

Presentation Theme: The economic and industry impacts of VET research

MAKING THE LINKS BETWEEN QUALITY TRAINING, GRADUATE DESTINATIONS AND BUILDING ALUMNI IN TAFE

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TAFE Institutes routinely claim their education and training offerings are high quality. But how do we really know and measure this? Clearly surveys are undertaken: Most TAFEs undertake student satisfaction surveys and there is the NCVER Student Outcomes Survey for domestic students. In addition, State jurisdictions require detailed reports of student numbers and contact hours. But what of graduate destinations? In particular for international students?

Research has shown (Cuthbert, Smith & Boey, 2008; Banks & Olsen 2008) that almost nothing is known of the outcomes of a TAFE course for international students. Do they go home after their training? Does their course allow them to work in their chosen field? Do they maintain contact with students or staff they met during their studies in Australia?

This presentation will report on research undertaken by Victorian TAFE International (VTI) on graduate destinations and alumni relations. In 2011, VTI undertook a scan of all member TAFEs in Victoria (13 TAFEs and 3 dual sector universities) to determine what activities they undertake in relation to measuring quality of outcome for international students. The research found that many TAFEs and dual sector universities were engaged in significant surveying, follow up of international students and alumni building activities. These activities are shared as good practice in our research report and will be highlighted in the presentation. Equally, the research found that some TAFEs were not engaged in significant activity researching graduate destinations for international graduates and also that the approach to graduation destination research for international students is ad hoc across the Victorian TAFE system. Our research report offers suggestions for improvement of the situation in order to adequately support claims of quality education and training in the TAFE system.

1. Introduction – A Brief History of International Education in Australia

International education in Australia had its origins in the Colombo Plans of the 1950s, where developing nations were given aid in the form of scholarships to study at Australian Universities. While education by scholarship continues, in the 1980s, international education became open to any student who was able to pay full fees for a course and who met entrance requirements. As Cuthbert, Smith & Boey (2008:) note Australian education moved from 'aid to trade'.

For the past 25 years, Australian education institutions (including universities, public and private vocational education providers, schools and specialist English language training providers) have engaged with the world by both providing their educational expertise offshore and in accepting students from other countries into their courses in Australia. In the 1990s (and until very recently), the Australian government saw this trade in education as a means of filling vacancies in skilled occupations and linked the gaining of an Australian

qualification with the opportunity to obtain permanent residency in Australia. The government has more recently moved to cut this nexus.

While much has been written about this long history of international education in Australia, including a new book commemorating the 25 years history of international education (Davis & Mackintosh 2011) little has been written about its outcomes (Cuthbert et al 2008:259). International education is Victoria's top export earner and Australia's third highest export earner, yet despite this huge scale of enterprise and the history of Australia's international student program, experts agree that little is known about the future career paths of its graduates (Banks & Olsen 2008: 23).

2. What Data is Collected in Australia on International Students?

The Australian government reports on international student enrolments (through the Australian International Education Branch of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations). DIAC (Department of Immigration and Citizenship) reports on student visa uptake according to education sector alongside its migration statistics. In addition, the ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) reports Australian export earnings (which includes the international education sector).

Australian universities each report on the earnings they make from international education, but this does not routinely occur publicly for VET institutions in Victoria. They report on fee for service earnings, but they are not required to distinguish numbers of international students within this broad category.

For university students, the Graduate Destination Survey is undertaken annually four months after graduation by Graduate Careers Australia and this survey includes students with an overseas address. In the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, a national Student Outcomes Survey is conducted annually by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research –NCVER – but this survey only includes those with an Australian address as their usual address and so separating international students is not easily done.

Many Australian universities and some (although not many) VET providers subscribe annually to the International Student Barometer survey undertaken by the i-graduate company. This survey tracks international student satisfaction with courses and teaching standards and is used as a benchmark for education quality globally. Its main function is comparing the quality of educational provision over time within one institution and in comparison with other like institutions around the world. Its primary focus is not graduate destination or career progression resulting from educational attainment.

In 2010, the Commonwealth government subsidised VET involvement in the i-graduate International Student Barometer survey in order to encourage and assist VET institutions with engaging in surveying their international students. The International Student Barometer survey will again be available for VET institutions in 2012. The 2012 survey will have a section that asks international students if they are happy to be contacted annually for the next 5 years to answer questions regarding their ongoing career progression. It will be the first attempt to systematically maintain contact with international graduates of the VET system in Australia. However since there is a cost to institutions to participate, they participate voluntarily.

Interestingly, i-graduate has recently won a tender from the UK Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to manage the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey for all UK further education colleges, which are similar to VET institutions here in Australia. They are also engaged in a survey to track the geographic and occupational destinations of international alumni from Dutch higher education institutions. The Dutch survey is sponsored by Nuffic, the Netherlands organisation for international cooperation in higher education. It appears that in other countries, which are engaged in international education, a government agency is responsible for funding the conduct of large-scale graduate destination surveys.

The only other significant survey of graduate destinations across institutions in Australia in recent times has been an online survey (reported in Banks & Olsen 2008) of nearly 2000 international student graduates of five technology universities in Australia in 2008.¹ This survey asked graduates where they currently reside and work, how long it took to get work in their field of study, whether they work for a small or multinational firm, if they are satisfied with their career progress and if they would recommend studying in Australia to others.

3. International Graduate Tracking Methods Undertaken by VTI Members

VTI members have discussed the lack of systemic data on international VET graduates on many occasions and have raised the issue with the NCVER, which is funded by the Commonwealth government to collect data on domestic students. As part of members' broader discussions, it was agreed to investigate exactly what each member institute does in relation to international student surveying and the development of alumni relations. In August and September of 2011, relevant staff in VTI member TAFEs were interviewed by phone to ascertain what efforts are undertaken to track international student graduates of the institution.

This interviewing was undertaken on behalf of VTI by research assistant Margaret Neith with financial support provided by the Victorian Department of Business and Innovation (DBI).

The VTI has 16 members, comprising 13 TAFE institutions and 3 dual sector universities. Eight of these institutions are Melbourne based and 8 are regional. The international staff members who participate in VTI activities are not the staff responsible for surveying students. The first step in this project therefore was to ascertain from VTI members, who was the most appropriate staff person to speak to about the survey work carried out at each institute.

That person was then contacted by email and/or telephoned, and questioned about what their institute is doing in relation to surveys of TAFE students - both international and local, either during or after the completion of their course. Where relevant, copies of local survey instruments were requested and mostly provided.

The research assistant conducted phone interviews with the relevant survey staff in each member institute over the month of September 2011, finding a variety of attempts to remain in contact with international students who had completed courses. Attempts had been made using mailed surveys, but results were not high, surveys had been emailed to students (again

¹ Curtin University of Technology, Queensland, University of Technology, RMIT University, University of South Australia, and University of Technology Sydney

results not high), telephoning international students was considered prohibitive in terms of cost. The most common survey was an internet-based survey using a simple tool such as SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com). However, the majority of Institutes currently undertake no surveys or research in the area of international student destination after course completion. Many contacts commented with regret on the dearth of activity and information on the destinations of their international student graduates.

3.1 Regional TAFE member institutes

One larger regional TAFE has recently instituted a graduate exit survey. However amongst the other 7 regional TAFE institutes, the efforts varied from no effort² expended on following up international graduates to informal follow up and contact kept by individual teachers and departments. A typical response regarding informal tracking from a regional institute is quoted below

We only have about 15 international students per year - the International Student Office knows them all and can keep in touch with them individually. One teacher keeps in touch with his Chinese students and the Chinese students actually did a sort of "where we are now" book for this teacher, including photos of these past students and their families. So a "survey" of such small numbers is probably not necessary when we can keep in touch with individuals.

All regional institutes routinely undertake student engagement surveys, student satisfaction, unit evaluation and student perception of educational quality surveys with their international students. One regional member noted that staff previously undertook a survey after course completion, but found that the survey return rate was so low, it became unfeasible. They now undertake course evaluation/satisfaction surveys with students who are in the last week of studying to guarantee a good response rate to the survey.

Another regional provider noted that it is currently putting together a team from across the institute to look at ways to improve surveying. This provider acknowledged that it has not been a high priority to date – following re-structure the new team hopes to report late in 2012 on new surveying plans. This provider is interested in looking at the whole international student "lifecycle" – before studying, during study and after study. This provider is also interested in tracking articulation – and admitted it has not been successful with this aim in recent times. The provider noted in interview that the new Victorian Student Number (a unique student identification number which stays with each student as s/he moves through their education), which commenced in 2011 at the secondary school and also in VET should help in tracking students after completion. The new Victorian government initiative to provide a unique student identifying number will apply to secondary school students and VET students, but not to university students. So again, tracking across the educational sectors remains difficult.

Another regional provider commented that it too would be interested in finding out specifically where its local students and international students go to continue their education – this was described as the big "missing data" issue. This regional provider has articulation agreements with six universities and yet no information on which of its TAFE students go on to learn at any of the six universities. The interviewee suggested that the universities would also like to have more information about articulation from TAFE. She noted that the

² Two regional member TAFEs had no international students during 2011

universities seem to have as much difficulty as TAFEs with tracking this type of information. Another regional provider also raised the same issue regarding articulation to other education providers.

It seems in summary that for regional providers, the number of international students is generally small and contact is maintained on a one-to-one basis. Regional providers however are very keen to work with universities to determine the best means of tracking articulation of their students into higher education (both international and local students).

Regional providers understand that development of alumni relations is something that TAFE needs to engage with and does not do successfully at present. Alumni contact provides access to valuable data about the success of programs offered to students. In addition, as one regional provider interviewee noted, alumni can provide testimonials and possibly act as mentors to new students coming to the institution.

3.2 Metropolitan TAFE and Dual Sector University members

In 2011, there were 8 metropolitan members of VTI that were either single sector TAFE institutes or dual sector universities. Of these 8 members, half do some form of survey of graduating international students and half do not.

The members who do survey their international graduates do so some 4 months after graduation. RMIT is involved in the university wide Graduate Careers Australia survey, making their results comparable with other universities in Australia. The other providers undertaking surveys are at present trialling their survey instruments. Two successful surveys of international graduates have occurred recently at Kangan and Victoria University. Their efforts are described below.

3.3 Victoria University Research on Graduates

Victoria University has taken considerable effort to retain contact with its international alumni and recently conducted a significant piece of research on the question: 'Do international student alumni contribute to global brain circulation?' The research used Victoria University alumni as a case example to answer the question. The research was focussed on asking graduates if they stayed in touch with the university, who they stayed in touch with and for what purpose.

Victoria University has an active alumni office and it was through this office and its networks with international students that the research was able to take place. The researcher, Dr Joanne Pyke (2011) reports that her *'survey went out to approximately 6,000 alumni (the actual data base was about 7,000 but there were roughly 1,000 dead links) and we received a return of 906 with roughly 800 of those completing all of the questions. So the return rate was approximately 15%.'*

It is interesting to consider this return rate: generally a return rate of 10% or higher is considered good on a survey. However, this is an already engaged audience – in other words, one could expect a higher response rate from alumni who already have a connection with the university and who choose to maintain it by giving a current email address to the university. As Pyke suggests herself, the respondents may be those who already feel a strong affiliation with the university and so they respond.

It is also interesting to note that even the alumni office whose sole work it is to stay connected with graduates found 14% (1,000 out of 7,000) of graduate email addresses on file were not current. These points are made to illustrate the level of difficulty involved in maintaining contact with students once they have graduated from any institution.

3.4 Victoria University Findings

Of the 800 graduates who responded to Pyke's survey, there is still connection with their Australian education experience, but it is primarily via electronic means (Facebook and email) and it is mainly with fellow international students and to some extent individual academics, but not largely with professional or business networks or with local students that they may have met while studying here in Australia. Less than 50% have travelled back to Australia or intend to return and for those who did return or intend to, the purpose is primarily for holiday or to visit with friends.

Pyke found that there is strong interest in maintaining connection however and that greater efforts need to be made to facilitate this. Since she surveyed alumni across both the VET and higher education sectors, it is interesting to note that her work shows that scholarship holders were significantly more likely to stay in touch than privately funded students and that no significant differences were noted between vocational and higher education graduates, although PhD graduates are most likely to stay in touch.

Pyke's study suggests there are opportunities to engage with international graduates to the benefit of both the graduate and the institution and her research will continue to investigate how alumni offices may best connect with international graduates and tap into what they actually want and need from their educational institution. She notes in particular, that the opportunity to build business relationships in Australia may be an avenue for further connection. This is surely a key issue in VET courses: do our graduates find work in their field? Could their career prospects be improved with greater business connections both here in Australia and in the home country? And in what way could the educational institution assist with building these links between international graduates and business?

A recent survey (Wiers-Jenssen 2008) showed that mobile students— those who study and graduate abroad— search for and gain work experience abroad more often than local students who do not study abroad. The same study also showed that the vast majority of international students return from abroad after graduation with many working in multinational firms or have overseas assignments more frequently in their work than local students. Thus international students do contribute to what Pyke calls, 'brain circulation' around the world.

3.5 Kangan Institute Survey of International Automotive Graduates

In 2011, VTI member institute, Kangan surveyed international graduates from its automotive courses. The online survey elicited 112 responses from students in 14 countries. Forty-eight percent (the largest proportion) of the respondents completed their course in 2009, with a further 31% finishing in 2010 and the remainder finishing in 2011. The significance of this result is that Kangan has been able to maintain contact with students who completed a VET course more than two years after completion, indicating it is possible to do so. It must be said also that 62% of respondents had either gained permanent residency status or were in the process of applying (indicating they were still in Australia).

Kangan's survey showed the majority of graduates undertook studies in light vehicle automotive and that 81% were working with 70% working in their chosen field. In the main this cohort were not undertaking any further study (78%). The majority (63%) were able to find work within 3 months of completion of their course at Kangan³. The survey asked about the relevance of the training, how Kangan could improve its training, the benefits students received and the best part of the training.

The survey by Kangan, highlights that contact with VET graduates can be maintained despite the difficulties noted above and it shows the wealth of information a survey can provide in order to continually improve the relevance and usefulness of courses offered.

4. Obstacles identified to Surveying VET International Graduates

Amongst the metropolitan VTI member providers, the survey function is managed centrally. Generally, surveys are undertaken by the research and planning area or in some cases the marketing department. They are not routinely undertaken by the international managers or department. Because of this split in responsibility, it is possible for providers to survey only their domestic students, because they are the majority and the NCVET survey is well established for that cohort.

Of those metropolitan providers that do not survey graduating international students, the responses as to why varied but all related to the difficulty and the cost of such a venture with the expectation of little return. This is not to suggest that strenuous efforts have not been made to follow up international students. One provider in particular told VTI in interview that their survey staff attended every graduation ceremony one year and spoke to each student individually after the ceremony. She handed them a survey form with an addressed envelope, gave them details about how to access the survey on-line if they preferred, emphasising how important their response was. Unfortunately the return rate was zero, even after this extensive effort.

Another provider said *they [international students] are so hard to track down and they often don't respond to surveys*. While another provider said, *we used to do it, but the response rate was so low, we don't bother now*.

Another obstacle noted was the high cost of development, administration and processing of survey instruments. It was suggested that a centralised process needs to be developed (similar to the higher education Graduate Careers Survey or the NCVET domestic student survey).

The difficulty in locating international students after graduation was also noted: with loss of email data, phone numbers and changes of address being commonplace. One provider noted her experience that students often see the course as "in the past" and have no stake in the Institute any more - they want to move on with their lives.

But this view should not go unchallenged. Kangan showed that successful surveying of international students can be done, as did Victoria University. Perhaps it is time for another combined effort? All providers undertake the NCVET survey for domestic students and if

³ Some of the results in the Kangan survey suggest there may have been technical issues with the survey instrument itself. This highlights the need to have surveying done on a large scale so that results are comparable.

they offer higher education courses, they participate in the Graduate Careers Survey. A system wide survey of international students is warranted.

5. How survey data could be used

Despite a lack of engagement overall with surveying international students and creating alumni, member institutions were aware of the value and purpose of such surveys. In interview, staff were able to highlight the uses of such data were it available to them.

- Improved marketing to attract more international students. Case histories or testimonials could be useful for demonstrating to prospective students how other students from their country had found good jobs through doing a course at a particular institute. The possibility for former students to act as mentors for other students was also mentioned.
- Making improvements to courses.
- Helping TAFE Institutes develop workplace opportunities and work placement while students are studying.
- Improving pathways to Higher Education. Major difficulties in tracking VET students who articulate to HE (both local and international) were noted – there is no consistent student ID system. Many VET students don't 'graduate' as such - they may use credits to get into HE or go to other providers.
- Improving student services.
- Performance benchmarking against other TAFE Institutes (and Private Providers).
- Articulating differences between on-shore and off-shore international student success rates.

6. Summary of key findings of this research

6.1 Who manages surveying of international students at institute level?

Although managers of international education oversee recruitment of international students, they do not manage surveying of those international students. This in itself is an interesting finding of the research. Other areas of the institute do this. In some institutes, it is carried out by research staff or strategic planning staff and in some it is undertaken by the marketing staff.

On several occasions our phone interviews found that the relevant survey/research staff had not thought to include international students in the work they are undertaking with regard to student surveying. This was either because they were considered to be a small cohort when compared with local students; they had not responded in high numbers to earlier attempts or lack of funds precluded involving them in survey work. In some cases there seemed to be confusion over who had responsibility for tracking international students.

In two instances, the international education manager referred the VTI research assistant to another member of staff for information on survey work done. When contacted that staff

member simply referred our researcher back to the international manager. The emphasis in most member institutes was on domestic students. In some cases fee-for-service students, including those from overseas were simply ‘forgotten’ by survey staff. This experience has ramifications for the future improvement of surveying graduate destinations of international students.

6.2 Student ID numbers

The VSN is a student identification number that has been assigned by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to all students in Victorian government and non-government schools, and to students up to the age of 24 undertaking Vocational Education and Training with a TAFE, Registered Training Organisation or Adult and Community Education (ACE) provider (referred to collectively as VET Providers). It also covers international students, but does not cover students in higher education. So there is still no easy way to track the progress of a VET student into further study. This has been highlighted as “missing data” in this research. The Commonwealth government is considering the introduction of a similar ID system across the country.

6.3 Lack of systemic data

The LH Martin Institute (part of Melbourne University) regularly undertakes research on articulation issues. Research staff are particularly interested in the issue of students going on to further study from their VET course and if the further study or work is in the same broad field of education. In interview with staff at LH Martin, a comment was made that the current LH Martin research must use the ABS survey of education and training as its main data source, as TAFE institutions cannot provide the needed data for this research.

The NCVER has indicated it is interested in providing survey data of graduate destinations of international students, (personal communication – Hugh Guthrie) but is not funded by government to provide survey data of graduate destinations of international students.

Following the example set by Nuffic and the UK Higher Education Funding Council for England (see section 2), it may be that the best means of undertaking graduate destination research of international students in VET in Australia is by a large-scale survey supported by the Commonwealth Government. This is suggested because of the prohibitive cost and as the best means of providing benchmarking across the private and public sectors and in each state of Australia. For such research to be successful some form of student identifier and accurate email addresses would be required and the Commonwealth government is planning to introduce such a number.

6.4 Limited focus on alumni

While universities fund alumni relations departments, this is not commonplace in VET. None of the stand-alone TAFE VTI members have alumni offices, although some do undertake alumni activities, in particular within the faculties. A good place to start with this work is to provide email addresses that students must use while studying and which they may still use after completion of study. In most cases in this research, students were not required to use a student email address in communication with the institute and were not given an email address to use for life. The exception is Victoria University, which now provides an email address for its students, john.smith@live.vu.edu.au. This address must be used in communication with the university and may be used after course completion. It is the key

means (in addition to the university Facebook site) of keeping in contact with students who have completed study.

Students are expected to regularly check their account for updates on the management of their course, key student administration matters, university events and individual emails from lecturers. Victoria University makes the use of this email address appealing with

- 10GB of email storage
- 25GB online storage (password protected) through Windows Live SkyDrive
- instant messaging
- improved calendars
- photo sharing
- Multiple browser support
- SMS alerts to student mobile phone.

7. Conclusion

This research has shown limited surveying of international graduate destinations among VTI member institutes. It did indicate a willingness to undertake graduate destination surveying of international students, an understanding of its usefulness, whilst at the same time highlighting obstacles to implementation at the institute level.

This report recommends that if Victorian TAFEs wish to demonstrate their commitment to quality education, they must engage in both graduate destination surveys of all students and in building alumni relations. Smart and Ang (1993) have highlighted that a view of education simply as a trade –just another export commodity – is not how education is considered in many Asian cultures. It undermines the status and role of education to consider it an export commodity. Therefore it is imperative that this intelligence is gathered routinely. However, it is likely to be beyond the scope of individual institutions to achieve and is much more useful for benchmarking purposes if such surveying is done on a national scale. VTI recommends that this option be discussed at state and national level.

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