VET pathways in Tasmania: collaborating for successful participation

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Abstract

The imperative to increase pathways from vocational education and training (VET) to higher education is clear in Tasmania, where it is recognised that the development of effective education and training pathways is critical for workforce development and retention in skill areas of identified need. In Tasmania, like other rural and regional areas in Australia, students are more likely to have lower socioeconomic status than those living in mainland metropolitan areas and less likely to move to higher education directly from school: also more likely to articulate to university from vocational education and training. However, the level of post-compulsory participation in the state is low, with approximately 40% of the age cohort completing Year 12 and fewer students completing either higher-level VET qualifications or entering university. The barriers to participation and pathways are significant.

This paper reports on the outcomes of a study of the pathways of students admitted to the University of Tasmania (UTAS) on the basis of previous VET, over a period of 7.5 years, from 2004 to semester one 2011. The study used a mixed-methods approach combining statistics collected from admission and enrolment data from UTAS and completion data from the VET sector (Tasmanian TAFE and subsequently the Tasmanian Polytechnic and Tasmanian Skills Institute) from 2003-2010, with qualitative data from a sample of current UTAS and current Tasmanian Polytechnic/Tasmanian Skills Institute students. Sources of qualitative data were focus group and individual interviews with a sample of current UTAS students (Human Research Ethics Committee [Tasmania] Network, approval no. H11280) and open-ended questionnaires completed by a sample of current Tasmanian Polytechnic/Tasmanian Skills Institute students.

Examination of the student experience, effective pathways and lessons learnt nationally gives educators in Tasmania some strong guidance for collaboration in delivering the desired outcome of greater and more successful participation in Tasmania.

Introduction

Education is a key determinant of socioeconomic status and a significant contributor to regional development. Those with lower standards of education fall behind in a range of key areas including income, employment, health and democratic participation. This is highlighted for those living in regional Australia who are more likely to have lower socioeconomic status than those living in metropolitan areas (Cram 2010).

This is particularly the case in Tasmania, which consistently ranks at or near the bottom on a range of socioeconomic indicators; for example, a higher proportion of Tasmanian census collection districts are included in the most disadvantaged 5% of all census collection districts than the other Australian
states on the ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Relative Disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). Here, low educational attainment becomes a central component in a cycle of disadvantage.

By lagging behind the other states in terms of educational retention, participation and attainment, Tasmanians also lag behind in the benefits afforded by tertiary education. According to the 2006 Census approximately 54% of the Tasmanian population had only completed Year 10 or below. Despite significant improvements since 1998, in 2008 Tasmania still remained around seven percentage points behind the national average in terms of Year 7/8 to Year 12 retention (Australian average: 62%, Tasmania: 55%). Low levels of participation in the higher-level VET qualifications — under 60% of the age cohort completing Year 12, and only 40% of those eligible entering university — are indications that the barriers faced are significant.

The Tasmanian Articulation and Credit Transfer Committee (TASACT) was established in 2007 as a partnership between the then Institute of TAFE Tasmania, the Tasmanian Education Department, the Tasmanian Qualifications Authority, Skills Tasmania and the University of Tasmania in order to provide high-level institutional and sectoral leadership. It was recognised that pathways between the educational sectors were critical for workforce development in skill areas of identified need and indeed for the regional development of the state.

The ‘Double Advantage’ Program at UTAS includes a number of courses which offer varying levels of credit transfer from VET to some degree programs. However, little was known about the success of the program, the pathways or longitudinal outcomes of VET students articulating to university.

It was in this context that TASACT supported a research study into the articulation and performance at UTAS of VET articulants, some of the outcomes of which are reported in this paper.

The study examines the pathways and success of students admitted to the University of Tasmania on the basis of previous VET, over a period of 7.5 years, from 2004 to semester one 2011. The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining statistics collected from admission and enrolment data from UTAS and completion data from the VET sector (Tasmanian TAFE and subsequently the Tasmanian Polytechnic and Tasmanian Skills Institute) from 2003–2010, with qualitative data from a sample of current UTAS and current Tasmanian Polytechnic/Tasmanian Skills Institute students. Sources of qualitative data were focus group and individual interviews with a sample of current UTAS students (HREC, approval no. H11280) and open-ended questionnaires completed by a sample of current Tasmanian Polytechnic/Tasmanian Skills Institute students.

Statistics were collected from admission and enrolment data for 19 584 students from UTAS for the period 2004 to semester one 2011. The sample comprised a total of 1902 students who were admitted to UTAS on the basis of previous VET diploma and advanced diploma, and a statistically representative random sample of students from other groups — mature-age/other (4381), previous higher education (5146), Tasmanian Year 12 (7434), interstate Year 12 (721). These data were analysed with the aid of SPSS software. Completion data were also collected from the public VET sector for the period 2003 to 2010.

Sources of qualitative data were focus group and individual interviews with a sample of 24 current UTAS students, who were admitted on the basis of previous VET diploma or advanced diploma, to gain an insight into their personal experiences of VET pathways and open-ended questionnaires completed by a sample of current Tasmanian Polytechnic/Tasmanian Skills Institute students to gain an insight into
their future intentions regarding higher education and factors that would make this pathway work successfully.

The study was limited by the need to use available statistical information and enrolment data, rather than data collected specifically for the purposes of the research. Data on the individual students' socioeconomic status for the entire study period or previous VET field of study were not available in retained administrative records. The final study report (Langworthy, Johns & Humphries 2011) is published on the UTAS website.

Findings and discussion

Student characteristics, participation and performance

Overall, the numbers of students enrolling at UTAS with a reported VET background have increased steadily from 2004; although the overall percentage remains around 11% of all enrolling students. The number of students articulating with a diploma or advanced diploma and identified for the purposes of this study has also increased. These students are not an homogenous group; some had completed their study many years ago while others had more recent experience; some were following a direct pathway from VET to higher education while others were pursuing a career change through higher education.

In general these students were:

- older than all other student population groups (mean age of 34 compared with previous higher education [32], mature-age/other [27], Tasmanian Year 12 [20], interstate Year 12 [20])
- more likely to be female
- more likely to enrol in education, management and commerce, society and culture, and health (table 1)
- less likely to enrol in agriculture, environmental and related studies, and architecture and building (table 1)
- more likely to be granted credit in management and commerce, information technology and education (table 1) Langworthy, Johns & Humphries 2011, p.18.

Gender, age and study area characteristics of students admitted to UTAS on the basis of previous VET study are similar to those of regional higher education students in general, where there are fewer students enrolling in areas of regional need, natural and physical sciences, engineering and related technologies, agriculture environmental and related studies, for example (Richardson & Friedman 2011).
Table 1: Number of VET student enrolments by study area and credit granted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrolment study area</th>
<th>Credit granted</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>237 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management and commerce</td>
<td>126 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society and culture</td>
<td>266 (79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>257 (99%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative arts</td>
<td>110 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering and related technologies</td>
<td>106 (76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural and physical sciences</td>
<td>90 (98%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information technology</td>
<td>42 (48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, environmental and related studies</td>
<td>28 (88%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture and building</td>
<td>25 (89%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1287</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: King & colleagues, as cited in Friedman 2012.

One-third of all students admitted to UTAS on the basis of previous VET were granted credit upon commencement of their degree. While no data were available regarding students who may have applied for credit but were refused, qualitative data suggested there were a number of reasons why credit had not been sought, including lack of awareness or the complexity of the credit transfer process; completion of VET in an unrelated area (wool classing to nursing, for example); and the time spent away from study since completing VET. Other research also links low rates of credit transfer to lack of formal articulation arrangements (Cram 2011) or change of field of study (Fredman 2012). Some students said they decided not to apply for credit even when they were advised they were entitled, for fear of missing foundational information and concepts if they did not complete the whole course. This suggests that confidence in credit transfer needs to be increased, requiring greater collaboration between VET and higher education to map curriculum and identify equivalence (Cram 2011).

The higher levels of articulation and credit transfer in management and commerce, and education are consistent with the findings of other research, which suggests that the pathways are strongest where there is strong industry alignment or regulatory drivers (for example, Fredman 2012). The increased accreditation required for employment in the early childhood area for example explains the level of articulation in education but the apparently strong pathway from enrolled nurse to registered nurse is not reflected in the UTAS data. This perhaps can be partially explained by university course quotas. In common with experience Australia-wide where there appears to be misalignment between the VET and higher education programs in engineering (King and colleagues as cited in Fredman, 2012), there is little articulation at UTAS despite apparently strong industry demand.

Where there were formal articulation arrangements (for example, community services/social work, management and commerce, education) current UTAS and current VET students who participated in focus groups and surveys indicated a fairly high level of awareness of credit transfer. Students in areas where there were no formal articulation arrangements or less well established pathways (for example, VET courses in commercial cookery, and electrotechnology) had little awareness of further education and training options.

Figure 1 shows that completion rates for students admitted to UTAS on the basis of previous VET are similar to those across all other student populations.
Figure 1: Overall completion rates for VET versus all other student populations

![Bar chart showing completion rates for VET and all other students.]

Source: Langworthy, Johns & Humphries 2011, p.27.

Figure 2 shows that students admitted to UTAS on the basis of previous VET performed as well if not better than the student population on average. On completion of their degree, there was little to no difference in grade point average (GPA) between these students, Tasmanian Year 12 and mature-age/other students. On average, the GPA of the VET-admitted students was between 0.3 and 0.5 higher than previous higher education students, and between 0.2 and 0.6 higher than interstate Year 12 students, which represents statistically significant differences at the 95% level as the confidence intervals do not overlap. This supports findings from earlier UTAS research (Abbott-Chapman 2006) and other research (PhillipsKPA 2006) on the academic performance of VET students.
The student perspective

Most of the students interviewed who had been admitted to UTAS on the basis of previous VET, had made a deliberate choice to enter VET from school. They were motivated by career and vocational aspiration and had gained confidence from their VET experience and, in many cases, from their VET teachers, that enabled them to make the transition to university. Their personal motivation and performance at university was strongly linked to their satisfaction with their university experience; they had high expectations of themselves, and had the capacity and desire to do well:

I think because of what I’ve done in the past I should be doing well.

(Female Bachelor of Nursing student)

Several students who did not have a family background of further education were keenly aware that they were role models for future generations:

... so I would be the first one ... hey that’s another reason to graduate isn’t it?

(Female Bachelor of Business student)

Satisfaction was linked to different factors for different students, including effective transition strategies and supports; the ability to maintain work/life/study balance; having a supportive family or workplace; the culture and practices of the particular school in which they were enrolled; adequacy and timeliness of information, instruction and feedback received, and length of time they had been at university. Most acknowledged that things became easier the longer they spent at university:

I enrolled in UPP [University Preparation Program — an enabling program] and did six months. It was excellent, particularly the maths course, and I got distinctions, and it prepared me well for University study ... I am nearly finished my Nursing degree now, and have been getting good marks. University was not as hard as I thought.

(Male Bachelor of Nursing student)
Surviving the first few months and getting over the ‘fear factor’ was most important:

... they probably mentioned UniStart [orientation program] and UPP [enabling program] but I didn’t take it in [at the time] because I was full of anxiety and fear.

(Male Bachelor of Social Work student)

A common theme that emerged from current UTAS and current VET students was the need for earlier provision of a bridging program to assist in the transition from VET to higher education. The program would need to start before entry to higher education, while students were still at their VET institutions. Several students suggested that the program should be co-delivered by VET and UTAS staff utilising the facilities of both institutions.

Interview and online survey data report that the granting of credit was only one of a number of factors that influenced the decision to continue with higher education. For some students, receiving credit was seen as a bonus. Similarly, very few of the current VET students enrolled at the Tasmanian Polytechnic/Tasmanian Skills Institute identified the availability of credit transfer as a factor that would encourage them to continue to higher education.

Aside from the issue of credit transfer, a number of students reported that previous VET study offered a range of benefits in the transition to university, even if VET was in an unrelated area or if it was undertaken some years ago. Benefits were identified as increased confidence in their ability to undertake post-compulsory study, skills to cope with and adapt to university study, specific study skills (for example, public speaking, advanced writing skills), and a more general sense of giving students a head start at university. These benefits were particularly important for more than half the students interviewed, who had no family history of higher education:

I wouldn’t have gone to university without it ... because I’d been out of schooling for a long time ...
I didn’t have anybody as a mentor ... which was what I was provided with through TAFE ... [TAFE] gave me confidence, and also learning time management and what was going to be required.

(Female Bachelor of Arts student)

Some of the current VET students enrolled at the Tasmanian Polytechnic/Tasmanian Skills Institute not intending to study at university expressed negative views about university; costs were an issue for some and for others time, perceptions of university teaching and lack of connection with industry were strong disincentives.

However, most current VET students agreed that participation in VET had changed their attitudes to further study in a positive way, although only around one-third thought they would continue with higher-level VET and/or university study. They noted that ‘[study is] not as scary as I first thought’ (female Certificate III Education Support student) and ‘[VET] made it clearer how the pathway to university studies was laid out’ (male Diploma of Enrolled Nursing student).

Conclusions

The study has demonstrated to TASACT that, even after five years, the partnership still has a long way to go fulfill its brief to maximise credit transfer and articulation arrangements between the sectors. Use of direct pathways is limited and, while pathways to identified priority areas exist, they are more effective for some priority areas than others.

There is some evidence from students who had completed a community services VET course that they were encouraged to follow a pathway to higher education by their VET teacher. Even where well-defined pathways from VET to university existed, students needed to be encouraged and supported to
follow these pathways, indicating the need for an enhanced role for VET and university staff, along with family and friends.

There is also evidence that VET does provide benefits to the student in subsequent higher education studies — in confidence, skill and sometimes motivation and guidance. The students in the study performed as well if not better than the other student comparison groups and demonstrated similar completion rates. They also gave us some strong clues to bridging the gap between the sectors for future students.

Long-term pathway effectiveness is compromised when pathways are not embedded at a systemic level, and are dependent on the cooperation of individuals or groups who may change. The variation in levels of participation and credit transfer indicate that embedding the cooperation at a systematic level is still an aspiration.

The study reveals promising signs that the VET pathways can increase participation and therefore social inclusion. However, this will require continued collaboration between the sectors and with industry to increase participation in existing pathways, create new pathways and create student transition strategies. Although the journey has begun, there is still some distance to go.

Acknowledgment

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References


