



How a 'tertiary education' sector
impacts on the way NCVER
thinks about research and
statistics

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NCVER is an independent body responsible for collecting, managing and analysing, evaluating and communicating research and statistics about vocational education and training (VET).

NCVER's inhouse research and evaluation program undertakes projects which are strategic to the VET sector. These projects are developed and conducted by the NCVER's research staff and are funded by NCVER. This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector.

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About the research



How a 'tertiary education' sector impacts on the way NCVER thinks about research and statistics

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The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) was asked by TAFE Directors Australia to consider, in a discussion paper for their conference held on the Gold Coast in September 2009, how a 'tertiary education' sector impacts on the way we think about research and statistics.

It has been apparent for some time that it makes little sense to consider vocational and higher education research issues in isolation. A research and information base covering the whole of the tertiary education sector would better reflect the realities of the system and provide a more coherent platform for policy. In addition, an integrated approach to statistical collections is desirable, taking into account the need for a common core set of standards and a unique student identifier to assist in the coherence of data.

Tom Karmel

Managing Director

How NCVER thinks about research and statistics

The Review of Australian Higher Education (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2008) proposed, among other things:

That the Australian Government and the governments of the states and territories agree to expand the purpose and role of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research so that it covers the whole tertiary sector.

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) would be very pleased to undertake a broader role if governments decide to accept this recommendation.

The higher education and vocational education sectors each have distinct and important roles to play. For too long, however, they been treated as if they were quite separate, at odds with the reality that many providers offer courses from both sectors, and that large numbers of people move between the sectors in order to satisfy their education and training needs. In terms of employment, graduates from both sectors share many skills in common and often compete for jobs in the labour market.

A research and information base covering the whole of the tertiary education sector would better reflect these realities and would provide a more coherent platform for policy in the tertiary education sector.

Research

It has been apparent for some time that it makes little sense to consider vocational education and training (VET) and higher education research issues in isolation. Reflecting this, NCVER has produced a range of research reports in recent years, both commissioned and from our own researchers, that have adopted a tertiary education focus. Indeed our new monograph series has just been released with the first cab off the rank being *Higher education in TAFE* by Leesa Wheelahan and colleagues.

There is no question that the VET sector is facing further significant change with the trend towards an integrated tertiary education sector. This has given rise to a reconsideration of governance arrangements and will call for greater attention to systems of credit transfer and collaboration.

It is expected our research emphasis would most likely be on institutional and systems issues and the links between tertiary education, the labour market and society as a whole. Student motivations, aspirations, experiences and outcomes will continue to shape the research agenda.

While a tertiary education focus would be a forward-looking step, it is important that both VET and higher education issues receive due attention. We need to build on the good work done for the VET sector rather than subsume it in any sense.

Importantly, NCVER manages the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) competitive grants program. This program is open to all researchers (except NCVER staff) who submit proposals against the national research priorities endorsed by ministers. This program could easily be expanded to cover the tertiary education sector as a whole. The current set of VET priorities cover 2008–10, and it is timely that NCVER is about to undertake comprehensive consultations with stakeholders to develop a new set of ministerial endorsed research priorities for 2010 onwards.

Another area of change in NCVER is the VOCED research database. This comprehensive database of research has an international reputation and focuses on vocational education and training. NCVER has always collected higher education material, although we can in no way claim to be comprehensive in this area. We are looking to broaden this research database to encompass more higher education research. The organisation has been given some funding from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to broaden the areas of workforce needs and skills development in particular.

In addition, NCVER is currently undertaking a project for the Australian Qualifications Framework Council to review current data collection and reporting mechanisms for vocational education and training and higher education and test their effectiveness in monitoring the movement of students between the sectors. The project will analyse trends in student movement between the sectors, and the institutions and discipline areas in which a substantial number of students gain credit for previous study; those institutions and discipline areas that appear to have little or no students gaining credit will also be analysed. Recommendations will also be made to assist the development of more effective data mechanisms to monitor and foster improvements in student movement. The work will be completed by the end of September 2009.

Statistics

Policy-makers are interested in students, their participation in education and training and outcomes from it. We see two major issues: firstly, making sense of the complex institutional arrangements and, secondly, not losing sight of the fact that education is for the individual—it's not just about counting institutional activity. We are in a poor position at the moment to measure this.

For example, take diploma courses where there is one dual-sector qualification under the Australian Qualifications Framework. Diplomas are mostly delivered by VET providers, but some are delivered by universities. There are no significant differences in the qualifications delivered by the sectors. Yet currently those delivered by the VET sector are reported in official VET statistics and those delivered by universities are not. Similarly, there is a small number of bachelor courses delivered by TAFE. These are included in VET statistics but not in higher education statistics.

What is needed to make sense of the education, participation and achievement of individual students is an integrated tertiary education statistical system. This would require a common core set of standards. It would be relatively straightforward to populate a tertiary education student database from different collections. This database would then be a resource for policy-makers and researchers. An integrated approach is required, not an approach which appends higher education statistics to the VET statistics or vice versa.

Some differences between arrangements in the two sectors would need to be accommodated in building an integrated tertiary education statistical system (vocational education and training delivering units and modules, whereas universities work on the basis of units of study). Such differences are quite minor.

The bigger issue is the current scope of the VET collection: it covers the publicly funded part of the sector and this scope needs to be broadened before we have comprehensive coverage of the whole sector. This is one area receiving considerable attention at the moment.

A unique student identifier would greatly assist the coherence of the data. This has remained a challenge for the VET sector for a number of years. The higher education sector is better off in this respect, with the tracking of students required for income-contingent loans. It is pointless to look at a unique student identifier for vocational education and training alone. There are technology solutions that can assist with this process, with the barriers to implementing being mainly political. The Australian Information & Communication Technology in Education Committee (AICTEC) is currently taking the lead in investigating a cross-sectoral approach. This is something we strongly encourage.

Reference

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2008, *Review of Australian Higher Education final report*, Denise Bradley, chair, DEEWR, Canberra, viewed 8 March 2009, http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review_one%20document_02.pdf>.