

Higher Education Review Swan TAFE Response

Chapter 1 Higher education in modern Australia

1. How adequate is the statement of functions and characteristics of higher education in modern Australia?

It is our view that this statement of function and characteristics not only adequately describes the function of higher education providers in Australia but could also encompass the role of VET providers. The counter argument to this proposition is that only higher education providers engage in research. We would argue that the VET sector does engage in, and have a role in, research and innovation.

Increasingly the VET sector in partnership with industry engages in applied and action research, particularly in the area of emergent industry trends. The importance of giving recognition to this VET sector role is stressed here in order that consideration be given to providing funding towards these research endeavours

Section 3.1 Meeting labour market and industry needs

5. Are there particular examples of good practice where you can demonstrate either rapid response to skill shortages or successful initiatives to improve generic skills?

The VET sector has for some time been responding to labour market and industry demands by :

- providing flexible modes of training delivery ,
- providing skills recognition opportunities,
- the development of skills sets
- incorporating workplace learning and assessment into blended delivery approaches

These innovative practices are in direct response to the needs of individuals, communities and industry.

The current skills shortages being experienced particularly in States like WA can in some small part be attributed to years of declining take up of apprenticeships by school leavers. In addressing skills shortages State governments have invested in promotional campaigns to encourage younger and older people to take up apprenticeships.

Where previously students had aspired to achieving a ' university qualification' they now are recognizing the advantages of having a 'trade qualification'. Swan TAFE, as the largest trade training provider in Western Australia, has experienced in the last two years, an exponential increase in apprenticeship numbers

6. How effectively are Australian higher education institutions responding to demographic change, especially in providing lifelong learning to meet the challenge of the ageing population and the need for upgrading of skills and re-training?

In the current strong labour market and skills shortage environment there is a need for all tertiary education institutions to provide programs for existing workers. With the uptake of apprenticeships and the need for higher level skills in the 'Trades', the VET sector has already moved to develop "Master Class " programs that provide post trade qualifications . The challenge for higher education providers is to provide accessible pathways from these post trade qualifications to degree courses.

Traditionally, trade trained people have had difficulty meeting the entrance requirements for degree programs. Even where VET students have achieved a diploma or advanced diploma the articulation to a degree program is not guaranteed. Higher education providers, particularly universities struggle to find ways to acknowledge VET qualifications because the VET competency based system does not differentiate between students, and the only mechanisms many universities have for awarding degree places is on the bases of grades.

7. What is the relevance and applicability of the findings and approaches proposed in the United Kingdom paper, Higher Education at Work, for increasing skills levels in the workforce to Australia?

The approaches outlined in the Higher Education at Work Paper, are, as mentioned previously, the approaches currently employed by the VET sector to meet the needs of employees and employers.

In particular, the traineeship system provides a useful model for combining employment with training. Cadetship and internship opportunities need to be created for on-the-job achievement of higher level qualifications

Section 3.2 Opportunities to participate in higher education

10. What institutional initiatives have proved successful in increasing low SES or Indigenous participation and success? (Please provide information about outcomes as well as activities.)

It is interesting to note that the discussion paper refers to statistics showing students from rural and SES backgrounds believe that TAFE qualifications are more useful and relevant to them, and also that these students are more interested in gaining an income than taking up higher education.

It has to be considered that this is not just a perception for these students but that in reality, VET qualifications compared to higher education qualifications, for these students may be:

- more accessible
- more directly linked to employment opportunities
- offered in their local communities

Section 3.4 Connecting with other education and training sectors

15. To what extent should vocational education and training and higher education continue to have distinctive missions and how should these missions be defined?

In broad terms we would argue that the missions of the VET sector and higher education are very similar. However the following aspects are distinctive:

- learning environments
- industry Involvement
- teaching, learning and assessment approach
- learning pathways

While we have concerns about the convergence of the two sectors we believe the suggestion that the VET sector may be in danger of becoming a feeder to higher education, assumes the predominance of the higher education sector and fails to acknowledge that in the current climate students are keen to get a qualification and enter the labour market as quickly as possible.

What may be gained by a closer alliance between the two sectors is the opportunity for the higher education sector to benefit from the VET sector practices in the following areas:

- national quality assurance
- industry engagement in the education and training process at every level
- products, services and delivery methodology that is responsive to industry needs
- workplace learning and assessment practice and skills recognition service

16. Does the movement between the sectors of students with credit need to be improved? If so, in what ways?

Articulation pathways between the two sectors are dependent on local arrangements and as already discussed universities do not have a mechanism to allocate places to VET graduates because the competency based training system does not provide a grade and universities have no way of differentiating between students particularly where places are limited.

17. To what extent should relative provision between the sectors be planned or demand driven. What are the effects of current differences on funding, governance and regulation in limiting planning or influencing choice between the sectors?

VET delivery is planned through State training profiles and matched to demand for graduates rather than through student demand. The Federal Government's Skilling Australia framework has emphasized the need for a demand- driven approach to training, the demand though is from industry not from students.

However the VET sector also has a role in providing entry level education and training. Education and training and pathways for disadvantaged and marginalized groups, are made available through a planned State wide assessment of need.

18. Can institutions provide examples of good practices which have led to movement between the sectors with high levels of credit and good learning outcomes?

Swan TAFE is the first TAFE college in WA to become higher education provider and is now accredited to deliver a number of associate degrees. In developing these associate degrees Swan TAFE has worked in partnership with a University so that students completing the associate degree has articulation into the third year of a degree program. One other university has also agreed to this articulation arrangement.

Swan TAFE in conjunction with these two universities now provides a seamless pathway for students coming from a TAFE diploma into the associate degree and then into a degree program. Alternatively year 12 students mat come straight into the associate degree and then on into the final year of the degree program. We believe these pathways open possibilities for students who for a number of reasons would not be able to go directly into a degree program. This level of collaboration between the sectors goes some way to providing 'a seamless post secondary education system'.

Section 3.5 Higher education's role in the national innovation system

19. By what mechanisms should research activities in Australian universities be supported?

20. On what principles and for what purposes should research activity be concentrated in particular universities or types of universities?

21. Do you believe there is a place in Australia's higher education system for universities that are predominantly 'teaching only' universities? If so, why?

We believe that the VET sector has a role in research and innovation and indeed many VET providers are engaged in research and innovation projects with industry partners. This role needs to be recognized and consideration needs to be given to including VET in the allocation of funding for research and innovation activities.