

Selling TAFE short: Are VCE business students deterred from choosing the TAFE business option?

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INTRODUCTION

The view that the only successful outcome of the Year 12 Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) is the achievement of a Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Ranking (ENTER) score that ensures a university place, has led to a strong emphasis by secondary schools preparing students for tertiary study, regardless of the interest and abilities of their students. Once the competitive marketing strategy of solely the more prestigious private boys' schools, this strategy is increasingly being used within secondary schools in the state sector (Cook, 1997).

Vickers (1993, 33) argues that we need to stop juxtaposing academic and vocational education against each other, observing that "A competitive workforce - a competitive economy - will demand the highest levels of intellectual creativity and skill from every worker." However, it seems that securing a TAFE place is not regarded as a successful outcome of Year 12 either by secondary school students, or the community at large (Dwyer *et al.*, 1997), resulting in some, and perhaps particularly male students, appearing to devalue the opportunity, in terms of qualifications and even pathways into higher education, that TAFE can provide.

This paper is concerned with the way some boys within the secondary school sector view the TAFE sector, often dismissive of the information provided by careers teachers, and the way in which their views appear to change once exposed to the TAFE sector. The concern here is that students may miss out on what could be a significant tertiary educational opportunity.

METHODOLOGY

Eight post-Year 12 male students were the focus of this qualitative study, which formed the basis of a Master of Education thesis (Pitt, 1998). Tape-recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted at the Hawthorn Campus of Swinburne University of Technology, a multi-sectorial institution with five campuses located in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. These eight young men were, or had been, enrolled in the two year TAFE Associate Diploma of Business (Marketing) offered at Swinburne's Hawthorn Campus, and at the time of the interviews three had still to complete the course. Of the five who had successfully completed their course two were in full-time employment and three had already been accepted into undergraduate degree courses.

BACKGROUND

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many boys are not achieving academically at the levels to which they aspire, believe they are capable of and, indeed, expect to achieve? So what happens then to those boys who do not achieve? In order to understand what is happening to boys in secondary schools, not only the culture within those schools has to be understood, but also society's notion of what it means to be a 'successful' male.

Schools, regardless of social class, are seen as crucial cultural institutions involved in the shaping of masculinity. Both Mac an Ghaill, (1994: 197) and Connell (1993: 95-98) observed that "masculinity shapes education, as well as education forming masculinity" via the curriculum "which organises knowledge hierarchically, and sorts students into an academic hierarchy through competitive grading and streaming." Salisbury & Jackson (1996) also observed that it is "the important, serious knowledge schools transmit that counts as serious to the ruling groups within society, namely the male, middle-class, white, able-bodied, heterosexual majority, and that the ruling group have legitimised, validated and authorised a particular type of knowledge" (p. 25). It is apparent that acquiring this serious,

rational knowledge, which is perceived to be the domain of universities and sustains the professions, is the goal of most VCE students in middle-class schools.

Taking up a place in the TAFE sector might, for some male students, confirm their lack of academic achievement, as this sector is viewed by many across the spectrum as 'second-class', or at best, the less attractive alternative in post-secondary education (Chapman & Smallwood, 1992; Dwyer *et al.*, 1997). This is particularly relevant for full-time male students enrolled in a TAFE Business Studies course, and may result in such a course attracting some students who are confused or even angered over their inability to secure a university place, and who feel as though they have failed.

It needs to be stressed that the students in this course are quite academically able, having achieved an ENTER score within the mid 40s to mid 50s range, which would allow them to gain entry into an undergraduate business course at a number of universities. They are not the students who are failing to achieve, but rather those who are not achieving at a level at which they believe they could or should.

Unlike Walker's (1988) 'Louts and Legends' who came from a disadvantaged school, or Connell's (1993) group of young men "from the unrespectable end of the working class" (p. 92), these young men were all from middle-class families in the green and leafy eastern and south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Five of the eight had attended private schools. Their families were mostly professional and would understand the value of, and need for, education. These students had intended to go to university and none had chosen TAFE as their first choice or, in fact, as a choice at all.

VCE STUDENT AWARENESS OF TAFE

Given that the community generally values university as being a more desirable provider of tertiary education than TAFE (Chapman & Smallwood, 1992: 15), there is a strong focus on the linear pathway from secondary school to university (Dwyer *et al.*, 1997) as the only real option. This can be understood from the teachers' perspective, as virtually all secondary school teachers have come through the university system and few, if any, have experienced the TAFE sector at a personal level. Even parents who are in a profession are more likely to have an undergraduate degree or to recognise it as a minimum qualification.

It is understandable that students would hold the view that TAFE is a place for students who have failed to gain entry to university, because it is, after all, the message the secondary sector conveys by actively promoting higher education whilst tending to ignore TAFE (Dwyer *et al.*, 1997:28). It is hardly surprising therefore that males generally expect to get their first preference (course of their choice); regard university more highly than TAFE; and consider that their parents' views concur with this opinion (Chapman & Smallwood, 1992: 27).

The students in this study were all aware of TAFE but did not consider it an option for them, as evidenced by the following comments:

You were deciding which uni to go to and TAFE wasn't really something...you don't expect to go to TAFE at the start of the year. (Thomas)

At the start of the year before I did exams it was just 'which Uni am I going to?' I never even considered TAFE (Brock)

All I knew really about TAFE was just a main generalisation that it wasn't as good as a University (Scott)

Business courses within the TAFE sector were, for most of these students, unknown and rarely considered.

SENSITIVITY TO ADVICE FROM SCHOOL CAREERS TEACHERS

According to the hegemonic masculinity apparently prevailing within the culture of their middle-class secondary schools, where academic success and university entrance equates to power, a student destined for TAFE would then conform to Connell's notion of the 'failed' (1993: 95). That this view prevails not only within the schools, but also among parents and peers (Dwyer *et al.*, 1997: 44), might well begin to explain why these young men were either not receptive to, or did not believe, the information regarding TAFE.

The Careers Counsellor talked to us about TAFE and said it was an option but you know, she didn't put it down in any way but it was set in my mind that TAFE's for trades and I did not want to do a trade. (Brock)

The teachers didn't exactly describe what TAFE was, they more put it as what sort of an option it was. TAFE was presented as something that if you didn't get into university kind of thing. (Doug)

We got told that while Uni is very theoretical, TAFE is much more practical and that it wasn't always a bad thing to go to TAFE either. It was just sort of a stepping stone...(but)....if you had your mind set on going to Uni, it's sort of like a step down. A backward step. (Billy)

It would appear that the information available to students in the private sector was more comprehensive than that generally available in the state sector. Alain, who attended a state high school announced in a somewhat matter-of-fact way

I am sure there is a lot more that I could have done if there was a careers teacher and that, but we weren't told anything and we pretty much had to seek it for ourselves which was fair enough.

However, information about the TAFE sector was more likely to be dismissed as not relevant by those students within the private sector, as illustrate in this comment by Matt.

The emphasis is 'do uni, do a uni course, uni, uni, uni, uni, and never, like A TAFE'.

STUDENT INSIGHT INTO THEIR OWN ABILITY

A recent Australian study of secondary school students showed that males were more likely than females to rate their ability as good, and that at the upper secondary school level, male students had a tendency to over-estimate their levels of competence (Rennie & Parker, 1996). This was a common thread among the male students in this study who believed that they would achieve at a level significantly above the range into which their final result fell. This caused them considerable angst at the time and was still clearly troubling at the time of the interview. The most moving account came from Brock who expected to achieve well above his final score of 55:

I was a mess after that. I so much thought I was going to get a lot higher. Maybe in all honesty like 75. I couldn't even believe I was going to TAFE. So when I got my marks and understood that I was going to TAFE I could not believe it — like I am looking at myself and I could not believe — I just could not believe I was going to TAFE. I would never have thought it.

Thomas had also overestimated his likely score, acknowledging in a voice that was quiet and flat:

At the beginning of the year I thought I would aim for 80 plus and as the year went on I thought (pause) its probably not possible and I thought at the most 70 or in the 60's somewhere. And then the result I got was 53 which is...(trails off) I had to change everything, all my preference and all of that, course selection, and I wasn't very happy.

Billy, with a swaggering bravado somewhat reminiscent of Ludowyke's 'cool to be a fool' culture, also failed to predict his likely outcome, saying wryly:

When I began VCE as an actual mark I was aiming for maybe an 80. The 80 changed three-quarters of the way through Yr 12. I was expecting maybe a 70, 75 and then, I wouldn't say I was slack, I think I just might have left things a little late or not enough research. I ended up with 43 and a half or something.

OBSERVATIONS OF TAFE AS A TAFE STUDENT

Despite their ENTER score, these young men had all enrolled in a TAFE business course believing that it would be the 'easy option'. It appears that they still clung to the notion that they would succeed, moving on and up to the higher education sector effortlessly, as these comments clearly indicate

(Initially) I was under the impression that I wouldn't have to work hard and yet I would still do well. At the start I thought it would be like a walkover. I'm just so gifted I'll walk in and go, you know because I'm going to TAFE and I'm with all these carpenters you know, because they're the people who go to TAFE. (Brock)

There's a perception with TAFE that you shouldn't be getting less than HD or a distinction because you think TAFE is easier than higher Ed because the work will be like, you know we had two maths levels at VCE you've got hard maths and the easy maths. I thought this would be like the easy marketing compared to the hard marketing! (Thomas)

However, as they approached the completion of the course, or in some cases, reflecting back, they could acknowledge that TAFE was more professional and required more effort than initially thought, and their comments proved quite insightful:

Well even first semester I thought they (my results) would have been a lot better but I got distinctions but I didn't get high distinction. But from my initial thoughts I thought I would have done a lot better. (Brock)

I thought I could have done a bit better if I'd really have got down to it a bit more. Studied more. (Scott)

I would say it was a great opportunity. A step towards Uni, because you have got that learning under you and you are given a great opportunity to go up to Uni and when you do get there you've got that learning behind you and I think it would make it easier too (Billy)

Another interesting point also emerged as Thomas reflected on his TAFE experience. He had specifically chosen a multi-sectorial institution so that he could mask his TAFE status by telling others simply that he 'went to Swinburne'. He now valued both the course he had undertaken and TAFE generally, and was thus more comfortable saying 'TAFE, Swinburne TAFE'.

CONCLUSION

These young men had enrolled in a TAFE business studies course following, what was for them, an extremely disappointing VCE result. They approached the TAFE sector with a somewhat negative attitude, believing that they would be competing with tradesmen, even though they were undertaking a business Marketing course. Once exposed to the sector, they began to realise that TAFE was not only both challenging and relevant to them, but also provided a range of options. Some had specifically chosen a course offered at Swinburne's Hawthorn campus because it allowed them to mask their status as a TAFE student, and others because it afforded them a pathway into the higher education sector.

Having studied in the sector had changed their perceptions and they became more comfortable with their TAFE status. They were now able to acknowledge that it had allowed them the opportunity to consolidate their study and time management skills and that it had, or was likely to, facilitate a phased-transition from school to the higher education sector.

The issue now becomes how can we, educationalists and researchers, change the views of secondary school students, teachers, parents and, importantly, the professions.

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