Student perspectives on the VET-Higher Education interface

Peter Noonan
26 October 2012

Greater openness in the national tertiary education provider market

The Tertiary Education Quality and Pathways Principal Committee (DIISRTE) is conducting a broad project that examines:

- interconnections between VET and higher education
- effectiveness of existing connections and whether these could be made more systemic
- identification of disconnections and how they might be addressed
- needs of students, employers the community and the economy, now and in 2020
- the role of governments in a more interconnected tertiary education sector

The Allen Consulting Group was engaged to conduct a study on student perspectives on tertiary education as a contribution to this project.
Overview of the Student Perspectives Study

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The study sought to understand students’ understanding of, and interaction with, the tertiary education system

A particular emphasis was placed on the point of intersection between VET and higher education

Key research questions

1. What information do students use to decide to enrol in VET or higher education? How effective is that information?

2. Are the application processes overly complex and prohibitive?

3. How do the different funding and student support mechanisms between VET and higher education impact on students’ decisions about enrolling in tertiary education?

Options in the broader tertiary market
Structure of the study

- Students and staff at four types of institutions were involved:
  - Charles Sturt University - regional higher education institution with comprehensive VET pathways across most courses
  - QUT - metropolitan higher education institution with selected VET pathways
  - Challenger Institute - TAFE only
  - RMIT - dual sector institution

Data collection

- Targeted literature review regarding influences on choice of study and institutions
- Brief student focus groups (15 mins) – 203 participants
- In-depth student focus groups (45-60 mins) – 62 participants
- On-line student survey – 274 valid responses
- Staff interviews – 39 participants
What options did you consider when applying to study?

N=264 (81 school leavers, 183 mature students)
Sample was intentionally biased towards courses with a high level of substitutability.

Background - influences on student choice

- There are four significant influences on student choice between VET and higher education:
  - career goals or aspirations may narrow study options to courses only offered through VET (eg. the trades) or university (eg. law or medicine)
  - career goals or aspirations may narrow the range of possible institutions to a select number of VET or higher education providers offering highly reputable, specialised courses
  - student’s level of academic achievement may restrict choice or present a strong preference for higher education
  - the location and amenities of particular institutions and/or campuses may further define choices
- The choice between VET and higher education does not apply to all student cohorts for one or more of the following reasons:
  - self-perception of education identity
  - historical family or parent engagement with tertiary education sector
  - the desire or intention to enter the labour market may shape a strong preference for shorter, vocationally-specific VET course
# Student Perspectives Study – high-level themes

## Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All students</th>
<th>School leavers</th>
<th>Mature aged</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most students found sufficient and relevant information about courses and career prospects.</td>
<td>Schools obviously play an important role in providing information and advice on tertiary options.</td>
<td>Mature age students and relevant staff identified a preference for more detailed information from this cohort – such as timetabling, course costs – prior to enrolment.</td>
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<td>One third of students choosing between VET and HE could not find all the information they needed.</td>
<td>However the quality of this information and advice is highly variable – depending on school resources allocated to the task and factors such as rurality or levels of socio-economic disadvantage.</td>
<td>These students were more likely to nominate colleagues as a source of information, particularly in cases of career change.</td>
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<td>Informal sources of information – parents, partners, friends – were important to students.</td>
<td>Not all students are made aware of alternative pathways to their preferred course or area of study (such as bridging courses, VET pathways).</td>
<td>It can be difficult for these students to access career guidance and discover bridges and pathways to study.</td>
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<td>Institution websites and tertiary admissions centre publications are preferred sources of information; government sources were rarely used.</td>
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<td>Career advice and support is critical; but must be personalised and contextual.</td>
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## Applications

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<td>Centralised tertiary admissions procedures can support the expression of student preferences across VET and higher education.</td>
<td>Most school leavers find university admission straightforward.</td>
<td>Most school leavers have minimal knowledge of fees and funding arrangements and aren’t influenced by them.</td>
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<td>Most school leavers find university admission straightforward.</td>
<td>For mature age students, university admission can be complex and burdensome.</td>
<td>Most mature aged students are sensitive to the costs of study and may prefer TAFE where possible as it is cheaper.</td>
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<td>Credit transfer and Recognition of Prior Learning are a source of frustration for students.</td>
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<td>Particularly large disparities between students in knowledge of funding and financial support.</td>
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## Fees, subsidies and loans

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<td>Most students are not aware of all financial support options, and many struggle with related costs (e.g. housing).</td>
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<td>The overwhelming majority of applications for tertiary study are processed online</td>
<td>School leavers most commonly gain information about the application process from their school</td>
<td>Mature age students are more likely to find application processes complex due to requirements for background information</td>
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<td>The vast majority of respondents found application processes fair, good or very good – whether through admissions centres or direct application to institutes</td>
<td>Some school leavers indicated a desire for a consistent source of information on changing eligibility, admission rules and requirements</td>
<td>Staff at one institution noted particular complexity in that state’s tertiary admissions centre processes and efforts to simplify requirements</td>
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<td>Centralised application process offer advantages to students by reducing application burden, allowing the expression of preferences across VET &amp; HE and offering procedural certainty</td>
<td>Institution staff identified that more information could be provided to students on course competitiveness and application timelines (student awareness often depended on level of support received at school)</td>
<td>TAFE institutions are perceived to have simpler application processes and provide more transition support for mature age students</td>
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<td>The varying fees, subsidy and loan arrangements across VET and higher education and jurisdictions can create confusion</td>
<td>Most school leavers attending university have only a vague idea of HECS-HELP as a deferred loan</td>
<td>Mature age students are more sensitive to the costs of studying than school leavers</td>
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<td>Students are generally unaware of the extent to which their courses are subsidised by governments</td>
<td>Some school leavers (and their parents) enrolling in TAFE do not realise they cannot access a HECS-HELP loan (except in Victoria)</td>
<td>A significant number were averse to taking a loan to cover the costs of study</td>
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<td>Many students would like more specific information on course costs and associated costs of study</td>
<td>Students would like more information about support available to them from Centrelink</td>
<td>Course cost often influenced the pathway of mature aged students – TAFE pathways were selected to reduce the overall cost of gaining a bachelor degree and the time taken to achieve it</td>
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<td>There are relatively low levels of knowledge and understanding of income contingent loans, particularly in the VET sector</td>
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<td>The opportunity cost of lost wages is more important to mature age students</td>
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# Key considerations for government

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| - Where government is a provider of information, it should be delivered in the form of advice targeted to individual needs.  
- Information should span both VET and HE sectors.  
- Government should explore the possibility of standardising and centralising the storage of information, making it publicly available and allowing innovators to represent the information in new and meaningful ways.  
- Government should consider the need for standardised distribution of basic information on tertiary options via schools. | - The benefits of tailoring application processes according to the differing needs of school leavers and mature age students warrants further investigation and, where possible, the burden of application should be minimised.  
- In the medium to long term, tertiary admissions centres should accommodate both VET and higher education and all tertiary education providers. | - Government should develop a policy for the basic disclosure of subsidy arrangements for all tertiary courses.  
- This will support students as informed consumers to understand:  
  - the total amount of revenue received by their provider  
  - the payment options available, including income contingent loans and  
  - the options available to the student if they are unsatisfied with the quality of the training. |

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# Key considerations for the tertiary education sector

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| - Staff identified the most important information provision activities as:  
  - outreach activities in schools from Years 9 & 10 onwards  
  - information hotlines, with capacity to refer to another service or institute  
  - highly informed front counter & administrative staff  
  - provider open days with detailed information by area of study  
  - Greater intersectoral cooperation is needed for the benefit of students planning their tertiary education pathway. | - While credit transfer and Recognition of Prior Learning procedures are administratively intensive, efforts are needed to ensure they are not overly complex or burdensome to students and are more transparent.  
- Participation by VET and HE providers in centralised admission processes supports student choice and diversity of tertiary education pathways  
- Direct application processes for mature age students need to be clearly communicated and streamlined as much as possible. | - Tertiary education providers have a role to play in ensuring that course and unit cost information is easily accessible by students.  
- Associated costs of study can be clearly indicated to students to assist them in budgeting and planning for those costs. |
Implications for middle level qualifications

- Potentially more students may make genuine choices between sectors with improved information and equitable funding arrangements
- Need for better information and transparency around funding arrangements including differences between sectors
- Differences in perspectives between school leavers and mature aged
- Continuing issues around credit transfer and RPL

Implications for middle level qualifications

- Need for greater consistency and coherence in the way information is presented
- Value of the combination of centralised applications processes and direct entry
- Funding differences between the sectors not currently a major factor in choice but are likely to become a factor if funding gaps between sectors continue to increase
- Implications of differences and anomalies in eligibility criteria

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