Summary of thoughts

Closing remarks at the conference on AQFs 5 & 6: debating the future of mid-level qualifications in Australia, 26 October 2012, LH Martin Institute and RMIT, Melbourne.

2 themes helped me organise my thoughts about this conference over the last 2 days. The first is how qualifications can drink coffee and chew gum at the same time. This was sometimes understood as considering how the same program can lead to both a vocational and higher education qualification. At other times drinking coffee and chewing gum at the same time was understood as considering how the same qualification can contribute to both educational and employment outcomes. Thus in opening the conference Margaret Garner noted that higher education institutions are preoccupied with diplomas and associate degrees as pathways to further education, whereas at least RMIT first conceives of diplomas and associate degrees as having an occupational outcome, and subsequently constructs the educational links.

The alternative of developing associate degrees as the fist stage of a baccalaureate is very common in the US. There has been a similar tendency in continental Europe. Until 2000 many continental European countries had a long first university qualification – the diploma – of notionally 5 years’ duration, altho as Leo Goedegebuure will tell us, many extended for several years beyond. The Bologna declaration of 1999 was a statement of intent to construct qualifications into a shorter initial bachelor degree of 3 or 4 years which may be augmented with a masters of 1 or 2 years, so that the combination of bachelors and masters added up to 5 years. While the Bologna declaration insisted that the initial bachelor should have an occupational outcome, many universities simply split their former diplomas into a 3 year baccalaureate which was useless unless it was followed by the 2 year masters.

Helen Smith’s workshop struggled with how associate degrees’ curriculum and pedagogy may be constructed to drink coffee and chew gum at the same time. It occurred to me that some difficulties arise because people were trying to drink gum and chew coffee. That is, they were trying to construct the associate degree as 1 program which had 2 natures, rather than as a program which had 2 different aspects. Others insisted that false dichotomies were being propounded between vocational and higher education as they are currently constructed in Australia, as if drinking coffee and chewing gum weren’t really that different.

David Dowling’s workshop explained a process for consulting industry on work roles to develop qualifications which was very familiar to vocational education participants.

Gareth Parry’s description of England’s establishment and experience with foundation degrees demonstrated familiarities but also differences with Australia. He reported that the UK Government expected foundations degrees not only to drink coffee and chew gum, but also to smoke at the same time. For foundation degrees were planned to contribute to skills development, progression to higher education and to broaden access. Many of the issues Parry raised about English foundation degrees resonate with Australia: whether they should be offered by colleges or universities, whether they should be free standing or transfer, and whether they just increase participation or also broaden it. Parry noted that foundation degrees were an instance of high policy, that is, close government involvement in setting goals, plans and outcomes. This contrasted
with further education in the 1980s and 1990s which Parry has earlier described as a period of low policy. It also contrasts starkly with Australia, which as Helen Smith noted in her workshop had almost no policy on associate degrees until recently.

In her workshop Margaret Mazzolini noted what she called the ‘qualifications maelstrom’, reflecting the changing role of qualifications.

Catherine Burnheim and Stuart Levy described Monash University’s diploma of tertiary studies. Some mixed sector participants found their graduate attributes as bridging concepts very useful in explaining higher education to vocational education colleagues. These bridging concepts are: reflecting on the process of transition, critical thinking, the construction of knowledge, and building a bridge to the capabilities of graduate professionals.

Mary Leahy rehearsed different understandings of competence and different understandings of capability. In his workshop David Dowling posited competences and capabilities on a continuum, which I don’t think is consistent with at least some understandings of competence and capability outlined by Leahy. To illustrate, a simple capability would be entering this room. This involves both an actor taking some action to enter the room, but also the provision of infrastructure and facilities such as doors for actors to use. But the doors to the rooms in this building are constructed to be almost unusable by people who have mobility problems. Someone in a wheelchair would have considerable difficulty opening these doors. Their capability to enter this room is a function both of their attributes and also the design and building of this room.

Ma partner Leesa Wheelahan argued that associate degrees should, like English foundation degrees, be able to drink coffee, chew gum and smoke at the same time, for she also posited that associate degrees have an important equity role. However, Leesa argued that as important as are the relations between qualifications within education, more important are the relations between qualifications and occupations, and yet even more important, are the relations between occupations within work.

This led me to my second theme: the importance of the economy and the workforce in constructing qualifications and the relations between them. The conference was informed by key contributions on developments in the economy and the workplace. Tom Karmel introduced us to neoclassical economic modelling. He found 2 constructions of work which shaped qualifications and movement between them.

Areas such as health, education and engineering have work roles which are established by regulation; some such as engineering are segmented between vocational and professional occupations which accordingly have little movement between sectors. Others such as some parts of education and health have occupations which are regulated but are articulated, while other work roles in education and health are segmented, as Robin illustrated with dental health. But there are other examples in health. There are very strong links between state enrolled and registered nurses which is reflected in strong transfers from diploma to degrees in nursing. But there are very weak links between state enrolled nurses and health services assistants prepared by a certificate III.

Other areas such as management and sciences are not highly regulated and there is much more fluid competition between holders of different qualifications.
Robin Shreeve gave us some interesting and informative examples of pathways and credit transfer in the early and mid 20th century. But the main point of Shreeve’s presentation was Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency’s thinking on the future of Australia’s workforce based on its description of scenarios, modelling and analysis, from which it plans to derive strategy. This set the macro economic context for Karmel’s micro analysis.

This left Leesa and presumably others asking: what is the future of educators considering the relations between qualifications. David Dowling gave 1 answer which I found most illuminating. He observed that tertiary education institutions develop and promote qualifications, often as discreet programs. Perhaps, he suggested, institutions should promote careers and develop and present programs as a preparation for a career.

I would also answer Leesa’s question by suggesting that we should start our discussion not with the Australian qualifications framework, but with occupational roles as they are constructed in the workplace. So for me next year’s conference would examine workforce data and occupational descriptions, and consider the implications of that for the construction of qualifications.

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Gavin Moodie
RMIT
Gavin Moodie@telstra.com
http://rmit.academia.edu/GavinMoodie