

LIFELONG LEARNING: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STRUCTURE OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Current frameworks in tertiary education need to be re-examined if lifelong learning is to be sustained in Australia. Thirty interviews were conducted with staff at dual-sector and single-sector universities on the provision of cross-sectoral education and training. The impact of the different sectoral structures on the creation of cross-sectoral learning communities is described.

Learning communities are, to a large extent, shaped by policy and by systemic and institutional frameworks derived from policy. A tension exists between the past as bequeathed, and the future that must be shaped, as practitioners struggle to create supportive learning environments within the parameters defined by existing frameworks. The massification of tertiary education has resulted in the participation of a generation new to tertiary education, within declining public resources per capita. Social and economic imperatives will continue to drive increased and continuing participation, and this has resulted in the creation of policy frameworks in many Organisation for Economic Development nations which aim to foster, sustain, and support lifelong learning for their populations (OECD, 1998).

In Australia, tertiary education is structured by a higher education sector and a vocational education and training (VET) sector. Increasingly, students are moving between the two sectors, to meet their educational and vocational goals, while others would move if the opportunity presented itself (see Kinsman, 1998). This movement has led to growing collaboration between staff in both sectors, as new pathways and course arrangements are established to meet diverse student learning needs. There are five recognised universities in Australia that contain both a Technical and Further Education sector (TAFE institutions are the main publicly funded and managed component of the VET system) and a higher education sector. In addition, there is a plethora of arrangements to facilitate cross-sectoral collaboration between staff in single-sector TAFE and higher education institutions and the movement of students between them.

This paper is a report of a project funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, conducted by researchers principally based at Victoria University of Technology, on behalf of the

Lifelong Learning Network at the University of Canberra. The project aimed to investigate effective institutional structures for delivering cross-sectoral education and training. Important differences were found between single-sector and dual-sector institutions in the way in which staff collaborated and constructed their learning communities. This paper sets the context for reporting some findings from the NCVER project, by exploring policy frameworks which have shaped the institutional environments in which staff work. It is necessary to undertake this exploration, as it helps to clarify the obstacles and impediments staff confront in attempting to work across sectoral divides, and their achievements.

BACKGROUND

Lifelong learning is generally understood to be an important goal for Australia, but planners have yet to consider fundamental questions about the systemic and institutional structures needed to facilitate and underpin lifelong learning in tertiary education. The fact that this issue must be placed on the agenda reveals a paucity of the current policy discussion of lifelong learning. That lifelong learning is a desirable policy goal is uncontested. Yet, the nature of lifelong learning, and the *contested* concepts and philosophies which are spoken in its name, have *not* been subjected to scrutiny. To do so would call into question the nature of tertiary education, the purposes to which it is put, and the outcomes expected. The structure of provision would be central to the debate. This has not happened. The current notion that we have two systems, one 'academic' and one 'vocational' has not been seriously challenged. The putative mission of the two sectors is asserted and insisted upon by government (cf. Kemp, 1997; and Australian National Training Authority, 1997), by peak sectoral bodies (cf. Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee, 1997), and by other

commentators (cf. Schofield 1998). However, these differences in mission must be justified and examined to determine whether they still meet individual, social, and economic requirements.

Competing conceptions of lifelong learning have emerged as a basis for policy development. Hyland (1999) distinguishes between approaches based upon utilitarian and economic models which have gained almost hegemonic sway in government and policy communities in Anglo countries in the last 20 years, and those based upon broad social and economic conceptions, concerned with the development of an active citizenry and inclusive society. The former subordinates education and training principally as a tool of economic planning (Hyland, 1999; Marginson 1997), while the latter has a broader social and individual function and explicit social redistributive objectives.

The hegemony of 'new right' principles in education policy development over the last 20 years (Hyland, 1999; Marginson 1997) results in a narrow and reductive framework for the development of vocational education, as vocational education is deemed to be principally about meeting the needs of industry and the economy. Systems of education, including curriculum, are shaped to meet this goal. Vocationalising the curriculum has begun to pervade higher education in the United Kingdom (Hyland, 1999), and is increasingly guiding the development of new courses and student choice in higher education in Australia (Donaghy, 2000).

Rather than there being an essential and intrinsic difference between vocational and liberal education, Hyland (1999) argues that the distinction between the two, and the resulting inferior status of vocational education, is based on class distinctions, and "its historical association with power relationships in an hierarchical society (p 28)." He quotes Skilbeck (cited in Hyland 1999, p 28) who argues that "this tradition [liberal or classical humanist] has demonstrated a 'remarkable capacity to change and adapt, from mathematics and philosophy, to theology, to classical languages, to literature, for example, according to changing cultural circumstances.'" General education was for the elite, while vocational education for the artisan class.

Skilbeck (cited in Hyland, 1999) counterposes the current narrow framework of vocational education with one that:

"acknowledges social and personal aims, values and needs, and locates education and training goals in relation to the kind of society we wish to see develop and the qualities in people that are to be fostered and nourished" (p 23).

Hyland (1999) draws on a variety of sources in concluding that the difference between academic and vocational programs should be acknowledged at the level of content, but that the divide between the two can be bridged "at the level of methodology and ultimate aims" (p 49). He suggests further that:

"the one common unifying element in relation to the main either-or divisions in this sphere – vocational/academic, general/practical, education/training, theory/practice – is precisely and centrally the process of *learning*. All the activities, whether they are classified in terms of one side of the divide or other, involve, in some degree, processes of learning" (p 49).

Hyland's approach offers greater scope for developing a policy framework to support and sustain lifelong learning. It frees both sectors – higher education and vocational education and training – to acknowledge the current reality, that both sectors offer vocational *and* academic education (Doughney, 2000). Hyland's approach also develops both types of provision, maintaining the strong links between them and the central foundation of general education that underpins both.

POLICY CHALLENGES

The view outlined above permits a policy framework to develop which may take account of the following policy challenges in Australian tertiary education:

- the necessity to construct a tertiary education system which enables individuals to move across and combine studies in both sectors as they need to undertake relevant learning to meet their personal, social, and vocational aspirations;
- the development of mechanisms to support school-leavers to make the transition from secondary school to further work and study, without being locked into one framework of provision or the other, and drawing on expert advice and access to high-level information;
- the involvement of the current generation of adults in lifelong learning, with a particular focus on those who do not yet have the foundation skills they require to be able to access further education and training;
- the development of programs that meet the needs of young people who do not successfully complete secondary school and consequently make the transition to post-school education at this point in their lives;

- the development of a comprehensive and universally accessible mechanism for informing lifelong learning choices, particularly by those who have not already participated in tertiary education and therefore are not aware of the full range of choices of sectors, providers, courses, and financing options.

These policy challenges imply fundamental systemic reform to tertiary education in Australia. The policy response to date has been to create 'seamlessness' which, in this context, is defined as the provision of multiple entry points and the movement of students across and between VET and higher education while maintaining existing sectoral boundaries and distinct sectoral missions (Teese, 1997).

There are several problems with this approach. First, Kinsman (1998, p 10) points out that using current patterns of demand is an inadequate basis for framing future cross-sectoral policies. Second, this approach means that *students* must create seamlessness, based on their own knowledge of the two systems, or the knowledge they are able to glean once they are already in one system. *Students* must develop the capacity to navigate the labyrinth of tertiary education, and effectively choose between the vocational education and training or higher education sector without access to support. Third, this approach does not permit attention to be placed on the reforms required to the system, or the *institutional frameworks* needed to underpin lifelong learning. It is these institutional frameworks which shape (and limit) opportunities for students. These frameworks also provide the parameters for the creation of learning communities. Their structure has *direct* bearing on the extent to which student needs are met, and the forms of collaboration that can occur between practitioners.

COMPARISON OF A NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE REQUIRED TO SUPPORT LIFELONG LEARNING WITH EXISTING SECTORAL STRUCTURES

Determining the characteristics and features of systems and their institutional frameworks is thus an important policy question in constructing systems able to sustain and support lifelong learning. In its interim report entitled *Thematic Review of the Transition from Initial Education to Working Life*, the OECD (1998 p 12-13) suggests a number of such features which include: clearly defined, coherent and open learning pathways; frameworks for collaboration between all key

stakeholders; opportunities for both class-room and work-based learning; and well-designed statistical and monitoring tools. Pitfalls to be avoided include excessively narrowly defined curricula, and large numbers of early skill-leavers in low-skilled work. The OECD (1998) also, and importantly for this paper, warns against "insufficiently developed pathways between initial vocational qualifications and further and higher education due to separate entry requirements, qualification structures and financing mechanisms for secondary, tertiary and adult education" (p 13).

This requirement is in marked contrast to the system of tertiary provision that exists in Australia. The entry requirements, qualifications structures, and financing mechanisms for the higher education and vocational education and training sectors are diffuse, complex, and difficult to compare.

Higher education traditionally builds its curriculum on the knowledge base underpinning disciplines, while TAFE operates on the basis of competency based training (CBT). Each sector therefore operates within differing learning paradigms and accreditation frameworks. They also have differing funding, reporting, and accountability requirements to different levels of government. They have differing governance arrangements, count students differently, and define fields of study and reporting categories differently. All this makes it extremely difficult to compare and align the sectors.

METHODOLOGY

In investigating effective institutional structures for the delivery of cross-sectoral education and training, several approaches were used. A broad literature review was undertaken to discern policy developments relating to lifelong long learning in OECD countries. The Hansard of, and submissions to, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Education and Training 1997/98 inquiry into *The Appropriate Roles of Institutes Technical and Further Education*, were examined. Also examined were commissioned reports to, and the report of, the 1997 Victorian Government *Ministerial Review on the Provision of Technical and Further Education in the Metropolitan Melbourne Area* (known as the Ramler Review).

Ten universities were chosen as case studies. Five were the recognised dual-sector universities (four in Victoria, and the Northern Territory University) and five were single-sector, higher education institutions. The websites of each were extensively explored, and the policies on credit transfer, articulation, and dual-sectors awards were obtained, as was information on student load, management

structure, governance and the history of each institution. Thirty interviews with staff were held at eight of the institutions, with an additional interview held with a staff member at a single-sector TAFE institution. Interviews were semi-structured, with two interview formats developed; one each for dual-sector and single-sector institutions. Initial interviews were held with staff nominated by the vice-chancellor at each institution, with a snowballing approach used subsequently. In some cases, links were made using the contacts of the researchers. Staff interviewed ranged from those at vice-chancellor and pro-vice chancellor level, to school and department heads in TAFE and higher education, course co-ordinators, lecturers (in TAFE and higher education), planning and administrative staff, and staff with policy roles. Particular focus was on the way in which staff constructed learning communities, and the extent to which the existing systemic and institutional structures impeded or facilitated their efforts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Patterns emerged in the interviews. These demonstrate that learning communities develop differently according to their institutional framework. Dual-sector universities and single-sector universities differed in the way in which cross-sectoral learning communities were constructed.

While there were differences in the organisational structure of each dual-sector university, there were similarities in governance arrangements and in the approach to curriculum and course development, in the development of dual-sector and nested awards (which combine elements from both sectors in one coherent course framework), and in approaches to credit transfer, articulation, and learning pathways.

The single-sector institutions were most striking in the differences that existed not only *between* institutions, but also *within* institutions. Several of the single-sector universities saw collaboration with TAFE as a key institutional priority, and developed an institution-wide approach. This relied on the commitment of senior management and the creation of staff positions to build and maintain links. Management commitment and resources were essential in developing a culture and policy framework which supported collaboration, and in empowering those committed to this work.

In those single-sector institutions that did not necessarily rank sectoral collaboration as central to institutional priorities, enormous variation existed *within* the universities between faculties and departments, with many innovative and exciting examples of collaboration. These examples of individual practice were, in several instances,

outstanding successes, because practitioners were not necessarily constrained by the requirement to engage in political and organisational change processes required to implement coherent and institution-wide change in universities.

The following points emerged from the interviews

- Staff in dual-sector universities tended to engage in extensive curriculum matching across the sectors in constructing dual and nested awards, credit transfer, and articulation and learning pathways, and in constructing the learning environment for students who travel through dual-sector awards and pathways. At times, individual courses were constructed which comprised components from both sectors. In contrast, single-sector institutions tended to grant credit transfer and advanced standing in blocks for completed TAFE awards. Approaches to pathways in single-sector institutions varied: staff in some institutions engaged in curriculum mapping with their TAFE colleagues, while others developed general articulation pathways with little or no collaboration with TAFE. Both approaches could exist within one institution.
- Staff at both single-sector (with some variation) and dual-sector universities said that National Training Packages in VET would lead to the development of institution-specific pathways between TAFE and higher education institutions, and would undermine the generic credit transfer arrangements which have tended to exist, and which are sought by government and peak tertiary education bodies as a key policy objective. This is because training packages stipulate the industry derived and endorsed competencies to be achieved and qualifications that can be issued. There is no requirement that each training package share a common approach to curriculum, and in practice they vary widely. There is no requirement of TAFE institutes (or other VET providers) to demonstrate *how* they support students to become competent, as long as they *are* competent. This would lead, according to staff interviewed, to the development of institution-to-institution pathways, which shared a common approach to curriculum, or where there was a high level of confidence in the academic standing of the TAFE institution.
- Attitudes to competency based training (CBT) varied, with staff from dual and single sector and from TAFE and higher education having differing views on the

benefits of this model. Attitudes to CBT were not aligned to the sector from which the interviewee came. Staff in both higher education and TAFE were in favour of, or opposed to, the model. However, even those staff who supported CBT as a model of provision felt that the introduction of National Training Packages would result in institute-specific pathways between the sectors, as opposed to the continuation and further development of generic arrangements.

- Students were provided with different support to access dual-sector awards. Dual-sector institutions attempted (not very successfully) to provide administrative seamlessness from the student's perspective, while students undertaking dual-sector awards at single-sector institutions were required to independently access, and comply with the sectors' different administrative requirements to enrol and pay fees for courses.
- The different funding, reporting, and accountability requirements and industrial awards for teaching staff, were regarded by staff in dual-sector institutions as a fundamental impediment to the development of dual-sectoral provision and the development of shared culture across the sectors. In contrast, staff at single-sector institutions did not find these differences to be a major problem.
- Teaching staff at dual-sector institutions tended to have very little understanding of the differing funding and reporting requirements for each sector. This did not prevent them from attempting to develop awards which drew on both sectors. As the development of cross-sectoral awards is relatively recent, and not yet a mainstream feature of tertiary education provision, the resulting administrative consequences arising from these awards tended to be dealt with manually in a highly labour intensive manner by administrative staff and heads of schools and departments. Teaching staff who developed such awards hoped that 'everything would come out in the wash'. Staff who had a good understanding of the funding, reporting, and accountability requirements of these arrangements suggested that the current methods of dealing with such awards would not be viable should they become a mainstream feature of tertiary education provision.

- Flat demand for tertiary education in regional areas and areas with low levels of participation, was a barrier to the development of dual-sector and nested awards in dual-sector universities, and a barrier to cross-sectoral collaboration between single sector TAFE and higher education institutions, as both competed for the same students. The imperative for each partner was to fill load first, and collaborate second.
- Staff in both dual-sector and single-sector institutions had very little understanding of the other sector. This was seen to constitute a major problem for the development of collaborative relations.
- Staff from both sectors and from both single-sector and dual-sector universities cited the existence of separate cultures, mutual suspicion, and sectoral blindness as major, if not the major, obstacles to cross-sectoral collaboration.
- Conversely, staff reported that when teaching staff from each sector, but from the same discipline base, had the opportunity to work together, that the similarities arising from the shared discipline were more important than the differences arising from each sector.

BOUNDARY SPANNERS

A key finding which replicated research undertaken by Sommerlad et al. (1998) was the importance of staff who manage the relationships and information exchanges between the institutions. Sommerlad et al. (1998) coined the phrase 'boundary spanners' to describe such staff. These staff exist in dual-sector universities, and in those single-sector universities that have implemented an institution-wide approach to collaboration with the VET sector. Their role is to manage the relationship between partners in dual-sector institutions or between partners from single-sector institutions. In the case of single-sector institutions 'boundary spanners' must also manage this relationship within their *own* institution. Their role is to understand the culture and structure of the other sector and to translate this understanding to their own community. In dual-sector universities 'boundary spanners' help to build a shared culture across the sectors. Given the difference in culture, organisational structure, accreditation frameworks; and State and federal funding, reporting, and accountability requirements; 'boundary spanners' are an indispensable component for cross-sectoral collaboration.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion reached through the research was that differences in funding, reporting, and accountability of the two sectors; and the infrastructure, culture, and practices that have emerged in each as a consequence of these differences; present barriers to policy development, and to the creation of an institutional infrastructure to underpin lifelong learning. Rather than insisting on the difference in mission inherent in each sector, this must be examined. Moreover, existing institutional structures fundamentally affect the way in which staff can collaborate in constructing learning communities which are underpinned by a commitment to sectoral co-operation. Recognition that both sectors offer general and vocational education would free each to fully develop the range of offerings available and to collaborate in more effectively meeting the education needs of society. It would also free staff to develop their collaborative relationships (and hence their learning communities), more directly to support student learning, and to be less concerned with developing elaborate 'work arounds' to overcome existing obstacles.

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