Types of tertiary education institutions: description or prescription?

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I have been asked to set the scene for the panel discussion after morning tea on what is the tertiary education sector, what should it look like and what needs to change. I will do so by presenting ways of defining educational sectors which may be useful to the panel in answering the first question: what is the tertiary education sector. I will then say something about types of tertiary education institution.

Ways of defining tertiary education

By source of funding

The education sectors were first defined in Australia by governments, mainly the Australian government, to delineate funding responsibility. Thus, the Australian Government first identified universities as a sector when it started contributing to their standard running costs in 1951. Universities were easily identified and the Australian Government did not initially distinguish between levels of programs offered by universities, which included sub-graduate diplomas and certificates which were 22% of universities’ enrolments but almost no research higher degrees as late as 1959.

The Australian Government offered to contribute to the running costs of newly established colleges of advanced education in 1964, but these had to be separated organisationally from the technical colleges from which some of them had been formed. The Martin Committee and the Universities Commission enjoined universities to stop offering diplomas which were to be the distinctive program of colleges of advanced education. The Australian Government offered capital grants and special purpose recurrent grants to newly established colleges of technical and further education in 1975, but these had to be separated organisationally from secondary education which many if not all technical colleges offered. One possibility would be to continue defining sectors by governments’ financing responsibility, but I presume not many would do that.

By institution

Some people define tertiary education by institution. Thus, some define vocational education as the education offered by institutions that are commonly accepted as vocational education and training institutions, and higher education as the education offered by institutions that are commonly accepted as higher education institutions.

By program

Some people define tertiary education by program. The most widely used but by no means best classification of programs is the 1997 edition of UNESCO’s international standard classification of education. This distinguishes between level 4 - post-secondary non-tertiary education which in Australia includes certificates I, II, III, IV, from level 5B - first stage of tertiary education (practical/vocational) which includes Australian diplomas and advanced diplomas. Tafe Directors Australia and Universities Australia define tertiary education as ISCED levels 5B and above, that is, ISCED’s first and second stages of tertiary education comprising diplomas and above. But I suggest
the predominant understanding in Australia is that vocational education also includes certificates I to IV, that is, ISCED level 4 - post-secondary non-tertiary education (Table 1).

Table 1: international standard classification of education (ISCED) level and Australian sectors and qualifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ISCED-97</th>
<th>Australian sector</th>
<th>Australian qualification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 6 - second stage of tertiary education</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5A - first stage of tertiary education (theoretical/professional)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Associate degree, bachelor, masters degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5B - first stage of tertiary education (practical/vocational)</td>
<td>Vocational education</td>
<td>Diploma, advanced diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4 - post-secondary non-tertiary education</td>
<td></td>
<td>Certificates I, II, III, IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3 - (upper) secondary education</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Senior secondary certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 - lower secondary or second stage of basic education</td>
<td></td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 – primary education or first stage of basic education</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 0 - pre-primary education</td>
<td>Pre-school</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other ways of defining tertiary education

Tertiary education may also be defined epistemologically (by ways of knowing, by ways of learning or by discipline), teleologically (for example, training for an extrinsic purpose compared with cultivation for intrinsic worth, training for work in contrast to education for life and training for work directed by others and education for self-directed work), hierarchically (by occupational level, educational level or cognitive level), or pragmatically (what happens to be the current arrangement) (Moodie, 2002).

Types of tertiary education institution

A typology of cross sectoral institutions

There are 96 institutions in Australia which are accredited to offer both vocational and higher education. Of these 23 are self accrediting institutions, including the 5 dual sector universities. Most of the 18 non dual sector universities offer such a small proportion of vocational education that they are essentially single sector institutions. For example, Monash University’s Centre for Ambulance and Paramedic Studies offers 3 certificates in emergency medical response and a diploma of paramedical science, and the University of Adelaide offers 2 certificates and a diploma of music. As important as the qualifications are in their own field, they are a tiny part of their universities.

Similar observations may be made of vocational education institutions which offer a few higher education programs to small numbers of students. In these institutions the smaller sector depends on the bigger sector for almost all of its processes, systems and infrastructure and probably also for some of its resources. Since almost all its students, staff and resources are in its bigger sector the institution’s governance, management, policies and processes are almost fully concerned with its bigger sector and the institution remains essentially single sector.

An institution may increases its smaller sector to become more self sustaining, perhaps supporting specialist senior staff, infrastructure, scholarly activities and committees. The point at which a smaller sector becomes self sustaining differs for different activities in institutions of different sizes.
and in different contexts, but the higher education in TAFE issues paper (Moodie, Wheelahan, Billett and Kelly, 2009: 9) proposed that the smaller sector becomes self sustaining when it comprises more than 3% of the institution’s student load. An institution’s smaller sector may be self sustaining, yet still be a relatively modest proportion of the institution’s total activities. In these circumstances there are processes in the smaller sector for enrolling students, appointing and managing staff, constructing budgets and allocating resources, but these processes are exceptions to the norm established by the bigger sector. These institutions have mixed processes and systems and so may be called mixed sector institutions.

At some stage the smaller sector reaches a size where it is no longer an exception to the bigger sector but sustains its own distinctive systems, processes, resources and infrastructure. There is no obvious point where a sector becomes sufficiently substantial to be part of the institution’s normal processes across most of its activities. Trow (1974: 63) argued that the transition from elite to mass higher education occurs when the participation of the relevant age group reaches 15%. I related this to the concept of ‘tipping point’ (Grodzins 1958) and referred to a number of empirical studies of different tipping points to posit that an institution is dual sector when its student load in each sector ranges from a minimum of 20% and a maximum of 80% (Moodie, 2009). Where an institution’s smaller sector passes such a tipping point it usual requires dual systems and processes, and such institutions may be called dual sector institutions.

I therefore propose this terminology –

**single-sector institutions**: those with more than 97% of their student load enrolled in one sector;

**mixed-sector institutions**: those with at least 3% but no more than 20% of their student load enrolled in their minority sector;

**dual-sector institutions**: those with at least 20% but less than 80% of their student load enrolled in each sector.

Because State and Territory governments suppress vocational education enrolment, student load and graduates’ data for individual institutions it is often not possible to distinguish mixed sector institutions from single sector institutions with some but very small student load in their minority sector, so I use cross sectoral institutions to refer to institutions which may be single- or mixed-sector institutions.

*Against prescriptive morphologies of institutions*

No sooner has Australia started to blur the boundaries between vocational and higher education than people want to reintroduce sectors or tiers into tertiary education. The Group of Eight has long proposed that universities be divided into tiers according to research performance, Tafe Directors Australia (2010: 29) proposes that tertiary education institutions be divided into 5 tiers, and vice chancellors amongst others have proposed their own schemes for segmenting institutions into tiers. It seems that some feel insecure without an institutional morphology not only to structure their own thought but others’ action.

Classifying institutions into groups may help analysis, but in my view dividing tertiary institutions into tiers or sectors impedes policy for the sector as a whole as well as the management of individual institutions. Big cities such as Perth and Sydney support several universities and numerous Tafe institutes which serve different roles. But over 40 university campuses are located outside the big capitals and have to serve a range of roles that can be specialised in the big capitals. Neither is it adequate to posit that all regional campuses serve the same role and thus should be
classified as the same type. For example, the university campuses in Armidale, Cairns, Hobart, Launceston, Newcastle and Townsville are very different in size and scope and serve very different regions.

Dividing institutions into tiers or sectors impedes institutional management by introducing structural barriers to their development. The former colleges of advanced education had their development frustrated for over a decade by the former binary divide. This diverted considerable effort to unproductive wrangling over structures and roles. There are far better ways to direct institutions into different roles if governments want to do that.

I therefore suggest that classifying institutions into types is useful for analytic or descriptive purposes but would be wrong for national policy and distracting for institutional management.

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2 November 2010

References


