

Research, policy, and practice: how do they fit together?

A case study on pathways and articulation at Victoria University of Technology

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The relationship between research, policy and practice in tertiary institutions is complex. Policy-makers like linear relationships: first there is research, which develops policy, which in turn directs practice. The 'action research spiral', favoured by reflective practitioners, is similarly staged: reflection, planning, action, observation, then reflection again. The reality is more incoherent, with research, policy and practice muddled together; and the prominence of one or the other is just as often the outcome of institutional political imperatives as of the need to develop grounded policy to underpin practice. Yet, it is possible over time to see the translation of research into policy and practice, and to observe how the latter acts as the impetus for further research.

This paper examines the relationship between research, policy and practice through a case study at Victoria University of Technology. The University introduced a key strategic policy in 1997 that was (and is) predicated on learning pathways and student articulation between its TAFE and higher education sectors.

This paper will use a case study to explore the relationship between research, policy and practice. Victoria University of Technology is a dual-sector university with sizeable TAFE and higher education sectors. In 1997 the University introduced its Personalised Access and Study policy, a policy underpinned by learning pathways between the two sectors. This case study examines the outcomes of pathways from the perspective of the students who have used them, and from teaching staff in both sectors.

While the University has been successful in implementing pathways, there is, nonetheless, a gap between stated policy objectives and outcomes. Examining the policy/practice gap in this case study illustrates the relationship between research, policy and practice. It reveals the complex and interdependent relationship between each; the extent to which they are 'muddled together'; but also how research *can* be demonstrated to translate into practice, if not in the linear and straightforward manner envisaged in policy documents. Key to understanding this relationship is the need to move beyond descriptive research to analytical research, so we can answer the question *why* as well as *what*. Understanding the policy *environment* can lead to the development of more effective implementation strategies, a key theme of this conference.

Personalised Access and Study policy at Victoria University of Technology

Victoria University of Technology implemented the Personalised Access and Study policy at the beginning of 1997 to make education available to, and meet the learning needs of, the University's students and region. VUT is the principal provider of credentialed tertiary education in Melbourne's western region, serving more than 615,000 people (excluding the Adult and Community Education sector). The region is among the most culturally diverse in Australia, with a higher than average proportion of its population from immigrant non-English speaking backgrounds, and with lower than average participation rates in tertiary education. Many of the University's students are the first in their family to have attended tertiary education (technical and further education (TAFE) or higher education).

The University merged with the Western Melbourne Institute of TAFE in July 1998, creating a university with more than 50,000 students, approximately 14 campuses and two sectors roughly equal in size with a high level of complementarity of course offerings. The Personalised Access and Study policy was (and is) predicated on learning pathways and student articulation, which in turn was predicated on transforming the relationship between its TAFE and higher education sectors.

The policy has two components:

- Personalised Access, which seeks to find a place in an accredited course within TAFE or higher education for school-leavers and mature age students at a level commensurate with their academic preparation and vocational aspirations; and
- Personalised Study, which attempts to support student learning through the development of learning pathways and individual student compacts or learning agreements.

Pathways link the two components of the policy because they offer students access to study at a level commensurate with their level of academic readiness, while also providing them with the opportunity to build on success. Pathways remove the spectre of pass/fail, as there are options for students other than being lock-stepped through rigidly constructed courses. If a student does not meet the entry criteria for a particular course, they can enter a learning pathway that supports them to reach the required standards, while *reserving* a place for them in the destination course provided these standards are met. Pathways are available to *all* students within the University, and to *prospective* students from the western region, through the personalised place process. In this way, pathways open access to under-represented groups within Melbourne's western region.

Evaluation in 2000

The University has built an extensive policy framework to support pathways, and, as part of an evaluation undertaken in 2000, interviewed 50 students who articulated from the University's TAFE division in 1999 to a higher education course in 2000. The university also interviewed 27 (mainly) teaching staff from TAFE and higher education. The evaluation also compared the student progress rate and demographic profile of TAFE students commencing higher education courses compared to other students. The evaluation sought to answer two questions:

1. Is student articulation helping students to gain access to higher education, and what student outcomes have resulted as a consequence?
2. Does the University's field of study framework (which the University established to, in part, facilitate the development of pathways) effectively support the development of pathways?

The evaluation focused on *how* pathways were constructed, and how they were experienced by students and staff. Much research focuses on patterns of student movement and student outcomes (Cohen et al 1997; Golding and Vallenge 1999; Kinsman 1998; Teese 1997), but there is little on *how* institutional frameworks are put in place and function, and how staff collaborate to facilitate student movement (see Carnegie 2000; Sommerlad et al 1998; and

Wheelahan 2000 for a discussion of some of these issues). Yet it can be argued that the *form* of collaboration directly shapes the way in which pathways are structured, and the student outcomes that result. In other words, the means used to develop pathways may well affect the ends that result.

Examining implementation is an important part of evaluation or policy research. It has the capacity to reveal gaps between policy objectives and outcomes. Merely focusing on policy 'outputs' (for example, the number of students moving between the sectors) reveals nothing about *why* some achieved this result and others did not, *how* they did so, and who is included or excluded. It also tells us little about how policy should be changed or refocused.

What we found

The evaluation found that the overall demographic profile of the University's higher education division has changed since the University introduced its Personalised Access and Study policy in 1997, of which the pathways framework was a key part. The percentage of students from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds commencing degrees in the higher education sector increased, suggesting that the policy has been effective in improving access to higher education for disadvantaged groups. The number of commencing students in higher education from a low socioeconomic background rose from 23.4% in 1997 to 26.4% in 1999, while the number of students from a language other than English (LOTE) background¹ increased from 36.5% to 42.7% over the same period.

This cannot be explained by the actual numbers entering the University's higher education division through the personalised place component of the PAS policy (as these were only several hundred each year). It may be that the PAS policy and the commitment to pathways had symbolic importance to students from equity group backgrounds, thereby encouraging students to apply for entry to higher education (see Golding et al 1996 for a discussion of symbolic importance and pathways).

Student experience of articulation

While the 'seamless' movement of students from one sector to another is a long-standing government policy objective (see Teese 1997), the student experience of articulation shows it has not yet been achieved. Students who were interviewed show that articulating from one sector to another *within the one institution* required a significant degree of support from teaching and administrative staff. Thirty-six (72%) said articulating was 'straight-forward', 'simple', or 'easy', while the remaining 14 (28%) experienced problems that varied in nature and degree.

Half of the group deliberately commenced TAFE studies as a stepping-stone to a specific higher education course, while the remaining half decided to articulate sometime during their TAFE course, and *became aware that they could do so* mainly through information and support provided by teaching staff. The former group, while possessing high levels of knowledge about the *possibility* of articulating, still needed support to successfully do so. It seems that those who found the process straightforward were supported by staff (mainly TAFE teachers, and to a lesser extent, higher education teachers).

The learning experience is contrasted with the 'administrative' (broadly defined) experience. While most students were able to identify differences in the learning environment between

TAFE and higher education, 80% stated that TAFE had been important in preparing them to undertake their higher education studies.

Staff experience of articulation

Of the 27 staff interviewed, 14 were TAFE teachers, 12 were higher education teachers, and one was a key member of administrative staff involved in the Personalised Place component of the PAS policy. All staff were, to a greater or lesser degree, involved in pathways or in the University's field of study approach (the framework that links like TAFE and higher education disciplines to develop pathways and new courses).

Only four of the 27 did not feel student articulation was a useful mechanism to facilitate access by TAFE students to higher education. Half of the remainder felt that articulation was 'useful', and half that it was 'very useful' or 'absolutely useful'. Those who were less fulsome about articulation felt that the mechanisms used to facilitate student articulation could be improved, thereby improving the extent to which students were able to access higher education. That is, they were in favour of the *concept* of articulation, but felt that the *implementation* of mechanisms to support articulation did not adequately operationalise the concept.

The two key factors identified by staff as facilitating student articulation were: collaboration between teaching staff from the two sectors; and the administrative arrangements and policy frameworks that had been put in place to underpin articulation. The three most cited factors that hindered articulation were: the introduction of Training Packages in the VET sector; the need for greater institutional support for, and facilitation of, pathways; and, industrial and political issues.

Policy/practice gap

The policy/practice gap has occurred *despite* a commitment to learning pathways at VUT. The University has invested considerable effort to support students in making the transition and has developed administrative and institutional systems and structures to underpin and *encourage* such movement.

The reasons for the gap can be found by examining policy on two levels. First, we need to examine the broader environment within which institutional policy is made; the national education policy context. Second, we need to understand *how* policy is made. Both these types of research are analysis *of* policy, that is '... the critical examination of existing policy' rather than analysis *for* policy, which refers to '... the informational base upon which policy is constructed' (Berkhout and Wielemans 1999, p 405). Analysis *for* policy is often descriptive. Education policy studies have been criticised for being overly descriptive and insufficiently analytical (Ball 1997; Berkhout and Wielemans 1999; Fritz 1994; Troyna 1994) and, in my view, much VET research fits within this category. It fails to analyse the broader policy framework, the extent to which this reflects particular stakeholder interests, and who wins and loses and why. As Ham and Hill (1984, p 16) explain: 'Policies may be intended to improve social conditions, but this should be part of the object of enquiry rather than an assumption of research'.

An examination of the overall policy environment shows that the factors cited by staff (and experienced by students) as hindering pathways development could be divided into external factors over which the University has no control, and internal factors over which the

University could exercise some control (Wheelahan 2000). However, examination of the internal factors shows that they mostly derive from the existence of separate TAFE and higher education sectors, and while the University could develop 'work-arounds' to overcome these obstacles, the resources and time involved in doing so are considerable. TAFE and higher education are funded by, and report to, different portfolios and different levels of government. Students are funded and counted differently, and they pay different types of fees. Student load is calculated very differently. Teaching staff are covered by different industrial awards and career structures that reinforce the status gap between the two sectors. The two sectors operate with different curriculum models. All this makes it extremely difficult to develop a 'seamless' approach to courses and student movement within the one institution.

Moreover, national education policy has resulted in contradictory policy edicts and imperatives. We have, on the one hand, increasing blurring of the boundaries between TAFE and higher education, reflecting the convergence of vocational and liberal education, and the social and economic imperatives driving lifelong learning policy. On the other hand, we have the gap between the curriculum models in both sectors (Training Packages and competency-based models in TAFE and content-based curriculum models in higher education) which is driving the sectors further apart, accompanied by the 'Balkanisation' of the politics surrounding the sectors, reflected in recent *separate* Senate enquiries into different aspects of each sector.

This broad context provides the backdrop for the development of pathways. The sector in which each course is based is mostly a given. Staff who develop pathways and courses that simultaneously draw on both sectors *must* include the funding, reporting and accountability differences of the two sectors in their thinking. Subjects that are taught in TAFE will incur TAFE fees, while subjects taught in higher education will incur HECS fees. TAFE staff must teach TAFE subjects, and the reverse for subjects taught in higher education. Cross-sectoral teaching can occur, but not easily, and is fraught with all sorts of industrial and political ramifications. Load must be available from both sectors and negotiated simultaneously. Shifting load (and money) between the sectors is a complex process, and in the end is not always possible, given that higher education is funded at a higher level than TAFE. TAFE *must* use Training Packages, even if teaching staff don't think they are appropriate. Higher education *must* accept the learning outcomes based on Training Packages in credit transfer arrangements, particularly in nested awards (awards that are taught in both sectors yet are part of a three-year degree). It is a 'take it or leave it' requirement. This makes teachers in both sectors unhappy, and is a reason why Training Packages have been cited as a key obstacle to the development of pathways.

Staff who want to collaborate in developing pathways or other course types that draw from both sectors must negotiate all these obstacles. This is in a context of declining public funding in both sectors and increased workloads. Yet a key factor cited by staff as facilitating pathways is staff collaboration, however this requires time – time to get to know and trust each other and to develop confidence in the standard and integrity of each other's courses.

These factors have a profound effect on how people behave and what they can do. It shapes courses and curriculum, the sectors students enter and how they move between them, how staff think about their own context and that of the other sector, the cultures and traditions that arise in each, and the work-arounds people have to construct to get around them.

How policy is made

To have a deeper understanding of the policy/practice gap in this case study we need to consider how policy is made. While 'rational-comprehensive' policy development models may be the strategic goal of government (Considine, 1992), the reality is that:

Most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice.
(Ball 1998)

The PAS policy, as is the case with most institutional policy, was developed from a dynamic exercise of power at national, state and institutional levels; and within the institution, at the central, higher education faculty and TAFE school level, and at departmental level. At each level there exists competing interests and different stake-holder groups. PAS was and is the university's response to help it to meet national and state policy contexts (particularly the need to compete for students in a marketised system in both sectors). The university sought to market and promote the benefits inherent in a dual-sector university, particularly in the possibilities that pathways offer. It was also an attempt to meet the education and training needs of its region. In developing policy the university was required to contend with the conflicting policy imperatives at the national level (eg seamless *and* Training Packages), and the missions that define each sector. *Within* each sector there are conflicting interests at the national and state level: the 'sandstone' universities *versus* the 'Dawkins' or new universities, with both arguing for a bigger slice of resources in relation to the other (particularly research funding); and the competition between public and private providers in the VET sector. In developing PAS the university was required to steer through all these competing pressures and interests. If the policy did not take account of this national context it would have been a marketing disaster.

To this complex brew must be added the history, culture and traditions of the university. PAS and pathways resonated with many in the university community, because all the university's antecedent institutions brought to various mergers a commitment to social justice and equity, and a desire to meet the learning needs of the region. However, not everyone was thrilled. Support for PAS and pathways can be envisaged as a continuum, with champions of the policy at one end and opponents at the other. Dotted along the continuum were people at various points, who changed their views and practice as the policy evolved. PAS required staff to change their practice, and in a large institution there are always groups who feel threatened by that requirement. This is because in 'any real transformation of work, new ways of doing things must sooner or later conflict with established individual and institutional interests structured into the way things were done previously' (Kemmis 2000, p 15). Understanding this helps us to more effectively translate research into practice, because it helps us to understand the *strategies* we need to develop to effect change. Again, if the policy had failed to take the institutional politics into account, it would have been dead from the beginning.

Policy evolves as it is implemented. This is because policy has an impact on how people work and what they can do. Revisions to policy are necessary, as it must be reshaped to meet new needs in light of experience. PAS has gone through several iterations since it was first implemented. The Personalised Place component of the policy has been reshaped to focus mainly on students in the western region, rather than all of Victoria. Policy has developed to reflect a plethora of pathways arrangements; customised, standardised and guaranteed pathways, with variations in each.

Has change occurred?

The experience of developing pathways at VUT shows that the University's Personalised Access and Study policy and the pathways framework has been effective in creating access to tertiary education for students from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds. The profile of the University has changed overall. Students are generally positive of their experience, and most felt supported by the University and teaching staff. The staff interviewed were, on balance, supportive of the pathways framework and saw real benefits accruing to both students and the University. Most staff had ideas as to how the process could be improved. This shows real engagement by staff with the process.

The outcomes reported here show the impact of the broader tertiary education policy framework upon the University in attempting to undertake this work. It also shows how the culture and history of the University and its staff has interacted with and reshaped this framework to create their own work environment. The Personalised Access and Study policy has changed since it was introduced in 1997. There have been several evaluations, internal and external, which have fed back into, and become part of, the policy development process. It is possible to see research translated into policy and practice over time - only it is not linear and sequential. It is all muddled in together.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between research, policy and practice by using a case study of pathways development at Victoria University of Technology. It was found that each is related and mutually dependent. Understanding how each acts upon the other is an essential condition for understanding how research is translated into practice. Much research in the VET sector is research or analysis *for* policy. This must be located within a broader set of understandings; ones that reveal the political, social, economic and cultural processes that shape the policy environment. This is so at the level of government, peak bodies, institutions and our classrooms. Consequently, analysis *of* policy must not be neglected.

Notes

1. Defined as speaking a language at home that is not English, regardless of whether English is also spoken.

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