LEARNER PATHWAYS: MEETING THE HIGHER SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS

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Abstract
Traditional learner pathways have been considered to be linear in nature and have led to the gradual increase in the number of working aged Australians who hold a post-secondary qualification (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, ND-b). More recent Australian Commonwealth Government targets for both the Australian vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE) sectors aim to increase these numbers significantly to ensure Australia meets its future skills requirements and remains as a global leader (Bradley, 2008; Council of Australian Governments, 2009).

The new Australian Qualifications Framework (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2011) together with a more open and competitive formal adult education market place (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Government of South Australia, 2011; Ross, 2011; Victorian Government, 2008) has seen the emergence of a ‘new tertiary sector’ in Australia. This new tertiary sector is seeing HE providers targeting traditional VET students and VET providers are offering HE qualifications (Bennett, 2011; L. M. Wheelahan, G, 2011). The Diploma level qualification has been identified as the main transition qualification between VET and HE, and it has also been acknowledged that getting individuals into Diploma level qualifications in the first place is as important as encouraging them to articulate to Degree courses (L. Wheelahan, 2010).

In order for VET and HE providers to achieve this higher skills and qualification agenda in the new Australian tertiary sector it will need to be recognised at an individual, organisational and sector level that learner pathways are tumultuous in nature and better reflect ‘crazy paving’ than smooth, linear pathways (Harris, 2006). These providers will also need to provide effective support systems together with transparent recognition and articulation mechanisms to enable effective transition points between to the two sectors (Miller, 2010; D. Paez, Byrnes, J, Blacker, J, Jackson, A, & Dwyer, C., , 2011).

Projects supporting higher skills and qualification pathways which utilise innovative technology-based programs are being supported by the National VET E-learning Strategy (Flexible Learning Advisory Group, 2011a). These projects will provide delivery and support models which will enable learners to gain a Diploma level or higher qualification or skills set. At the same time, VET and HE providers and industry stakeholders will be able to investigate and determine the key principles for developing a culture of ongoing development that supports the irregular transition points of adult education and provides explicit transition mechanisms.
Keywords: learner pathways, learner transitions, continuous professional development, ongoing development, lifelong learning,

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**Introduction**

The Australian adult education system offers many pathways for adults to gain a formal education through vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE) which has seen a gradual increase in the number of Australians who hold a non-school qualification (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, ND-b). However, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (2009) have recognised that to support the skills demands within a growing economy, further increases are required in the proportion of working aged Australians who hold a non-school qualification. This has resulted in higher targets being set for both the VET sector (Council of Australian Governments, 2009), and the HE sector (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

Recent changes to the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) has seen a blurring of the line between VET and HE at levels 5-8, seeing the emergence of a ‘new tertiary sector’ in Australian adult education (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2011). The VET Diploma has been recognised as the most common qualification to support learners ‘transition’ between VET and HE (L. Wheelahan, 2010).

To enable these targets to be attained, the Australian Commonwealth Government (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, ND-a) and several State Governments (Government of South Australia, 2011; Ross, 2011; Victorian Government, 2008) have implemented demand driven funding models for both sectors. These funding models have seen both the VET and the HE sector look to the other sector’s traditional market to increase their enrolments. However, encouraging individuals to gain more than one higher level qualification will be required rather than the poaching of another sector’s target market, as there are not enough Australians to meet these targets (Jones, 2010).

Therefore, in order to achieve these higher qualifications targets there needs to be work done at an individual, organisational and sector level to support more effective pathways, improve learner support systems, and offer better ways of helping learners gain credit and recognition of prior learning (Miller, 2010). This will require VET and HE organisations to work in partnership with industry to enable integrated articulation and credit transfer models (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, ND-c)
Funding through the National VET E-learning Strategy (Flexible Learning Advisory Group, 2011a) to support higher qualification pathways through e-learning programs is being provided to registered training organisations (RTOs), businesses and community organisations. These organisations are working with HE organisations and employers to develop innovative technology-based programs which allow learners to gain a higher VET qualification, skills set and/or entry into higher education (Flexible Learning Advisory Group, 2011b). These pilots are also investigating ways to develop a culture of ongoing development (Miller, 2012) and support the triangular relationships required between VET, HE and industry stakeholders (D. Paez, Byrnes, J, Blacker, J, Jackson, A, & Dwyer, C., , 2011).

This paper provides a literature review of the key areas which are driving the higher skills and qualifications agenda currently happening in formal adult education in Australia. The paper also provides a commentary of the progress to date of the Higher Qualification Pathways pilot projects being supported by the National VET E-learning Strategy as a key initiative to supporting this agenda. It also provides some considerations as to the requirements needs to further support higher level qualification pathways.

**Literature review**

*Increasing the number of working aged Australians with a higher qualification*

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (2009, p. 6) has recognised that there are a “depth and breadth of skills and capabilities required for the 21st century labour market” within Australia. This has resulted in the following targets being set for the VET sector (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 6):

- Halve the proportion of Australians ages 20-64 without qualifications at Certificate III level and above between 2009 and 2020.

- Double the number of higher qualification completions (diploma and advanced diploma) between 2009 and 2020.

Around the same time, the Australian Government recognised the integral role that HE plays in achieving its vision for a “stronger and fairer Australia”, and to “fuels economic development, productivity and high skilled jobs and supports Australia’s role as a middle power and leader in the region” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 6). As a result of this through the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education, the Australian Government has set the HE sector the following target (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009):

- 40 per cent of 25- to 34-year-olds will have attained at least a bachelor-level qualification by 2020 (2009 attainment was 29 per cent)
Jones (2010) however recognises that to achieve these targets Australia will need some people to obtain more than one higher level qualification, as there are not enough people living in Australia to enable these higher qualification targets to be achieved by people only gaining one higher level qualification.

**New tertiary landscape**

The Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) provides the structure for educational qualifications in Australia and has recently been updated to provide clear information about pathways between qualification levels (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2011). The following diagram highlights the overlap between the VET and HE sector which is being more commonly referred to as the ‘new tertiary sector’.

![Figure 1: The New Tertiary Landscape](http://www.beegazine.com/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&catid=36%3Aoversea-story&id=46%3Astart-point&Itemid=75)

Wheelahan (2010) acknowledges that the VET Diploma is the main transition qualification from VET to higher education, and that VET providers need to develop better partnerships with universities to deliver associate degrees which support business, community and learner needs that also articulate to HE qualifications (L. M. Wheelahan, G, 2011).
Further Australian Government initiatives striving to support the higher qualification targets has been through a learner demand driven funding model, which has resulted in:

- the Australian Government no longer specifying the number of undergraduate student places a university can offer domestic students, except in medicine (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, ND-a)

- Numerous State Governments implementing or are in the process of implementing VET sector reforms which is seeing the uncapping of VET training places and the introduction of a VET Fee Help as an equivalent to the HE Contribution Scheme (HECS) to cover the substantial increases of VET courses at higher qualification levels (Government of South Australia, 2011; Ross, 2011; Victorian Government, 2008)

This is seeing both sectors look to the other’s traditional client base to widen their market through such initiatives as:

- ‘University Colleges’ where individuals can “to take on tertiary studies” which “provide extra pathways into university” through “a suite of diploma programs that articulate into full degrees” (UniSA, 2010, p. various paragraphs).

- ‘Degrees at TAFE’ which offer an ‘industry influenced’ HE qualification which enable graduates to be “immediately employable and productive in the workplace and have the skills most needed and valued by employers” as well as “a seamless articulation pathway ... from relevant diploma and advanced diploma courses into accredited ... undergraduate degrees” (TAFE NSW Higher Education, ND, p. various paragraphs)

*The non-linear nature of adult education*

Working aged Australians are able to select from a range of adult learner pathways (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, ND-b). However, Harris (2006) acknowledges that adult learner pathways within and between VET and higher education is more like crazy paving than the linear pathways traditional depicted for a typical tertiary education pathway.

Statistics show that many learners do take a traditional pathway from VET to HE with 11% of VET learners who obtain a VET qualification also obtaining a degree. While even more take a reverse pathway from HE to VET with 14% of HE learners with a Bachelor degree going on to obtain a VET qualification. However, only 4.3% of people with a VET qualification gain credit towards their HE qualification despite 25 years of articulation arrangements and dual sector universities in Australia (ABS, 2011; D. Paez, 2012).

Miller (2010) acknowledges that learner pathways are a natural part of education and training and provide both efficiency and equity advantages but are stifled by significant barriers. One key
driver for improving learner pathway support mechanisms is that a second related qualification can often be completed in less time than the original one, saving both the provider and the learner time and money. Successful learner transitions mechanisms include:

- providing clearer course arrangements and information between the tertiary sectors
- improving learner support systems
- streamlining the way learners gain credit and recognition of prior learning

Creating a culture which supports the ongoing development of lifelong skills and the recognition of the non-linear nature of adult learner pathways are others ways of enabling successful higher qualification pathways (Miller, 2012; Walls, 2010).

**Australian Government initiatives to enable effective learner pathways**

Paez (2011) has been leading an Australian Government initiative that provides mechanism for the VET sector, the HE sector and industry to all benefit from higher qualification pathways through a three dimensional focus on articulation and credit transfer which is learner focussed. The 3D Focus on Articulation Pathways project ([http://3darticulation.com.au/](http://3darticulation.com.au/)) highlights how VET and HE providers can work together with their industry partners to provide effective higher qualification pathways. The following diagrams demonstrate some learner pathway models being used in Australia.
The Flexible Learning Advisory Group (FLAG) have also been supported by the Australian Government to manage the National VET E-learning Strategy (Flexible Learning Advisory Group, 2011a). Some of the key goals of this initiative are to support workforce development while expanding participation and access for individuals through innovative and targeted e-learning training solutions. Higher qualification pathways are a focus across both of these goals through the Higher Qualification Pathways project. Funding provided by the National VET E-learning Strategy is enabling registered training organisations (RTOs), businesses and community organisations to develop innovative technology based delivery and support programs to help individuals gain a higher qualification beyond the one they are currently studying.

**Research method (or author may choose some other title)**

The Higher Qualification Pathways pilot projects aim to distil the key principles for effective e-delivery and/or e-support mechanisms which enable learners to pursue higher qualification goals through developing a culture of ongoing development for lifelong learning within their organisation. The potential outcome of this research is to develop a conceptual framework which will help build capacity within the VET sector to embed effective e-delivery and/or e-support strategies which enable more learners to attain a higher qualification through effective learner pathway programs.

The research will draw upon the action research projects (Elliot, 1991) and action learning experiences (Serrat, 2008) of the Higher Qualification Pathways pilot projects leaders. The researcher and writer of this report, Allison Miller, is also the Higher Qualification Pathways Project Manager for the National VET E-learning Strategy.

The research method to be used is based on the key principles of cooperative learning theory (Johnson, 1998) through the development of a professional cooperative learning community.
which can empower the Higher Qualification Pathways pilot project leaders to achieve their action research goals while contributing new ways of supporting higher qualification pathways (Hargreaves, 2003; Moriarty, 2004; Simpson, 2004).

The researcher will use an adaptation of Brofenbrenner’s Social Ecology Model (Rowan, 2004) which reflects an adult action learning context (Serrat, 2008) to analyse the data gathered from the Higher Qualification Pathways pilot project leaders. Data will be collected through:

- oral and written communications during scheduled monthly team member face to face and/or online meetings
- regular online communications and reflective journals via the Higher Qualification Pathways pilot project leaders’ collaborative online space, and
- the information shared by the Higher Qualification Pathways pilot project leaders via their personal online spaces, which will be part of a collective online public space

It is acknowledged that there are limitations to this research method in that the researcher is also the project manager of the pilot project leaders and could possibly be seen as a potential gatekeeper and stakeholder (Coombes, 2004). As the researcher and supervisor of these pilot projects there is a conflict of interest in terms of what should be reported. This means that the researcher will need to ensure that the information disseminated about the outputs and findings of the pilot project is not viewed as being biased by having the project participants themselves endorse the research findings and outputs (Simpson, 2004). This will provide a means for the research participants to have greater faith in the research process, together with ensuring that only accurate information, regardless of whether this is positive or negative, is reported and disseminated (McDougall, 2004).

At the same time, the researcher will need to reflect on their potential hierarchical power status as the Higher Qualification Pathways Project Manager and potential subordinate role of the participants as recipients of project funding to ensure that there is an even balance of power (Harreveld, 2004). The researcher will also need to ensure that they are not causing participants too much inconvenience within their normal workplace, as well as, to not exert too much pressure on the participants to provide data excessively, but rather gather the required data through the natural course of their action research projects and action learning activities (Jarzabkowski, 2004). It is important to acknowledge these potential issues, however, should not stop the research moving forward, otherwise a lot of good research would never happen (Anteliz, 2001).

It is also acknowledged that having the Higher Qualification Pathways Project Manager as the researcher, rather than employing a research assistant to gather and analysis the data, will enable the negotiated trust and ‘emotional labour’ developed with the participants to provide greater anonymity and confidentiality (McDougall, 2004; Moriarty, 2004).
Findings and discussion

This research is a work in progress. At the time of writing this paper (March 2012), the Higher Qualification Pathways pilot projects had been underway for two months, with the projects running from January to June 2012. More information about the individual pilot projects funded can be found in the January-June 2012 Higher Qualification Pathways Project Summary Sheet at http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/files/Higher%20Qualification%20Pathways%20Project%20Summaries%20.pdf.

The eight pilot projects were selected through a competitive tender process against clearly stated selection criteria which aimed to sponsor pilot projects which offered learners support and delivery mechanisms which allowed learners to reach their education/career goal beyond just that of the qualification they would be studying during the pilot. This saw an array of lead organisations and their key stakeholders being selected, including: public, private and enterprise RTOs; various university partnerships, as well as the involvement of a State-based industry group.

Within the bulk of the applications for the pilot projects funding there was little or no consideration about how learners would be supported to use their newly acquired skills/qualification to achieve their education and/or career goals, even though the selection criteria clearly stated that the applicant must demonstrate how their proposed pilot project would closely align “with the strategic objectives, outcomes and measures of the Higher Qualification Projects Program to assist learners to pursue educational pathways through e-learning programs for higher qualifications” (Flexible Learning Advisory Group, 2011b).

A number of strategies have been put into place to support the successful Higher Qualification Pathways pilot project leaders manage their projects, including:

- being supported to improve their proposed Project Plans
- a face to face Induction Workshop so the pilot project leaders could meet each other and understand the key requirements of the pilot funding
- sharing their projects’ progress, resources/tools and queries/questions through contributions to a personal, group and a public online space as well as to private group discussion forums
- monthly online meetings, and regular email and telephone communication

Varying digital literacy within the pilot project leaders has meant engaging in the synchronous and asynchronous online collaborative spaces has been a challenge for some while other pilot project leaders have embraced the online experience quickly. The pilot project leaders have
access to an eMentor as well as the Project Manager to help them with their projects as well as how to function in the online group spaces.

Inter-accountably of the pilot project leaders of having to share their projects’ progress, both that of the opportunities and the barriers, is having mixed responses. Some of the pilot project leaders are being inspired by their colleagues’ work and are asking for support to improve their own work/project, while others are finding the experience overwhelming having to ‘air their dirty laundry in public’ and are reluctant to fully participate online.

In order to model what is required to support cultures of ongoing development which enables individuals to utilise their learning experiences beyond the life of their immediate training, the pilot project leaders are being encouraged and supported to collect evidence of their action research projects and action learning activities for possible recognition of prior learning (RPL) following the completion of their pilot project. The Project Manager and the eMentor are aiming to use the online experiences of the pilot project leaders, the recording of the progress of their projects and their participation in online forums and meetings as evidence for obtaining RPL for a unit within the Diploma of VET - TAERSS01A Apply research to training and assessment practice.

Conclusions

At a strategic level, the Australian Government has recognised that there is a need to improve working aged Australians’ skills and knowledge to sustain Australia’s economic growth and social wellbeing through higher qualification pathways. To address this, various higher qualification targets have been set for the VET and HE sectors. However, in order to attain these targets, some Australians will need to gain more than one higher level qualification. This requires effective learner pathways which avoids either sector targeting or poaching the other sector’s traditional clients at the expense of the other sector.

While some initiatives have been implemented to enable these targets to be achieved it appears through the lack of information in applications to fund e-learning programs which support higher qualification pathways that there will be a time lag before VET organisations and trainers are able to effectively implement delivery and/or support models which enable individuals to reach higher qualification goals beyond the qualification they are currently studying.

Of those organisations which are demonstrating an understanding of the mechanisms required for supporting higher qualification pathways through a culture of ongoing development, there is evidence that a holistic, three-dimensional approach is still difficult to achieve. This coupled with the low digital literacy skills of some VET leaders and educators highlights that there is still some way to go before we are going to see successfully embedded innovative technology based delivery and support models which enable higher qualification pathways. However, pilot
projects being funded by the National VET E-learning Strategy may go some way to overcome this.

All Australian Governments may also need to consider funding models which encourage the lifelong development of learners beyond that of the limited linear approach to gaining qualifications currently operating in the Australian adult education sector. One possible way to do this would be to introduce incentives for VET and HE organisations to work collaboratively on enabling individuals to achieve more than one higher level qualification in a lesser amount of time than if they were to study them as two separate courses. E-learning approaches being piloted in the Higher Qualification Pathways project may also have a lot to offer this approach.

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