

The place of VET in the tertiary sector

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The place of VET in the tertiary sector

The utilitarian spirit of Australian education has meant that since the nineteenth century the notion of tertiary education has embraced all post-school learning, delivered in sandstone universities or working men's institutes or on the job.

This is not the definition the peak bodies TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) and Universities Australia (UA) proposed in late April. They see:

‘Tertiary’ education qualifications as those at diploma level and above, including where these qualifications may embed pathways from the qualification level below.

In other words, they are taking the point of intersection on the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) between the vocational education and training (VET) and university sectors, with both having an eye to getting more federal government funding to assist them to meet the Council of Australian Governments’ (COAG) targets for increasing the number of Australians with higher-level qualifications.

TAFE Directors Australia and Universities Australia say their definition is ‘generally’ consistent with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). At the same time, it is a departure from the understanding of tertiary education that has prevailed in Australia for the past two centuries, which has embraced the entire gamut of adult learning. In their proposal, they are explicit about certificates I and II, which they see as more equivalent to secondary school. They are silent about certificates III and IV, except to suggest these can be a stepping stone to a diploma ... but not, it seems, to a degree.

Yet the certificate III is a tertiary qualification in its own right, in high demand as the basis on which our tradespeople, technicians and others launch their careers. To concentrate attention on higher-level qualifications is not the way to encourage commencements in the trades and to address the demand for skills.

The gist of my argument is that all vocational qualifications should be included in the definition of tertiary education. While the definition proposed by TAFE Directors Australia and Universities Australia questions the place of certificates I and II, and it is true that these do not lead directly to skilled jobs, they can be the pathway for people who have left school to re-enter the educational system. When viewed like this, they have the right to maintain their place in the Australian definition of tertiary education.

I am sceptical about a system that concentrates on acquiring higher qualifications to the exclusion of other credentials or indeed unaccredited skills. But that’s the current reality. So let’s consider where vocational education providers fit in this expanding higher end of the tertiary education market. Will the demand for higher qualifications grow in the area of diplomas or in degrees (still primarily the preserve of universities)?

The common theme in the notion of vocational training is the imparting of special skills required in a job. In a sophisticated society these can be at a very high level, which explains why medicine, dentistry and veterinary science remain firmly in the purview of the university. In a more seamless tertiary education sector, how will VET providers gain their share of degree market?

The applied nature of much vocational education and training and its links to industry are clearly relevant to many of today’s degrees. Not surprisingly, it is in these types of courses (nursing, management, food and hospitality) that the ten TAFE institutes offering degrees have chosen to specialise—knowing it would be futile to fight entrenched tradition and try to offer medicine. But they could look further and teach degree courses in journalism, marketing, accounting and other such clearly vocationally oriented subjects.

TAFE institutes understand their market and the demographic of their students. But as Wheelahan et al.'s study, *Higher education in TAFE* published by NCVER in 2009 suggests, their success in the world of degrees will depend not only on choosing the right subjects to teach but on different industrial arrangements, attention to workforce development and to their image.

On the last point, the flurry of activity aroused by the COAG targets, particularly for increasing the number of low socioeconomic status students in universities, will assist. We are already witnessing greater cooperation between the VET sector and universities. In the area of credit transfer this has been underway for a long time, but without real systemic improvements. This has been in major part because of the gulf in understanding and respect for the different pedagogical approaches in the two types of institutions. But articulation from VET to higher education is not the only way to work together. Other avenues being explored are franchising and blended-delivery models. Let's hope the alliance between Universities Australia and TAFE Directors Australia builds the momentum towards the sort of collaboration that goes beyond the VET sector being merely a feeder for the universities.

VET providers should not, however, lose sight of their role in workplace learning. Seventy-five per cent of learning at work is informal and most of this should probably remain so. Yet, we do know that for many of those trapped in low-paid jobs or who can't get a job, it is foundation skills that are lacking. These are skills people acquire through formal training. I welcome the federal government's budget announcement to look seriously into adult literacy and numeracy and expect that the solutions it finds will involve VET teaching at the low end of the qualifications scale.

At the other end of the spectrum is a requirement to encourage people to keep acquiring the skills they need and to offer our highly skilled tradespeople and technicians the opportunity for continuing professional education. Such learning does not have to translate into a higher qualification. Irrespective of government targets, we will have to keep skilling our workforce and our citizens: this to my mind is what tertiary education means.