Some ideas from England: A practitioner's perspective

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About this research

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Australia's vocational education and training (VET) system is well regarded internationally, in particular for its competency-based training and flexible delivery. Yet we can also learn from the experiences in other countries.

In March 2009, NCVER invited Robin Shreeve, Principal and Chief Executive of City of Westminster College in the United Kingdom (UK), to present at a seminar on developments in vocational education and training in the UK, where VET is known as the skills or further education (FE) sector.

This paper provides Shreeve's views on the UK system and his insights into lessons for Australia.

Key messages

- ✧ The English and Australian systems, while sharing some similarities, have distinct differences socially, economically and politically.
- ✧ One of the biggest differences between Australian technical and further education (TAFE) institutes and English FE colleges is the student profile. In the UK over 40% of students use FE colleges as the primary pathway to gain university entrance rather than as direct preparation for a job.
- ✧ Foundation degrees in the UK (equivalent to the first two years of a bachelor degree) are largely delivered by FE colleges and offer a 'cross over' level qualification between VET and higher education. This model is worth considering in Australia if we are to increase articulation into higher education.
- ✧ Course success rates are used as a key performance measure for FE colleges. Used appropriately, they emphasise learner achievement and clearly affect institutions' behaviour.

Those interested in this work should also read *New directions in European VET policy and practice: Lessons for Australia* by Roger Harris, Michele Simons and Katie Maher (forthcoming).

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

Introduction

It is a great pleasure for me to be back in Adelaide with you today at this National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) Research on Toast Seminar. I think the vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia is fortunate to have such a high-profile and well-respected information and research organisation as NCVER. This judgement was recently endorsed by the *Review of Australian higher education* (Bradley 2008, p.190). Working in England, I still regularly use the NCVER website as I have yet to find an English resource as comprehensive and easy to use, although the website of the fairly recently established United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills has made a promising start (see <http://www.ukces.org.uk>).

Australia has a very good VET system as was recognised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in their recent thematic study (Hoeckel et al. 2008). One of the many strengths of the Australian system is the keenness of its leaders to learn from others. Many other systems seem far more insular. Having worked as the chief executive officer (CEO) of a VET institution in both England and Australia, and as a bureaucrat in Australia, I have a perspective on what each country's system might usefully borrow from one another. To get down to brass tacks, as they say in the North of England, what I think Australia might usefully poach or borrow from England are:

- course success rates as a key performance measure at all levels of the VET sector
- foundation degrees.

Australia and England

However, I must make the general point that although many Australian and English institutions share a common heritage dating from colonial times, my personal experience leads me to believe that the two countries' VET systems are now characterised as much by their differences as their similarities. This growing divergence is hardly surprising, given the different economic and social circumstances found in the two countries. Economically, for example, there is no large resources sector with an operational dependency on VET-trained technicians in England. The English economy is far more driven by services such as finance and banking, as has become painfully obvious during the current economic crisis. In societal matters the current government in the United Kingdom (UK) is much exercised by social mobility, which has actually declined since the 1970s. An OECD study (D'Addio 2007, p.33) on intergenerational earnings elasticity found that individuals in the United Kingdom were three times more likely to earn the same as their parents as their peers in Australia. Increasing social mobility is one of the key drivers for increased investment in all sectors of education in the United Kingdom, including VET.

The VET sector in Australia and the skills and further education sectors in England

Although not unknown, the term 'VET sector' is not one commonly used in England. Rather, the generic terms used are either 'skills sector' or the 'further education (FE) sector'. These terms hint at the hard distinctions that exist in England between 'work-based learning (WBL)'

and ‘further education (FE)’. There is a similarly hard distinction in England between further education and ‘higher education (HE)’—there are no ‘cross-over’ qualifications like the Australian diploma and advanced diploma which can belong to either VET or HE. Work-based learning, which is characterised as the ‘occupational pathway’ in the policy statement *Raising expectations* (Department for Education and Skills 2007), covers areas such as apprenticeship. The core qualifications for this pathway that combines employment with part-time study are the competency-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). These are normally assessed in the workplace. Further education is associated with the vocational pathway—this involves full- or part-time study in a wide range of industry-related disciplines such as business studies, heath and social care, construction, engineering, tourism and hospitality. Its qualifications are sometimes described as Vocational Related Qualifications (VRQs) to distinguish them from the competency-based NVQs. Historically these institutionally delivered qualifications included the credentials of examining bodies such as City and Guilds and Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC). In the future, the government hopes many of these qualifications will be the new flagship ‘specialised’ diplomas that it is introducing as a vocational alternative to the traditional, academic ‘A Level’ program. Both FE or vocational courses and WBL or occupational programs are funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

Given that WBL qualifications are competency based and FE or vocational qualifications are sometimes not, it can be argued that what is described as VET in Australia is closer to WBL in England than some of the more general vocational programs delivered by FE colleges. Many vocational qualifications, such as the BTEC National in Business Studies, are taken by 16–19-year-old students primarily for use as a university entrance qualification rather than as direct preparation for a job.

In England, the delivery of publicly funded HE programs is not the unique preserve of the university sector. Nearly 10% of all HE is delivered by further education colleges, the broad equivalent to Australian TAFE institutes. FE colleges can receive funds direct from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) or can receive HE funds indirectly through franchise arrangements with universities.

English FE colleges historically have not awarded or accredited their own qualifications in the same way as Australian TAFE institutes. Normally English FE colleges deliver qualifications awarded by third parties. For their FE programs, this means the courses of examination bodies such as City and Guilds, Edexcel, or Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR). In HE, it means degrees which are awarded by a local university. However, this process is now changing. Under the new Qualifications and Credit Framework, FE colleges can seek to accredit their own qualifications by being granted ‘awarding body status’, and colleges such as City College Norwich have done this. In 2008 the government also announced that FE colleges can now apply to award their own foundation degrees. This announcement was a surprise and not one requested by the FE sector; as can be expected, the announcement was also highly unpopular with universities. As far as I am aware only one FE college has, to date, applied for this privilege.

However, probably the biggest difference between English FE colleges and Australian TAFE institutes is in their student profiles. Although both systems teach students such as apprentices and adults following part-time vocational and occupational programs, English FE colleges have large numbers of full-time 16–19-year-old students taking courses with the

prime objective of using them for university entrance. These courses can be 'vocational', such as a BTEC National Diploma in Business Studies, or the traditional 'academic' A-level programs in the sciences and humanities that are also taught in many English FE colleges. In England, many students choose to leave school at 16 and do their full-time sixth-form study at an FE college. In Australia, about 9% of university applications come from applicants with TAFE credentials according to the Universities Australia website (Universities Australia 2008). In England, over 40% of university applications come from students at FE colleges (Association of Colleges 2008, p.1). Although English FE colleges do prepare people directly for employment, preparation for higher education is a far more important activity than in Australia. In my view, Australia has a far 'harder', more vocationally focused system than England.

So, having dealt with the contextual differences, what about the learning differences?

Course success rates

In Australian vocational education and training, the traditional emphasis has been on module rather than course completion rates. (I use the term module here rather loosely to include concepts such units and individual competencies; in other words, parts of a credential such as an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) certificate or diploma rather than the whole credential). This emphasis has been justified on the basis that VET students and their employers are more interested in skills than credentials. An example of this position is given by NCVER's John Foyster, who wrote,

Unlike in the higher education sector where most students enrol in a course, with the intention of gaining a qualification, in the VET sector many students intend to complete only some modules of the course. These students are primarily interested in acquiring specific skills. (Foyster, Hon & Shah 2000, p.xi)

At the national and state levels, the principal student achievement measures reported in the annual reports of bodies such as the former Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and the Productivity Commission are load pass rates. These are defined as:

'*Load pass rate' is the ratio of hours attributed to students who gained competencies/ passed assessment in an assessable module or unit of competency to all hours of students who were assessed and either passed, failed or withdrew. The calculation is based on the annual hours for each assessable module or unit of competency and includes competencies achieved/units passed through recognition of prior learning (RPL).*
(Steering Committee for Review of Government Service Provision 2009, p5.40)

Load pass rates only measure at the module, unit or competency level. Course completions are reported on, but as a raw statistic with no reference to the numbers who initially enrolled in the course.

In its *Report on government services 2009*, the Productivity Commission does list a measure for, 'students who commenced and complete a course', but does not report any results because:

Reporting on the 'number of students who commenced and completed', expressed as a proportion of all course commencing enrolments in that year is dependent on the capacity to track individual students over more than one calendar year. Data were not available for the 2009 Report.

(Steering Committee for Review of Government Service Provision 2009, p5.40)

When I raised the issue of course completions as a performance measure with some institute director colleagues in Australia, they repeated the view that many VET students and certainly employers of VET students both wanted skills more than credentials. To put it bluntly, I think this is a 'cop out'—the majority of students certainly enrol in a whole course, which might indicate that when they enrolled they had the acquisition of a credential as much in mind as the acquisition of skills.

In England, course completions are far more important than module completions. A senior Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills official told me she was against module completions as a key performance measure, on the basis that official statistics indicate that increases in earning for individuals were associated with whole course rather than module completions.

However, the highest level policy drivers for course completions in England are the public sector agency (PSA) targets set by the Treasury. For the VET sector, these targets are based on a comparison of the number of people in England with certain levels of qualifications compared with other OECD countries. They have recently been strengthened by the priorities outlined in the seminal Leitch report on skills (Leitch 2006). For example, Leitch sets a target of 90% of adults having successfully completed a level 2 qualification by 2020.

Thus, the prime course completion measure is the 'success rate'. The Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) describes how success rates as well as retention and achievement rates are calculated:

Success rates are calculated by multiplying retention rates and achievement rates. For instance if a cohort of learners has a retention of 80% and achievement of 80% (0.8 x 0.8) x 100, this would show a success rate for the period of time being measured of 64% (0.64).

Retention is a measure of the number of learners in a cohort or group completing a programme divided by number of starters. If we take for example a cohort of 75 learners who started a learning aim and 15 left by the end of the programme then this would produce retention of 80%: (60÷ 75) x 100 = 80%.

Similarly, achievement for a group of learners is measured by dividing the number of learners achieving a qualification by the number who complete the qualification. For instance if 5 learners of the 60 who complete failed, from the cohort in the example above, then from the 75 starters, 60 completed and 55 achieved producing 91.6% achievement (55 ÷ 60) x 100 = 91.6%. For this cohort the success rate would be 73% (0.8 x 0.916) x 100 = 73%.

(Learning and Skills Improvement Service: Excellence Gateway 2009)

At City of Westminster College in the academic year 2007–08, we achieved an overall course success of 73%. This was 1% above our target and a 3% improvement on previous years. However, our performance did vary considerably by academic level and age group.

We were highly successful with level 1 students aged 16–19 years where we achieved an overall success rate of 79%, but less successful at level 3 where the success rate was down to 71%. This situation was reversed for learners aged 19 years plus, where the level 1 success rate was 68% and the success rate at level 3 was 71%. All these figures are for 'long courses' lasting over 24 weeks. Our success rates for short and very short courses vary from 74% to 96%.

Our success rates are not exceptional; rather, they vary from the satisfactory to good. We are, however, classified as a 'widening participation college' as we serve an area of multiple social and economic disadvantages. Over 70% of our students come from ethnic minorities.

It is difficult to get any real idea of overall course success rates for VET institutions in Australia. We know module completion rates (load pass rates) were around 78.8% for all publicly funded VET students in 2007 (Steering Committee for Review of Government Service Provision 2009, p5.40). When I was in the NSW TAFE Commission we once estimated that the course completion rates for some courses were around 50%. The only published statistics broadly similar to course success rates I could find on Australian VET were for a study of students commencing in 2002 who were aged over 25 and taking lower-level courses at certificate 1 and 11 (Stanwick 2006). For the limited sample in this publication, the tables indicate the proportion who had completed a qualification the following year were around 25% for those following certificate 2 level programs and around 20% for those on certificate 1 programs. It must be added that in many cases nearly 10% of the students were still enrolled the following year but had yet to complete and in other cases up to 5% were enrolled in other courses. Nevertheless, in all cases over 57% of the students were neither enrolled in the following year, nor had they achieved an award. By way of comparison, in 2003 for similar level English FE courses, success rates were around 50% to 55%. In 2008 the overall national success rate for all FE courses was over 75% and had increased by 18% since 2000 (Learning and Skills Council 2008b). The national FE success rate target for 2011 is 80%.

The real utility of course success rates is the focus they put at the institution, faculty and teaching section on learners and learner achievement. At City of Westminster College our quality assurance measures include monitoring meetings twice a term with faculty and course teams where success, retention and achievement statistics are scrutinised. To facilitate this monitoring we have developed a portal on our intranet, known as MiData, where staff can readily access up-to-date attendance, retention and achievement data at the course, section faculty and college levels.

Retaining students is an integral part of achieving success rate targets. English colleges have developed a wide variety of strategies to help achieve this. They include 'welcome back' postcards and text messages to students at the beginning of each term. Some colleges provide incentives such as flash drives and Ipods for returning students. College financed cash payments are not unknown whilst the National Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) has severe penalties for learners with poor attendance. Some colleges employ attendance support workers to contact and support students whose attendance is unsatisfactory and who are at risk of dropping out.

The only downside of this emphasis on retention is that colleges are sometimes not pleased if a student leaves a course to take a job. Even if a student leaves to take on employment, it

usually has a negative impact on retention and hence success rates for courses, which then reflects on the college.

The same emphasis is put on helping students to achieve. The quality monitoring meetings conducted twice a term try to identify any students who may be in danger of missing an assessment or not completing a module, which may make their overall course completion difficult. Extra tuition is often provided for these learners.

City of Westminster College puts greater emphasis on student selection than occurred during my experience in Australia. At City of Westminster College we are interviewing students from October for the following year's September intake. Students who are in the wrong or inappropriate course are more likely to fail or drop out, and so selection criteria can be quite rigorous. All 16–19 year olds have an assessment and interview before being offered a place on a course.

Part of the motivation for these strategies to improve success rates is both the institution's concern for learners, and a desire for continuous improvement. Another motivating force is the external inspection and quality monitoring regimes in place in the UK. Despite the official rhetoric that these regimes are to promote continuous improvement, I can only describe them as punitive towards students.

Inspection and quality assurance in England

I would not advocate replicating aspects of these in Australia.

All publicly funded skills and FE providers are subject to regular inspections by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), and details of these inspections are contained in the publication *Handbook for inspecting colleges*. A full college inspection involves a team of inspectors visiting a college for up to a week, observing lessons, and scrutinising policies, action plans and data. Based on their observations and analysis, they assess the provider against a number of key questions on a scale ranging from 'outstanding' to 'inadequate'. The results are published in an inspection report publicly available on the Ofsted website. In many cases, college principals do not survive an 'inadequate' Ofsted grading.

Although inspectors make judgements on the basis of a wide variety of inputs, two of the most critical factors are the grades for lesson observations and college success rates. College success, achievement and retention rates are always published as annexes in Ofsted reports and provide comparisons made with national averages. I would conclude from my reading of Ofsted inspection reports that despite all the other evidence which inspectors collect, there is a fairly close correlation between Ofsted gradings and college success rate outcomes.

It is not only Ofsted who uses success rates to judge colleges. They are also used by the VET funding body to set minimum levels of performance (MLPs). The annual Learning and Skills Council publication *Identifying and managing underperformance* (Learning and Skills Council 2008a) sets out a series of sanctions which colleges can face if they do not reach certain standards. If more than 15% of your publicly funded FE provision, for example, fails to achieve a success rate of 60% (75% for A levels), you can receive a 'notice to improve'

and, if you then fail to improve, lose funding. If more than 25% of your provision falls into this category and you fail to improve the LSC can, eventually, not only reduce funding, but also replace the college governors and the College Executive Team.

I must stress that I am not an advocate of such punitive sanctions. I do, however, strongly believe that course success rates used appropriately as a key performance measure do put an emphasis on the learner and learner achievement. They clearly assist in maximising the credentials gained by learners.

Foundation degrees

The other initiative that I believe the Australian VET sector might usefully consider importing from England is the 'foundation degree'. The body Foundation Degree Forward (Fdf) is charged with promoting foundation degrees in England and Northern Ireland and has an excellent website full of useful information about these credentials (see <http://www.fdf.ac.uk/>).

In comparison with Australian Qualifications Framework credentials, the foundation degree is broadly similar to a VET sector advanced diploma or an HE sector associate degree. In England it is the equivalent to the first two years of a full-time, three-year bachelor degree. Most three-year bachelor degrees are awarded with honours included as part of the degree, partly because it's believed that students who go to university will have completed Year 13 at school rather than completing Year 12, as is usually the case in Australia. In the credit point system used by many English universities the foundation degree is worth 240 credit points, while an honours bachelor degree needs 360 credit points. At the Open University a pass bachelor degree requires 300 credit points.

A core characteristic of all foundation degrees is that they must have a clear, guaranteed articulation pathway into a related full honours bachelor degree.

Foundation degrees are largely, but not exclusively, delivered by FE colleges; however, they are an HE not an FE Qualification. This means they are funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and not by the VET sector funding body, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). This funding can come through a direct contract between the FE College and HEFCE or indirectly through a 'franchise' arrangement with a university. They are 'externally inspected' or quality assured not by Ofsted, but by the HE sector Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

When they started in around 2000, foundation degrees could only be awarded by a recognised university, although FE colleges were allowed to actually offer the degrees. In 2007, however, the government announced that FE colleges could apply to the Privy Council (via the QAA) to award their own foundation degrees. This announcement came as a surprise to both the university and college sectors, and was treated with dismay by many universities who argued that it would 'undermine' a qualification that was yet to be fully established or recognised. Some universities also felt that degrees should only be developed by institutions such as theirs with staff who were 'research active', or demonstrably at the forefront of their disciplines.

Although it is an HE qualification, the English foundation degree has many of the core characteristics of a VET sector qualification in Australia. These include the need for:

- employer involvement in their design and delivery
- linkages with sector skills councils and, through them, with National Occupational Standards
- flexible delivery
- a format which attracts non-traditional students
- flexible entry requirements: they are one of the few degrees in England which will accept a work-based learning credential like an NVQ as an entry requirement
- degrees which are 'open' to the public or 'closed' to one employer (such as the supermarket Tesco's) (Quality Assurance Agency 2004).

Foundation degrees have become an attractive option for many students, employers and colleges. Enrolments have grown from 4000 in 2001 to nearly 50 000 in 2005 and may reach nearly 100 000 by 2010 (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2008). They are particularly popular with public sector employers, which is why foundation degrees in health and education have some of the largest enrolments, although the two biggest areas are in business and computing.

At City of Westminster College we offer a range of foundation degrees. In our Faculty of Culture, Media and Sport we run foundation degrees in both media technology and professional photography. Both are accredited by the University of Westminster, which offers a pathway into its bachelor degrees in media, art and design. Our Faculty of Technology offers a Foundation Degree in Building Services validated by Southbank University. However, this has not yet actually run, partly due to the popularity of the longer established HE qualification which we also offer: the Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Building Services. HNCs have been available for 50 years and became classified as HE qualifications in the 1990s. Although often validated by universities, they are not degrees and have no guaranteed articulation pathways; however, in some slightly more conservative professions such as construction, their familiarity makes them popular with employers.

Our School of Medical Technology has for many years run a Bachelor of Science in Clinical Physiology (Hons) validated by Middlesex University. The course is run exclusively to train medical scientists employed in National Health Service (NHS) or public hospitals. We have recently converted this course to include a foundation degree pathway. This is partly in response to a recent government policy decision not to publicly finance students who want to do another 'first' degree, whereas foundation degrees are exempt from this Equivalent Level Qualification (ELQ) funding policy. As the NHS often recruits people with a first degree in subjects such as sports science to train as medical scientists, our being able to offer the NHS a foundation degree pathway will save on course fees. This exemption in general is a further encouragement for foundation degrees to be used in the same way as graduate certificates and diplomas in Australia: as a conversion or 'career switching' qualification for existing graduates. Certainly the Foundation Degree in Professional Photography offered by my college recruits many graduates with degrees in other art and design disciplines.

Foundation degrees have proved popular with students because of their flexibility, their linkages to employers and the fact that they are offered by the local FE college. But an integral part of their attractiveness is the degree label and the guaranteed progression route.

If Australian TAFE institutes were to copy them, I suppose most would prefer to offer their own degrees rather than teach those of another institution. Although the Bradley Review might recommend a more integrated tertiary sector, sectoral dignity and sectoral jealousies have a long history. Teaching someone else's degree might be irritating but it would save on the interminable negotiations currently involved with credit transfer arrangements between TAFE and universities. Surely it should be possible to design a VET sector foundation degree with articulation to a university course as a core component?

Would Australian foundation degrees be VET or HE sector qualifications? If they followed the English model, they would be industry led and linked to industry skills councils as well as to National Occupational Standards. But because they are a degree, it is difficult to avoid the HE association. Potentially, they are a flagship qualification for a more integrated tertiary sector.

Concluding remarks

In course success rates and foundation degrees, I have provided two examples of what the Australian VET sector might learn or copy from England. I could also have outlined what England could have learnt from Australia. Some of this would not be surprising; for example, Australia's strength in flexible delivery and its interest in the pedagogy of vocational education and training. The OECD pointed out that Australia had a respected VET system with a well-engineered qualification structure which was very well engaged with employers and industry. In these respects England could learn a lot from Australia. The OECD raised the issue of complexity in the architecture of the VET sector in Australia as a result of the shared responsibilities of the states and Commonwealth. However, everything is relative. The English commentator Steve Besley (2008) recently identified that the English VET sector has four planning and funding bodies; four regulatory and inspection agencies; nine bodies representing or supporting providers; ten support agencies; 12 strategic bodies; and 16 separate support mechanisms. It is thus not surprising that the UK Commission for Employment and Skills recently launched a 'simplification' strategy. We all have our strengths and weaknesses. We all have something we can borrow and indeed something we can lend. But we also need to remember that the greener grass in the next paddock might not be suitable for our breed.

Thank you

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