Diploma to degree: why successful VET diploma graduates undertake a university enabling course

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The aim of this paper is to explore the factors that influence VET diploma graduates’ decisions to proceed to a degree but undertake a university-based enabling course as part of that journey. The pathway for VET graduates in Australia who wish to undertake higher education studies has been described as a ‘crazy pathway’ or ‘seamless’, with some being well documented and advertised, and others unclear and haphazard. Over the past few decades the number of university entrants with a VET qualification has risen significantly. However, even where formal articulation arrangements are in place, the evidence suggests that VET graduates may lack the confidence to move directly from the VET sector into higher education. This is suggested by the enrolment in university-enabling courses by students who have successfully completed a VET diploma. A diversity of factors influences this decision but two stand out as being of importance. One is a lack of confidence by individuals in their ability to move between the two sectors; this is based on their perception of having a gap in their academic literacy skills and their ability to adapt to the different teaching and learning environments. Another is confusion about the process required to move between sectors of education, particularly from VET to higher education.

Introduction

The pathway for VET graduates in Australia who wish to undertake higher education studies has been described as haphazard, a crazy pathway or seamless. Over the decades a number of terms have been used to describe the transition between sectors of education. For example, the term ‘pathway’ is usually reserved for the broad movement across education sectors, including schools, VET and higher education, whereas, ‘credit transfer’ is used to describe recognition of previous equal or similar study. Another term commonly used in Australia is ‘articulation’ and this generally describes a process that enables students to progress from one completed qualification to another with admission and/or credit in a defined pathway. It is often the case that articulation between VET and higher education institutions (universities) is based on local arrangements rather than state or national arrangements. Anecdotal evidence as well as formal research suggests that many factors impact on articulation or credit transfer arrangements. While advancements have been made to ensure ‘seamless’ movement between differing sectors, there are still significant barriers for students wishing to pursue this pathway, even though various Australian governments have undertaken initiatives to promote student pathways from VET to higher education.

Educational bodies who deliver accredited courses are required by the Australian Qualifications Framework (2011, p. 66) to have ‘clear, accessible and transparent policies and processes to provide qualifications pathways and credit arrangements for students’. The number of students making the transition from VET to higher education qualifications has increased significantly. According to Watson, Hagel and Chesters (2013, p.10) in ‘2001, only 12 916 students were admitted to
undergraduate programs on the basis of a VET award, compared with 22 676 in 2010’, which represents an increase of 75% in this student cohort. While this proportion has grown, there is an enormous difference in the arrangements for transition. There may be many reasons for these differences: those that are obvious are variations in the policies, procedures and practices of VET providers by comparison with those of higher education institutions, lack of congruence between the vocational disciplines offered by educational providers, lack of will on the part of institutions, and gaps in resources to support the development of transitional pathways. However, even where formal articulation arrangements are in place there is some evidence to suggest VET graduates may lack the confidence to move directly from the VET sector into higher education or may not know about or understand how they can undertake the journey from VET to university. This is partly evidenced by enrolment in university-enabling courses by students who have successfully completed a VET diploma. This has occurred even when there is an established articulation pathway to a degree.

The factors that influence this decision are worthy of research, in that it could add to the body of information that already exists on the topic and may provide direction to policy-makers and practitioners in the development of educational pathways. While there has been significant research into the profile of students making this transition and their pathways (Harris, Rainey & Sumner 2006; Langworthy, Johns & Humphries 2011) there has been little research into the influencing and motivating factors for these students. These factors may include the VET environment from which they are making the transition, as the environment in which VET qualifications are gained has changed significantly, with an ever-increasing emphasis on job-specific skills. This may mean students do not recognise the transferable educational skills they hold, such as critical thinking and academic writing. In addition to the differing educational environment of VET and higher education, other factors may include a lack of exposure to role models who have successfully made the transition, or personal factors, such as the length of time between VET qualification completion and going to university.

This small study will consider the research already undertaken into the factors that generally influence students’ decisions on articulating from a VET qualification to higher education, but it will focus on any unique features that influence students’ decisions to undertake a university-based enabling courses as part of that transition. A review of the literature revealed two important themes relevant to this study. Firstly, the terminology used to describe the movement of students between sectors of education or a qualification varies. Secondly, the variety of pathways available to students is broad and diverse, which may present problems for students wishing to make this transition. However, missing from the literature was any in-depth exploration of the factors that influence students’ decisions to pursue a pathway from VET to higher education, specifically those that influence students who choose a pathway utilising a university-enabling course. This paper will consider the influencing factors at a very micro level: the result of interviews with five students who have undertaken a specific university-enabling course. These students were invited to take part in the research, based on their capacity to provide data relevant to the research question. They met the criteria of having successfully completed a VET diploma course and were eligible for direct entry to a university course but had decided to undertake a university-enabling course first. The interviews were conversational and asked students to describe their journey throughout VET and onto higher education, with an emphasis on the factors that influenced their choices along the way.

Findings and discussion

A review of the existing research found that there are many paths available to prospective students if they wish to undertake trans-sector study. While educational institutions must be cognisant of the
Australian Government policy (Australian Qualifications Framework Council 2013) that requires attention to ease of transition; that is, clear pathways for students who want to pursue this avenue, there are vast differences and inconsistencies in the choices available. Watson, Hagel and Chesters (2013, p.33) state that ‘while all Australian universities have policies to promote VET to higher education pathways, there are subtle differences in the way in which pathways policies are implemented’. It could be argued the differences are more than subtle, as there are many models, including arrangements where institutions in different sectors have made provision to share campuses and facilities. Examples of these are the former Frankston College of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and Monash University with the Diploma of Business offered as a shared course with direct entry to a degree on successful completion, or Goulburn Ovens TAFE with arrangements between it and La Trobe University for nursing studies. Other arrangements in place at different institutions to allow transition are formal memorandums of understanding or informal credit transfer pathways, whereby staff of two or more institutions have created a credit transfer process. However, Walls and Pardy (2010, p.25) maintain ‘the formal structuring of articulation between VET and higher education occurs on a spectrum ranging from well-organised to haphazard’. Of particular interest to this study (with the establishment of a dual-sector university in CQUniversity) are the models created by the dual-sector universities, which have developed pathways between VET and higher education qualifications. Swinburne University of Technology provides an example of this, having developed a number of pathways specifically for successful VET students with guaranteed entry for business, ICT and science diploma graduates into a range of business, ICT and science degrees.

While there are many models available to students considering making the transition from VET to higher education, there has been considerable concern expressed by writers such as McKenzie (2001) and Golding and Eedle (2001) in relation to the difficulties that students undertaking this path may encounter and the gap between rhetoric and reality when looking at education pathways. The ability to move between sectors has been under discussion for decades but the terminology has not been consistent (Hass 1999). The term ‘credit transfer’ is frequently used in relation to the transition from VET to higher education, particularly when describing recognition of specific courses already undertaken. ‘Articulation’ is also a commonly used term for describing the process by which educational institutions match their courses to those at other institution. Nevertheless, these terms are often used synonymously (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2006). In addition, a broader and equally common term is that of ‘pathway’. However, this term more commonly embraces not only the transition from VET to university but also the transition from school to VET. According to McKenzie and Hillman (2001) the term ‘pathway’ began to be widely used in Australia with the publication in 1991 of the Young people’s participation in education and training, colloquially called the Finn Review. It has been used extensively since then both as a term and also as a descriptor of policy.

Interviews with the students elicited a number of factors that had influenced their decisions to undertake a university-enabling course and some of these were foreshadowed by the literature reviewed. The initial impetus for undertaking the enabling course, as described by the interviewees, related to long-term goals such as the wish for a higher education qualification, with the possible subsequent benefits of a better job and salary and the desire to attain more knowledge in their field. Undertaking an enabling course ensured that they could confidently achieve this goal. The specific factors influencing their decision to undertake an enabling course related to: confusion caused by the terminology used by educational sectors to describe movement between different sectors; the availability of relevant information and advice from course advisors; the time elapsed since completion of a previous qualification; and perceived gaps in educational ability, such as academic
literacy and understanding of assessment methods. Table 1 represents responses for each identified factor from five interviewees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confused by terminology</td>
<td>3/5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty in finding relevant pathway information</td>
<td>3/5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time gap between qualifications</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling to complete STEPS*</td>
<td>2/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy confidence</td>
<td>5/5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sector differences; especially assessment</td>
<td>5/5</td>
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* STEPS = Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies.

When the interviewees were questioned in depth about their rationale or reasons for undertaking an enabling course, many common factors were identified. Because the number of interviewees is very small, a wider study could be usefully undertaken to determine whether this is consistent with students engaged in a wider range of enabling courses.

For all interviewees the two main reasons given for undertaking the course was a lack of confidence in their academic literacy and their ability to complete assessment tasks. As indicated by table 1, all students identified these as influencing factors. This is consistent with the research of White (2014) and Watson, Hagel and Chesters (2013), who found that those wishing to make the transition from VET to higher education are likely to face many and varied challenges. The differences between the sectors, which were identified as being challenging, are the competency-based approach used in VET compared with the more traditional curricula emphasis of universities. According to Keating (2008, p.5), ‘VET is concerned with the human capital needs of competencies and applied skills, while higher education attends to the social and cultural needs of knowledge mastery and conceptual understandings’. This means that students who make the transition between the sectors have to adjust to different teaching and learning philosophies and specifically to methods of assessment. The responses from the students interviewed for this study were consistent with established research, in that they also identified that the different teaching and learning environments in VET and higher education may create challenges, perceived or real, for students in adapting to the requirements of the different sectors. This raises questions about the compatibility of the requirements of the different sectors, which may be related to the expected outcomes of the qualification. Vocational and educational qualifications generally focus on industry-established competency standards, while universities commonly wish to retain the major influence on the content of their courses.

The second most common factors identified by students in this study were confusion caused by the terms used in the sectors to describe transitional arrangements and the difficulties faced in obtaining information about established arrangements and possibilities. They described encountering terms such as ‘credit transfer’, ‘recognition of prior learning’ and ‘articulation’ without really having a clear understanding of their meaning or application. This finding is probably not unexpected, given that earlier research has found that a variety of arrangements exist and that the terms are often used interchangeably, when in fact they are describing different concepts or procedures. This indicates that attention could be given to the terminology used when communicating with students about pathways in education in Australia. Whether the issue is that the terms are being used synonymously when they should not be, or that the terms are being applied correctly but are unfamiliar to students, is an area that requires further clarification. Another factor identified as influencing students’
decisions was that they had been counselled by higher education course advisors to complete an enabling course prior to undertaking a degree or consecutively with a degree. The interviewees were unable to provide an explanation for the basis for this advice but had made the assumption that they lacked academic skills. This assumption may be flawed, but as it has been identified as an influencing factor it would be valuable to explore the rationale underpinning this advice. A final factor identified by one interviewee was the time gap between completion of a VET qualification and undertaking higher education. While this interviewee also identified a lack of confidence in their academic ability, they were not able to definitively state the factors were linked.

Conclusions

There are a number of conclusions that could be drawn from this research. Firstly, successful VET graduates face challenges, either real or perceived, when moving to the higher education sector to complete a qualification, particularly in relation to their literacy and their ability to successfully adapt to a different teaching and learning environment. Secondly, the terminology used to describe the transition arrangements between education sectors and a variety of practices may be contributing factors to students’ understanding of the process and, therefore, their ability to take advantage of possible progression through sectors. Thirdly, advice from faculty advisors in the higher education sector is influential in determining whether students include an enabling course in their journey from VET to higher education. Finally, a time gap between the completion of a VET qualification and undertaking higher education can also be a contributing factor in this decision. Overall, it has been possible to identify very clear factors that influence VET students’ decisions to undertake an enabling course as part of their journey to higher education.

References


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