Neither fish nor fowl: the contradiction at the heart of Australian tertiary education

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Abstract

This paper explores the extent to which pathways from technical and further education institutes (TAFE) to higher education in Australia are able to act as a mechanism for social justice, access and equity. Like Britain, Australia uses the market as the mechanism to distribute access to a near-universal system of higher education and, like Britain, this has not solved the problem of access to elite higher education. However, Australia has an additional obstacle to overcome in developing coherent pathways from TAFE to higher education, which is that publicly funded TAFE qualifications in Australia must be based on competency-based training models of curriculum. TAFE is increasing its provision of short-cycle higher education qualifications, but only as full-fee provision. This article explores the tensions that arise in Australia from conflicting models of curriculum in TAFE and higher education, from the growth of private higher education provision in TAFE, and from the use of markets to mediate access to higher education. It argues that these tensions must be resolved so that pathways from TAFE to higher education can ensure socially just access to, participation in, and outcomes from higher education by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Key words: Pathways, qualifications, social justice, access, markets.

Introduction

The dramatic expansion of higher education in wealthy nations over the last generation from being elite to mass and now universal systems has had profound consequences for the way social inequality is reproduced and mediated in those countries. Scott (2003: 74) explains that “those who are excluded from participating in a mass higher education system are much more disadvantaged than those who are excluded from elite systems.” Access to, and capacity to succeed in, HE mediates access to a much wider range of jobs than in the past, and to the lifestyle and culture associated with high levels of education.

While the mass expansion of HE held out the promise of greater social equality through providing access to all, this has not been the reality. Scott (2003: 73) argues that in Britain “the effect has been to produce a middle-class mass system; this expansion has done little, or nothing, for working-class participation.” Similar outcomes have been experienced in Australia; whilst the system has grown, and consequently provided more opportunities for working class students to go to university, their share of HE places within the system overall has not changed throughout this period of expansion.
Moreover, the mass expansion of HE has resulted in greater hierarchical differentiation within the system. While the purpose of a universal system, may be, as Martin Trow (2005: 18) explains to “maximize the adaptability of that population to a society whose chief characteristic is rapid social and technological change”, the traditional functions of elite universities to prepare future social elites continue to be performed as old patterns persist within the new (Trow 2005: 36). Consequently, it is more accurate, as Bathmaker and Thomas (2007: 2) explain, to see “the current system as an elite, mass and universal system all at the same time, with different parts of the system functioning in different ways.”

Concerns about social inclusion, equity and distributional justice consequently need to address two problems in overcoming unequal access to HE. The first is access to the system, and the second is access to elite institutions within the system. Anglophone countries such as the United States, Britain and Australia have attempted to address this through pathways from short-cycle tertiary education programs offered in vocationally oriented open access institutions such as community colleges, further education colleges and technical and further education (TAFE) institutes in the US, Britain and Australia respectively. Each type of institution belongs to the ‘second’ sector of tertiary education in their respective countries, and they are differentiated from universities by the range, level and type of qualifications they offer, lower funding, and different accreditation, quality assurance and regulatory frameworks. Compared to the universities in each country, the student population in all three is likely to be older, study part-time, come from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds, and be seeking vocationally oriented qualifications or ‘second-chance’ education.

Australia differs from England and the United States however, because FE colleges and community colleges deliver short-cycle HE programs as the basis for progression to degrees in universities. This is not the case in Australia – at least until now. In 1988, the Australian government created one sector of HE when it merged its universities and colleges of advanced education. At the same time, the government narrowed the scope of TAFE to be a provider of skills for industry using competency-based curriculum, and designated public TAFE institutions as one educational ‘provider’ in a competitive vocational education and training (VET) market which it proceeded to create. These changes resulted in increased sectoral differentiation between HE and VET, with VET delivering competency-based qualifications that are distinguished from HE qualifications. Consequently competency-based VET qualifications are the basis of pathways to HE, and this is an important difference between Australia on the one hand, and England and the US on the other. This difference has implications for the way in which pathways are developed.

The different balance between markets and planning in the three countries affect their pathways to HE. Despite the US’ commitment to ‘free’ markets, many states stipulate, often in legislation or other enforceable policies, the numbers of student transfers to public four-year degree granting institutions, including to the elite doctoral granting universities, and often, the amount of credit transfer that will be granted (Moodie 2003a). Britain and Australia rely more on the market to allocate students, through creating competitive tertiary education markets in which universities are required to compete with each other from the available pool. As we will see, while this approach
may provide access to the HE system, it is less able to provide access to elite universities when compared to the planning model in the US.

Britain has established targets for widening participation in HE and designated FE colleges as important for meeting those targets, mainly through providing two-year foundation degrees (Parry 2005). While these targets may be more about work-force planning and the demand for graduates than intrinsic concerns about social justice (Scott 2005: 71), nonetheless, the targets and associated policies have created a ‘space’ where inclusion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in HE is seen as an important issue (Stuart 2002).

There is no parallel in Australia. Equity has been a second order concern of government, well behind policies that seek to create a ‘diverse’ and ‘competitive’ HE market as the mechanism for delivering the knowledge and skills Australia needs. There is also no explicit policy that designates a role for TAFE (or VET more broadly) in providing HE qualifications to meet these needs, or indeed to expand access for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Yet it is likely that TAFE will be drawn into delivering short-cycle HE programs, as a consequence of government policies that seek to increase private HE and to diversify the market. This article argues that this expansion will not necessarily lead to more equitable outcomes for working class students. This is because TAFEs are offering HE qualifications to secure their market position, and not to achieve equity objectives.

This article thus tries to capture an important time of transition in Australia. It first outlines the contradictory tendencies shaping existing policy with a particular focus on the Australian Qualifications Framework. It then examines levels of student transfers, and the way in which VET and HE construct institutional models and pathways and students’ experience of these arrangements. The final section discusses the changes that are taking place as a consequence of government policy and increased marketisation of both the HE and VET sectors, and the way institutions are responding to these changes. It considers the extent to which the changes will result in more equitable outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Contradictory policy & ambivalent outcomes**

Australian tertiary education policy is beset by a contradiction. On the one hand, government policy insists on the distinction between VET and HE, while on the other it seeks to promote seamless student transfer and articulation between the sectors. This contradiction is not unique to Australia, but it takes a particularly sharp form here.

Young (2005b: 15-16) argues that national qualifications frameworks are based on two tensions that arise from conflicting assumptions that are used to design qualifications. The first tension is around the principle of difference and the principle of similarity, and the second tension is around qualifications designed on the basis of inputs and those designed on the basis of outputs. Traditional, ‘tracked’ qualifications systems use the principle of difference because they emphasise the different purposes of VET and HE qualifications and the different occupational destinations they are
designed to serve. This works if graduates enter relatively stable labour market destinations and tracked systems are able to effectively allocate graduates to job vacancies and to careers that draw from the differentiated knowledge base in each sector (Moodie 2003b). ‘Unified’ systems are designed to meet the needs of more fluid labour markets in which knowledge and skill requirements change in response to change in markets and processes of production and technology, and this means that they are putatively underpinned by common knowledge and skill requirements. This is encapsulated most clearly in policy that establishes generic skills as an important component of qualifications. The principle of similarity underpins qualifications frameworks in unified systems that emphasise progression to and from general and vocational education (Young 2005b: 15).

Qualifications that are based on inputs assume that they cannot be defined independently of the syllabus, processes of learning and assessment and the institutional setting in which learning takes place. This usually requires a high level of trust between all stakeholders. Young (2005b) refers to these types of qualifications systems as process-based or institutional systems. Qualifications that are based on outputs sever the link between the institution and learning outcomes because they are based on the premise that learning outcomes can be defined independently of when, how or where learning takes place. Process-based systems use shared agreement among stakeholders (such as professional bodies) about content, learning and assessment, whereas outcomes-based systems are premised on the specification of ‘objective’ criteria in a national framework (Young 2001: 11). Governments have used outcomes-based qualifications frameworks to support the shift from the ‘provider culture’ of education and training institutions and awarding bodies to a ‘user-led’ marketised system. National criteria are needed where there is low trust and the ‘rules’ are used to regulate behaviour between stakeholders and to regulate buying and selling in a qualifications market. In fluid labour markets, the qualifications themselves become signifiers of the knowledge, skills and attributes of individuals (Young 2005b).

Qualifications systems in Northern Europe tend to be tracked and process-oriented systems. In contrast, qualifications systems in Anglophone countries tend to be unified and outcomes-oriented systems (Young 2005b). This maps to the different ways each organises their economies. The economies of Northern Europe use social partnerships between employers, business, and labour to match graduates to jobs in relatively stable labour markets, whereas Anglophone liberal market economies use the market as the mechanism for matching graduates and jobs in volatile labour markets (Hall and Soskice 2001).

The Australian anomaly

While Australia is a liberal market economy like Britain and the US, it has deeply differentiated VET and HE sectors that are in many ways similar to the tracked sectors characteristic of Northern Europe. However, unlike many countries in Northern Europe, which have tracked secondary systems of education leading to tracked post-compulsory education and training systems, the senior years of secondary education in Australia have been relatively undifferentiated and the senior school certificates have been designed primarily to rank students for competitive entry
to university (Keating 2006: 62 - 63). However, this may change because of the increasing provision of VET in schools as part of reforms to senior school certificates in Australia’s states and territories and the commitment by the newly elected Labor government to establish a trades school in every secondary school in Australia.

These contradictions in the Australian system are particularly evident in the structure of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), which is presented in Table 1. The AQF was established in 1995, and it lists all qualifications that are accredited in the senior schools, VET and HE sectors respectively. Unlike other qualifications frameworks, most notably those in England and New Zealand, the AQF does not play a role in the accreditation of awards or in quality assurance, and as such it is a relatively ‘weak’ framework (Young 2005b: 13). Each sector has its own quality assurance and accreditation process and, generally speaking, receives public funding to offer only its own sector’s qualifications, with the exception of schools which are now able to offer accredited VET qualifications as part of the senior school certificates (provided they implement the VET ‘rules’ in doing so). Educational institutions are not prohibited from offering qualifications accredited in other sectors, but they offer these qualifications as full-fee programs. This means that when public educational institutions in one sector enter the territory usually occupied by public providers in the other, they are regarded as private full-fee providers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools sector</th>
<th>VET sector</th>
<th>HE sector</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doctoral degrees</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Masters degrees</td>
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<tr>
<td>VET Graduate diploma</td>
<td>Graduate diploma</td>
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<td>VET Graduate certificate</td>
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<td>Advanced diploma</td>
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<td>Associate degree</td>
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<td>Certificate IV</td>
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<td>Certificate III</td>
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The AQF website says that the AQF “is a unified system of national qualifications” in schools, VET and HE.1 Its objectives are, among other things, to promote pathways, credit transfer and articulation between sectors, and between work and life experience and qualifications through recognition of prior learning, and to promote “national and international recognition of qualifications offered in Australia” (AQFAB 2007: 2). That is, the AQF is premised on the principle of similarity. However, arguably the AQF contributes to entrenching sectoral differences, because, of all the qualifications that are listed on the AQF, only two, diplomas and advanced diplomas, are listed in both the HE and VET sectors. However, even though these qualifications share the same descriptors in the AQF, they are ‘different’ because:

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“...there are no standardised rankings or equivalences between different qualifications issued in different sectors, as these qualifications recognise different types of learning reflecting the distinctive educational responsibilities of each sector. Where the same qualifications are issued in more than one sector but authorised differently by each sector (ie Diploma, Advanced Diploma) they are equivalent qualifications, although sector-differentiated.” (AQFAB 2007: 2)

In other words, the sectors’ qualifications are differentiated from each other on the principle of difference. The contradiction at the heart of the AQF is deepened because VET qualifications are based on outputs whereas HE qualifications are mostly based on inputs. Qualifications that are accredited in the VET sector must be based on national training packages, which consist of competency-based qualifications using ‘industry’-specified units of competency. In contrast, qualifications in HE are usually curriculum-driven and are therefore input focused. The AQF states that the objectives and academic requirements of HE qualifications are “set by higher education institutions having regard for requirements set by peer review and the requirements of relevant professional bodies and employer groups” (AQFAB 2007: 7). That is, they are developed through shared understandings of stakeholders about the syllabus, processes of learning and assessment and outcomes.

The tensions between equivalence and difference and between inputs and outputs within the AQF are not recognised in policy. In 2005, all Commonwealth and State education and training ministers endorsed a set of ‘good practice’ principles for credit transfer from VET to HE. These principles are not prescriptive and operate more at the level of ‘good suggestions’, particularly for universities, which are self-accrediting and are therefore free to determine if, when and how they will provide credit for VET qualifications. These principles clearly assume that learning outcomes can be determined independently of processes of learning. The first principle says that credit transfer and articulation is used to establish “equivalence of learning outcomes” that are “regardless of the similarity or differences of the education processes”, which includes “delivery, teaching methodology and assessment” or type of provider delivering the qualification (MCEETYA 2005).

Political, institutional & epistemological barriers

This assertion of equivalence between VET and HE qualifications is a form of policy blindness that makes it difficult to address the tensions between similarity and difference, and inputs and outputs. Raffe (2005) provides a useful framework for making these tensions visible when he argues that there are political, institutional and epistemological barriers to integration in qualifications frameworks.

In Australia political problems arise because the sectors report to different levels of government, and they fund, report and count students differently, have different student fees arrangements, different industrial awards, quality assurance regimes, regulatory bodies, curriculum models and accreditation processes. Political problems also arise because the different cultures of the sectors and the lower status of the VET sector promote proselytisers in each who base their campaign for the distinct sectoral
mission of each on negative stereotypes of the other. These political problems exist in a number of countries (Raffe 2005).

Institutional problems arise, often as an unintended consequence of the way institutions work (Raffe 2005). This is because the dead weight of administrative requirements is an almost irresistible counterforce to policy that seeks to deepen and extend collaboration. Different student management information systems, timetabling, quality assurance and course review cycles, staff industrial awards, funding rates, and associated problems make it difficult to integrate the sectors, particularly where this is compounded by the sectors’ different regulatory regimes and government masters.

Political and institutional problems are often disguised as epistemological problems. For example, industrial issues are often masked as disputes over philosophy, teaching style and standards, but upon closer examination are just as often as much about preserving jobs and status in each sector. All these political and institutional problems have been discussed extensively in Australia (see PhillipsKPA 2006a; 2006b for the latest review of this research).

However, the conflation of political, institutional and epistemological differences has meant that the epistemological problems intrinsic to the AQF haven’t been addressed fully. Gabb and Glaisher (2006: 10) argue that much of the cross-sectoral literature tacitly suggests “that cross-sectoral pedagogy is unproblematic, or at least much less problematic than the institutional and structural barriers.” While it is often conceded that the different accreditation and curriculum models are problematic for sectoral collaboration (let alone integration), the insistence on the divorce of learning outcomes from processes of learning in VET means that there is very little scope for addressing and doing something about these epistemological problems. This is despite the fact that research into student pathways and credit transfer has demonstrated that practitioners who are trying to construct pathways think there is a problem, even if some researchers think the issue can be resolved through greater understanding and better implementation (PhillipsKPA 2006b: 108; Schofield et al. 2004). Arguably, credit transfer cannot be further developed until these differences are confronted, and some practitioner/researchers are beginning to do so, in part because of their experience in trying to address these issues constructively, particularly at the dual sector universities that consist of large HE and VET sectors (Milne et al. 2006; Young 2005a; Gabb and Glaisher 2006).

Levels of access, existing frameworks & outcomes

Australia has a weak policy for facilitating student articulation, pathways and credit transfer between the sectors. There is no cross-sectoral policy body that is able to advise government and there is no lifelong learning policy that spans the sectors. The only cross-sectoral body in Australia is the AQF Advisory Board. The AQF has principles and guidelines for credit transfer and recognition of prior learning but these are not enforceable. These are in addition to the ‘good practice’ credit transfer principles endorsed by Commonwealth and State education and training ministers referred to earlier. There is no punishment for not complying with the principles, particularly for universities because they are self-accrediting. VET providers may be more compelled to comply, only because VET policy insists on credit transfer and
RPL, but this is mainly within VET and does not incorporate credit transfer for students moving from HE to VET. Universities are required to report to government on their credit transfer and articulation policies as part of their annual reporting and this puts them under some pressure to demonstrate they have such policies, but this is not onerous.

However, despite the absence of a coherent national policy, student articulation between the sectors is increasing, and various institutional arrangements and policies have arisen that facilitate student articulation. The next section first discusses patterns of student access, then the different policy and institutional frameworks that have emerged, before concluding with a discussion about students’ experiences of these outcomes.

Selecting & recruiting universities, equity & patterns of student access

Maclennan et al. (2000) distinguish between ‘selecting’ universities and ‘recruiting’ universities and this provides a useful framework for considering the way access to HE is differentially distributed between different kinds of universities. Selecting universities are high demand, elite universities, and they are able to select the ‘most qualified’ students from the available pool, while recruiting universities are lower demand and must actively compete with each other. Selecting universities are more likely to focus on school leavers with high tertiary entrance scores based on their senior school certificate results, while recruiting universities must draw from a wider and more diverse pool and market for prospective students. Recruiting universities have more flexible entry requirements, provide more credit for prior studies (particularly TAFE studies), provide more flexible study options, and seek to emphasise vocational relevance and outcomes for students. In Australia the selecting universities are the elite Group of Eight universities, and the remaining universities are all, to varying degrees, recruiting universities, even though they are organised into groupings that are differentiated by status and levels of demand.

If students from low SES backgrounds were represented in universities in proportion to their population share, they should be 25% of all students and not the 14.55% share they currently hold. While some universities individually get close to, or in some cases, exceed 25%, overall students from low SES backgrounds are persistently under-represented within HE, and they are most under-represented in the Group of Eight selecting universities, as is illustrated in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% low SES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group of Eight</td>
<td>9.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other universities</td>
<td>16.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>All universities</td>
<td>14.55</td>
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Source: derived from DEST (2007b)

TAFE students are more representative of the broader population (Karmel and Nguyen 2003) and this is why pathways from VET to HE are an important social justice and equity mechanism. A key measure of access by different groups to HE is
basis of admission. In 2005, 10.14% of students were admitted to HE on the basis of prior TAFE studies (derived from DEST 2007a), compared to 3.9% in 1993 (DEST 2002: 7). However, this is an under-estimate of the percentage of students in HE with prior TAFE studies because it does not take account of student multiple enrolments in both sectors. Students who have experience of both VET and HE are thus not counted as TAFE entrants. Moodie’s (2005: 3) research shows that 25% of commencing under-graduate students and 19% of commencing post-graduate students in 2003 had studied in TAFE.

Table 3 illustrates the basis of admission for students admitted to universities in 2005, and it shows that TAFE students are far less likely to gain access to the Group of Eight universities than they are to the recruiting universities. Table 3 also uses ratios to illustrate the way access is distributed between elite universities and recruiting universities. It shows that the Group of Eight admitted one TAFE student for every 19 Year 12 students they admitted in 2005, with the other universities admitted around one TAFE student for every three Year 12 students. The last column also shows that the Group of Eight admitted one TAFE student for around every four the other universities admitted, and this has not changed since Moodie’s (2003a) identical finding in 2001.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% Year 12</th>
<th>% TAFE award</th>
<th>No. Yr 12 for every TAFE</th>
<th>Ratio of TAFE entrants Go8 cf. rest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group of Eight</td>
<td>60.24</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>19.06:1</td>
<td>1:4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other universities</td>
<td>36.63</td>
<td>12.35</td>
<td>2.97:1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42.30</td>
<td>10.14</td>
<td>4.17:1</td>
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Moodie (2003a: 5) compared the ‘unified’ university systems in Australia and Scotland with the more formally segmented systems in three states in the United States which specify the number of student transfers and levels of credit transfer between community colleges and universities. He found that elite Australian and Scottish universities admitted one ‘transfer’ student for every four and five the recruiting universities admitted respectively, while the ratio between elite and less selective universities in the United States he examined was one to two. This shows the extent to which the unified systems are informally, but powerfully, differentiated by status. It also shows the importance of government policies in structuring opportunities for students to transfer from lower status sectors of tertiary education to higher status universities, including the elite public universities as in the United States examples.

Gallacher (2006: 54) argues that the absence of pathways to the elite universities in Scotland is itself a mechanism for stratification, and that “an important challenge for policy is to ensure that opportunities for entry and progression within HE are not limited in ways which reinforce patterns of inequality.” Relying on the market to distribute access to university for TAFE students will result in pathways only to the recruiting universities and not to the elite universities and this remains a problem for society because it is an issue of distributional justice.
Frameworks, institutional arrangements & models

Despite the absence of national lifelong learning policy, regulations, performance indicators or funding mechanisms to support student articulation from VET to HE, a range of frameworks and models has emerged to support the development of pathways between the sectors. PhillipsKPA (2006b: 3) report that trend is “towards developing more systematic models both within institution-to-institution partnerships and in multi-institutional arrangements.”

The State governments have been active to varying degrees in promoting cross-sectoral collaboration that lead to pathways. Several State governments have instituted state-wide approaches to credit transfer by developing memoranda of understanding between TAFE at the state level and universities collectively or with individual universities in their state, and by publicising information about pathways on websites (PhillipsKPA 2006a: 85). All levels of government have funded projects to facilitate greater co-operation and pathways between institutions in both sectors, and to promote resource sharing.

The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority has developed a ‘credit-matrix’ to facilitate credit transfer in that State. It provides a mechanism for evaluating the complexity and volume of learning within subjects or modules “based on common taxonomies of knowledge, autonomy and application” (PhillipsKPA 2006a: 83) that can be used to identify commonalities and equivalences. In other words, it is based on the principle of similarity. Whilst its development was influenced by similar developments in other countries, it will look quite different because it is State-based and not national, it must reflect local circumstances, it operates at the level of subjects and modules and not whole qualifications (as is the case with the AQF) (Noonan 2003). The Victorian credit matrix is also distinctive in having to relate to the national AQF in some way, although the way in which it may do so is not clear. Its importance lies in its recognition that inputs into VET qualifications can and should be evaluated to establish credit with HE qualifications.

Three main institutional types or models of cross-sectoral collaboration have emerged. The first consists of single-sector TAFE and HE institutions that have established various mechanisms for supporting collaboration and pathways between their institutions. This ranges from virtually no contact, to collaboration between pockets within each institution, to high levels of engagement expressed through memoranda of understanding designed to serve the educational needs of communities and regions, and enacted through complex pathways based on close collaboration around curriculum. Closer collaboration often leads to joint project work and resource sharing.

The second model is dual-sector universities that contain both a TAFE and HE division. Four of the eight universities in Victoria are dual-sectors, as is the only university in the Northern Territory. They are integrated to varying degrees, with teaching and learning sectorally differentiated while most corporate, administrative and student services are integrated. The dual-sectors are emphasising their dual-sector character and promoting pathways as a key promotional tool for potential students;
this seems to be working, at least in providing TAFE students with access to HE. The percentage of students admitted to HE on the basis of prior TAFE studies at Swinburne University rose from 13% in 2000 to 25% in 2005, while at RMIT it rose from 9% in 2000 to 21% in 2005.2

The third model consists of co-located campuses of a TAFE and a university, sometimes with a senior secondary school campus. This has emerged as an important model that is designed to provide access to comprehensive post-compulsory education and training in regional Australia. Co-located campuses often comprise partners that exist as satellite campuses of their parent institution and this adds to their complexity because the partners must relate to each other on their co-located site while simultaneously relating to their parent institution based on another campus. While there are different degrees of integration, most are administratively and financially distinct, and they differ in the extent to which they jointly fund provision of integrated student services. Teaching and learning remains sectorally differentiated, as with the dual-sectors.

There are good and bad examples of each model. The extent to which each facilitates student pathways depends on whether there are good, collaborative relationships based on trust, and the extent to which senior management in both sectors support and resource the cross-sectoral relationship. A key part of this resourcing is the designation of staff who are employed to develop links between the sectors, who understand the cultures, language, demands, priorities and realities of each. Sommerlad et al. (1998) refer to such staff as ‘boundary spanners’. These three factors – trust, management support and boundary spanners – are necessary because a close institutional partnership will not result in a uniform willingness to collaborate throughout the institution. Educational institutions are sites of contested organisational and political culture, and the political and institutional problems discussed earlier will inevitably reassert themselves. However, such conflict may not necessarily always be negative; it is sometimes a sign of engagement and necessary for identifying obstacles as the first step in overcoming them.

The single-sector, dual-sector and co-located models can vary in the extent to which collaboration occurs:

- at senior levels to develop a shared sense of purpose and mission;
- to facilitate student entry arrangements through, for example; guaranteed pathways into HE programs for TAFE students;
- to develop articulation and credit transfer agreements;
- to develop coherent and shared curriculum as part of developing pathways;
- to develop shared teaching arrangements within pathways; and,
- to develop shared projects around research, community needs, government tenders, business development and so forth.

There can be no collaboration at one end of the continuum on each of these dimensions, to extensive collaboration at the other. There can also be collaboration around some of these dimensions and none around others. For example, it may be possible for institutions to guarantee TAFE students a place in a HE degree or to provide TAFE students with a ‘bonus’ in their entry score if they must still compete

2 Source: Derived from DEST Student Statistical collections, various years.
for a place in HE, and then provide them with credit based on their prior TAFE studies once they win a place, but in programs in which there has been no attempt to develop a shared curriculum or shared teaching arrangements. Or it may be that TAFE students are provided with no advantage in seeking admission but with an agreed level of credit once they win a place. The latter probably characterises most credit transfer arrangements in Australia.

Enhanced pathways are based on shared curriculum development that attempt to build coherence and progression from VET to HE qualifications by considering both programs holistically and relationally, and these usually result in more credit than would be the case in a ‘standard’ credit transfer agreement. However, while important, these ‘enhanced pathways’ are expensive because they take a lot of staff time to develop and must be revisited every time a change occurs in the award in one sector. Consequently, a strategic and effective cross-sectoral partnership would implement a suite of strategies that range from inexpensive to implement but high in symbolic importance, such as offering TAFE students a ‘bonus’ in their entry score or a guaranteed place on successful completion of their TAFE award, to moderately resource-intensive work around ‘standard’ credit transfer agreements that link existing programs but with little or no modification to those programs, to resource-intensive work around enhanced pathways and new programs that span the sectors and draw from each.

**Student experiences of transition**

Until relatively recently, there has been surprisingly little written about the way students experience the transition from VET to HE. This is an extraordinary gap, given the extensive literature about ‘transfer shock’ in the United States which identifies the personal, social, cultural and pedagogic hurdles community college students experience when they transfer to four-year universities (Laanan 2007). The US literature is premised on students moving from one type of HE program to another in programs that have been designed to complement each other. In Australia however, most pathways are designed after the programs in each sector have been developed using CBT in VET, and knowledge-based curriculum in HE. A possible explanation for this omission is the more or less consistent finding over several years now that TAFE students, on the whole, have pass rates that are similar to school leavers in HE, which demonstrates their capacity to study at HE level. This is confirmed by more recent institutional studies (Young 2005a; Wheelahan 2005; Milne *et al.* 2006).

However, a number of institutional studies have been undertaken recently that provide more insight into students’ experiences. These have found that TAFE articulators perform at similar levels compared to other groups of students but that their experience of their first year at HE is somewhat stressful (Cameron 2004; Abbott-Chapman 2006; Milne *et al.* 2006). Students reported difficulties as a consequence of differences in teaching style, bigger class sizes, lower contact hours, higher academic standards, lower levels of support, and expectations of more independent study. They also report problems with not knowing how to access resources, not knowing what to expect, time management, study skills, motivation, finances, managing work and family, and making new friends (Abbott-Chapman 2006; Cameron 2004; Milne *et al.* 2006). These are all problems associated with ‘transfer shock’, and point to the need
for transition support (Laanan 2007). Milne et al. (2006) report that some students said they found it difficult to get the information they needed, and to navigate administrative requirements to obtain credit transfer. Many credit transfer agreements result in students being provided credit for the first year of degrees, and Milne et al. (2006) found that some students said that it was difficult to go straight into second year of degrees because of gaps in their knowledge, and because lecturers expected them to be performing at second year level and not as a first year student. Ian Young (2005a: 6), the Vice-Chancellor of Swinburne University of Technology, argues that TAFE students “cannot simply be ‘dropped into’ 2nd year degree programs and be expected to do well.”

Milne et al. (2006: 47) also identified the factors that support transition. They argue that students benefit if they are prepared for HE study by their TAFE teachers before entering HE; if their TAFE course equips them with the academic knowledge and skill they need in their field; and, if their was a ‘good fit’ between the TAFE and HE program. They argue that institutional attention is needed to provide students with a more ‘seamless’ experience, so that their process of transition is smoother.

The Australian literature is beginning to emphasise the importance of transition support for TAFE students entering HE. This is accompanied by a growing awareness that the different curriculum models in the sectors do matter and that transition support involves the ‘normal’ transfer shock as well as the particular problems that arise from largely different curriculum models. This work is beginning to address the contradiction at the heart of Australian tertiary education. However, this contradiction will not be adequately addressed unless policy changes so that VET qualifications equip students to study at HE as well as preparing them for a vocational destination, and this requires a degree of curricular commensurability between the sectors.

**Conclusion: the growth of HE in TAFE & equity**

TAFE’s entry into offering HE qualifications will help to transform relations between the sectors but it is not clear that the outcomes will be more equitable for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, even if it does result in greater commensurability between programs offered by the two sectors. The recently ousted conservative government intensified the marketisation of HE through providing income-contingent loans to students undertaking full-fee under-graduate and post-graduate qualifications in universities and in private HE providers. This has, in a very short time, led to the proliferation of small private HE providers. Moreover, many universities have established small commercial VET providers to enable them to offer full-fee programs to students as a prelude to undertaking full-fee HE programs, particularly to international students. Whilst the new Labor government is likely to alter these policy settings, they are not likely to fundamentally change.³

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³ The new Labor government has said it will abolish full-fee under-graduate places in universities. This is meeting resistance by universities, particularly the elite Group of Eight who have the highest number of full-fee under-graduate students. Whatever happens, the Labor government is not likely to alter the arrangements that facilitate the provision of private HE by private HE institutions in the interests of maintaining a competitive HE market.
TAFEs will enter HE through offering associate degrees and, increasingly degrees, to maintain their position relative to private providers with whom they already compete in offering VET qualifications. Private VET providers have long sought access to short-cycle HE as a way of circumventing the constraints of VET training packages because they are too inflexible (Anderson 2006), and because HE qualifications are more prestigious, particularly amongst international students. In addition, several State governments are developing a role for TAFE in delivering HE as full-fee programs, putatively in ‘niche areas’, but increasingly in areas that are the terrain of the new universities in vocational fields such as hospitality and business. The only foreseeable brake on this process is the Commonwealth government’s decision to provide income-contingent loans for students undertaking full-fee VET diplomas and advanced diplomas that are subject to a credit transfer agreement with a university. Apart from income-contingent loans for full-fee HE programs, there is no other income-contingent loan available to VET students, and they must pay their fees for VET qualifications up-front if they are publicly subsidised, or if they are full-fee programs below the level of diploma.

It is likely that as TAFE’s provision of HE grows, the emphasis will move to developing pathways based on HE awards and not the existing CBT training packages in VET. However, because these pathways will be based on full-fee HE programs in VET, access will be restricted to those who are prepared to pay full fees, and this is a problem if pathways are meant as an equity measure for the most disadvantaged students. While TAFE is restricted to offering HE awards as full-fee provision, its public provision will continue to be based on CBT and the problems intrinsic to VET awards cannot be addressed. This is likely expand two tracks that are emerging in VET: publicly funded programs that are lower level and based on competencies, and full fee programs that are higher level and based on curriculum. This in turn will accentuate the existing processes within TAFE that track low SES students and other members of equity groups into lower level qualifications and medium and higher SES students into the higher level VET qualifications (Foley 2007). These problems would be overcome if TAFE were able to offer short-cycle HE awards as public provision, and TAFE were able to progressively replace training packages qualifications with HE awards, but this is unlikely to change in the short-term.

However, even if TAFE were able to offer publicly funded HE qualifications, it would not solve the lack of pathways from TAFE to elite universities. Australian HE is already informally stratified into selecting and recruiting universities. Creating large ‘mixed economy’ providers in VET runs the risk of reproducing the binary divide, but with HE providers in VET that are even lower in status than the new and rural universities. The consequence is, as Grubb (2006: 33) explains in speaking of the US, that:

“… equality of opportunity in practice means greater chances of enrolling in tertiary education, but not equality in the resources invested in different students, nor equality of the probability of completing a degree, nor equality of occupations for which students are being prepared.”

HE provision in TAFE will grow in ways that are unmonitored, unplanned, and uncoordinated in the absence of policy, similar to the period of ‘low policy’ in England described by Parry (2005). This is because markets are being used to
diversify HE rather than developing a specific role for TAFE in providing HE. This period may give way and result in a period of 'high policy' which brings coherence to HE provision in TAFE. But this can happen only if and when HE is also publicly funded in TAFE, and if considerations of equity and distributional justice once again become concerns of the new Labor government. Ensuring equity will also require government attention to mechanisms that provide transferring students with access to the elite public universities, as in the United States. Then HE in TAFE may have the capacity to challenge existing boundaries. Whatever happens, it seems that the contradiction at the heart of Australian tertiary education is being challenged, and that the liberal market economy in Australia is helping to produce a tertiary education system that looks more like those in the liberal market economies of Britain and the United States.

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