NCVER

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Mixed-sector tertiary education

This research overview provides the key messages arising from two related projects investigating tertiary education institutions that have recently begun to offer tertiary programs outside the sector of their initial establishment and the sector of the majority of their enrolments. These are TAFE institutes offering higher education programs, universities offering vocational education programs, and private providers offering both.

Both projects sought to understand the nature and focus of mixed-sector provision: why institutions want to offer both vocational and higher education programs; how this provision is perceived by participants, particularly students and teachers; the kinds of pathways to work and further study that are possible; the benefits of this provision as well as problems with its delivery; and how quality may be ensured.

The projects followed a similar research design and asked similar questions, an approach that enabled a comparison of the two projects, the identification of commonalities and differences between mixed-sector universities, TAFE institutes and private providers, and some general conclusions on the tertiary education sector in Australia and its future directions. Both projects reviewed the relevant literature on mixed-sector tertiary education, surveyed similar provision in other wealthy English-speaking countries, analysed the available statistics and other quantitative information and interviewed staff of state and territory offices for higher education and VET jurisdictions as well as institutional managers, program managers, teachers and students.

The projects involved 159 interviews in 15 institutions in six states or territories, as shown in the accompanying table.

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Number of interviews	People interviewed	Institutions	States
13	Staff of state/territory offices for higher education and VET registering bodies	6	6
4	Senior private sector representatives	2	2
46	Senior staff in universities, TAFE institutes and private providers	15	5
5	Program/curriculum developers in TAFE institutes offering bachelor degrees and associate degrees	3	3
44	Teachers in universities, TAFE institutes and private providers	15	6
47	Students in universities, TAFE institutes and private providers	15	5

Types of institution	Number
Dual-sector self-accrediting institutions	6
Other self-accrediting institutions	16
Sub-total self-accrediting institutions	*22*
Private creative arts colleges	10
Private health colleges	5
Private management colleges	23
Private religious colleges	8
Other private colleges	11
Sub-total private colleges	*57*
TAFEs	11
Total	**90**

Scope of mixed-sector provision

There are at least 90 mixed-sector tertiary education providers.

There are currently at least 90 institutions accredited to offer both vocational and higher education. It is difficult to be sure of the precise numbers because vocational and higher education institutions are recorded in different registers, and providers appear in different registers with somewhat different names. It is also not clear how to count conglomerates. For example, Navitas has several colleges which are registered separately to offer vocational and higher education and which are therefore counted separately. Think: Education Group on the other hand has several colleges covered by one higher education and vocational education registration and is counted as a single entity. TAFE NSW is registered as a single entity to offer vocational and higher education programs and is therefore counted as one provider, notwithstanding that it will offer both vocational and higher education programs in several of its ten institutes.

There are currently six dual-sector self-accrediting institutions— the four dual-sector universities in Victoria, Charles Darwin University and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, both in the Northern Territory. There will probably be at least one more dual-sector university as Central Queensland University and Central Queensland Institute of TAFE are planning to merge.

Overview messages

One tertiary education sector is emerging, but it is hierarchical and stratified.

The sharp distinctions between the vocational education and training (VET) and higher education sectors and between publicly funded and privately funded institutions are giving way to a more differentiated single tertiary education sector with greater institutional diversity. However, this has resulted in a more stratified and hierarchical tertiary education sector as university provision becomes the benchmark and comparator for other forms of provision. Institutional hierarchies are present and arise from the competition for students and funding within a more market-focused tertiary education sector.

The remainder of this research overview details a number of issues raised by the two research projects which are pertinent to the development of a more coherent tertiary education sector.

While as yet there is still no coherent national policy on tertiary education, elements have been established recently which may in time develop into a coherent group of national institutions of tertiary education.

In *Transforming Australia's higher education system* the Australian Government aimed for 'an interconnected tertiary education sector'[1], but this is a policy about higher education and considers vocational education only incidentally. Similarly, vocational education wasn't specified in the terms of reference of the Bradley Review.[2] Skills Australia, for its part, stimulates

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1 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Transforming Australia's higher education system*, Canberra, 2009, p.8.
2 D Bradley (chair), *Review of Australian higher education*, DEEWR, Canberra, 2008.

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discussion and makes recommendations on tertiary education, but concentrates heavily on vocational education. Since no policy review or statement has considered vocational and higher education together and in relation to each other, there is as yet no coherent national policy on tertiary education.

However, a number of elements of a policy framework now exist, which in combination may eventually become elements of a coherent framework for tertiary education. These include: the Standing Council for Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment of the Council of Australian Governments; the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations which has a division of Tertiary, Skills, International and Indigenous Strategy (although separate sections for skills and higher education); the *Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000* (Cth), which establishes a common framework for providing English language and school, vocational and higher education to international students studying in Australia on a student visa; and a new version of the Australian Qualifications Framework, which establishes a common framework for all educational qualifications—school, vocational and higher education. In addition, the Australian Government plans to establish the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency as a common body for regulating vocational and higher education from 2013, but this has yet to be implemented.

While these elements are still to be integrated, they may in time become the foundations of a tertiary education architecture.

Knowledge of tertiary education and evaluation of its performance are limited by inconsistent, incomplete and, in some areas, missing data.

While the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) has been gradually expanding the comprehensiveness of its reports on tertiary education, it is severely hampered by the lack of consistent data requirements for vocational and higher education institutions and for public and private providers. In addition, a national student identifier should be introduced, at least for all tertiary students supported by public funds (and to include government-guaranteed and subsidised income-contingent loans), but preferably for all tertiary students. To this end, the Council of Australian Governments has given in-principle support for a national student identifier in VET 'with a future capability of being fully integrated with the entire education and training system'.

Higher education scholarship requirements are vaguely expressed, poorly understood and inconsistently implemented.

The draft provider course accreditation standards (April 2011) drawn from the *National protocols for higher education approval processes*[3] require providers without self-accrediting authority to demonstrate that 'The content of the course is drawn from a substantial, coherent and current body of knowledge and scholarship in one or more academic disciplines, and includes the study of relevant theoretical frameworks and research findings', and that 'The provider ensures that people who teach students in the course, including tutors … have a sound understanding of current scholarship and/or professional practice in the discipline that they teach'. Yet there is no clear understanding of what such 'scholarship' might be. On the one hand, non-self-accrediting institutions complain that they are required to conform to university norms they believe are inappropriate; on the other, the same institutions seek to develop research programs that are similar to universities' applied research and consultancies.

The difficulties that mixed-sector institutions have with implementing the scholarship requirements of higher education are therefore understandable. Further work is needed on the nature of higher education scholarship and how it may be undertaken in these institutions. If the understanding that universities have of scholarship is considered inappropriate for non-university institutions, then it may be timely to look at other models, such as those offered by Aotearoa New Zealand polytechnics and technical institutes, Canadian community colleges, two-year colleges in the United States and English further education colleges.

Individual institutions are not well resourced to support their minority sector alone—sector-wide support is needed.

The research found many instances of institutions not providing the appropriate depth of resources and richness of educational experience in their minority sector, while teachers in their minority sector had few if any colleagues in their field with whom to share expertise and experiences. Most of these were

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3 Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (2007), *National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes*, MCEETYA, Canberra, viewed 23 February 2009, <http://www.mceetya.edu.au/mceetya/default.asp?id=15212>.

found in TAFE institutes and private providers with a small higher education offering—fewer than 1000 equivalent full-time student units. However, while universities are larger and better resourced to support their vocational students and teachers, some interviewees were concerned that vocational education in universities may be swamped by higher education curriculum and pedagogy.

It is hard to imagine how institutions could increase the richness of their teaching and learning in a small minority sector without spending a very large and probably disproportionate amount of money. A longer-term approach may be the development of policy to encourage economies of scale to ensure that provision is large enough to provide collegiality for staff and rich learning experiences for students. However, while this could be an option for some mixed-sector institutions, it will not be for all, and support will need to be provided across the sector. If governments are not forthcoming with such support, it could be organised by institutions acting cooperatively, perhaps facilitated by national disciplinary associations in higher education, while in vocational education by bodies such as the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association, NCVER, and state bodies such as the TAFE Development Centre in Victoria.

As the sectors become increasingly blurred, a more sophisticated understanding of vocational education will be needed.

TAFE (technical and further education) was previously defined as the education offered by TAFE institutes, but that is clearly circular and is now inaccurate. Australian vocational education is currently defined in effect as training packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework. But that is obviously restricted to Australia and to vocational education as it is currently offered in Australia. It offers no guide to identifying Australian vocational education's analogues in other countries, no continuity with vocational education offered in Australia before training packages and the AQTF were introduced, and no understanding of what Australian vocational education might be in the future, when training packages and the AQTF no longer exist. A more secure and universal understanding of vocational education is needed in Australia to chart it through the changes in students, teachers, institutions, curriculum, qualifications and policies.

Further information

Further information is available from:

L Wheelahan, G Moodie, S Billett & A Kelly, *Higher education in TAFE*, NCVER, Adelaide, 2009.

L Wheelahan, S Arkoudis, G Moodie, N Fredman & E Bexley, *Shaken not stirred? The development of one tertiary education sector in Australia*, NCVER, Adelaide, 2012.

You are welcome to submit comments and queries to:

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Australian Government

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations