a vocationally orientated course, with a clear career path following graduation' (Victoria University, 2013) and, as indicated from our dual award alumni data, creative arts graduates do not have one set career path. This higher than the University average attrition rate could be related to the established VET to HE transition effect, which has been well documented in the literature for more traditional pathway models (as discussed above). This transition shock normally occurs when VET graduates enrol directly into the second year of an HE course, due to advanced standing or credit transfer, and who often have an academic skills gap (Delly, 2016). We suggest that some commencing students in the Flinders University/TAFE SA dual award have an equivalent 'shock' as they need to engage immediately with HE units of study as well as Diploma / Advanced Diploma units of study.

Secondly, the continuing student attrition is much lower than the University's average. Interestingly, the data collected in this study shows that low SES students also have a lower attrition rate than Medium and High SES categories. We postulate that lower continuing student and SES student attrition may be due to the high number of face-to-face hours delivered at TAFE in the arts studios, and that this high level of peer and teacher contact time mediates the effect of attrition. The students who did not attrit completed their

course successfully at rates above the Flinders University average. Again, this may be due to both the investment in their creative practice and/or the high number of contact hours.

Thirdly, our dual-award students have lower average grades for units containing professional writing, which supports the findings of Lumley and Lloyd (2018) in their study of student attainment in the creative arts. Hoadley-Maidment (2000, p.170) argued that in education 'communication is not simply for talking about practice but also a vital way of carrying our practice.' Although students in the dual model described above have to pass their core communications unit, one recommendation for improvement is to tailor the unit to creative practitioners' interests more closely, which we hypothesise would increase interest in and thereby attainment of the required skills. At cohort level, students in this course clearly do well when they can apply their practice to a unit of study more aligned with their creativity as our findings show that in CREA1001 the dual-award students gain more Distinctions and High Distinctions than the cohort at large. When students complete their 'Student Evaluation of Teaching' survey, the TAFE SA unit of study lecturers score above the University average. However, the students rank their development to think critically and analytically lower than average, which may be due to their lack of engagement with non-practice units of study, as evidenced by the COMS1001 Coordinator's personal communication. Alternatively, their lack of engagement generally may result in their lack of engagement with COMS1001.

Fourthly, we aimed to answer the question as to whether our students were successful. The findings from the alumni point to a mixed picture when it comes to the respondents' assessment of the usefulness of a dual TAFE/university degree. It appears that a small minority of them see some benefits in having a degree, especially in terms of self-development and in terms of the acquisition of broad transferable skills. Few benefits, however, have emerged from the data in terms of providing necessary industry training and connections that would support graduates to transition into employment in the creative arts field. Furthermore, the data indicates that having a university degree doesn't guarantee finding and keeping a job in the profession in which respondents were trained, as more than 50% of them currently work in non-creative arts fields.

Fifthly, we asked, what could be done to improve the overall experience and success of our student cohort. This study raised several issues which, if addressed, will improve the student experience. Our recommendations are:

- That first-year HE units of study should be re-imagined taking into account creative arts' students characteristics, needs, prospects and expectations by integrating activities and materials based on their creative interests.

- Dedicated tutorials for the HE first year units of study should be created for the Flinders/TAFE students which would include materials relevant to their creative practice as well as additional contract time to improve interest and retention.

- Work Integrated Learning units of study should be added as core to the BCA specialisations in order to provide direct exposure to industry, as well as foster connections with key stakeholders who could provide further advice and guidance on employability.

- An entrepreneurial unit of study should be made as a degree capstone to provide support in setting up and running a small business, maximising opportunities, applying for grants, and managing risk and resilience.

- Regular networking opportunities with industry should be established. This could take the form of an integrated mentoring scheme that would allow each completing student to be mentored by an established industry professional.

Limitations and future research

There was a very low response rate from alumni, so the self-report data on employability outcomes may be skewed, for example, those who are not working in their field may have been more inclined to let us know. In addition, we did not include data from Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) as this gives overall full-time employment data for the creative arts, but we know that most creative artists take time to establish themselves and will be working multiple jobs to support their creative practice or will have set-up their own small business. A second limitation is that we have not taken the current students' views into consideration. By undertaking a qualitative study on this cohort, we may have been able to gather more nuanced data to triangulate the quantitative historical data. Future research should take this into consideration. Future research should also evaluate changes to student success based on the improvements recommended above.

Conclusion

This article has presented a novel embedded dual VET/HE award, the Bachelor of Creative Arts, administered by Flinders University and TAFE SA. Through a case study approach, it has presented the students' stories of challenges and successes. Clearly, the successful completion of this degree by the large majority of students indicates that there are benefits associated with offering the combined creative practice and theoretical focus of the specialisations. However, this study has identified significant issues that need to be addressed in the future. These are twofold: 1) the provision of better support to commencing students to support them to transition to the more autonomous manner needed to successfully navigate HE, as previous scholarly literature has also indicated; 2) the need for more support to ensure Flinders / TAFE SA graduate 'work ready' students who have had opportunities for placements, networking, and entrepreneurial skills training. It must be acknowledged that we have presented a case study of a single program; consequently, this work cannot be generalised to other similar programs. However, while this study is not yet generalisable, it has provided insights into the benefits and challenges of an embedded model, which could serve as a valuable reference point for other tertiary institutions to embed a dual award program to increase the breadth of their offerings, and to potentially increase their widening participation cohort, which may be important due to the outcomes of the Higher Education Accord in Australia. In the longer term, as we improve, monitor and evaluate our program, the Bachelor of Creative Arts at Flinders could be a blueprint for universities considering implementing integrated VET/HE awards. However, this work indicates that, even with an embedded dual award model of VET/HE, students still struggle with the HE segment of the degree, even though units of HE study are introduced in their first year. Further studies investigating dual award VET/HE programs in Australia and internationally are needed to broader our outlook, establish comparisons, and produce generalisable data.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s). We hereby confirm that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not responsible for this research output and that no AI assistance, including but not limited to ChatGPT and Bing AI, was used during this study. Consequently, AI is omitted from the acknowledgements section of this study.

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