Are TAFE to University partnerships essential to TAFE’s future in International Education?

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Introduction.

This paper is about the nature of partnerships. It is about building relationships and positioning. And it is about perception.

It is a complicated argument based on combined experience of three practitioners who have seen the way that universities and TAFE cooperate, either fully in offshore or onshore recruitment, either not at all and all of the levels of cooperation in between.

This paper will not be advocating a particular best practice model but it will examine the nature of the relationship and the market it operates in.

TAFE is diverse and advocating a one size fits all approach is not appropriate however this diversity provides the opportunity for this paper to make comments on the effectiveness of various systems at least on raw intake figures. This paper will try to identify best practice and to look at how TAFE is relating to its university colleagues as a means to extend Australia’s international student activity.

We will also comment on the perception of each other and how this can work both for and against good seamless programs and its consequent marketing.

Background

It is difficult to generalise about TAFE as a system, in the same way as it is difficult to generalise about the university sector. From the university viewpoint and indeed from the community viewpoint, TAFE is the same wherever you go. A TAFE in Victoria is the same as one in the Western Australia offering VET courses to local students and generally having little to do with International students. TAFE’s mission really is focussed or so it is believed on our local constituents. How often have we heard the line, “well they offer it at the local tech college?”

But when it comes to International education, the diversity of approaches in International programs, from the administrative processes to the marketing programs varies from institute to institute, from the very active in the market to those who do not wish to participate. For some TAFE colleges, International
education is too difficult and really not worth the effort. To others, it is one of the primary planks of their activities.

It is clear that the administrative systems of TAFE often determine this participation rate. NSW has a semi-centralised system which allows its institutes some autonomy but which is marketed, for all intents and purposes, centrally. TAFE WA markets generically also and feeds its students to the institutes. In Victoria, the system is decentralised and more autonomy is available to institutes to market. It is further complicated by the fusion of the University and the TAFE system in a number of places such as at VUT, RMIT and Swinburne.

Attitudes

Up until now we think it is fair to say that hierarchically, Technical and Further Education - TAFE has been considered by Universities to be of a lower rather than ‘different’ level of education. The Universities have tended to support the conventional line of demarcation, which had universities delivering Bachelor Degrees, Master Degrees, Doctorate and Post Graduates Certificates and Diplomas whilst TAFE’s prepared people with Technical Education for trades and non-managerial level applications for workplace. TAFE courses were typically viewed as heavy in application and light in theory while degrees were heavy in theory and light in practical application.

TAFE was also considered a ‘second chance’ education for individuals who, for one reason or another had missed out on successfully completing high school studies and gaining an offer for entry into university level studies.

University attitudes.

Many universities looked at their markets and segmented them into those with applicants who could be recruited directly into the Bachelor and Masters programs, those who might need some bridging courses in order to get into university and those who might study offshore. With respect to the bridging course, certain universities established their own diploma, certificate and foundation courses by developing feeder colleges to university. In doing so, TAFE would argue that in many ways the universities pushed into their territory. After all TAFE has always fed university courses with their graduates.

Universities broke the line of conventionality and entered into what they viewed historically as below their demarcation level of delivery-namely pre-degree Diploma and Certificate courses as opposed to degree and post degree courses. The proliferation of university colleges have in many ways taken the ground of university preparation away from TAFE’s and in essence acted as a barrier to better articulation arrangements with TAFE.

The other area of cooperation, the offshore courses proved more difficult to establish and the setting up of twinning programs often necessitated universities working with the VET sector directly. These precedents made it
easier to work with TAFE offshore and at home, particularly when TAFE itself established offshore campuses and needed a university partner.

Auspiced programs where the Australian university and TAFE curriculum is principally delivered by offshore institutions but quality assured by the Australian university/ TAFE have proved less costly to operate.

In some ‘twinning programs’ operating in overseas countries, the university was the lead manager and complete one contract with the offshore partners and a separate contract with a TAFE institute for the supply and quality assurance program of the TAFE component. The level of intake into the TAFE program was very much dependent upon the level of marketing of the eventual university degree and the benefits gained with such a qualification.

Exogenous events in the overseas countries, whilst not impacting necessarily on domestic programs in Australia and enrolments, did have local endogenous effects. For example, a recession in the overseas country might result in parents not having the income levels to financially support their children in the twinning programs. One of the benefits of the twinning program is the dual qualification concept. If necessary for example, for students to exit the program prior to degree completion, depending upon the modules completed, the TAFE qualification could still be awarded thus earning the student a valuable, employable qualification and practical skills.

The student has the ability to return to the program for completion if circumstances change. Students actually completing the TAFE-University program have multiple qualifications to show prospective employees demonstrating the sound practical and theoretical aspects of the combined testamur.

Students enrolled in offshore programs, also have the ability, subject to visa, to complete studies in Australia paying the full international fee.

TAFE’s attitudes.

A feature of TAFE’s role in the 1990’s has been to look at competing in the VET market with private providers. The providers themselves have looked to universities to boost their numbers. Many private VET colleges promote the links and universities are willing to allow this to occur.

If you look at figures issued by IDP 1999-2000, the VET sector continues to recruit student mainly into Diplomas and Certificates, sometimes couched in seamless articulation terms.

In the year 1999-2000, International Students coming to Australia rose by 15%, for Higher Education it rose by 19.4% and for VET it rose by only 3.9%.

In NSW, the number of International Students rose 14.1%, higher education by 24% and VET by only 2.5%.
We would argue that such figures are not surprising. When Australia first approached the Asian market in the late 1980s and early 1990's, the university led the charge with its degree programs. The ability to obtain a Bachelor degree was the cornerstone of International marketing. In many areas, particularly in Asia this remains the currency of trade. Bachelor degrees vary in length and style across the world from two-year associate degree programs in US Community Colleges to undergraduate degrees of 5 years in length in countries like Colombia. In each case the ability to attach initials after someone’s name is most important for the career prospects of our International students. The Bachelor degree, in all its forms is the key to recruitment.

With this in mind and with the growth of the university college it appears that tentative steps toward a TAFE degree in South Australia and the ACT has now been followed by the Victorian government in giving TAFE’s the opportunity to compete with the university sector in this product line. It is quite possible that TAFE Victoria decided to develop and offer Degrees in niche areas as a means of winning back some competitive ground since facing the proliferation of “in-house” Certificate and Diplomas delivered and issued by universities.

Leesa Wheelahan in her article at the announcement of the launch of Victorian TAFE degrees states that the aim of the Victorian government is to “increase the range and diversity of courses available to students to meet their diverse needs”.

Victorian TAFE Associate Director Richard King stated for Campus Review (Vol 12, No 24) with respect to TAFE degrees “Everyone is a winner here. The partnerships that will flourish between TAFE institutes and universities as the nature of their degrees develop, will mean that the students will be better equipped to enter the workforce”.

Its impact on the International market will be somewhat different. Time will tell and the market will judge whether the ability to offer TAFE degrees will impact on the university market. We are sure that in some markets that are knowledgeable about Australian education that an Ivy League of universities already exists. Some universities are preferred to others. In some markets the initials themselves is the most important thing so whether they come from an Institute or a university might not matter all that much. Will the TAFE degree be seen as an inferior degree? How will the market take to such degrees? Which markets should be the ones that TAFE approach? Good questions and if you have an answer we would be most interested.

There is ample evidence from Institutes such as Holmesglen that in offering degrees, albeit university degrees, that such a philosophy works but it works because the process is seamless. The outcome for students is extremely rewarding. A true win-win situation for institute and university.

The university attitude to the “Applied degree” is somewhat ambivalent. Already in the province of Ontario in Canada we see a similar situation with
the allowing of Applied Degrees amongst its TAFE equivalent colleges. Again
the challenge is quality. The process of setting up these degrees was long
and painful with fierce resistance from the universities, many professional
bodies and from laypersons who were concerned at the dumbing down of
education. Significantly for Australia TAFE is only allowed to offer degrees in
new areas, usually vocational-in the areas of IT, technology, Communication
and business. In Canada the new programs were vigorously assessed by
committees largely made up of university academics. One area of
considerable debate was the academic qualifications of College staff with only
a minority having a postgraduate degree and only a very small minority having
research masters or PhD degrees.

It would be foolish to say that all universities think the same way about TAFE
and the role of TAFE in delivering degrees, but it is true that many, if not most,
feel uncomfortable about TAFE offering full degrees. How much thought has
gone into this feeling is difficult to know but it is a view certainly not confined
to Australia and mention of it here does not imply that is wrong.

So this is the situation we are in. We believe that nothing mentioned above
actually stops good collaboration between the sectors. There are still great
opportunities for collaboration.

So why continue to partner?

For Universities relying upon HSC cohorts for the bulk of their intake each
year and with the Federal Government changed the funding formula to
universities, additional sources of revenue will still be required to support
growth. They still are.

Robert Manne in an article from the Sydney Morning Herald of September
2nd this year said

"At present on the university front, all is far from well. Last year, one quarter
of Australian institutions recorded financial deficits. Over the past decade
staff-student ratios have worsened rapidly-from 13-1 in 1990 to 19-1 last year.
Student drop out rates are increasing. Among academics, morale is
dangerously low. Although new money can be found for certain purposes –
like defence or refugee repulsion- for universities, we are told no public
money can be found."

As recently as a few weeks ago the University of NSW decided to allow
domestic students scoring below the university admission INDEX to gain entry
if willing to pay up front fees. Deputy Federal Opposition Leader Jenny
Macklin stated in a recent Daily Telegraph article that students paying upfront
fees were being admitted to UNSW’s Bachelor of Arts with a UAI of 73
compared with a score of 91.9 requirement for HECS students.

If cohorts completing the Higher School Certificate fall eventually in size,
and/or if funding remains problematic for universities then in order to grow
enrolment numbers, universities will need to continue to expand the
international student intakes both with Australian and overseas programs as well as no doubt, seek new domestic groups of individuals as additional intakes.

From the TAFE viewpoint its motivation is to become a real force in International education. Articulation is a successful and proven formula for this to occur. Private and Public VET providers still eagerly seek partnerships and the SIBTs and MIBT’s of this world a predicated on the pathway.

In off shore programs, the tyranny of distance and culture will challenge administration and diminish educational outcomes in some instances. If the relationship, with the offshore institutions is not supported with strong management, communication and Australian delivery methodologies, there will be ongoing operational challenges and educational outcomes less than optimistic. Universities, in many instances, need to work with VET partners.

Why are seamless pathways an excellent model?

TAFE’s ability to deliver or to assist in delivering the degree is crucial in its attempts to recruit international students to its courses. In turn the university sees its role to lock those students into their pathway. This has been a win – win situation for many reasons, not least because it is often difficult to get overseas funding to study at TAFE. However this is surely changing as TAFE develops a stronger role at the professional end of the education sector. Articulation agreements have allowed seamless (or almost seamless) pathways for students and there is growing acceptance of these pathways internationally. Self-funded Asian students have little problem with this model and the government funding agencies in Europe are looking at the feasibility of these. Sweden already recognises these pathways and Norway has looked at them but is yet to report.

However what is clear is that while the sectors are different with different clientele, aims and aspirations it is also clear that there is scope for the sectors to work together in the international arena. Articulations through TAFE provide a new market for universities in many countries, as students and funding agencies demand education that is a mix of the practical and theoretical. There is always resistance to articulation in universities but with the AQF this resistance is much less and there is growing recognition of these agreements inn the academic world.

The necessity is to take it further and make sure that in the international arena these articulations are seen as seamless paths and are advertised as such.

This is an issue for seamless pathways in Australia and if the concept is to be more universal than now then it is beholden to TAFE to ensure that their staff are qualified to teach university programs. This remains an inhibiting pathway in selling these pathways overseas where paper qualifications are often more important than they are here in Australia.
Therefore logic implies the TAFE – University packaged program is the most desirable. TAFE can argue the case for Certificate / Diploma application based foundation programs leading to degree level studies as the package that produces the best final product (most employable graduand)

TAFE can argue quality. As government owned institutions, TAFE brings exceptional strengths to a partnership program whether offered domestically or offshore. These include historical longevity through Government guarantees, high standards of program quality given the RTO status and AQTF Standards that must be adhered to the ongoing relevance of courses due to industry driven competency requirements and impressive abilities to create new courses when significant demand has been identified. These can be developed in concert with universities to produce ‘complete packages’ for the complete employees.

TAFE can argue that it’s very rigorous system of course design and course appraisal is a guarantee of quality unlike any other system in Australia. It would be right. Its centralised curriculum control and quality management outcomes mean that students are given a thorough education. But it means little if the product it delivers is not wanted.

Further it has an inbuilt flexibility in its programming to adapt to the needs of pathway requirements. Academics at university level have trouble with this concept.

What are the barriers?

We believe that TAFE bureaucracies play their role in hampering partnerships. The most autonomous of the Institutes tend to be the most successful. By far, the most Public VET sector students are in the State of Victoria by a measure of 3 to 1 compared to the nearest state NSW. Centralised systems are bureaucratic and although speed of response has been dramatically improved at least in NSW. Both universities and TAFEs have had difficulties in changing work culture of lectures / teachers, to embrace the mutual recognition and equality of each other. Until universities view TAFEs with greater academic equivalence, and TAFEs view universities as a compliment to its own courses and not simply a higher level, joint program development will not proceed as smoothly and quickly and competitively as is required to increase opportunities in the highly fluid international market.

What is the perception?
WE believe that link to a university is a crucial marketing tool, a very good product which should be marketed well. In material to overseas students, successful TAFE’s promote the link with a university partner as one of the main selling points for the promotion of its Certificate and Diploma programs. But a cursory look at websites of TAFE International programs is interesting. The generic marketers do not emphasis the link to any great extent.

The question we would like to put to you, that you might like think about, is what signal does TAFE give to the market when it represents itself as an articulation partner. Does it relegate TAFE’s diplomas to feeder programs into the real game, the university courses? In diagrammatic representations of TAFE pathway programs, TAFE physically positions itself either below or at the beginning of all programs. The signal this sends to the market can be interpreted as being of a level below the universities and really for also rans. If you can’t make the real game, a Bachelor degree, then it is TAFE you might look for. But if I can get straight into to university then that is the way to go. TAFE is not represented as an equal partner and therefore suffers from an inferiority syndrome.

Without a doubt, successful TAFE recruitment programs are predicated on a link to universities and testimonials of success for TAFE graduates are usually about the next good university they attended after TAFE.

Fundamentally the issue of the cooperation of the university and TAFE sectors lies in the complementary nature of its products. What all of this comes down to is the clarity of roles between TAFE and the universities. Where does the TAFE /university divide sit? One thing is for sure, that the divide between TAFE and the university will be increasingly blurred. In Victoria, the government has stated that the degrees they will be allowing will “be vocational in focus and show clear linkages to the Training packages competencies in the various industry sector. What an interesting concept, a degree designed around industry needs. Not so interesting in Humanities but in IT…. is this a marketing edge for TAFE?

Leesa Wheelahan in her paper has said that the edges are so blurred that a whole end funding system needs to be put together. The local implications for funding are many but for the international market, at least in many TAFE systems, a whole new product appears on the horizon, the TAFE degree.

For TAFE to succeed in becoming a world player, it needs to go beyond the recruitment of students alone. Which leads us to the original question, Are these partnerships essential. We would argue that such partnerships certainly give TAFE institutes an edge in the market but here’s our point, International education is more than about recruiting students. We believe that the following section may give some ideas as to how TAFE can become a world player in International Education.

Internationalisation
Many of you will know the history of International education in the university sector has been a path of learning. At first, and there is possibly still the same criticism, the universities looked at International students as cash cows, the great saviour of reducing government commitment. The evolution of International education has been to look at the how there can be win-win situations.

Universities have come across the concept of Internationalisation somewhat recently and TAFE needs to embrace it early in order to maximise its place. To do so, it is important that the VET sector internationally starts to look at itself in the way that forms its alliances across the world. For it to do so it must shed the kind of inferiority complexes it seems to gather from the university sector and be certain that its graduates need to be ready to take their place in a more globalised society.

In Internationalisation there is the opportunity to form alliances with other countries. In TAFE we have the perfect opportunity to align ourselves with other government providers of education. The TAFE sector can find its place by looking to replicate the internationalisation concepts with other providers of VET products. It needs to lead in order to elevate VET as a truly global player.

And it must provide the administrative ability to make this happen. Certainly with the bureaucratic arrangements in TAFE NSW, it is not easy to even allow exchange students to come to Australia to study. Such arrangements are commonplace at universities and even in government schools but there is not even a suitable CRICOS code to allow this to happen in NSW. The swapping of students is fundamental to the internationalisation process.

Further very few TAFE’s have little concept of themselves on the International stage. How many head teachers actively see themselves operating in this environment. Yet there are wonderful opportunities for this to occur. But this is a worldwide phenomenon. A few years ago I attended the American Community College Conference in Washington DC. There was a global section dedicated to the conference but speaker after speaker saw global education in terms of the study of languages and subjects they taught at their own colleges. Apart from Summer schools abroad, there was little in the way of reaching out to other countries. So when someone mentioned they were studying the sectarian violence in Ireland I asked if anyone had actually spoken by email or by other means to colleges in Ireland to see if the class would benefit from a local perspective. Of course they hadn’t.

The Internet allows cheap internationalisation. It allows college classes to speak to one another. And the attitudes and opinions of the world can come home. This is essential in the way Internationalisation at the community level; might flourish.

Reverse Articulation

An area in which TAFE has not moved in a major way has been the idea of becoming the feeders to other universities offshore. As Australians we have
confidence in our system of education sometimes to the detriment of other international universities. We naturally trust our system to be top notch. But the notion and the academic opinion that it is unrivalled by other systems means that we miss opportunities to work with other education systems.

The push has been in many ways to articulate others courses into ours. We believe that there are many opportunities for foreign universities to articulate our courses into theirs. By partnering universities, which have a very high demand for courses, and by ensuring a pathway back home, a student is able to have an overseas experience directly credited to the work they would do at university level. The mechanism to make this work is mutual respect for courses and education systems across the world and the detailed matching of subjects to ensure a comfortable and steady pathway.

Second chances

Universities, which accept students into their courses, do so in great quantities. In the Sydney region alone it is estimated that over 20,000 students study degree programs. Of those 20,000 it would be interesting to see how many fail to complete their first year.

Failure rates of only 10 per cent in the Sydney area alone would mean that over 2000 students would need to find another course. It is important for the image of Australian education that we do not abandon such students. I know at UWS, the idea that students might be able to fall into other training was never made clear to students. The creation of exit points needs to be made much clearer by university International programs. TAFE has for many years been proven to work with students who need assistance to get through courses. Seamless transitions both ways would elevate the status of Australian education as a caring and environment.

Postgraduate

Post graduate qualifications present a different problem but great opportunity. Traditionally all postgraduate activity was housed in the university with little thought being given of the need to study for vocational education at this level. World wide this is changing. In Canada as well as Australia there are more graduates going to TAFE programs than there are TAFE students articulating from TAFE diplomas into undergraduate degrees. This movement is largely unreported, especially in universities, perhaps because it is not an articulation process but the moving on to another award. Industry requires students to have vocational as well as theoretical knowledge and the trend toward postgraduate programs at TAFE is not surprising.

Internationally this demand exists too. Students study first and foremost to get a job and anything that helps to do this should be perceived as an asset. As well as working with universities on undergraduate opportunities TAFE should be promoting their postgraduate sector through the universities and internationally with the universities. How successful this would be is of course unknown. There are problems with funding agencies, recognition, etc, etc but
that is not say that it should not be tried and again it is these areas where TAFE has perhaps been somewhat lax in promoting these programs. In North America they are not unusual, they are well advertised and they often have the all-important professional accreditation that universities cannot get because of the weak vocational element in the degree.

This is particularly so with the newer disciplines where many universities have emphasised theory to get academic recognition rather than practice which gets professional recognition. TAFE has been proactive in getting universities to advertise these as acceptable pathways and in getting professional accreditation for these postgraduate diplomas. (The nomenclature may be difficult—in Canada they are called, rather clumsily, post diploma diplomas to get round the universities monopoly of the term postgraduate.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the building of relationships between TAFE and the university sector carries with it about 12 years of baggage. There are some very good examples of progressive and interesting arrangements. However, the landscape changes regularly and new products such as TAFE degrees go towards changing the mix. We argue however, that the seamless pathway remains a wonderful tool for TAFE and the university sector to create win-win situations, we need to be careful as to how it is represented and we need to eliminate the notion of academic snobbery. We do different jobs not inferior ones. The sectors must work towards quality.

Other opportunities exist for TAFE which allow them to stand as global players in their own right and in closing it is important to remember one of the aims of the 2nd World Congress of Colleges and Polytechnics held in Melbourne in March this year and that was to look at the VET sector as a global player and to from alliances within our own sector- after all training students for a global world is what all tertiary institutions need to think about.

In answer to our original question, the answer is that it is not necessarily essential but it certainly helps a lot.

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