

Faces in tertiary places and spaces: experiences of learning in both higher education and VET

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The development in today's society of knowledge workers for tomorrow is of critical importance. Worldwide, there is considerable interest in the respective roles of higher education (HE) and vocational education and training (VET) in building human capability. This paper is designed to provoke such questions as: what kinds of learning places and spaces are Australia's HE and VET institutions? and how do individuals make sense of the learning and teaching in these sectors? The paper focuses on the experiences of those learners who have studied in both sectors – faces who are therefore in a unique position to analyse them as learning places and spaces.

A survey was undertaken of 556 learners who commenced study in technical and further education (TAFE) and universities in South Australia. Subsequent interviews with 69 of these students explored their educational histories in greater depth. The data reflected important differences in the learners' experiences within the sectors.

The findings can provide policy-makers and institutional leaders with insights into how best to position these two sectors to the advantage of learners with changing needs, expectations and desired pathways. They suggest that greater recognition could be afforded to the different but increasingly complementary roles that HE and VET play.

Introduction

There is considerable national and international interest in the respective roles of higher education (HE) and vocational education and training (VET) in building human capability. This theme is particularly significant in today's society where development of knowledge workers for tomorrow is of increasing importance. The relationship between these sectors, for example, was a priority of the Maastricht Communique in 2004 in the European Union. It was the subject of the 25th Agora in 2007 of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), and has formed a key theme in several recent journal editions. It is also a key theme in the Australian Government's (2008) *Review of Australian higher education* that is currently taking place.

In Australia, the HE and VET sectors both provide opportunities for tertiary education. They are different in missions, structures and funding regimes, as well as in number of students, age profile of students, and coverage of fields of education and equity groups (Karmel & Nguyen 2003). However, though different, they are not distinct and they display increasing overlap (Australian Government 2008:37). This paper aims to provoke such questions as: what kinds of learning places and spaces *are* Australia's HE and VET institutions? and how do individuals make sense of the learning and teaching in these sectors? The paper focuses on the experiences of those South Australian learners who have studied in *both* sectors

– faces who are therefore in a unique position to analyse them as learning places and spaces.

There is a growing, though still small, body of research on learner transitions within and between educational sectors. Much of it focuses on the transition from school to post-secondary settings (Hillman 2005) or work (Muller & Gangi 2003, OECD 2000), and particularly on policy and structural matters such as articulation and curriculum (Harreveld 2005, Hall & Thomas 2005, Keating 2006), sectoral boundaries (Young 2006, Grubb 2006, Gallacher 2006) and accreditation (West 2006). There is relatively little empirical attention paid to *learners'* experiences, especially related to learning and teaching, and what there is, tends to concentrate within one sector (e.g. Laanan 2007, Lowe & Gayle 2007, Auburn 2007, Kraus *et al.* 2005, Anderson 2005). While the Australian Government's (2008:39) recent discussion paper refers to the interface between the sectors being manifested in

credit transfer and articulation arrangements, dual sector universities, multi-sector campuses, some limited sharing of infrastructure, some research collaboration and increasing overlap in qualifications offered ..., little is known about the effect of these relationships on the quality of provision, satisfaction of students or the efficiency of the system.

Hence the focus in this paper is on (a) learners' experiences (rather than bureaucratic or literary opinions), (b) learning and teaching (rather than structures and policies) and (c) two-way transitions between VET and HE (rather than transitions from school to work or further education). In so doing, it explores issues related to 'boundary-crossing', to relationships between these two educational sectors, to structure and agency, and to perceptions of sectoral status.

Crossing boundaries

Crossing boundaries applies to almost all walks of life. Whether considering national, community, organisational or disciplinary borders, crossing affects language, relationships, cultural habits, citizenship and identity. Potential benefits are that such crossing can lead to the cutting edges where change, innovation, discovery are more likely to be generated and where there is a breaking out from silos or ruts. Potential dangers are that crossing can lead to culture/role conflict, tension and confusion. In the case of learners, boundary-crossing may occur in many ways – in this paper, however, the focus is limited to educational sectors and study fields.

Koeglreiter, Torlina and Smith (2008:170–1), in reminding us that boundaries are multi-dimensional and that cultural differences must be appreciated and addressed, have identified four types of boundaries with regard to organisations: social, information, structural and communication. It is the structural category – the physical and geographic aspects, organisational design, and procedures – that is perhaps the most applicable of these types in the instance of learners studying in VET and HE organisations. These authors refer also to ‘boundary spanning activities’ (p.172) that can help to minimise problems of information flow and decision-making. Thinking of such activities as occurring at both formal and informal levels, it is likely that lecturers and career advisors could be of assistance in the former and fellow learners and social networking in the latter. Similarly, Islam (2008) has highlighted how learner-led communities of practice can be important tools for learning, in that they can provide the context in which to learn professional identities that, beyond technical knowledge, facilitate the transition of learners from one setting to another. They act as ‘intermediary zones’ (p.279), offering opportunities to learn social and professional norms that would be difficult to acquire in traditional classroom settings. They provide a space between institutionalised fields that eases the crossing between settings.

Boundaries can be problematic in that they can be difficult places, with connotations of marginality and peripherality, being on the edge. Wenger (1998:254) warns us that they are places where 'one can anticipate problems of coordination, understand issues of miscommunication, and come to expect transformations as people and objects travel across the social landscape'. However, for that very reason they are worthy of attention as places of learning where meaning can be negotiated anew:

Boundaries are like fault lines: they are the locus of volcanic activity. They allow movement, they release tension; they create new mountains; they shake existing structures ... they are the likely locus of the production of radically new knowledge. They are where the unexpected can be expected, where innovative or unorthodox solutions are found, where serendipity is likely, and where old ideas find new life and new ideas propagate (Wenger 1998:254–5).

In analyses of sectoral boundary-crossing of learners, the literature reflects a pre-occupation with *structural* factors. Commonly, such interest is related to responses to government agendas on widening participation in tertiary education, increasing opportunities for adults to 'return-to-learn' (Warren & Webb 2006:2) and promoting lifelong learning. Studies frequently focus on the importance of articulation and curriculum issues between post-compulsory institutions (Knox 2005, Harreveld 2005, Keating 2006), attempts at blurring boundaries between sectors (Grubb 2006, Gallacher 2006) and differences in accreditation arrangements (West 2006). Other literature focuses on barriers to student movement. For example, the Australian government (DEST 2002:3) has acknowledged that 'the challenge is to develop in Australia a national system that underpins educational choice', yet concedes that 'significant barriers remain ... [including] fundamental differences in learning and assessment' between the sectors. Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training 2004–2010, *Shaping our future*, also recognises that, although pathways between education sectors have improved, barriers still exist, particularly between

vocational education and training and universities (ANTA 2003). Gardener's (2002:12) Queensland review of pathways articulation also concludes that:

Differences in the approaches of the ... education sectors make transition between them – with effective recognition of the prior knowledge and skills gained – complex, opaque and inconsistent. All these barriers make transitions for young people more difficult and time consuming.

Other research, with a focus more on *individual agency* than institutional factors, suggests that it is not simply a matter of smoothing credit transfer and administrative processes. McMillen, Rothman and Wernert (2005:32), for example, concluded that 'interests play a major role'. They found their data emphasised the importance of preferences and interests, such as wanting to get a job or new apprenticeship, the course turning out not to be what they wanted or losing interest as common factors for withdrawal or deferral, and that the high proportions indicating these reasons 'suggest a need for students to have better access to course and career guidance prior to entry to tertiary study' (p.36). Certainly, recent research has highlighted the prevalence of stress among university students (Robotham & Julian 2006), concerns over the balancing of study with other commitments (Christie *et al.* 2006; Harris *et al.* 2005) and considerable anxiety at leaving highly supported further education environments (Christie *et al.* 2006). Moreover, the work of Bloomer & Hodkinson (2000a & b) on the 'learning careers' of British young people aged 15 to 19 years illustrates that they are erratic rather than linear or entirely predictable, rarely the products of rationally determined choice, inextricably linked with other life experiences, and tightly bound up with the transforming personal identities of people at this age.

One study of factors affecting transition of business students from VET to university study in Victoria, Australia found that it was 'more complex than anticipated' (Pearce, Murphy & Conroy 2000:1). The difficulties centred on the sudden changes in the depth and detail

of subject knowledge, pedagogical approach and assessment, and the level, genre and independent nature of academic research and writing. This suggests that learners with fewer personal resources and lower competence may be unlikely to be able to adjust satisfactorily. Laanan (2007:37), too, speaking of community college students moving to universities in the USA, calls the transfer process 'complex', and refers to the concept of 'transfer shock'. And Saunders (2006: 17–18) has referred to the 'complex social and cognitive processes' that take place in crossing boundaries, with individuals 'struggling to make sense of their circumstances as they move from one set of practices to another'. This paper is offered as a contribution to the further unveiling of this 'complex' process.

Research approach

This study used a mixed-methods approach. First, extant national databases were mined for relevant information. Second, an online questionnaire survey was undertaken of 556 learners who commenced study in all eight VET institutes and the three universities in South Australia; these included VET students with university experience (n=190, hereafter labelled 'HE→VET') and university students with VET experience (n=366, labelled VET→HE). Third, interviews were held with 69 of these learners (22 HE→VET, 47 VET→HE) to probe their educational journeys in greater depth. Caution should be used in interpreting the quantitative findings due to the relatively low numbers of learners.

The learners in this study were purposively sampled precisely because they had experienced study in **both** sectors and therefore could be regarded as distinctive and credible commentators on similarities and differences (Harris *et al.* 2006, Harris, *et al.* 2005). They were also close enough to their entry into their current course to reflect back on their transitions and motivations, and far enough through the course to be able to speak with experience and knowledge on both sectors (cf. Warren & Webb 2006:3).

Main findings

1. What was the nature of their boundary-crossing?

In this study, boundary-crossing can be depicted in terms of both moving between and within sectors and changing study fields. In the detailed analysis of the 69 interviewees, for example, Table 1 reveals 186 boundary-crossings between (n=91) and within (n=95) the two sectors. Of the inter-sectoral moves, 60% were from VET to HE and 40% from HE to VET; in the case of intra-sectoral moves, 58% were within VET and 42% within HE (for further detail, see Harris *et al.* 2005).

Forty percent of all sectoral crossings were to the same study field and 60% to a different study field. For those who made only one inter-sectoral transition, most were into a different study field. Those moving from HE to VET were more inclined to enter a different study field than those moving the other way. There was very little movement from HE into the same study field in VET. On the other hand, the intra-sectoral transitions indicate that there is more movement within VET, both for the same and for different study fields, than there is within the HE sector.

Table 1: Transitions within and between tertiary sectors

	Same field of education		Different field of education	
Inter-sectoral transitions (91)	19	VET→HE	36	VET→HE
	9	HE→VET	27	HE→VET
Intra-sectoral transitions (95)	22	VET→VET	33	VET→VET
	25	HE→HE	15	HE→HE
Total transitions	75		111	

Note: 'Field of education' is the official classification used in Australia to describe tertiary education courses, specialisations and units of study, in order that all those with the same or similar vocational emphasis are reliably classified to the same 'field of education'. There are 12 broad fields of education.

2. What were their reasons for boundary-crossing?

There were important differences in the nature of their motivations for crossing sectors. First is their perceptions of the educational experience they would be receiving: getting a ‘broad education’ (VET→HE 69%; HE→VET 38%), a ‘prestigious qualification’ (VET→HE 65%; HE→VET 28%) and an update of their previous qualification (VET→HE 51%; HE→VET 30%). The crossing to university was clearly perceived as a broader and higher status education. Second is their occupational motivation: ‘retraining for a different career’ (VET→HE 63%; HE→VET 41%) and ‘improving their employment prospects’ (VET→HE 94%; HE→VET 81%). While the majority of the VET→HE learners reported that they were crossing to retrain for a *different* career (63%), the majority of the HE→VET learners were crossing to improve their career prospects in their *current* field (65%). Third, more VET→HE learners (83%) agreed that they were studying for ‘personal interest, development or recreation’ reasons than did HE→VET learners (70%).

The data therefore clearly reveal that the learners perceived their boundary-crossing to the other sector to undertake further study was driven by a combination of occupational and personal interests. The picture of this learner movement is the outcome of a process which starts at a very personal level – a process of career planning undertaken by each individual that starts with a goal or vision.

3. Did they experience barriers in boundary-crossing?

Around half of the learners considered that they did not encounter any barriers. Those who did report barriers expressed them in terms of difficulties with the transfer to university studies such as the adjustment to a different level and learning environment from VET, personal issues such as being unsure whether they would be able to cope with the demands of the course, and the course being academically less rigorous than previous studies and causing issues with adjustment.

The transition from [VET] to university – that was hard for me because it was very, very different. When I was in [VET] the learning was just business-like and you do reports, and when I went to uni it was a shift – we do essays – a different style ... The hardest part was the transition from [VET] to university because I was very busy and probably because university is just a very big overwhelming thing and I was alone at the time. (VET→HE, interviewee #216)

I think uni was very different to [VET], completely different ... I just didn't how big it actually was at that point. It opened my eyes quite a bit – a different world as such. University is very much theory based where VET is very much hands-on and I think the benefit for me is I got both of those and a lot of people don't – they just come straight to uni and I would certainly recommend to anyone to do both because they get both sides of it, rather than just the theory side. Certainly in that field [IT] that was a huge bonus and I am just glad I did it that way, because when I first came to uni, had I not been to VET, it would have been much harder to understand the whole process. (VET→HE, interviewee #174)

4. Were expectations met in crossing boundaries?

Despite any difficulties they experienced in crossing boundaries, most of those surveyed were confident that their expectations in choosing their program would be met (VET→HE 79%; HE→VET 73%). And the majority of those interviewed felt that their expectations at each move were met, particularly the case for those crossing from VET to HE. Where expectations had not been met, participants most commonly reported that this was because of curricular reasons, such as: the course changed, some modules were below expectations, concern over lack of intellectual rigour, the course found to be unhelpful as it was at a base level, not learning and developing skill as much as had been anticipated, inability to obtain the desired level of employment with this course which had been the motivating factor for initially undertaking the move, and perceptions that employers desired employees who had higher qualifications. One interviewee spoke of HE lecturer attitudes:

Yes, in most ways. I would say the response you get from some lecturers is a little disappointing and their attitude is poor – that could just be a personality thing that is part of life and people. That is probably the biggest disappointment, the disconnect that the lecturers seem to have with the students. (VET→HE, interviewee #253)

This comment supports the findings of Kraus *et al.* (2005), who found that HE students reported less access to staff, a substantial number of first-year students perceived staff as not accessible and less than one-third believed that staff took an interest in their progress and gave helpful feedback. Another interviewee in the current study referred to the lack of depth in the VET course:

Sort of. It wasn't really that in-depth. It could have probably been a lot better in a number of ways. I have done some project courses before that – just short industry courses that tended to repeated in some sections of it and other sections didn't provide the background that working in the area did. You came out of it not really understanding government finances which should have been the mainstay of it all and seeing how it went together. It was a mickey mouse course. (HE→VET, interviewee #2988)

5. What was their experience of boundary-crossing?

(1) Boundary crossing between sectors was not particularly difficult

The majority of surveyed students in both sectors found their crossing of sectors relatively easy. The exception was 'making changes in your life so that you had enough time to study' which 62% of VET→HE students and 53% of HE→VET students found difficult. (cf. Christie *et al.* 2006 also found this in her study of Scottish students).

Furthermore, the crossing of boundaries did not appear to have caused much consternation for these students. Almost three-quarters in both sectors reported feeling 'very' (VET→HE 31%, HE→VET 43%) or 'fairly' (VET→HE 42%, HE→VET 31%) comfortable crossing from one sector to the other.

(2) Boundary-crossing VET→HE was more difficult than HE→VET

Learners crossing from HE into VET found, on average of all the factors, the move easier than students moving into HE (VET→HE 51%; HE→VET 62%). There were major differences between the two groups of students with respect to financial issues: 66% of VET→HE students found 'having sufficient income to study' much more difficult compared with 37% of HE→VET students; and 57% of VET→HE students found 'paying the fees' difficult compared with 30% of HE→VET students.

There were also significant statistical differences in their level of response in other areas. HE→VET learners found the process easier, particularly (at the .01 level of significance) in respect to 'meeting the entry requirements for the course', 'having the confidence to undertake further study', 'getting advice from staff at the current institution' and 'going through the application process' and to a lesser extent (at the .05 level of significance) to 'getting careers guidance to help you make a decision', 'getting your employer's support to study' and 'doing something different from your friends'.

Confirming the finding above, it is in the boundary crossing from VET to HE where the greatest disjuncture occurs, with twice as many of those commencing HE than commencing VET reporting feelings of discomfort (significant at the .01 level).

*(3) Boundary-crossing between sectors was a **different** educational experience*

Transition between educational sectors necessarily involves adjustments to different systems of tertiary education. While these learners may not have found boundary-crossing between sectors particularly *difficult*, it was nevertheless perceived as quite *different*. Two features are prominent in Table 2. The first is that three-quarters of the learners, irrespective of direction of movement, found their boundary-crossing a different experience. The data highlight particular areas that have the potential to be stumbling blocks and

could lead to attrition if not carefully handled or negotiated. The second is the consistency in the figures of the two groups of learners. Not only are the various items in a similar sequence (for example, study cost, teaching style and assessment processes are in the top four in both lists), but the proportions from each sector are similar on each item (for example, on assessment processes, 80% of VET→HE and 82% of HE→VET learners reported these were different).

Table 2: Learners' judgements on how similar or different aspects of their current educational experience are from those in the other sector

Aspects of educational experience	VET→HE (HE commencers with VET experience)			HE→VET (VET commencers with HE experience)		
	Similar (%)	Different (%)	Total (N, %)	Similar (%)	Different (%)	Total (N, %)
How similar or different are each of the following aspects of your current educational experience compared with that in the institution at which you studied most recently?						
cost of studying **	7.6	92.4	100 (353)	18.5	81.5	100 (162)
teaching style	16.5	83.5	100 (351)	20.5	79.5	100 (176)
level of work in course **	17.6	82.4	100 (347)	29.0	71.0	100 (176)
assessment processes	20.3	79.7	100 (355)	18.2	81.8	100 (181)
amount of work in course	22.2	77.8	100 (351)	29.9	70.1	100 (177)
structure of course	22.8	77.2	100 (347)	18.3	81.7	100 (175)
practical content	24.1	75.9	100 (344)	24.3	75.7	100 (173)
theoretical content	25.8	74.2	100 (349)	28.5	71.5	100 (179)
class size *	26.5	73.5	100 (328)	37.7	62.3	100 (138)
institutional climate	31.6	68.4	100 (335)	25.5	74.5	100 (153)
provision of support services and facilities	46.5	53.5	100 (342)	46.8	53.2	100 (158)

** level of significance <.01

* level of significance <.05

It is clear that aspects mentioned in the literature earlier concerning different pedagogical approaches in the two sectors are indeed those reported by the learners in this study as different from what they had previously experienced in the other sector. Apart from study costs, the leading factors are all concerned with curriculum. For those crossing the boundary from VET to HE, teaching styles (84%), level of coursework (82%), and assessment processes (80%) show the greatest difference; while for those crossing from HE to VET, the top ones are assessment processes (82%), course structure (82%) and teaching style (80%). These key aspects are illustrated qualitatively through this paper.

(4) In crossing boundaries, significantly more VET→HE learners found difference with level of coursework than HE→VET learners

The statistically significant differences between the two groups were level of work, cost of studying and class size where, in all three, more VET→HE than HE→VET learners reported differences. In terms of the focus of this paper, it is the level of coursework that is the important factor to note here – learners reported higher levels of work at university than at the VET institutions.

... the difference in workload and the level of difficulty. When I got to university, I found out the workload was about 40% heavier. I also found out that the subjects themselves were about 25% harder which made it very difficult for each semester because I had gone from doing 2–3 subjects a week to 4 subjects at uni. At VET you might put 2–3 hours into a subject outside of lecture time, and uni you put about 10 hours to do it properly ... [For] someone from VET who wants to do a uni degree, it is a real culture shock. (HE→VET, interviewee #260)

... the main barriers are the totally different learning style and the workload that is placed on you at uni. They were unexpected for me and I found that really tough. It basically took me 12 months to settle into that totally different learning style and the commitment and the time management that is required

to churn out the assignments and be ready for exams and everything that is required ... I don't think anything will prepare you for the actual experience of doing uni other than doing it. I think it is a case of 'head down, bum up' and it is the only way you are going to learn. (HE→VET, interviewee #253)

I would say that at uni ... the level of commitment required is a little bit greater than at TAFE. The level that is taught at uni is more in-depth where you don't seem to get that same in-depth teaching at TAFE. No disrespect to TAFE, but ... the level of learning was a little bit higher at uni.
(HE→VET, interviewee #145)

In an open-ended survey question on differences between the sectors, learners' comments concentrated heavily on differences in interaction with and accessibility of staff, though other comments related to level of work, assessment approaches, nature of the study, course structure, degree of self-management and self-direction, available modes of study, timetabling issues and learning climate.

Many comments by VET commencers were about teachers. Teachers in VET were generally seen as 'more caring and approachable', 'very helpful', 'life-experienced', 'a lot more personal' and 'much nicer and kinder'. However, some respondents considered them 'less professional and academic', 'inexperienced in teaching', 'mostly HPIs [hourly-paid instructors] and you can't speak with them', '[needing] to be more in tune with adult learning principles, we are not children', and 'to be very patronising and not as professional ... more like school-teachers'.

VET courses were typically seen to be 'a lot more flexible' and 'far more applicable to getting a job, less theoretical and academic, more relevant'. Regarding the VET climate, respondents stated that 'we have school students studying at TAFE. This makes the place have a very different atmosphere – it makes it feel more like school instead of TAFE. I did not like this. It was very different to university'; while others thought that the 'VET experience has a more friendly atmosphere'.

Some other typical comments from the survey respondents included:

Homework requirements at VET, which have to be handed up and checked by the lecturer, unlike HE, which was based on adult learning theory – self-directed study with assistance available, as long as outcomes were met.

[A difference is the] amount of feedback on assignments. HE assignments were graded HD, D, C, P or F, with comments. VET, so far, after four topics, I have received ticks, and one question received ‘good’, and grading is simply pass or fail.

The HE institution provides a much better studying environment and the lecturers treat you with a lot more respect. Through my VET experience, everyone is treated like they are back at school. It is too much like school and not like the real world ...

The support, help and assistance offered at TAFE is much higher and you’re not just another number, the lecturers actually do their best to help you out.

Comments by HE commencers on the nature and level of work at university and the ways they were expected to study were very common, such as ‘study is much more impersonal’, ‘all my subjects are mainly theory’, ‘HE is much harder than VET and involves a lot more work’, ‘subjects [are] more theoretical’, ‘onus is on me at uni to organise my time how I see fit – TAFE was more like school!’, ‘the workload is huge compared to anything I have experienced before’, ‘this course is much more conceptual, abstract and theoretical’, ‘my VET course was like a production line!’, ‘uni is so much harder than TAFE’, ‘material for course is so much more difficult at uni level. TAFE did not prepare me at all’, and ‘workload is much more at HE level. Class sizes are substantially larger than at TAFE’. Positive comments about VET courses normally highlighted its relevance to the world of work: ‘theory and content were more applied to the workplace in the TAFE course; ‘used more work-based examples and course coordinators had practical experience in the area’ and ‘VET

was competency-based'. Two students bluntly contrasted the level of work in the two sectors:

... the intensity of study is very different; uni is a hard slog, long hours, a mind boggling amount of reading, but to get a good grasp of the topic, you need to do it.

It took me about 5–10 hours a week to complete a full-time load at TAFE and do very well. It takes me 50–60 hours a week to complete a full-time load at uni and do very well.

Once again there were many comments also about differences in teaching. Positive comments about HE teaching were that 'we are treated like adults. At [VET institution], we were treated like children', 'current teaching staff are much more professional', 'uni has a much better learning and helpful atmosphere – there are more opportunities for self-improvement', and 'uni is much more relaxed and casual. TAFE's attitude and structure are very similar to high school'. Two other typical comments that made direct contrasts between the sectors were:

University has more student support, informed lecturers who engage more readily in industry, theoretical discourse, and international practice. TAFE needs injections of international speakers, guest lecturers and more theory to create an informed student.

University has required a much deeper level of research, theory and analysis – much more academic. VET is more practical in relation to the workforce, more relevant skills are taught. However, to get a decent job, you need a degree from uni.

However, again there were far more positive comments about approachability of VET staff, such as 'TAFE is more about people, and how you are coping and more helpful', 'TAFE was more organised in terms of students knowing what was going on, ... where services were and what department you went to for any issues you had', 'the availability of lecturers and their willingness to help and support

students was much greater at VET institution', 'the lecturers/tutors are less accessible at uni than at TAFE', and 'more individual teacher assistance at my VET institute'. Some other features of VET teaching were:

... at [VET], there is more interaction between students and lecturer. [VET] lecturers appear more interested in their students than at Uni.

Level of personal interest in students was greater at [VET] and more flexible approach to work and more flexible, down-to-earth staff.

Much easier to communicate with staff/institution at [VET]. More practical focus and less emphasis on exam performance at [VET].

TAFE is a lot more personal in regards to teacher/student contact, as well as interaction within the classes, making it a lot more comfortable.

Many of the HE commencers' responses hinted at the structural problems facing higher education in particular. Costs came in for some strong criticism; for example, 'Uni costs an arm and a leg, and I need at least one of them', and 'the cost of HE is massive in comparison to TAFE'. Other comments were:

Class sizes for higher education are massive, cost is extreme and time spent studying at home is far greater. This has a large impact on the social and psychological well-being of students.

Due to smaller classes, high contact hours and the nature of the courses, the staff at TAFE are more like friends, are more approachable and it's easier to get help.

This course tends to lack the human contact and one-on-one attention. Much higher class numbers for external and internal lecturers, I feel like a number in the line ...

... uni has much more work and no personal contact with teachers; teachers don't know who you are due to no time to find out and to big classroom.

Conclusions

The paper illustrates that there is value in analysing ‘more fully and systematically student accounts of their experience’, as it escapes the constraints of a ‘factors-and-outcomes’ model (Auburn 2007:131). This helps in developing understanding of how phenomena are experienced by the actors themselves, thereby adding a valuable perspective to any official interpretation that can often be the only voice heard. It also adds to the literature on ‘subjective career’, where there is, as Walton and Mallon (2004:92) in New Zealand have observed, ‘a dearth of studies which give primacy to individual sense-making in career’, especially given career will increasingly be seen as a subjective phenomenon (see Simons *et al.* 2007).

The transcripts reflected important differences in the learners’ experiences of teaching and learning in the two sectors. Comments focused heavily on differences in interaction with and accessibility of staff, while others related to level of work, assessment approaches, nature of the study, course structure, degree of self-management and self-direction, available modes of study, timetabling issues and learning climate.

Although much of the literature on learners moving between higher education and VET focuses on structure and policy, the learner voices in this study rarely mentioned such issues. Rather, they referred to relational issues as being key factors in their reasons for studying across sectors, in coping with barriers in boundary-crossing, in whether their expectations were met and in their experiences of studying in both sectors. They spoke less often and with less passion about receiving course credit, articulation arrangements between courses or being offered program and career guidance, and more about (a) receiving assistance and empathy from lecturers and (b) being uplifted by the support from learner colleagues.

With regard to (a), this was expressed more commonly in the VET cases, which may have been because VET learners were more in need of assistance, or because they were studying in smaller institutions with smaller classes. Most likely, however, it was because the lecturers were more understanding and willing to provide such support as a result of having travelled that learning journey themselves. In the words of Koeglreiter *et al.* (2008:172), they were in a position to be able to engage in 'boundary spanning activities', helping to overcome difficulties in information flow and decision-making. Certainly many of the learners made positive comments about the caring nature of their VET teachers. They were perceived as 'nurturing', 'very helpful', 'more approachable' and 'more in touch with students'. One learner said, 'at uni you don't have anyone to guide you in a sense whereas at [VET] you did', while another spoke highly of the relationships with staff: '[in VET], I had a much closer relationship with my lecturers in that I felt I could confide, ask advice, get support and even gain employment opportunities through their connections'. With their likely experience of study in university and work in VET, they served as 'brokers', being 'able to make new connections across communities of practice, enable coordination and open new possibilities for meaning' (Wenger 1998:109).

With regard to (b), this was articulated more frequently in the university sector, where often several learners moved on to HE having studied together in a VET course and become friends, encouraging and instilling confidence in one another. In this sense they formed a 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998), especially in cases where as mature-aged learners they banded together in the face of a sea of younger, less experienced school-leavers entering tertiary education for the first time. This phenomenon supports the findings of Islam (2008:279) on learner-led communities of practice being important tools for learning in that they act as 'intermediary zones', offering opportunities to learn social and professional norms that are difficult

to acquire in formal classrooms and providing the space that eases the boundary-crossing between settings.

These findings thus confirm McMillen, Rothman and Wernert (2005) in their assertion that facilitating transition is more than simply smoothing credit transfer and administrative processes.

The learner comments clearly cluster in the domain of *teaching and learning* – the interpersonal concerns – rather than institutional or policy matters. And, given that the learners spoke often, too, about their own agency in taking risks to cross sectoral and disciplinary (Dillon 2008) boundaries, about their persistence, their motivation and their desire to find the learning experience that was ‘right’ for them at that particular stage of their lives, the emphasis here was firmly on the *learning* rather than the teaching end of the educational seesaw. It might not be even too far-fetched to contend that, in past years, students may have been more concerned with issues pertaining to their lecturers and their teaching than with their own learning, while in this research, there is a glimpse of the nature of their personal learning, studying in the appropriate course and the camaraderie of fellow learners as critical factors in their educational journeys. If these latter matters were not perceived to be ‘right’, the learners were not averse to ‘jumping ship’ and crossing boundaries to another course, discipline and even sector. While it needs to be acknowledged that these learners were transient learners by virtue of the sampling, nevertheless this study does reveal and reinforce the significance of factors related to *learning* in decisions by adults who return-to-learn to cross boundaries in their educational journeys and as they increasingly construct their ‘portfolio careers’ (Anderson 2005:8).

In addition to empathetic staff acting as brokers, it may be that there is need for other forms of boundary-spanning activities. Hultberg *et al.* (2008), for example, argue for a well-planned and stimulating introduction to higher education that could be a natural component

of any transition process, assisting learners to develop better prerequisites to manage their studies at university level. Similarly, Abbott-Chapman (2006) advocates induction programs and study support to assist the first-year transition, given that it is in the first year that VET-background learners experience more study problems and less satisfaction than other learners. Saunders (2006:18) also believes that there may be a need for a wide range of what he calls 'bridging tools' to help learners and those supporting them to navigate the transitions.

The findings of this study provide policy-makers and institutional leaders with insights into how best to position the two sectors to the advantage of learners with such changing needs, expectations and desired pathways. Strategies to promote lifelong learning, as Anderson (2005:5) has observed, require deeper understanding of the factors that motivate individuals to engage in further education. While current policy tends to afford precedence to increasing employability, on the assumption that individuals are solely or largely motivated to enrol in courses for extrinsic, work-related reasons, this study supports other studies (for example, Anderson 2005) that identify the intrinsic value of further education as a strong motivating factor. The findings further suggest that greater recognition could be afforded to the different but increasingly complementary roles that HE and VET play. The VET sector could be more clearly and strongly positioned as a viable option for post-school education.

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