

Pathways in tertiary education and funding for work-ready degrees: *Why TAFE pathways are critical for students and industry*

Objective: Increased participation by students in higher education in TAFE

Student choice to enrol in undergraduate degrees and higher education courses should be recognised and supported by Commonwealth supported funding. To date, Commonwealth funding is allocated almost exclusively to university students for undergraduate course enrolments and completions. The provision of higher education qualifications by 23 TAFE Institutes across Australia is in direct response to increasing industry demands for work-ready graduates with specialist higher education qualifications.

TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) advocates for access for non-university providers including TAFE Institutes to Commonwealth Supported Places for students, with preference for areas of skills shortages. TDA also advocates that the capability of TAFEs to deliver higher education is recognised through a specific category in the Higher Education Provider Standards. This will allow wider branding capacity for those TAFE Institutes operating in this area.

Australian school leavers and mature aged students are increasingly pursuing pathways into higher education from vocational education and training (VET) courses; a trend that supports the achievement of Council of Australian Government (COAG) targets aimed at up-skilling the Australian workforce for greater productivity and Australia's future economic success.

Research undertaken by Moodie and Fredman (2013) for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) highlights an increase of up to 20% in enrolments in Diplomas across industry areas such as food and hospitality, health, agriculture and environmental studies. These enrolment figures

illustrate acceleration in the number of students seeking pathways into higher education for greater employment and career opportunities. This trend follows recommendations made by the Bradley Review of Higher Education¹ (2008) for new ways to lift Australia's productivity and competitiveness and to strengthen linkages with industries operating in the Asia-Pacific region. Under Chair, Professor Denise Bradley AO, recommendations were made to create more seamless transitions for students from technical and further education to higher education. The reforms were endorsed by COAG as ways to meet Australia's future need for higher skills and qualifications.

1. Bradley, D, Noonan, P, Nugent, H, Scales, W, 2008 *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report*, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra

Upskilling from TAFE into Tertiary Education

In Australia

Currently, 23 TAFE Institutes are registered as Higher Education Providers (HEPs) in Australia delivering over 100 accredited higher education qualifications across a range of industry sectors. By supporting those students who may not otherwise have attended university, these institutes are enhancing the diversity of the tertiary sector through the provision of new and innovative pathways into higher education. The delivery of higher education by TAFE directly contributes to the achievement of Commonwealth targets for social inclusion in higher education; targets currently not being met by the higher education sector alone.

However, most students studying higher education in TAFE are required to pay full fees. This contrasts to universities, where the Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP) funding scheme substantially subsidises students to study 'HECS' courses in undergraduate qualifications. To counter funding inconsistencies, the Australian Workforce Productivity Agency (AWPA) has recommended that the Australian government fund higher education courses offered by VET providers (TAFE and vocational education colleges) registered as HEPs.

Pathways funding

Of the 23 TAFE Institutes offering higher education qualifications, the majority are offering 'work-ready' qualifications such as Diplomas, Advanced Diplomas and Associate Degrees that provide significant pathways into higher qualifications and are currently not funded. Yet these pathway qualifications meet increasing industry demands for work-ready graduates with specialist higher education qualifications.

Internationally

The emergence of TAFE institutes as 'integrated tertiary providers' is in line with developments in other Anglophone countries such as North America (through Community Colleges), United Kingdom (through Further Education Colleges) and, in the region, New Zealand (through Polytechnics), Indonesia, Singapore and Hong Kong. The strength of these integrated tertiary providers, also known as 'polytechnics' lies in the applied nature of the learning, the supportive learning environments, the direct links with work and industry and innovative pathways into higher skills and qualifications for a diverse range of students. Qualitative research currently being undertaken by TDA of students who have completed a higher education qualifications in TAFE in clearly demonstrates these strengths.

Our Case

TDA makes the case that TAFE Institutes registered as HEPs should be funded on the same basis as universities for higher education delivery. TDA submits that neither the funding framework nor the regulatory framework have kept pace with the evolution of TAFE institutes as integrated tertiary providers. Commonwealth funding is required to support the increasingly important role TAFE plays in broadening student choice and access, strengthening the capacity and reach of the system, particularly in regional areas, and addressing critical shortages of higher skills in the Australian economy.

Recommendations

TDA recommends that the Federal, State and Territory Governments:

1

Provide access for non-university providers including TAFE Institutes to Commonwealth Supported Places for students, with preference for areas of skills shortages;

2

Expand the demand-led funding system with funding to support pathway qualification for students from vocational education and training into higher education; and

3

Recognise the capability of TAFE to deliver higher education through a specific category in the Higher Education Provider Standards.