What is needed for TAFE to take its place as a HE provider?

TAFE institutes now offer degrees and associate degrees in five states in Australia. We are no longer discussing whether TAFE should offer higher education (HE) programs, but how they should do so and how government policy can support this provision to ensure it opens rather than closes opportunities for students.

The growth of HE in TAFE will mean that TAFEs will start to look more like further education colleges in England and community colleges in the United States and Canada, which have long had provision of associate degrees and other short-cycle HE qualifications as part of their roles. The most important lesson we can draw from each country concerns the relative balance between markets and government planning in establishing a role for these institutions in delivering HE. Despite their liberal market economies and policies that encourage institutional competition for students, FE colleges and community colleges established their role as public providers of HE to achieve government policy objectives of social inclusion, and in the case of England, to help increase the skill levels of the population through vocationally oriented two-year foundation degrees.

The example of England is particularly instructive because of the similarities between our systems, and because FE's role in delivering HE is more recent. FE has moved from the margins of HE in the 1990s and now teaches one in nine under-graduate HE students. A small number of FE colleges are able to self-accredit their own foundation degrees. The government is planning to establish university-centres in regionally isolated areas and FE colleges are expected to take a major role in this provision. England offers many lessons about what to do and what not to do.

TAFE needs to be mapped into government policy with an explicit role that distinguishes it from universities and private providers if it is to establish itself as a HE provider. Its role as a HE provider will remain marginal if it is left to the vagaries of the market and restricted to offering only full-fee HE programs, as is currently the case. Private providers have lower costs and no community service obligations and this makes it hard for TAFE to compete. Like England, it needs to establish its distinctiveness as a public provider of HE. If TAFE remains only as a private provider it will not be able to make claims on government resources and public funding. This is not good for students because, like England, provision of HE in TAFE can be a mechanism for social inclusion for people from low socio-economic backgrounds and from regional and rural areas.

If TAFE is to act as a mechanism for social inclusion the focus of its provision should be to complement rather than duplicate provision in universities. This means that the emphasis in metropolitan areas needs to be on associate degrees that articulate with degrees in universities, and the provision of associate degrees and degrees in regional areas without ready access to a university. FE colleges in England won the right to self-accredit through their distinctive role in offering foundation degrees, not bachelor degrees, demonstrating that sometimes a more limited goal brings greater success.

However, TAFE also needs to get its house in order by ensuring that its higher level qualifications do act as a mechanism for social inclusion. Students from low socio-economic
backgrounds are overly concentrated in lower level VET qualifications, and this makes it hard to argue that TAFE can provide a ladder of opportunity.

TAFE can act as a mechanism for social inclusion only if it is provided with publicly funded HE places. It is unjust and inequitable to restrict TAFE students to full-fee HE provision, particularly if these qualifications are meant to act as pathways for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to publicly funded degrees. The provision of publicly funded HE places in TAFE would also mean that government must develop an explicit role for TAFE in delivering HE and bring it in from the margins of the market.

We need to develop nationally consistent and conducive quality assurance arrangements to support the provision of HE in TAFE to ensure public confidence in TAFE qualifications. At present HE in TAFE is overseen by the state offices of higher education, which are in turn audited by the Australian Universities Quality Agency. AUQA may also choose to audit a private HE provider – but there is no consistent framework or timetable of audits as with universities. On the face of it, the national guidelines for non self-accrediting HE institutions that support the MCEETYA National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes do not appear to be conducive to establishing consistent approval processes within states let alone nationally because the processes seem to be based on convening ad hoc panels.

Finally, a key lesson we can learn from England is that the growth of HE in FE can lead to the re-establishment of the sectoral divide within mixed sector institutions in ways that reproduce rather than transcend the problems associated with dual-sector provision and sectoral boundaries. HE in TAFE won’t necessarily solve problems of progression and seamlessness. We need to make sure we develop the policies and institutional culture that is needed to support students and create opportunities for them.

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