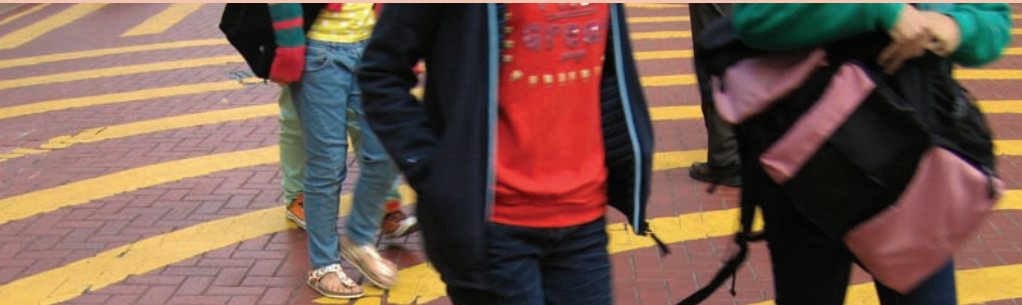


DAVID CURTIS



Australia has two main tertiary education sectors: higher education (universities) and vocational education and training (VET). Substantial numbers of students enrol in both tertiary education sectors at different stages of their lives. Student transfer occurs when an individual enrolls first in one tertiary sector and then later in the other.

- Transfer can go in both directions. VET is a pathway into higher education, but many university graduates enrol in VET qualifications. The pathways for a small number of learners involve many steps back and forth between the two sectors. Estimates of the extent of transfer vary greatly.
- Successive governments have encouraged transfer for both efficiency and equity reasons. Transferring, with credit, is efficient for providers and individuals because a second, related qualification can be completed in less time. VET, because of its very wide geographical reach, offers a possible pathway into higher education.
- The term 'transfer' covers very diverse situations. Transfer may occur shortly after participation in the first course or many years later. The second qualification may be in the same field of study as the first, or in a different one. It may follow a complete or incomplete first qualification and may lead to a complete or incomplete second award.
- Most young people who commence a tertiary qualification undertake a single program, but about one-third undertakes two or more study programs. The majority of that one-third commences a second program in the same sector as their first course. Transfer between the sectors is less common than transfer within either sector. However, movement between the sectors has grown over recent years.
- Among older individuals, movement between the two tertiary sectors is more common. This reflects changing skills needs and changing career directions.
- Throughout their careers, individuals acquire skills that are relevant to their needs. For some, this means further study in the same sector as a first qualification, while for others it means enrolling in the other tertiary sector.
- Several mechanisms facilitate transfer. Negotiated arrangements such as coordinated course structures between universities and VET providers are particularly effective in enabling transfer from VET qualifications to higher education programs.
- There are barriers to successful transfer: These include difficulties in negotiating credit transfer and different expectations about independent study and assessment requirements between the two sectors. These barriers can be reduced by clearer course arrangements between the sectors and by providing support to students.

at a glance



Australian Government
Department of Education, Employment
and Workplace Relations

Student transfer refers to the enrolment of students first in one sector and then in the other. Effective transfer arrangements promote efficiency and equity

Tertiary education in Australia has two main sectors: higher education and vocational education and training (VET). Student transfer is the enrolment of a student in a program in one tertiary sector after having been enrolled in the other.

Governments and individuals are interested in transfer and in the arrangements that either facilitate it or inhibit it. Governments are interested for both efficiency and equity reasons. In a dynamic economy, many individuals need to develop new skills throughout their careers. One sector may have provided an individual's first post-school qualification, while the other sector may be better able to provide subsequent education and training needs. To maximise efficiency, individuals should be able to negotiate the skills development they require without duplicating previous study, saving their own time and provider resources. Some individuals may have experienced barriers to participation in education, especially higher education. Barriers include family background, ethnicity, gender and location. VET study may be an initial post-school pathway for these individuals, and arrangements that facilitate later study in higher education could ameliorate their past disadvantage.

THE STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE TERTIARY SECTORS

While differences between the two sectors exist, both have a common purpose—to provide graduates with the skills and knowledge required to achieve successful employment outcomes

The higher education and VET sectors in Australia differ in their funding sources, accreditation arrangements and the levels of qualifications they provide. Universities are self-accrediting and largely funded by the Commonwealth Government, while public VET providers operate under, and are funded through, state and territory authorities. Over 99% of VET enrolments (in AQF qualifications) are at diploma level or below (NCVER 2007), while over 95% of university enrolments are at bachelor degree level or above (Department of Education, Science and Training 2007).

The two sectors are not as different as their structures might suggest. Higher education's focus is the development, preservation and transmission of knowledge. Its programs equip students with that knowledge and they are expected to apply it in a broad range of contexts. By comparison, VET equips students with vocationally specific skills. But Coaldrake and Stedman (1998) argue that Australian universities have always had a strong vocational focus. Many observers note the similarity of purpose between the two sectors, with over three-quarters of graduates of both sectors undertaking their study in order to enter the workforce (Krause et al. 2005; NCVER 2008).

Australia does have a differentiated tertiary education structure, but with a common purpose—providing vocational skills. This suggests that some transfer between the sectors can be expected and could be productive.

THE MAGNITUDE AND DIRECTION OF TRANSFER BETWEEN TERTIARY SECTORS

While most policy is focused on movement from VET to higher education, transfer also goes the other way, and quite often back and forth

There is growing interest in articulation between VET and higher education. Most attention continues to be on facilitating VET to university transfer. Since at least the early 1990s, a succession of education ministers has sought to promote transfer, especially from VET to higher education, for both equity and efficiency reasons. The Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (2005) provided guidelines to promote effective practice in VET to higher education transfer and commissioned a national investigation into ways of improving credit transfer and articulation from VET to higher education (PhillipsKPA 2006).

In addition to transfer from VET to higher education, there is also evidence of movement from higher education to VET (Golding & Vallenge 2000; Harris, Sumner & Rainey 2005; NCVET 2007).

We see some evidence of student movement between the sectors. This movement, accompanied by credit transfer arrangements, is covered by a variety of procedures. We find that policy-makers want improved support for student transfer and credit. This leads us to ask how much transfer occurs between the sectors now.

Estimates of the extent of transfer vary greatly. Arguments about which direction is greatest are unproductive as it is difficult to establish a sound basis for comparison between sectors

Estimates of the proportions of VET commencers who have prior university experience vary from about 6 to 25% (Harris, Sumner & Rainey 2005). Moodie (2005a) concludes that VET to higher education transfer was somewhere between half and double the rate of transfer from higher education to VET, depending on the data sources used to estimate transfer. Curtis (2006) finds that VET to higher education transfer is 50% higher than higher education to VET transfer among people up to age 24 years. Golding and Vallenge (2000), looking at a greater age range, suggest that higher education to VET transfer is up to eight times higher than VET to higher education transfer; but Moodie (2005b) points out that the estimate is inflated by using different bases for comparison. (See box below on scope and quality for an explanation of the very varied transfer estimates.)

Arguments about which direction of transfer is greater are unproductive. It is difficult to establish a sound basis for comparison. Transfer can be measured by the numbers or proportions of students in a sector with experience in the other: It could also be measured by student load. The two sectors differ in size, in the duration of courses, in the extent of course completion, and in the tendency to study on a part- or full-time basis. These differences lead to potentially very different bases for comparison.

DATA SCOPE AND QUALITY

It is difficult to draw precise inferences about the extent of transfer. Published reports on transfer are based on many data sets. Some surveys are large-scale and representative of the Australian population, while others are small-scale and restricted to a few institutions in one region and may be subject to selection bias. The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) data are nationally representative, but are restricted to individuals aged between 15 and 25

years. Considerable transfer occurs among older individuals. Most surveys depend on self-reports and these appear to underestimate participation, especially in VET, and therefore to underestimate transfer.

Data on higher education admissions include the basis of admission to courses—whether it was Year 12 score, VET qualification or some other basis. Some, especially mature-age, applicants may have combinations of school

and post-school qualifications that may be complete or incomplete. Some of these individuals may be admitted on the basis of their school results, despite also having VET experience. Given the relatively high incidence of incomplete VET qualifications, VET to university transfer is likely to be underestimated.

Together, these limitations suggest that the estimates of transfer in both directions are approximate.

LIFE STAGE AND TRANSFER

Transferring from VET to higher education is more common for younger people, while movement in the other direction is more likely to occur later in an individual's career

It is useful to distinguish between transfer that occurs during the initial transition period after leaving school and transfer that occurs later in people's lives. The reasons given for transfer differ and depend on when the transfer occurs.

INITIAL TRANSITION TRANSFER

During the initial transition from education to work (to age 25 years), just over one-quarter of young people who enter university leave their first course. Half of them move to a second university course. About one-third of those who leave university without completing—about 5% of all university commencers—transfer to a VET qualification (McMillan 2005). A further 4% of university commencers complete their degrees and enrol in VET programs (Curtis 2006), so 9% of university commencers subsequently enrol in VET qualifications. Just over half of university to VET transfers are those who discontinued their university course.

Approximately 10% of VET commencers transfer to university (NCVER 2008), and, as there are more young VET than higher education commencers, the numbers of VET to higher education transfers exceed higher education to VET transfers among younger individuals. Three-quarters of VET to higher education transfers are made by students who have completed their VET qualifications.

Thus, during the initial transition period, transfer from VET to university is slightly greater than university to VET transfer. Most university to VET transfers are from incomplete qualifications, while most VET to university transfers are from completed qualifications.

Lack of interest is a more common reason than academic difficulty for students leaving their first university course (McMillan 2005). Similarly, Curtis (2008) finds that loss of interest and unmet course expectations are the main reasons given by students who leave non-apprenticeship VET qualifications. The reasons given for change or attrition suggest that the initial post-school period is one of adjustment for many students. Transferring to another course or sector when the first choice does not meet expectations is part of young people's initial transitions from education to work.

The number of undergraduate university commencers reporting a VET award as their highest qualification is increasing, and about 10% are admitted on the basis of their VET qualification

LATER LIFE-STAGE TRANSFER

Over recent years (2001–04), there has been an increase (from 14% to 16%) in the proportions of domestic undergraduate university commencers who report a VET award as their highest qualification (Department of Education, Science and Training 2007). Just over half of these people (7–10% of all commencing students between 2001 and 2005) were admitted on the basis of their VET qualifications. These data are not disaggregated by age, but, given that 9% of university commencers aged less than 25 years had prior VET experience (Curtis 2006), almost one-quarter of commencers over 25 years of age must have prior VET experience.

University graduates account for 7–10% (2002–07) of VET students aged over 25 years (NCVER 2008).

The 2007 proportion of VET students with a university degree (10%) is smaller than the proportion of university students with a VET qualification (16%). But the VET system enrolls many more students, so the total numbers of VET students with a university degree is greater than the number of university students who have a VET qualification.

Many individuals undertake a qualification in a sector at a later stage of life (possibly many years) after undertaking an initial qualification in the other sector. Former university students move to VET for many reasons. Some are dissatisfied with the theoretical orientation of an incomplete university course; others update their skills as

part of a plan to return to the workforce; still others plan a career change requiring a new qualification; and some are preparing for retirement activities (Golding & Vallenge 2000). Other students move to VET because they find their first qualification has not equipped them with the skills they need for the work that is available to them (Karmel & Nguyen 2007). VET graduates move to university to improve their skills, enhance their career prospects and, to a lesser extent, for personal interest (Golding & Vallenge 2000).

TRANSFER BY FIELD OF STUDY

People moving from VET to university usually stick with the same or similar field of study, while people going from university to VET often do something new

Do people move into subsequent qualifications in the same or different fields of study?

Students moving from VET to university tend to enrol in degree courses in the same field of study as their previous VET qualification.

About 40% of VET to higher education transfers are to the same or a very similar field of study and fewer than 20% are to a completely different field.

University graduates from the humanities and social sciences and education make up a substantial proportion of transferring students and they tend to move into new fields of study, especially business. University non-graduates tend to come from business and engineering awards and most often move into business qualifications in VET.

BARRIERS TO TRANSFER

Moving from VET to university is more challenging than going from university to VET. Students moving to university need to deal with the greater requirement for independent study and more onerous assessment

The barriers to study are also barriers to transfer. Students face challenges in managing work, financial, social/family and study commitments, but these are problems encountered by many students—not only those transferring from one sector to another. Transferring students face the additional problems of adapting to the learning context and expectations of the new environment. VET to higher education students experience greater difficulties in navigating the transition than those moving from higher education to VET. They find the greater requirement for independent study and the assessment demands more challenging than those they encountered in their VET courses (Harris, Sumner & Rainey 2005). Providing assistance, such as induction programs and ongoing study support services, enables students to adapt to the more demanding higher education environment (Abbott-Chapman 2006). Where support services are provided, articulating VET students achieve progression and success rates similar to those of students admitted on the basis of Year 12 scores (Abbott-Chapman 2006; Young 2006).

The processes involved in seeking recognition of prior learning and other forms of credit transfer are sometimes complex and can deter students from seeking appropriate recognition within or between the tertiary sectors. VET graduates experience additional difficulties in seeking credit for VET studies that report only that competencies have been achieved. Some of the arrangements described in the next section help to overcome these impediments, but they are not universally available.

Ungraded assessment in VET is an impediment to VET to higher education transfer (Phillips KPA 2006, pp. 14, 30). They recommend the use of graded assessment in higher-level VET courses as a way of facilitating articulation. Swinburne University of Technology uses graded assessment in its higher-level VET programs to facilitate transfer (Young 2006).

MECHANISMS THAT SUPPORT TRANSFER

The provision of credit for previous study supports transfer, usually from VET to university, but not all students seek credit or are aware they can do so

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit transfer are well-established practices used by VET providers to ensure that learners are able to gain credit for prior study and experience. Students are not always aware of these processes (Hargreaves 2006) and some transferring students do not seek credit for prior study, even when they are aware of their entitlement to it.

A variety of structures and tools have been established to support transfer. Most of these arrangements promote transfer from VET to higher education by the provision of credit for previous study. Some universities have generalised credit transfer agreements. Some treat each case individually and students apply for status in, or exemptions from, particular courses in a degree program. These universities have guidelines about how much, and under what circumstances, status may be given. Other universities have schedules that list VET awards and the status that will attach to them in degree courses. A student who has completed a VET diploma in a field of study may be given 'block' credit for the first year of a degree course in a related field. In other cases, students who have completed a VET qualification may receive credit for specified subjects.

Coordinated study programs, where a VET diploma course and related university degree course are designed collaboratively, provide an effective mechanism for transfer

Coordinated and nested study programs are particularly effective transfer mechanisms. Under these arrangements, the structure of a VET diploma course and a related university degree course are designed collaboratively as a coherent sequence. Students who enrol in the VET diploma award may exit with that qualification or move into the degree program. Such arrangements exist between Southbank TAFE and both Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology; Canberra Institute of Technology and the University of Canberra; and between the TAFE and higher education divisions of Swinburne University of Technology (Cram & Watson 2008; Young 2006).

The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (2008) has established the Credit Matrix, built upon the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), to facilitate credit transfer. The level of learning complexity and the amount of work required in units of learning from senior secondary education, vocational education and training and some higher education courses are recorded in the Credit Matrix.

Learners may use this information to match their current qualifications with those desired and know what credit is available to them and what further study will be required to complete the desired qualification.

HOW SHOULD WE INTERPRET TRANSFER?

Transfer may involve a single step from one sector to the other, but it could involve several steps

Our definition of transfer as enrolment first in one tertiary sector then the other simply describes observed behaviours: it implies no value judgement. But how do we interpret transfer? Is it good that people are able to make choices and that a first step in tertiary education can lead to another? Or is transfer an indication of a poor initial decision that results in a delayed transition? And what does transfer mean for older students?

The notion of transfer as a (single) movement from one sector to another is a limiting view of individuals' educational experiences. Harris, Rainey and Sumner (2006) use the stepping-stone metaphor to represent learning journeys, but acknowledge that for a small number of people 'crazy paving' might be more apt. Many young people follow complex transitions involving part-time work or work-related training, as part of a longer-term strategy to study for a career in another field. Older individuals undertake study that is appropriate to their changing life and career requirements. For both younger and older individuals, what we observe as transfer is a by-product of education and training decisions driven by careers and interests.

Transfer has different meanings for people who transfer for different reasons.

A STEP UP

In the initial transition from schooling to the labour market we see evidence of the first course being a stepping stone to the second. This is especially apparent in VET to university transfer, where many young people complete their first course and move into a second one. Established arrangements between VET providers and universities, through which students gain credit for previous study, mean that they do not waste time; rather, they build upon their initial experiences and create options. They may enter the workforce with their first qualification or build on it and undertake a higher-level qualification.

A SIDE STEP

In the initial transition period, some students do make poor choices. We know this from the reasons they give for leaving their first course, such as loss of interest or finding it was not what they had expected. Many students who leave their first course move into another in the same sector as the first, from one university course to another or from one apprenticeship to another. However, moving between sectors enables some students to pursue courses that are more consistent with their revised career goals. Enrolling in a course, finding it is not what they wanted and enrolling in another is part of an exploration of options. While changing courses results in some delay in transition, it may lead to successful longer-term outcomes for some students.

A NEW DIRECTION

Among those aged over 25 years we find a high incidence of transfer, especially to VET. This form of transfer is different from the step up and the side step observed among younger individuals. Older individuals may be dissatisfied with their previous study, but the majority undertakes further study to build additional skills for their existing roles or to take new career directions. The need for new career directions may arise because individuals find that their first qualification is not in demand in the labour market and so they undertake a qualification that they believe will be marketable.

MOVING FORWARD

Our information shows that students have been transferring between VET and higher education for many years, but the magnitude of transfer is growing. Transfer has come to the attention of policy-makers, who recognise its importance for efficiency and equity reasons and who support it through credit transfer arrangements. Institutions support transfer through a variety of agreements. Among these agreements, compatible course structures that facilitate seamless movement between VET providers and universities are particularly effective.

The recent Review of Australian Higher Education (the Bradley Review) identifies groups who are under-represented in higher education, including Indigenous Australians, individuals with low socioeconomic status and people in regional and remote locations. The Bradley Review notes that current higher education provision is not able to meet the needs of these disadvantaged groups and suggests that 'a continuum of tertiary skills provision' would help achieve the goals for increased participation that are recommended. An extension to the effective transfer arrangements that exist between some VET providers and universities will contribute to meeting these targets.

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