

Submission to the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord

Personal submission by Adjunct Professor Robin Shreeve

Executive summary

This submission is a comment on Section 3.1.2, “A more aligned tertiary education system”.

Whilst strongly supporting greater alignment, equalisation of funding and greater permeability between VET and Higher Education for students, industry and institutions, I would not want to see a Higher Education paradigm of largely institutional delivered programs universally imposed on VET. This might result in a separate Work Based Learning sector emerge which has partially happened in the UK.

Evidence and background points

I have been the Director of three large VET Institutions – two in Australia (North Coast and Western Sydney Institutes of TAFE) and one in the UK (City of Westminster College). I was also CEO of Skills Australia and Deputy Director General of TAFE and Community Education in NSW. I am currently an Adjunct Professor at Federation University and sit as an independent director on the board of Western Sydney University Enterprises.

Policy making in Australia tends to be critically influenced by senior officials and politicians who have experienced HE more than VET. This can lead to only partially correct assumptions. For example, a Vice Chancellor of a Queensland University who had recently taken over a VET provider once told me with the best of intentions that he wanted to equalise the undergraduate and apprentice experience as he thought apprentices were receiving a lesser deal. He was therefore proposing to make all his apprentices full time students like his undergraduates. He seemed to have no idea that apprentices were employees as much as students. He did not seem to understand that apprenticeship was about work based learning.

Greater industry involvement in policy making, especially from people with operational experience, would help address these limited assumptions.

Though work based learning is becoming far more common in HE it is not universal like in a registered apprenticeship. It has challenges as unfortunately not everyone in industry sees it as a benefit rather than a cost – even as a means to address contemporary skill shortages.

VET and HE have different roles, functions and often clients. But, it is increasingly common for Australians to experience both. It is not at all uncommon for a university graduate to go to TAFE to learn a skill such as how to fly a drone or how to administer CPR.

But the majority of VET students are enrolled in single units (microcredentials) and to a lesser extent Certificate 3 level (i.e. apprenticeship programs).

Student enrolments at AQF Levels 5/6 and above such as Diplomas where there is an overlap with HE are a minority. Yet we spend enormous effort and policy attention on this area.

VET student enrolments by qualification level

	2020	2021	2022
Total	3 943 400	4 306 710	4 527 230
Graduate diploma	5 185	6 730	9 945
Graduate certificate	3 065	3 175	3 065
Advanced diploma	61 890	63 015	57 270
Diploma	330 810	352 340	321 450
Certificate IV	437 160	483 545	476 300
Certificate III	872 415	921 910	918 600
Certificate II	368 415	371 555	355 445
Certificate I	97 690	96 130	81 960
Non-AQF level	2 488 410	2 843 445	3 133 910

Source: NCVET 2023, *Total VET students and courses 2022: students DataBuilder*

Though perhaps a minor policy point Certificate 3 and microcredentials, that is the majority of what VET delivers, would be classified by the OECD as ISCED Level 4 “post secondary -non tertiary”.

Post-secondary non-tertiary education

Serves to broaden rather than deepen the knowledge, skills and competencies gained in upper secondary level.

Programmes may be designed to increase options for participants in the labour market, for further studies at tertiary level

ISCED 4

(OECD (2022), *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en.p> 19)

Philosophically I wonder if it is somewhat misleading to conceptualise Tertiary Education as a hierarchy with Certificate One at one end and a Doctorate at the other. I accept this has often been modified into a “snakes and ladders” conceptualisation with students going down as well as up the ladder. But there is a considerable difference between acquiring a higher education qualification as the principal base qualification or foundation of a professional career and learning a specific skill.

I sometimes wonder if the now derided distinction between “education” and “training” did not have some utility in policy discussions.

Suggested recommendation

That whilst encouraging permeability between VET and HE differences in the roles, functions, level of qualifications and delivery styles are recognised and that an HE paradigm is not universally imposed on VET. This needs VET qualified and experienced professionals on national policy making and funding bodies.