

# The university — VET transition

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## ABSTRACT

Movement (articulation) from the university sector to the vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia was virtually unknown until studies by Golding beginning in 1993. This paper identifies some factors associated with this movement phenomenon and its prevalence, and discusses a two-way model of movement to explain and model it. It summarises some of what is now known about university to TAFE movement and the associated recognition (credit transfer). Some implications are also identified for policy makers. Finally, the paper identifies some problems and solutions associated with modelling two-way, inter-sectoral movement and recognition between the VET and university sectors in Australia.

## Introduction

... 'reverse articulation' is a phenomenon which has grown without any perceived encouragement by government, educational authorities or institutions. Demand has been a function of individual need. (Haas, 1999, 10)

## SETTING THE SCENE FOR INTER-SECTORAL MOVEMENT

In the context of rapid changes in education and training, some phenomena become established in practice before they are systematically identified or closely examined by research or become incorporated into policy. Phenomena which fall outside or which run counter to a prevailing policy, sectoral or qualifications framework, status or hierarchy are less likely to be detected or examined by research. Movement of students from university to vocational education and training (VET), which forms the focus of this discussion paper, falls into each of these categories.

This paper is based on original and serendipitous research in Australia by Golding, commencing in 1993 and culminating in a PhD (Golding 1999a; summarised in Golding 1999b), which uncovered the considerable size and complexity of university to TAFE (UT) movement, primarily in Victoria. This research has since been validated widely disseminated and debated nationally. Some of the research has been validated by Millican (1995), NTCC (1995) and Werner (1998).

Examination of UT movement, particularly in relation to movement in the opposite direction from TAFE to university (TU), has led to a rethinking of the idea of a universally 'upward' movement after school through training to education. The phenomenon provides evidence of the important role that VET (in its many forms) plays for individual adults seeking recurrent, lifelong learning, beyond its more limited role in imparting entry level, industry-related competencies to employees for enterprises.

The research has led to a realisation that the previous one-way models of movement, which lead only to university as the end goal, are not only simplistic, illusory and inaccurate: they have been misleading, patronising and destabilising of TAFE from a student and policy perspective. Finally, the research has led to some rethinking of the role of credit transfer associated with two-way movement. In summary, it has suggested that recognition (credit transfer) plays a lesser role in that movement between post-secondary sectors than had previously been widely assumed.

Trends in post-secondary education and training participation data in Australia illustrate the increasingly non-linear nature of the route from school to work, with work often being undertaken concurrent to study. Indeed, around half of both TAFE and higher education full-time students, and around 90 per cent of TAFE and higher education part-time students participate in the labour force while studying (ABS 1998, Table 5.27, p.66).

In summary, distinctions between VET and university based solely on assumptions of vocational preparation and intent for young school leavers on the way to work are at best artificial and ambiguous and at worst highly inaccurate. Studies of two-way movement and transition which form the focus of this paper have the potential to identify and explore some of that ambiguity and inaccuracy from a student perspective.

## TWO-WAY MOVEMENT, IN AUSTRALIA 1990-1998

This paper proceeds on the assumption that a two-way movement model linked to the notion of lifelong learning is more useful than a one-way articulation and credit transfer model in explaining movement and recognition between the VET and higher education sectors in Australia.

OECD (1991, 76) noted that in education and training systems with strong institutional and sectoral differentiation, it is difficult but necessary,

Both from a social equity and from an employment perspective ... that the structure and organisation of studies enable students and graduates to move across sectors and institutions, allow alternation between work and study, as well as later re-entry into higher education.

The opportunities for one-way movement, and particularly for recognition (credit transfer) from the university sector to the non-university sector (NUS), have received considerable attention in Australia since 1985 (Parkinson 1985; Parkinson, Mitchell and McBeath 1986). Articulation and credit transfer policies, projects and arrangements have focussed on 'upward' movement from TAFE to university within related fields of study. However as in most European countries to 1991, in Australia there had been '... little transfer from the NUS to universities and/or such transfers may involve considerable time penalty or financial cost' (OECD 1991).

Movement to TAFE, though unknown prior to 1993, apparently peaked in 1991 before it was identified, coinciding with an elevated flow of university graduates into TAFE at the height of the economic recession and at a time of reduced graduate employment. This movement was totally unanticipated by either policy makers or those students making that transition. Nevertheless an increase in applications for professionally oriented courses offered by the NUS was noted by the OECD in many countries including the United States (OECD 1991, 76). These so-called 'reverse transfer' of students and graduates were primarily moving '... from academic university disciplines, and seeking a double qualification'.

It is of some interest to reflect on the circumstances which leads to both forms of movement in particular countries. Haas (1999, 30), in a review of articulation arrangements in Australia between Technical and Vocational Education (TVE) and five other South East Asian countries, noted an apparent

... correlation between broad availability of TVE/higher education articulation arrangements, and an economy that has a significant services sector, high technology industries and substantial manufacturing capacity. Such a national economy demands continual workforce retraining/upgrading.

In the absence of comparable information or research on university to VET movement in other countries, it is difficult to identify with certainty what factors outside of VET and universities in Australia led to such a sudden, large but delayed outflow to TAFE in particular in the early 1990s. Three factors may be particularly relevant in Australia in the early 1990s: the rapidity of labour market restructure associated with the economic recession of the early 1990s; the associated high graduate and general unemployment, and particularly the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) in 1989.

Even for those without a completed degree, a subsequent and often delayed move to TAFE holds a number of related but slightly different benefits. Indeed, people who have not completed a university degree are in a very different situation in TAFE to those with a degree. Apart from being younger on average and more likely to be male, they are often more critically reflective of the university experience, and generally have more to gain from completing a higher level, vocational course in TAFE than many university graduates.

Some parallels can be drawn from research documenting moves from university to other forms of VET offered in community owned and managed (ACE) providers. This includes Volkoff, Golding and Jenkin's (1999) study of VET in Adult and Community Education (ACE) and Golding and Volkoff's (1998) longitudinal study of VET.

Many of the diverse university to VET transitions evident at a micro level are explicable from the perspective of the individual student. There is a need to consider a wide range of factors (age, life phase, gender, geographic, personal, linguistic, cultural, social, economic, vocational) over the course of a lifetime to make sense of particular transitions to VET after university. They also illustrate the

danger of leaping to a conclusion about single factors associated with the choice of a transition to VET after university for an individual, or of ascribing a single contextual cause or single change of circumstance.

One clear and unambiguous finding is that the common transition to VET after university was almost totally unanticipated by individuals at the time of enrolment in university, whereas the less common 'VET to university' transition was very widely anticipated. This raises the question of what had changed in people's personal or working lives, or in their sectoral perceptions, which led them to make this unforeseen transition at frequencies and in directions quite different from those intuitively predicted.

Because university to VET movement was unanticipated in Australia from a policy perspective, it is important to ask what factors had apparently inhibited (or not previously drawn attention to) university to VET movement in Australia, or why that movement had not more prevalent in other countries. As Haas (1999) alludes to in the opening quote, the phenomenon occurred in Australia as a response to individual need in spite of the low status of VET qualifications generally, and of TAFE and ACE provision in particular.

The well-known rush during the 1980s for the status associated with a university qualifications has not abated. What has changed is the ability of a completed degree to set up a student for a career for life in the much more difficult labour market in the 1990s. Despite TAFE's 'ugly ducking' status in relation to university, and without discounting a wide range of factors affecting individuals, more university is no longer the only answer or first choice for many people. This is particularly so for the short, sharp, cheap and vocationally specific learning required by many adult university graduates involved in ambiguous transitions into or between jobs, as well as for those who for whatever reason, fail to finish a university course.

## **SOME CONNECTIONS WITH RECOGNITION DURING THE SAME PERIOD**

There is not space in this paper to tease out the recognition (credit transfer) implications of this pattern of movement identified in Golding (1994) and elaborated in Golding (1999a). In summary, in the case of TU movement for undergraduate commencers in the period from 1991 to 1997,

- recognition for prior TAFE has comprised a small but growing proportion of total university recognition;
- the proportion achieving recognition at university for previous TAFE study has been increasing more rapidly than the total proportion achieving some recognition;
- between 1991 and 1997 the proportion of those with prior TAFE study achieving some recognition increased from around one quarter to one half.

The data on movement and recognition in summary

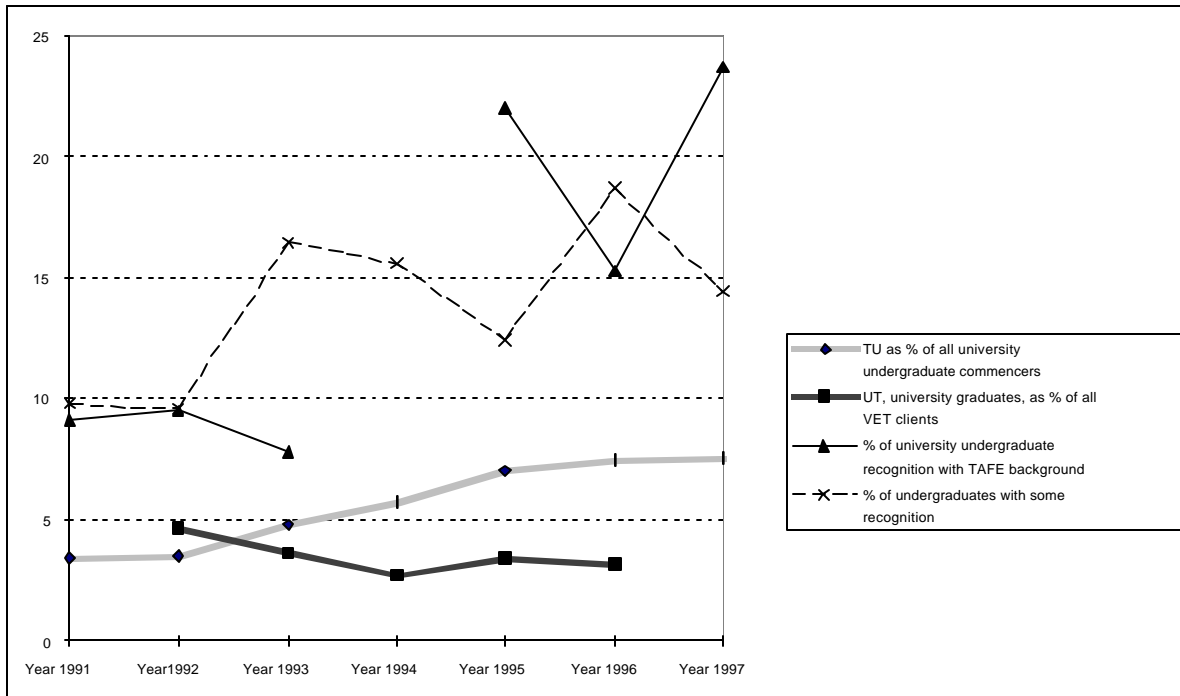
In the case of UT movement for VET commencers in vocational programs in the period from 1991 to 1997, the proportion with prior university completions has fluctuated between 2.2 per cent and 5.5 per cent. In that period, around 40,000 VET clients per year in vocational programs in Australia had previously completed a degree. On the basis of survey data from Golding (1999a), a similar (but additional unknown number and proportion) would previously have discontinued at university. By contrast between 5,000 and 14,000 university commencers had previously undertaken a TAFE course.

On balance, within the limitations of the data, it is possible to compare the extent to which the number of VET clients in Australia with a completed university award has outnumbered university undergraduate commencers with some prior TAFE experience. This UT to TU ratio has been decreasing since 1991, but has remained between 3.5 to 1 (1994) and 6.9 to 1 (1991). As argued in Golding (1999b), the backwash has certainly been swamping the wave, and for many tertiary students and policy makers, the backwash has come out of nowhere.

Figure 1 displays percentages of total commencers (for university data) and percentages of total clients (for VET data). It also displays the proportion of all undergraduate commencers receiving some recognition and the proportion of those receiving some recognition with previous TAFE backgrounds.

The graph shows that while there has been a steady growth in university commencers with previous TAFE backgrounds (and TU recognition associated with that movement), there has been a decline in the proportion of TAFE clients with university degrees.

**Figure 1: Comparison of two-way movement and recognition between university and TAFE, Australia, 1991-1997**

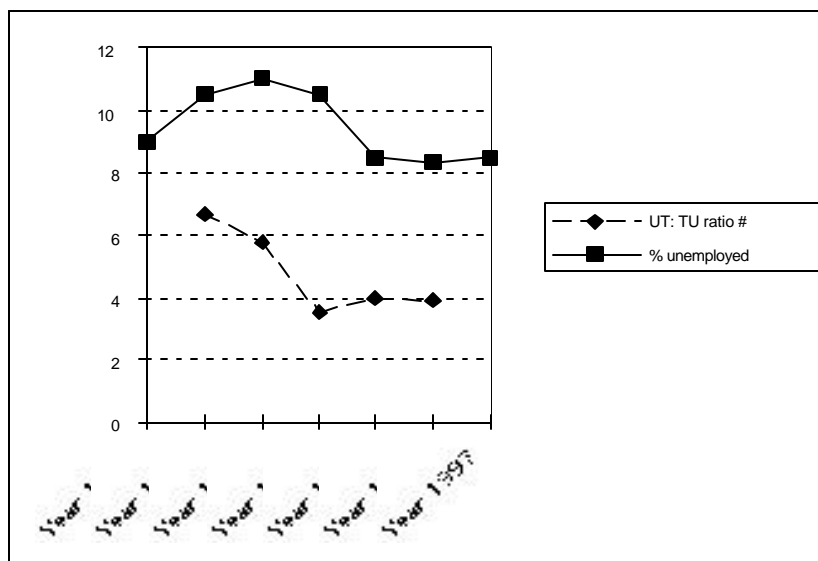


Source: Golding (1999a).

**Note:** Break in series for VET data in 1994; no university data available for 1994; UT data are based on VET clients who were university graduates, whereas the TU data are based on university commencers with TAFE backgrounds (complete or incomplete).

Figure 2 displays the ratio of the number TAFE clients who were previous university graduates to the number of undergraduate commencers with previous TAFE backgrounds (complete or incomplete). That ratio has been dropping since 1991, but remains close to 4: 1.

**Figure 2: Comparison of UT and TU movement # with unemployment rates Australia, 1991-1997**



**Sources** See TU and UT details below Table 1; TU = TAFE to university, UT = university to TAFE; unemployment rates from ABS 1998 *Labour force*, Cat. No. 6203.0.

**Note:** Break in series for VET data in 1994; # UT data are based on VET *clients* who were university *graduates*, whereas the TU data are based on university *commencers* with TAFE backgrounds (complete or incomplete).

## WHAT HAS CHANGED SINCE 1990 AND WHAT POLICY QUESTIONS DOES IT RAISE?

University to VET movement is but one window into some of the changes that took place in the labour market and the workplace in the 1990s. The appearance of UT movement coincided with a time of domestic oversupply of university graduates in the 1990-1993 period and with a low uptake of highly skilled immigrants (Hawthorne 1994). There was a sudden decline in the proportion of graduates available for full-time work and actually working after completing their course.

Graduate Careers Council of Australia annual surveys (eg 1994, p.10) document a crash from 88 per cent of graduates employed in 1990 to 71 per cent employed in 1992. For example unemployment amongst Australian engineers rose from 1 per cent in 1991 to 10 per cent the following year. Stahl et al. (1993) identified problems associated the increasing number of transients with skills (people moving from one point of support to another). This situation in the domestic labour market was not unnoticed by people in work, who were obliged throughout the 1990s to do more study and to acquire new qualifications and skills simply to keep ahead of competitors inside and outside of their workplace.

The minimum credential required to access a basic, entry level course or job has fundamentally changed in an upward direction. Opportunities for those in work without any credential have also considerably diminished. Prior to 1990, if an employer wanted a 'runner', it was sufficient to advertise for a 'walker' and to train them to run later. In many areas of employment in the late 1990s, if a runner is required, a runner's job is advertised, and the field of competitors available for interview consists of a large field of experienced heptathletes. When the heptathlete is employed, other employees have a large incentive to do more than run.

The route to initial work through 'entry level' education and training in Australia has become much more ambiguous, protracted and indirect. Multi-skilling and an ability to engage in lifelong learning, once optional attributes, have become essential. In summary, university to VET movement is more indicative of changes which have been occurring to individuals rather than to changed VET or university policy or provision.

UT movement raises important questions about the different applicability of competency-based, self-paced, flexible delivery teaching methods to mixed groups comprising older, highly motivated university graduates alongside younger, less directed students directly from school. The resistance to competency-based curriculum and assessment reinforces the fact that not all VET participants are there for the same reason - some are there out of interest, and the majority are already employed, making employment outcome data meaningless without taking account of individual intention.

UT movement also raises the question of displacement effects as a consequence of postgraduate study in VET and the more general question of what people are actually doing at both TAFE and university. Golding (1999a) has provided the first evidence that TAFE effectively absorbs university graduates at times of high demand for university places and low demand for graduates in the labour market, and that inter-sectoral flows are employment related. Recent policy interest in movement relativities in favour of movement to TAFE, particularly by university graduates, is partly because evidence of UT absorption runs directly counter to the previous and widespread perception of TAFE as a destination for people who cannot get into university. One of the drawbacks of UT movement for students, particularly when jobs are scarce, such as was hypothesised in Victoria during 1991 (Golding 1999a), is the potential displacement of TAFE's traditional clients.

If alternative favourable options (particularly for employment or postgraduate university study) are reduced for university graduates, the probability of UT movement increases. In a fixed places regime within universities, the options for TU movement presumably decrease. UT movement presumably limits study options for school leavers and TAFE graduates at times of high demand for university, particularly during periods of concurrent, high unemployment.

Werner (1998, 67) identified a number of policy initiatives '... should TAFE wish to attract more clients from the higher education graduate market': mainly teaching styles, course design, services and facilities. Apart from these participant-centred possibilities, the most likely outcome of better knowledge of UT movement is an altered, perhaps improved image of TAFE in relation to university. The secondary sector has traditionally held TAFE in low esteem in relation to university. If this changed and more exit Year 12s went directly to TAFE, though there might be less UT correction at a later date, there might also be more TU movement. If TAFE was perceived as a vocationally useful postgraduate destination after university, it might decrease demand for postgraduate university study, particularly at a graduate diploma level, but in turn displace school leavers, particularly school leavers, at initial vocational levels in TAFE.

Some policy implications associated with UT movement were identified in Golding (1994c). Although the movement is consistent with an emphasis in the late 1990s in all post-secondary education sectors of policies which encourage lifelong, recurrent learning, the size of the UT movement has particular implications for potential commencers in TAFE without university backgrounds who are seeking initial, middle-level, vocational training. The major recognition-related implications are the large size of the flow relative to the available recognition arrangements and the problems of recognising non-CBT learning acquired from university in a CBT context. In summary, UT movement in Australia now involves a movement direction, volume, manner and prior backgrounds not easily anticipated or accommodated by existing recognition policies or practices before the current research.

There is a general lack of congruence between policies promoting movement and recognition on 'pathways' between different sectors and the use of such pathways. These poor matches between policy and movement were described by Dwyer et al. (1996, 3) who observed '... that the usual tendency of defining transitions beyond school in terms of certain predetermined linear pathways fails to do justice to the actual experience and choices of young people.'

There is a need to rethink the assumption that post-secondary participants crossing sectors have a single prior post-secondary background and also of the notion of the 'highest level of study'. Reporting of movement and recognition by students with a single sectoral background becomes less meaningful as the frequency of multiple, prior, post-secondary backgrounds increases. Reporting on prior study solely by 'highest level of study' or on the 'basis for admission' categorisation continues to under-report widespread multiple backgrounds of students on the move within and between sectors.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

This paper has identified limitations to previous models of recognition which failed to account for the complexity and serendipitous nature of much two-way movement, the relatively minor role played by a desire for recognition and pre-eminence of the issue of access over recognition. Much of the policy focus to date has been on improved recognition arrangements rather than on movement. Recognition arrangements, however, are inevitably conditional on entry to courses and programs.

The high levels of recognition associated with movement into multi-sectoral institutions compared to single-sector movement identified in Golding (1999a) illustrates, in part, the potential for sectoral cooperation within and across particular institutions to enhance outcomes for students. Arrangements have been developed and maintained with most enthusiasm in the multi-sectoral institutions, which perhaps have more to gain from facilitating two-way movement and by casting a wider prospective student net.

In conclusion, it is important again to stress the importance of student experiences of movement and recognition, rather than their political and social construction. The paper provides evidence that movement and recognition policy, while the result of political processes influenced by political need (eg unemployment, sectors 'out of balance') is subject to and mediated by other factors at an institutional and a bureaucratic level. As OECD (1998, 384) suggested, 'The difficulty, then is to identify pathways independently of policy intentions on one hand, and of student movements on the other.'

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