



RESEARCH OVERVIEW ON STATUS

Higher education in TAFE

MONOGRAPH SERIES 01/2009

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A project funded through the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation program investigated higher education programs—mostly bachelor's and associate degrees—offered by TAFE institutes. This overview highlights some of the issues associated with the perceived status of TAFE higher education programs identified through this project.

The status of higher education programs in TAFE was raised in almost every interview in the project. Status was identified as a key limitation for developing higher education in TAFE by interviewees in offices of higher education, by senior managers at the dual-sector universities included in this project, by TAFE senior management at all TAFE institutes in the project, and by teachers and students (*Main report*, p.34).

Findings

It is useful to distinguish between standing, recognition and prestige.

The notion of the status of a TAFE-awarded degree was raised by many interviewees, including some students. However, these interviewees had different understandings of the concept of status. For some, it was a problem with TAFE's profile, while others referred to the community's understanding of TAFE and the common perception that TAFE offered study only in the trades. Many interviewees claimed that TAFE had a lower status than universities (*Main report*, p.28). Because the word 'status' means different things to different people, it is helpful to distinguish between standing, recognition and prestige.

Standing may be improved by the new regulatory arrangements.

By 'standing' we mean the acceptance of TAFE degrees as having the same standing or qualifying graduates for the same positions as graduates from higher education institutions in the same field. There should be no problem with the standing of TAFE degrees since they are accredited by state offices of higher education. However, the way that degrees in TAFE are accredited is not well known and the process is different from the process undertaken by universities. This issue of parity may soon be resolved with the establishment during 2010 of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, whereby the higher education programs of TAFE and other vocational education providers will adopt similar accreditation and quality assurance processes to universities and other higher education providers.

Recognition may improve over time and through the actions of TAFE institutes.

By 'recognition' we mean TAFE being well recognised as a provider of higher education. This recognition should grow over time as TAFE's higher education programs become more established and their current modest enrolments are consolidated. Furthermore, several interviewees believed that TAFE would earn higher status for, or recognition of, its qualifications in the future, as employers become aware of the value of graduates and graduates demonstrate their capacities in further study in universities (*Main report*, p.34).

TAFE institutes may also improve the recognition of their higher education programs by presenting them differently from their

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competency-based education programs. Institutes might consider the approach that non-dual-sector universities take to vocational education programs they offer. This includes 'virtual' divisions, which have a separate presence on the university's web page, separate internal organisational units, and university colleges established as wholly owned subsidiaries of their parent university.

Status in higher education institutions largely depends on the age of the institution; to a lesser extent it is achieved for research.

Prestige or social status may be gained either as a result of an institution's own achievements, known as achieved status; or it may be inherited, which is called ascribed status. Status in higher education is largely determined by the age of the institution. The ranking of universities on league tables by prestige is strongly correlated with their age. As Labaree observes: 'Rule one: age trumps youth' (*Literature review*, p. 11). To the extent that prestige is achieved in higher education institutions, it is mainly achieved for research. Yet, this achievement is strongly associated with age, because research reputation accumulates over time and is supported by resources, which are also accumulated over time; for example, Australia's elite Group of Eight universities, with the biggest research budgets, have an average age of 103 years.

TAFE institutions can improve their prestige by showing that they are a route to prestigious outcomes.

TAFE institutions, like younger universities, can do little to counter the prestige advantage of old universities. However, they can increase their prestige indirectly by demonstrating that they are also a route to prestigious educational and occupational outcomes (*Main report*, p. 39). Consider, for example, prestigious public and private secondary schools that secure their reputation partly by being a route to high-status programs in prestigious universities. And, within universities themselves,

medicine and law programs have greater status than other programs because they lead to high-paying and prestigious occupations.

Adopting this strategy may be difficult for TAFE institutes because the proportion of students admitted by universities on the basis of TAFE qualifications is directly related to the age of the institution. In 2007, the Group of Eight universities admitted only 3% of their undergraduate students on the basis of TAFE qualifications, a far lower level than that of universities founded in the 1960s and 1970s with 11%; the Australian Technological Network universities, also with 11%; and the post-1988 universities, with 16%. Nonetheless, some TAFE institutes have established good articulation arrangements with some Group of Eight universities, and institutes could emphasise to their university partners the opportunities for increasing their enrolment of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds by admitting more TAFE transfers. It is also possible that the Group of Eight universities may be more prepared to admit associate degree and degree graduates from TAFE rather than VET-qualified TAFE graduates.

About the project

The project examined the growth and the implications of higher education offered by TAFE institutes. It sought to understand the purposes of such programs, how they have been developed and implemented, the impact they are having on institutional partnerships, how they are perceived by participants, and whether they create opportunities for students.

The project involved a survey of bachelor degrees offered by TAFE's equivalents in Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. It also reviewed the literature on higher education in TAFE's equivalents in those countries. In addition, the project team conducted 98 interviews in six states and territories.

Further information

More information is available from the various publications associated with the project:

- the **research overviews**, which discuss the implications of the research for TAFE teachers, TAFE managers, staff development and public policy, as well as the issues raised about the status of TAFE degrees, NCVER, Adelaide, 2009, <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2189.html>>
- the **discussion paper**, *Higher education in TAFE: An issues paper* by Gavin Moodie, Leesa Wheelahan, Stephen Billett and Ann Kelly, NCVER, Adelaide, 2009, <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2139.html>>
- the **main report**, *Higher education in TAFE* by Leesa Wheelahan, Gavin Moodie, Stephen Billett and Ann Kelly, NCVER, Adelaide, 2009, <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2167.html>>
- the **literature review**, by Leesa Wheelahan, *Higher education in TAFE: Support document*, NCVER, Adelaide, <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2167.html>>

Additional information is available from:

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This overview is based on the research report, *Higher education in TAFE* by Leesa Wheelahan, Gavin Moodie, Stephen Billett and Ann Kelly. Visit <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2167.html> for more information.