

**TRANSCRIPT***PERSPECTIVE***LEARNING JOURNEYS IN THE TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR****Professor Roger Harris**

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In my work at the University of South Australia, I often come into contact with students who, as well as studying in the higher education sector, have also undertaken accredited TAFE subjects. Some have even started their learning pathway (or journey) by doing some accredited training in a neighbourhood house, or through a private registered training organization. All of these providers can be seen as part of what we know as the tertiary education sector.

An issue I am particularly interested in is the movement of learners between tertiary education sectors. I am not saying that transition from school to some form of further education (or work) is unimportant. But there is much discussed and researched about that pathway. So I am more fascinated in the transitions after school.

The Bradley Review of late 2008 has stimulated a lot of debate; arguably, its most interesting proposal was for a more integrated tertiary education system. What might such a system look like? If the sectors become marriage partners, I don't think we would want them to become so intimate that they risk losing their distinctiveness, nor so disenchanted that they separate or divorce.

Certainly the growing complexity in relationships between the tertiary sectors is being progressively highlighted in research. But what stands out to me is the pre-occupation with structural matters. Studies heavily focus on articulation and curriculum issues between institutions, attempts at blurring boundaries between sectors, and accreditation arrangements. It seems to me that a quite different, and perhaps more fruitful, perspective on sectoral relationships might be gained by focusing on learners. What is actually happening in reality, and what do they think?

However, this is a tricky area. Examining pathways presents a challenge when people engage in multiple learning and earning transitions throughout their lives. But what we need, I contend, is more research on the nature of the multi-directional movements of learners between HE (**higher education**), VET (**vocational education and training**) and ACE (**adult and community education**). This information would assist policy-makers and institutional leaders with insights into how best to position one sector with another: e.g. ACE and VET, or VET and HE. This would also be to the advantage of learners with changing needs, expectations and desired educational pathways.

I do think that integration implies optimum fluidity for learners within and between sectors, for equity and efficiency reasons. In a society committed to lifelong learning, and an economy requiring a knowledgeable, skilled and adaptable workforce, it's essential there is room to move, according to shifting interests and circumstances. These might include: changing geographical location, life events, career opportunities, or simply late personal development.

I have recently undertaken two studies on learner movement in Australia and in Singapore. The Australian one generated two reports: *Student Traffic* and *Crazy Paving*. Both are available free from the web, the VOCED database maintained by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. The Singaporean report, *Mind the gap*, has only just been completed, and is still under review in Singapore where I spent three months late last year as a Research Fellow.

The Australian study investigated the extent and nature of the two-way traffic of learners between VET and university, surveying 556 individuals in South Australia who had experienced both sectors. The Singaporean study focused on the transition of 111 graduates from universities and polytechnics into vocational education, called the Workforce Skills Qualifications sector. Both projects thus involved individuals who had engaged within a lifelong learning framework in studies in two different educational sectors: the academic and the vocational. They were therefore in a uniquely informed position to reflect on their experiences.

There are many conclusions that can be drawn from these two studies; here, I briefly offer six in the time available.

One is that the educational sectors are permeable to a certain extent. While the pathways may not be seamless, they do appear functional. In the case of the Australian learners, there was movement both ways, and while it was difficult to capture the extent, our estimate was that there were more learners with university experience enrolling in VET than learners with VET qualifications enrolling in university. This is very interesting, as it seems counter-intuitive. So learners are making transitions.

A second conclusion is that learner motivation in both sectors and countries is similar. Learners responded similarly to questions about reasons for undertaking further study, emphasising employment prospects and personal development. Thus, greater recognition, I think, needs to be given to the different but increasingly complementary roles that the tertiary sectors play.

A third conclusion is that transition in both countries was not seen as difficult, but was seen as different. High proportions of learners found moving from one sector to the other a quite *different* educational experience. Examples of differences were assessment processes, cost of studying, course structure and teaching style. These differences identify and highlight particular areas that are most likely to be stumbling blocks for learners.

A fourth conclusion is that there is generally a lack of awareness of career guidance services, few used them, and many did not feel that they needed them. Some had been influenced by a significant other (like a parent or teacher), others by their peers, but predominantly they spoke of making their own choices, either through intuition or by using the web. They expressed a strong sense of personal agency. They implicitly believed that they were their own career managers.

A fifth conclusion is that few applied for credit transfer. The studies found minimal credit exemption was occurring, even though a more integrated system would imply that there should be recognition of work experience and prior learning.

A sixth conclusion is that gains outweighed losses. Gains in moving to the vocational sector centred on the acquiring of practical knowledge, boosting confidence and credibility, and contributing to the building of networks. For a few, completion of such qualifications also led to promotion or a salary increase. Gains in moving to the academic sector included their university qualification, better opportunities and salary improvement, deeper understanding of the field, and

personal satisfaction. Losses were harder to identify. Some cited a lack of course relevance; others loss of time with loved ones and other activities; yet others the increased costs incurred.

In my view, what these studies show is there is value in analysing learner accounts of their lived experiences. Understanding how phenomena are experienced by learners themselves adds a valuable dimension to official interpretations from governments and media.

The respondents' frequent moves unveil how the sectors are playing complementary roles in providing for the needs of learners at different ages and stages. A richer understanding of these pathways, and the gains and losses, can assist learners themselves in navigating through educational sectors with very different missions, cultures and practices.

So *í* rather than *Minding the gap*, perhaps I should finish with 'mending the gap' between academic and vocational sectors! This would mesh more neatly with the Bradley Report's advocacy of a 'more integrated tertiary education system' #