‘Horses for Courses, or Courses for Horses?’

Issues and questions arising from Diploma holders transitioning into the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education at Holmesglen.

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Questions and issues

- the cohort of diploma entry students (characteristics, history)
- the diploma standard in terms of preparation for entry into Higher Education
- the ‘leap’ from an AQF level 5 (diploma) course to the level 7 of a Bachelor
- disparate cultures- of VET & of Higher Education
- An issue of particular interest is the impact on teaching and academic support of accommodating/supporting Diploma entry students (AQF level 5) into year 2 of the Bachelor (AQF level 7)
Focus

Specific focus on entry of diploma holders into the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education – but issues are common to other courses.

One distinctive aspect – highly gendered workforce and student group in early childhood care and education.

This factor adds complexity to our understanding of the issues.
Horses for Courses...

...acknowledges that we all have different aptitudes, capacities and interests - and these fit with different pathways. The best outcomes arise when the fit is close. Implicit expectation that the ‘horse’ will be ready for the ‘course’ – the course does not adapt to the needs of the horse.
Courses for horses…

… assumes a different expectation. The onus to fit in shifts from the student (horse) to the institution/course.

This parallels a shift that is occurring in primary schools: ‘school readiness’ is not the responsibility of individual children and their families; instead schools increasingly assume responsibility for being ready for individual children.

Transition programs form the basis of this ‘institutional readiness’.
Background
Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECE) at Holmesglen

BECE = 4 year, professional teaching degree – dual qualifications (kindergarten and primary school)
Degree accredited late 2010 – first intake of students in semester 1, 2011.
First entry of Diploma holders in 2011 – with equivalent to one year’s credit towards the Bachelor. So, Diploma holders enter the BECE at year 2 level.
Diploma entry requires minimum credit average; additional pre-requisites (maths & English), reflecting govt commitment to raising standards in early childhood education
Commonwealth Supported Places

CSPs make the BECE financially viable for many students for whom Higher Education may not have been otherwise possible.

The SES profile of VET students suggests that offering CSPs is even more important in terms of access than for students who enter directly into Higher Education.

But a financial trade-off is at work – Bachelor graduates earn more, have higher status, etc, but income is foregone in the years of study.
Diploma credits (+ and -)

Diploma holders given credits equivalent to one year of the Bachelor.

So, Diploma holders enter the BECE at year 2 level.

Reducing the time-frame for study presents a huge incentive - time out of the workforce is a critical factor for these students.

But, the down-side is that the year’s credit means they join an established student cohort who have successfully negotiated a year of higher education.

Compounding this disadvantage, many diploma-entry students have a weaker academic foundation, reaching back into their history and experience of education.
Diploma entry cohort

Small initial cohort – significant variation in skills, knowledge, capacities, interest, motivation….

…but some commonalities, too:

• lack of familiarity with academic requirements
• unpractised in academic conventions (notably referencing)
• limited experience of independent study, critical reflection and evaluation of research
• high attrition
• intensive support required by many, leading to high demand on academic and support staff
Demographic differences

The Diploma entry students are typically:
- Older
- Have more work experience
- A financial imperative to work
- Have family commitments
- Statistically more likely to have health problems, including higher rate of mental health problems

One thing they share with other BECE students is gender. (Gender is a key issue in early childhood services - I’ll return to this soon)

But differences go deeper, and amount to cultural differences between diploma and bachelor.
‘Cultural’ differences

Culture: ‘a shared way of life’
• developed through shared history
• embedded in symbols, rituals and traditions
• articulated in shared language
• appears ‘normal’ and feels ‘real’
• often defined by differentiation from others.

Workplaces have recognised cultures – but less recognition that this is an issue in educational settings and courses. In reality, VET is a different culture to that of Higher Education.
Two distinct cultures...

1. VET – culture of ‘hands on’; practical; task oriented; assessed as competencies; direct instructional teaching; ‘work-readiness’ focused outcomes.


Traditionally, the two cultures and their institutional ‘homelands’ remained separate and disconnected – essentially reinforcing the ‘horses for courses’ model.
The AQF clearly signals that this divide must end. This *process*:

- takes time
- requires resources, commitment and understanding of the issues and challenges
- involves deep cultural change
- challenges identity/self-hood, for some students
Holmesglen is explicitly responding to the AQF objectives related to creating ‘pathways which provide access to qualifications and assist people to move easily between different education and training sectors’ and which ‘support individuals’ lifelong learning goals by providing the basis for individuals to progress through education and training and gain recognition for their prior learning and experiences’.

But there are many challenges.
Socio-cultural differences – history, values, practices,

One additional aspect of significant difference relates to the students themselves and their educational history – evident in their collective profile.

While educational challenges are recognised, these socio-cultural differences are rarely acknowledged in terms of their impact on students attempting the cultural shift from diploma to higher education.
Educational history of VET students

Important to recognise that many VET students who progress through Certificate to Diploma to Bachelor have entered this pathway with a history of lack of academic success at school. Many have not successfully completed high school, so they lack experience of academic rigour, even at a foundational level. Experience with education may have been negative.

The pathway for some (many?) VET teachers is similar – teachers and students share many characteristics.
Teaching in Higher Education: BECE experience

• Initial recruitment of teachers from VET proved challenging
• need for institutional recognition of higher education’s needs for lecturers

In both, greater understanding is needed: a degree is not just a diploma with more added – it is qualitatively different (critical reflection, higher order thinking, etc) and requires time – AQF should facilitate this.
Gender - compounding disadvantage

Early childhood care and education settings - traditionally low status, low pay, with poor conditions and very limited career prospects – and they are heavily gender-biased, with over-representation of women.

Qualified early childhood teachers are differently positioned in terms of pay, conditions, status, career advancement.

Fully engaging with the Bachelor and its academic demands, challenges these women’s identity (sense of self-hood)
Conclusion

• Barriers and challenges (including attrition), but some real rewards, and deep satisfaction from student successes

• This is a valuable enterprise – we all want to see our students succeed through supporting ‘individuals’ lifelong learning goals by providing the basis for individuals to progress through education and training and gain recognition for their prior learning and experiences’ (AQF objective)