

Barriers to successful transitions from VET to HE – a case study of student pathways in early childhood education and care

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Abstract

The expectation of a “seamless” pathway through education and training, particularly between vocational and higher education, places demands on learning institutions in both sectors.

This paper examines the cross-sectoral learning pathways available to people employed in early childhood education and care (ECEC), which encompasses childcare, pre-school education and the early years of schooling. While there is a recognised pathway between the VET Diploma of Children’s Services to a university degree in early childhood or primary school teaching, students who are making the transition face a range of obstacles. Sectoral differences in approaches to learning and teaching, course delivery and curriculum and assessment means that many VET Diploma students are not adequately prepared to undertake studies in higher education. Lack of understanding of the VET system by teaching staff in universities compounds the difficulties VET graduates face in making the transition. Although credit transfer and articulation arrangements assist VET Diploma graduates to obtain admission to some universities, many students find the transition difficult due to sectoral differences in teaching and learning, and the failure of teaching staff in both sectors to recognise and accommodate them. These obstacles may contribute to the rate of attrition among VET Childcare Diploma graduates enrolled in early childhood education courses at Australian universities.

This paper argues that successful cross-sectoral transitions depend heavily on the level of understanding by teaching staff (in both sectors) of the differences between VET and HE and their willingness to cater for these differences in their programs. Institutions therefore need to look beyond credit transfer and articulation agreements if they are to facilitate successful student transitions between the sectors. Teaching staff in both sectors should be assisted to understand the differences between VET and HE and to accommodate the specific learning needs of students from another sector. Policy makers should also consider the costs of perpetuating unnecessary divisions between VET and HE and should investigate measures to reduce the differences between the sectors.

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Introduction

This paper surveys current practices in the delivery of qualifications in the broad field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia. We examine the barriers faced by people holding a VET Diploma in Children's Services in making the transition to higher education degree courses in Early Childhood Education.

Cross-sectoral pathways between VET and HE

The traditional route to higher education through the completion of senior secondary schooling is weakening. During the 1990s, the movement of students from TAFE courses to university courses increased in parallel with increases in the university undergraduate intake (Golding and Vallenge 1999). By 2001, only 41 per cent of students admitted to Australian universities were admitted on the basis of their satisfactory completion of a final year of secondary education at school. Twenty-four percent of students admitted have a complete or incomplete higher education qualification, and the remaining 35 per cent of university students are admitted on another basis (compared to 28 per cent in 1991). Seven per cent of university students are now admitted on the basis of a complete or incomplete TAFE award course, compared to 3.3 per cent in 1991 (Commonwealth of Australia 2003).

Carnegie's report on cross-sectoral qualifications linkages in 2000 identified eight possible barriers that adversely impact on cross-sectoral linkage development between VET and HE. Carnegie's survey of stakeholders found the key impediments cross-sectoral collaboration were: cultural differences; educational differences; sector focus and integrity; institutional autonomy; diversity of content across different qualifications in each sector and the continual change in course content; resources constraints; government policies (ie. competition policy, different operational, administrative, regulatory and industrial arrangements for each sector; and the role of professional associations (Carnegie 2000: 168-182).

Although VET graduates are entering universities in increasing numbers, research suggests that the transition from VET to HE is not an easy pathway for many students (Dickson, Fleet and Watt 2000, Long 1994, McClelland and Kruger 1993). A study conducted in the 1980s indicated that TAFE graduates performed less well in their early years of tertiary study but improved their grades in later years (West 1988). Dickson (2000) identifies six "recurring variables" in the Australian research that impact on TAFE graduates' transition experiences at university:

1. The theoretical knowledge expected at university in contrast to the applied and vocational knowledge required at TAFE;
2. Differences in teaching and learning styles at TAFE and university;
3. Higher academic standards and uncertainties of the level of expectations;
4. Repetition of TAFE content;
5. Contrasts in staff-student interactions and relationships;
6. Time management difficulties in combining study and other demands such as paid work and family responsibilities.

Dickson's study of the first year university experience of twelve TAFE childcare graduates enrolled in an Early Childhood teacher education degree, confirmed the

findings of previous research in that the students were “apprehensive about their academic preparedness, the amount of work involved and the seemingly open-ended nature of the work” (Dickson 2000: 6). In addition, Dickson found that structural or “contextual” issues added significantly to the stress of the students’ first-year experience. For example, as a consequence of the credit granted for their TAFE study, the students faced the challenge of taking a second year core unit in language, literacy and literature in their first semester, which intensified their anxiety about coping with university-level studies, and placed them in classes with students who had completed a full first-year of university. She also points out that as a result of credit granted for their TAFE studies, the students were never part of an identifiable first-year “cohort” and therefore missed out on the critical interaction with peers that may have led to more information sharing and support.

By entering higher level units in their first year of university study, they found themselves on the periphery of second and third year groups. . . Students in this study, therefore, had a qualitatively different experience from students who commenced a prescribed full-time program in first year (Dickson 2000: 6-7).

The provision of services during the early years of childhood is expanding and government involvement in this area is increasing. The quality of a child’s experiences in the early years has a significant impact on their life outcomes in terms of education, employment and wellbeing (Barnett 1996, Currie 2001, Karoly et al. 1998, OECD 2001). Increasing numbers of children spend several years in early childhood settings prior to commencing primary school. The proportion of young children in formal childcare in Australia increased by ten percentage points between 1993 and 2002. In 2002, 44.5 per cent of children aged between birth and 4 years used formal childcare compared to 34 per cent in 1993 (ABS 2003. *Child Care Australia. June 2002. Cat. No. 4402.0*).

Due to the different history and origins of schools, pre-schools and childcare provision, the qualifications and employment conditions for ECEC professionals vary depending on where they are employed. In general, ECEC professionals employed in the childcare sector receive lower wages, have less professional status and have poorer working conditions than their counterparts in the pre-school and school sector (Commonwealth of Australia 2000, Fenech, Sumison and Goodfellow 2004).

In all States and Territories except Victoria, a four-year Bachelor of Education with an early childhood specialisation is the minimum qualification to work as a teacher in the early years of school (K-2) or as a teacher in a pre-school (in Victoria, early childhood teachers are only permitted to teach in pre-schools). The “nationally recognised qualification” to work in childcare is a two-year accredited post-secondary qualification in child care (ie. a Diploma of Children’s Services) and a three year accredited tertiary course in early childhood education (ie. an early childhood degree). There is no published data on the number of VET graduates with a Diploma of Children’s Services who make the transition to Early Childhood Education degree courses in higher education. But the rapid growth in employment in the ECEC field is accompanied by a strong demand for qualifications in both sectors. (Commonwealth of Australia 2000).

Research Method

This research is based on data obtained from a semi-structured interviews with VET and HE providers and other stakeholders in the field of early childhood. The study sought the opinions of providers of both the VET qualifications in Children's Services (Childcare) from Certificate III to Diploma level and the HE qualifications in Early Childhood Education such as three and four-year Bachelor's Degrees. We also interviewed stakeholders in government at the state and federal level and several VET graduates who were enrolled in early childhood studies at university. We identified course providers from a search of institutional web-sites and sent 112 letters to providers and stakeholders requesting interviews. In total, we conducted 67 interviews with providers, stakeholders and students by telephone and in person from June to August 2005.

The semi-structured interviews took about half an hour. In the interviews with providers, we asked the respondents to discuss: the proportion of students in their program which had come straight from secondary school; the arrangements, if any, that their institution had in place to assist people with childcare qualifications to upgrade to early childhood education degrees; the main barriers, if any, faced by childcare workers in upgrading their qualifications to early childhood degrees; and the ways in which these barriers might be addressed. Interviews with students were more open-ended in terms of discussing their personal stories but they were also asked to identify and discuss the barriers faced by VET graduates undertaking university studies in their field.

Findings and Discussion

All of the HE providers of Early Childhood degrees whom we interviewed reported having students who had completed the VET Diploma of Children's Services in their courses. The arrangements for granting credit transfer differed between institutions. The Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (AQFAB) guidelines suggest that a VET Diploma graduate should receive the equivalent of one year's advanced standing in a three or four year Bachelor's degree, but granting of credit remains at the discretion of individual universities and departments. Most course convenors of three and four year Bachelor's degree programs gave the equivalent of one year's credit to Diploma graduates. In two of the institutions we consulted, credit was not routinely granted to VET Diploma graduates, but they could apply for it.

We identified only two models of structured qualifications linkages in early childhood education and care. The first model was a sequential degree program designed specifically for VET Diploma graduates that does not accept other students. This type of program was offered by four institutions – the University of Melbourne, Victoria University, Charles Sturt University and the University of New England (UNE) Armidale. The courses are three-year degree programs in which the students are offered between one and a half and two years' credit for their VET studies. The courses equip them with the qualifications to be employed as pre-school teachers, although at UNE Armidale, students have the option of undertaking a fourth year of study to become primary school teachers. The courses cater specifically to people working in the industry who may also have family responsibilities, by offering studies part-time and through flexible delivery and external study modes.

The second model was an integrated dual sector concurrent award, where a VET qualification and a HE qualification are delivered within the one course. In these courses, the units of study meet the learning outcomes of both sectors and the student graduates with both a VET Diploma in Children's Services and a Degree in Early Childhood Education after four years of study. This type of course is offered by the University of Canberra jointly with the Canberra Institute of Technology and by Charles Darwin University, a dual sector institution. In these awards, students face relatively few transition issues because all students in the course are studying for both a VET Diploma and University degree during the first two years.

As the two models of qualifications linkages in early childhood education and care are offered by only six universities in Australia, the granting of credit for previous VET studies is the dominant qualifications pathway offered to early childhood students making the transition to higher education. In these courses, where up to a year's credit may be granted for previous VET studies, three issues were identified consistently in our interviews as barriers to the successful transition of VET graduates through HE degree programs: academic literacy; graded assessment in VET; and work/life balance.

Academic literacy

Although some elements of Early Childhood degree courses involve the assessment of performance in the workplace (ie. the practicum), the demonstration of knowledge and understanding through written assignments and presentations remains the predominant assessment tool in HE courses. This form of assessment in HE demands specific levels of literacy – particularly academic literacy – on the part of students.

Academic literacy – or “tertiary literacy” – places a heavy emphasis on writing as a tool for developing skills of critical thinking and analysis. Although research suggests that academic literacy evolves during the course of university studies (Taylor *et al.* 1988), some HE lecturers expect students to arrive at university with academic literacy and do not see it as their role to teach these skills (Fiocco 1996).

A frequent comment from early childhood course providers in HE about students who have entered their courses with VET Diplomas was that they struggle with the academic literacy requirements such as writing skills, developing arguments, self-directed critical reflection, research skills and the use of theoretical concepts to inform their practice. Academic literacy was reported as a particular problem for external students, who have little or no access to support services on campus. Research suggests that studying externally is related to lower academic achievement and higher failure rates among university students generally (McLelland and Kruger 1993, Long 1994).

Problems with academic literacy are compounded for former VET students if the nature of their advanced standing places them in a second year unit during their first semester of the university studies. This practice appears to be quite common, as credit is usually granted for first year units – sometimes for the whole first year of a degree.

The Diploma graduates can be sitting in classes alongside Year 12 graduates who have come in with a high TER score and who have completed a full first year at uni. There's a huge gulf in experience.

(Convenor of Early Childhood degree course in a university)

In response to this issue, some course convenors reported that they had changed, or were changing the structure of the credit granted to Diploma students to ensure that they undertook some first year subjects at the outset of their studies.

A common approach to students struggling with academic literacy is to refer them to generic academic support services offered on campus. But research suggests that a generally low usage of student support services among Australian students (Dickson 2000). And a problem cited with the “referral to student support services” approach is that Diploma students, in general, experience more pressures on their time than other students. One student we interviewed acknowledged that the university provided extra help for students who were struggling with academic writing, but pointed out that getting extra help was “very hard to fit in, on top of study and when you are working full-time”. University providers also acknowledged that VET Diploma students were more likely to be in the workforce than students who entered from Year 12, and that many had family responsibilities. This limited the time they had to address specific problems, such as academic literacy, outside of class time.

It would be fair to say that our Diploma students have lower access overall to the resources of the university than other students.

(Convenor of Early Childhood degree course in a university)

Another approach is to offer pre-university courses (or bridging programs) in academic skills for students who may have difficulty with academic literacy. At the University of Notre Dame, students seeking entry to the university through non-Year 12 pathways are tested on literacy and numeracy skills and if they fail, are required to undertake a Tertiary Enabling Program of one semester’s duration. In this program, students are taught learning skills, literacy competencies, academic writing, research skills and information literacy, mathematical competencies, information technology for academic purposes and applied learning skills. The Program gives students a chance to experiment with academic study, prior to undertaking tertiary study. Although many HE course convenors favoured this approach, they mentioned that cost was a barrier to the provision of academic skills courses in addition to regular course provision.

Fiocco (1996) argues that as literacy is context-specific, the development of academic literacy should be considered a role of university teachers and be adequately supported.

With the ever-increasing diversity in class, gender and culture on our campuses, it can no longer be taken for granted that students arrive with the necessary skills and readily adapt to the social cultural environment of tertiary institutions. Because of this diversity, the needs of tertiary students have changed over the last twenty years and therefore teaching practice must reflect these changes (Fiocco 1996: 7)

We did find examples of courses that provided academic skills training to students within the course program and convenors who saw it as their role to assist students in this area. For example, one of the first year units in the early childhood education degree at Notre Dame University is “Presentation Skills in Early Childhood Education”. The University of New England provides a professional skills unit as the

first unit of study for students making the transition from the VET sector into their sequential HE course. At the University of Canberra, all students undertake a compulsory unit of literacy and a unit of numeracy in their first year that is focused on personal skill development. At Charles Darwin University (CDU), all commencing students in Bachelor's Degree programs in the Humanities or Social Sciences are required to complete an Academic communication unit entitled "Academic Literacies" during their first year of study¹.

The extent to which academic literacy is promoted in VET programs appears to depend on the extent to which this skill is valued by teachers in the VET sector. We interviewed one course convenor in the TAFE sector who mentioned that in her institute, they assessed students' academic literacy skills early in the course and provided additional support if needed. We do not know how common this practice is in other VET institutions.

Graded Assessment in VET

Many HE course providers and some VET course convenors suggested that the transition of Diploma students to university courses could be assisted through the introduction of graded assessments in the VET sector. HE course convenors frequently mentioned that the absence of graded assessments made it difficult to assess the suitability of applicants with VET Diplomas, and that this contributed to higher rates of attrition among these students. The AV-CC points out that when there is a high demand for places, universities have little or no basis for differentiating between applicants with VET Diplomas, compared to Year 12 graduates who are graded according to a tertiary entrance score (AV-CC 2001).

Although there is no nationally agreed position on graded assessment in VET, some of the HE course convenors we interviewed said they required applicants with VET Diplomas to have graded assessments or to sit an entry test. Other course convenors required applicants to submit written work as part of the selection process. But the majority of HE course convenors did not implement selection processes that enabled them to differentiate between applicants with a VET Diploma, apart from the processes applied to all non-Year 12 applicants by the University Admissions Office.

Recent reviews acknowledge that graded assessment practices are common in the VET sector but that there is very little consistency or transparency the forms of assessment used by institutions (Schofield and McDonald 2004, Williams and Bateman 2002). The information we obtained from our interviews supports this view. Many of the TAFE course convenors we interviewed were aware of the usefulness of graded assessments in supporting students' transitions to HE and made an effort to provide it in some form. For example, some providers offer grading for specific subjects within the Diploma of Children's Services, but not for the whole qualification. Others mark student assignments out of 100 and compile a grade for written work (which is reported separately to the competency-based assessment). One

¹ Most students in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) degree at CDU are exempt from this unit but VET Diploma graduates who have not received graded competency assessments of Merit level or higher are required to complete the Academic Literacies unit of study.

VET course convenor used her contacts with a university to award students “informal” gradings through personal references in support of their applications.

Work/life balance

Almost all of the course convenors interviewed for this project – in both the VET and HE sectors – mentioned that the life circumstances of people working in the childcare industry were a barrier to the successful completion of studies. They pointed out that most of their mature age students were working in childcare (often full-time) and many employers would not release staff to attend an educational institution during working hours, so the burden of studies fell on the students in the evenings and at weekends. A second factor was that many students had children and family responsibilities in addition to their work and study. Finally, the cost of study was cited as an additional barrier to undertaking studies in early childhood. As childcare work is poorly paid, many students found it difficult to meet the cost of studying. In all, the combination of a physically demanding job, family responsibilities and the cost of study, often meant that students did not complete their studies at the Diploma or Degree level.

VET course convenors tried to address these issues by providing flexible forms of delivery, usually teaching in the evenings or for a block in one day on the weekend. In general, HE courses involve less face-to-face teaching than VET studies but HE course convenors were concerned that VET graduates did not have adequate access to study skills support or library facilities because they spent so little time on campus during working hours. While external studies were popular with students working in childcare, HE course convenors reported a high drop-out rate among this group, possibly because they had relatively little access to the university’s academic and student support services. An exception was the HE sequential courses designed specifically for VET Diploma graduates, which, although offered through flexible delivery, appeared to cater more effectively to the needs of this group of students.

In some jurisdictions, governments provide scholarships to assist childcare staff to complete their studies. For example, the Tasmanian Branch of Early Childhood Australia (ECA) administers a scholarship program on behalf of the Tasmanian Department of Education to assist individuals to gain early childhood qualifications to meet government licensing standards. The Tasmanian government allocates \$35,000 per year to assist people working in Children’s Services to gain a qualification, with priority given to those who are acting in qualified positions. The scholarship is worth between \$400 and \$1,000 to the individual student. Diploma – level qualifications are currently a priority due to the shortage of these skills in the industry. A survey-based evaluation of the scheme in 2002 and 2003 suggested that the scholarships provided an incentive for students to complete the qualification, and 94 per cent of the survey respondents reported that they had subsequently obtained a further qualification (ECA TAS 2005).

Conclusion

This paper supports previous research on the nature of the barriers faced by VET graduates when they transfer to university studies, highlighting the specific issues faced by students in the early childhood field. Although credit transfer and

articulation agreements at the institutional level assist in making a pathway for VET graduates to university, they are not sufficient to ensure a successful transition between the sectors for individual students. The barriers that continue to confront VET graduates making the transition to university in the early childhood field fall into three distinct categories: differences in the teaching programs between VET and HE relating to academic literacy; the absence of graded assessment in VET, which appears to influence both HE selection processes and the development of academic literacy skills; and issues of work/life balance within the cohort of students making the transition, many of whom are working in childcare and studying on a part-time basis.

From our research, we conclude that one of the most successful approaches to overcoming these barriers is to offer a sequential degree program TAFE Diploma graduates (currently provided by four universities in the early childhood field). As these courses are customized to the needs of VET Diploma holders, they provide foundation studies in academic literacy and are offered on an external, part-time and flexible basis to accommodate issues of work/life balance. They offer students more credit than they would obtain if they entered a conventional early childhood degree program, and demand for these courses appears to be high.

Within conventional programs, it appears important to offer foundation studies in academic literacy as part of undergraduate degree programs, and to ensure that the process of credit transfer does not mean that VET graduates' first experience of university study is in second-year level subjects. These issues should be within the scope of university staff to address. Indeed, we found some evidence of HE course convenors taking positive steps to address the needs of VET Diploma students making the transition to HE studies through providing explicit assistance in developing academic literacy skills, and ensuring that Diploma graduates experience some first-year level university studies in their first semester. By considering the circumstances of VET graduates and making small changes to the organization of learning to accommodate their needs, universities can improve the educational outcomes of this group and reduce the stress they face in their first year of university studies. We also found that many VET course providers make an effort to encourage Diploma graduates to proceed to university studies and that some links exist between individual institutions in the VET and HE sector.

Nevertheless, successful cross-sectoral transitions still depend heavily on the level of understanding by teaching staff (in both sectors) of the differences between VET and HE and their willingness to cater for these differences in their programs. Given the continuing wide gulf between the two sectors in terms of pedagogy, assessment, regulation and administration, and the considerable cost in staff time and resources in bridging that gulf, policy makers should evaluate the costs of perpetuating unnecessary divisions between VET and HE and take more positive steps to reduce them.

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