HE IN FE IN AUSTRALIA, CANADA, ENGLAND, NEW ZEALAND AND THE US

Gavin Moodie and Leesa Wheelahan, Griffith University, Australia

This paper considers higher education programs that are offered by institutions that have historically and still predominantly offer vocational education programs. These arrangements are called higher education (HE) in further education (FE) in England. The paper compares HE in FE in Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand and the US. The paper notes that what is considered ‘further’ and ‘higher’ education differs in each jurisdiction. Nonetheless, it is possible to compare bachelor degrees offered by Australia’s vocational education and training institutions, Canada’s community colleges, England’s further education colleges, New Zealand’s institutes of technology and polytechnics and the US’ 2-year colleges.

This paper reports progress with a project funded by the Australian National Centre for Vocational Education Research to examine higher education programs offered by public further education colleges, which in Australia are called Technical and Further Education (Tafe) institutes. This report concentrates on just 1 of the several issues that arose in the study: interviewees’ accounts of the implications of higher education in further education for the identity of institutions, teachers and students.

In the third part of the paper we invite reflection on 3 questions: why is higher education in further education expanding, how is higher education in further education being structured by the broader relations between the sectors, and what may be the future of higher education in further education?

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (1997) International standard classification of education classifies education into 7 levels. Each level from lower secondary to the first stage of tertiary education is divided into 2 streams: an academic stream called ‘general education’ that leads to further academic education or after the first stage of tertiary education to high status occupations called ‘professions’, and a vocational or pre-vocational stream that leads to lower status occupations called trades or vocations.

Table 1: International standard classification of education 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>NAME OF THE LEVEL</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>DURATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Second stage of tertiary education</td>
<td>Leads to an advanced research qualification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>First stage of tertiary education</td>
<td>Does not lead directly to an advanced research qualification</td>
<td>At least 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5A</td>
<td>5A Theoretical or professional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5B</td>
<td>5B Practical or occupational</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 - 3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Post-secondary non tertiary education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A</td>
<td>Foundation program</td>
<td>Provides access to 5A</td>
<td>Up to 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4B</td>
<td>Vocational program</td>
<td>Leads to the labour market</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>(Upper) secondary education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3A</td>
<td>General education</td>
<td>Provides access to 5A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3B</td>
<td>Pre-vocational</td>
<td>Provides access to 5B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3C</td>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>Leads to the labour market, ISCED 4 or other ISCED 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lower secondary education</td>
<td>Second stage of basic education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2A</td>
<td>General education</td>
<td>Provides access to 3A</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2B</td>
<td>Pre-vocational</td>
<td>Provides access to 3C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2C</td>
<td>Vocational or ‘terminal’ program</td>
<td>Leads to the labour market</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Primary education</td>
<td>First stage of basic education</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Pre-primary education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Many further education colleges in many jurisdictions have long offered short cycle higher education: higher national diplomas and foundation degrees in England, associate degrees in Canada and the US, and diplomas and advanced diplomas in Australia. These programs are classified 5B in the international standard classification of education. While the relations between these and bachelor degrees or baccalaureates offered by higher education institutions have been problematic in all jurisdictions, the problems are longstanding and familiar, although they arise differently from time to time. In this paper we are considering just a subset of higher education programs, bachelor degrees or baccalaureates, because these are distinctively and were until recently almost exclusively offered by higher education institutions. These programs are classified 5A in the international standard classification of education.

In this paper ‘further education college’ refers to an educational institution that offers predominantly vocational and pre-vocational programs, which the international standard classification of education classifies as levels 4A, 4B and 5B. Thus most sixth form colleges which offer predominantly studies leading to A levels or the senior secondary certificate are not included in ‘further education’ in this paper, although they are included in the further education sector in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The distinction between further and higher education is relatively recent, having been formalised in the early to mid 20th century in most jurisdictions. Yet it has become firmly entrenched in all the jurisdictions considered in this paper: Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand and the US. To varying extents in each jurisdiction there has been a correspondence of the programmatic and institutional designations of the sectors: higher education programs are mostly offered only by higher education institutions that offer mostly higher education programs, and further education programs are mostly offered only by further education institutions that offer mostly further education programs.

This correspondence has started to fray in all jurisdictions recently, say since 2000, when further education colleges have increasingly started to offer baccalaureates. The first part of this paper describes the development of baccalaureates in further education colleges in each jurisdiction and the experiences of senior managers, program directors, teachers and students in a study of higher education offered by further education institutes in Australia. In the second part we invite reflection on 3 questions: why is higher education in further education expanding, how is the higher education in further education being structured by the broader relations between the sectors, and what may be the future of higher education in further education?

ARRANGEMENTS IN 5 JURISDICTIONS

Australian national and state governments have increasingly structured further education and more recently higher education as a market by establishing rules for any body to register as a further or higher education provider and by allowing any registered provider to seek accreditation to offer any program. The rules which allow any private body to seek registration as a higher education provider apply equally to Tafe institutes. So several further education colleges, including 10 Tafe institutes, have also gained registration as private higher education providers and accreditation to offer baccalaureates. Some Tafe baccalaureates have enrolments of 200 students, but most have much smaller enrolments.

Three Canadian provinces have approved 23 community colleges to offer baccalaureates: Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario. In British Columbia the 3 community colleges that were granted the right to award baccalaureates in 1989 were designated university colleges and 2 more community colleges were designated university colleges from 1990 and 1995. Flemming and Lee (2009: 98) argue that ‘the creation of the university colleges without engaging in thorough deliberation on their role within the post-secondary system resulted in a certain ambiguity of purpose and identity within the institutions and their communities’. Levin (2003) observed that British Columbia’s university colleges changed their structures and practices to emulate research intensive universities. For whatever reason, British Columbia’s institution of university colleges has been unstable. By September 2008 all five university colleges had become universities, one by restructure, one by amalgamation and the others by redesignation.
England’s further education colleges enrolled 15% of students commencing higher education in 2005, 11% in programs offered in their own right and 4% in programs franchised from higher education institutions (Rashid and Brooks, 2008: 4). Of those 22% were studying towards degrees (Hefce, 2006: 7), so further education colleges enrol only just over 3% of English baccalaureate students. Further education colleges do not award higher education qualifications in their own right, but offer them in partnership with higher education institutions (Blackie et al, 2009: 173). English authorities have sought to expand higher education in further education to deepen and widen access to higher education including in ‘cold spots’ or regions which currently have no access to campus based higher education (DIUS, 2008; Gill, 2008), to open vocational progression routes into and within higher education (Hefce, 2009: 3), to improve the interface between further and higher education, and to increase employers’ ‘engagement’ in higher education, including shared funding of programs (Hefce, 2006: 5-7; Blackie et al, 2009: 7).

All New Zealand public and private institutions can, in principle, offer any program on the national qualifications framework, from trades and technical certificates to doctorates. However, this is limited by the Education Act 1989 which requires all programs at bachelor level and above to be taught mainly by lecturers active in research. Some 16 of New Zealand’s 20 polytechnics or institutes of technology offer baccalaureates, mostly in computer science, business and teacher education (Ministry of Education no date). Polytechnics enrol approximately 20% of baccalaureate students in New Zealand. From 2003 the Government has sought to plan, coordinate and consolidate institutions’ provision, encouraging polytechnics to strengthen their regional focus and reduce their emphasis on adult and continuing education programs in favour of a broader range of diplomas and applied baccalaureates (Webster 2009: 116).

In the US 10 states have authorised 23 community colleges to offer baccalaureates, 2% of the 1,157 community colleges in the US. Most of the baccalaureate granting community colleges are in Florida (9 colleges), Washington (4) and Texas (3) (Community College Baccalaureate Association 2008). Dougherty (2008) discusses what he calls ‘the dilemmas of comprehensiveness’ and the conflicting pressures of ‘mission specialisation’. He notes the strong evidence that more comprehensive institutions are superior in providing broader access to higher education in the US but that there are continuing calls for colleges to become more specialised and reduce overlap in their functions (Dougherty 2008: 7-8). These calls are rarely heeded because of the clear hierarchy in higher education reinforced by higher funding for elite programs and research. Dougherty (2008: 9) also draws on resource dependence theory to explain that institutions try to compensate for uncertainties in funding from any one source by gaining their revenue from a variety of sources. Hence community colleges offer academic and vocational programs in pursuit of multiple sources of funding (Dougherty 2008: 9).

AUSTRALIAN STUDY

Australian public further education colleges, Technical and Further Education (Tafe) institutes, have started offering baccalaureates only very recently. Currently 10 Tafe institutes offer 33 baccalaureates and most of these are very small, with a small number of programs with around 200 enrolments. While most are therefore small, Tafe’s baccalaureates transgress what has hitherto been a sharp demarcation between further and higher education. They have thus unsettled both further and higher education commentators who believe, for different reasons, that institutions should keep within their sectoral boundaries. There has therefore been policy and media interest in the development.

The Australian National Centre for Vocational Education Research funded our colleagues and us to investigate higher education in Tafe. As part of this project we conducted 98 interviews:

- 10 staff of offices for higher education responsible for accrediting providers in 6 states;
- 6 senior staff in 2 dual sector universities;
- 16 Tafe directors and senior staff in 6 Tafes offering baccalaureates in 5 states;
- 6 Tafe directors and senior staff in 3 Tafes that did not offer baccalaureates;
- 5 program/curriculum developers in 3 Tafes offering baccalaureates;
- 27 teachers in 6 Tafes in 5 states and the Tafe division of a dual sector university that offers baccalaureates;
- 28 baccalaureate students in 6 Tafes in 5 states and in the Tafe division of a dual sector university.
Many themes arose from these interviews and the wider study, but in this session we will consider just 2: identities, and the related issue of status.

IDENTITIES

Institutions
Some Tafes considered their baccalaureates an extension of their role in further education that meets industry needs through vocational qualifications. But three of the Tafe institutes included in our study were clearly positioning their Tafe to become a new type of institution that offered a range of programs so that the balance of their provision might not be in further education. Such an institution would, as one Tafe director put it, offer applied or vocational baccalaureates and undertake applied research to transform workplaces and contribute to knowledge transfer and innovation. It would, ideally, in time win the right to accredit its own qualifications. Senior managers who wished to pursue this path emphasised that they did not want to become a university and that they were occupying a different sectoral position. There is a lot to be done before these aspirations become reality, even though these institutions are trying to establish the foundations. Much depends on government policy which is fluid in the aftermath of the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley 2008). The national government may endorse this model to cater for its projected expansion of participation in higher education of disadvantaged students, just as in England. It would certainly be cheaper than expanding existing universities, let alone establishing new ones as some analysts have suggested is necessary.

At present most Tafes' baccalaureates are integrated into departments that are responsible for both further and higher education, even though it may be a separate component within that department. However, some Tafes are considering their internal organisational structures.

Teachers
Of the 27 teachers we interviewed, 11 taught in both further and higher education although the balance of their teaching load in each sector varied, 9 taught only in higher education, 5 taught only in further education, and 2 were either program leaders or equivalent who were not directly involved in teaching, but had responsibility for both further and higher education programs in their area. We did not ask teachers specifically about their qualifications, yet virtually all volunteered this information or it arose in the course of the conversation. Some 60% already held a masters or PhD and a further 25% were studying towards a higher degree. It was apparent in the interviews that the time, effort and money teachers had devoted to upgrading their qualifications were an important part of their understanding of themselves as teachers and their position relative to other further education teachers and to management.

Teachers’ perceptions of their identities were related to their work as higher education teachers. One teacher who teaches only in higher education said ‘I don’t subscribe to the fact that I am a Tafe teacher. I am a higher education lecturer.’ Others, particularly those coming from a creative and performing arts professional field of practice that had a strong identity didn’t call themselves teachers – either further or higher education teachers; they were professionals from their field of practice helping others to access knowledge and skills needed to join this field of practice. One spoke for a few teachers when he sought to explain higher education in further education by saying that he is a further education teacher in a degree program. On the other hand, he found that:

Inside Tafe it is a little different, people sometimes jokingly refer to you as a professor, and it is sometimes like you have deserted the VET side. People just joke a bit occasionally. Most don’t see too much difference because they think of it as just another department that teaches.

One teacher didn’t make a distinction himself, but thought it was ‘important not to flaunt his qualifications’ because they are necessary to teach higher education. However, he ‘can sense that people feel the differences’.

While a couple of teachers said that there was no difference between teaching further and higher education students because ‘teaching is teaching’, most said that it was quite different, and many thought that management didn’t understand this. One said ‘There is a lack of understanding about the rigour of higher education.’ Another said that:
we have heads of department with effective control of degrees who don’t have degrees and who don’t understand what is involved. This is very frustrating because they don’t understand much about higher education.

One teacher said:

As long as higher education and VET are taught together it is a challenge to switch from one to the other. Teachers sometimes carry the wrong mode with them into higher education – and this is because Tafe is asking everyone to have two styles and to be able to deploy each when appropriate.

Teachers argued that these differences needed to be recognised if higher education were to be developed. Some thought that higher education and further education needed to be organisationally separate so that the administration of the programs was handled by those who understand the requirements, while ensuring that those teaching higher education and further education stayed within the one department to ensure silos didn’t develop. Another said that he ‘doesn’t want to see higher education as an exclusive division. But there needs to be cultural recognition in the institute about academic input.’ Others thought that there needed to be structural separation to benefit students. As an illustration, one said that higher education should be organisationally separate and that students should have their own facilities and study area ‘so they can feel a little bit proud and a little bit special’. She said this was important because:

It helps them to understand that studying higher education is different to studying Tafe. Some still have the Tafe mentality, and if they are mixing with Tafe students then they will continue to think that it is okay for assignments to be late and that things are a little bit easier.

Some teachers were more definite about this issue; higher education should be separate from further education. Others thought that it was important to distinguish between further and higher education to develop higher education communities of practice to support scholarship.

**Students**

Most of the 28 students interviewed for this project were young, full-time and domestic, although there were a smaller number of older, part-time students and six of the 28 were international students. Of the 28 students 10 said that their school experiences were not positive (and in some cases utterly miserable), 5 were ambivalent – they enjoyed the social side of school and weren’t particularly focused on the academic side and this was reflected in their results, and 8 had good experiences, but this included older students who already had degrees. Of the remaining 5, 4 didn’t say and for one such experiences were too long ago to remember.

Students’ identities as higher education students were also shaped by sectoral designation and the institution in which they were studying. Students’ reasons for studying higher education programs at a Tafe were complex and in many cases reflect an uncertain student identity. This is evident in the way they heard learnt about their higher education program and the reasons why they chose it. Seven students learnt about the program from their school or further education teacher, 8 from friends or family, 7 by word of mouth and their own research, 3 because they knew the institution (with 2 employed at their institution), and only 2 through their state’s tertiary admissions centre. Younger students were relying on the knowledge of others to help them choose their post-school options and on the views of others about what they should do, while older students had a clearer understanding of why they were enrolling and how it was related to their career progression.

At least 8 students explicitly said that one reason they enrolled in their Tafe program was because university was too daunting and they could get more support at Tafe. The fact that teachers knew students’ names was important to many students – they weren’t just a number. One young international student said ‘Tafe lecturers take care of overseas students’ more than university lecturers. She said they wouldn’t receive the same treatment in a university:

At uni lecturers keep going, keep going and won’t stop because you are an overseas student and you don’t understand.
On the other hand, there was a small group who thought their studies weren’t sufficiently challenging and were considering transferring to a program in a university as a result – but it was their experience in Tafe that made them realise they could do more. There was a sense that students’ enrolment was insurance against risk; if they didn’t get into program at university or if they didn’t finish at least they would have the associate degree (where this was available).

The notion of an uncertain identity as a higher education student was expressed by several students, and this was related to the question of status, which was addressed by almost all students. For example, one student explained that she tells people she is studying civil engineering. She then says she is studying an associate degree, but it ‘is a half a degree’. She says that:

> It is important to say that because when she says that she is studying civil engineering – they say ‘whoy!’ and she says ‘it is only half a degree’.

Another said that ‘I tell them the course name [he is enrolled in] and they are usually blinded by the big words’. Yet another student says when trying to explain what he does, tells people, ‘he is studying drafting at Tafe – he wouldn’t like to call himself an engineer when he is not qualified as an engineer – even though he will eventually be an engineer’. He explained he wouldn’t have this problem if he were doing the same course at a university; in that case he would just say he was doing engineering. Other students proclaimed themselves as higher education students doing degree programs, but were less forthcoming about where they were studying, and it was clear that they found issues to do with status and credibility of their programs troubling. With the exceptions of the 2 older students who found universities daunting, the other older students were much more confident about their identity as higher education students and it didn’t matter to them where they were studying.

We asked students whether they mixed with students enrolled in other programs in the institute or whether they knew other Tafe students. This was a question that was mainly relevant to full-time students because of the time they spent on campus. A few knew some other students through school, but overwhelmingly higher education students did not mix with other students. Some students interpreted this question as referring to students doing other majors or streams in their degree (it was if the rest of the institute did not exist), and there was not necessarily much contact with even these students, although there was some. They got to know other students in their class who then constituted a distinct group and the support they received from the group was very important. Those who had been to university contrasted this experience at the Tafe with their experience at university. In some cases this sense of a community was reinforced because all their classes were in the one building which was not used very much by other students. However, they were a distinct group, different from other students.

**CONCLUSION: 3 ISSUES**

We have observed higher education expanding in further education institutions in 5 jurisdictions, but for a range of different reasons. After a period of ‘low policy’ (Parry and Thompson, 2002: 3) English authorities are encouraging the expansion of higher education in further education to contribute to a number of government objectives. In Australia higher education is expanding in further education mostly at institutions’ initiative. Higher education in further education’s expansion in the other jurisdictions is between these 2 approaches, with Canada and the US being closer to England and New Zealand closer to Australia. Is the expansion of higher education in further education therefore different in each jurisdiction, or are there commonalities that explain the developments taking place at similar times?

One of the several advantages that many further education colleges in each jurisdiction claim for their higher education provision is that it removes obstacles to students progressing from further to higher education. Yet paradoxically, some further education institutions in both England and Australia are contemplating institutionalising a separation of their higher education provision. Is this internalising the external divisions between the sectors and does it suggest that the external divisions between the sectors in England and Australia are still too deep to be overcome by institutions alone?

Almost all of our interviewees raised the status of higher education in further education. It was identified as an important limitation for the development of higher education in further education by interviewees in offices of higher education, by senior managers at the dual-sector universities included
in this project, by Tafe senior management at all Tafes in the project, and by teachers and students. This raises another paradox. Further education claimed that its higher education programs are distinctive in being more practical and vocational than higher education offered by higher education institutions, yet further education also claims that its higher education programs are of a similar standard and should be accorded similar standing to those offered by higher education institutions.

Finally, are we observing the start of an important new trend of higher education in further education institutions, or are some further education colleges in a transition to designation as higher education institutions, as has happened over 2 decades in British Columbia?

REFERENCES


