Journal of Vocational Education & Training

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjve20

Stepping into higher education from the vocational education sector in Australia: student perceptions and experiences

Sarah O’Shea a, Pauline Lysaght a & Kathleen Tanner a

a Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

Version of record first published: 04 Jul 2012

To cite this article: Sarah O’Shea, Pauline Lysaght & Kathleen Tanner (2012): Stepping into higher education from the vocational education sector in Australia: student perceptions and experiences, Journal of Vocational Education & Training, DOI:10.1080/13636820.2012.691532

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2012.691532

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Stepping into higher education from the vocational education sector in Australia: student perceptions and experiences

Sarah O’Shea*, Pauline Lysaght and Kathleen Tanner

Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

(Received 2 August 2011; final version received 20 February 2012)

It is not unusual to hear study in the vocational education sector referred to as a ‘stepping stone’ into further studies in the higher education environment. What this pathway entails for those who choose it is not immediately clear however. This article reports on research conducted with a small cohort of students who arrived at an Australian university with advanced standing or credit transfer based on their studies in the vocational sector. A narrative inquiry approach highlights the voices of these participants drawn through stories of their individual experiences of the transition to higher education. Recommendations related to structural and educational change are based on evidence that this vocational ‘stepping stone’ can mean different things to different people.

**Keywords:** credit transfer; university; vocational education; mature age students; transition

Introduction

The experience of first year students in Australian universities is well documented (McInnis, James, and Hartley 2000; Krause et al. 2005; James, Krause, and Jennings 2010). Less understood are the issues faced by students who enter university with advanced standing or credit transfer gained through courses completed in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. This article explores the experiences of one such group of students transitioning between Australian Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges and the university environment. In Australia, TAFE qualifications may satisfy academic entry requirements to courses in the Higher Education (HE) sector and may also contribute to exemptions in particular programs of study. Advanced standing, which is also known as credit transfer, refers to the amount of credit carried from an earlier program of study into another where the content and/or complexity of the material is deemed equivalent. Typically, this results in a reduction to the number of subjects and possibly the time required to complete the second qualification. Individual institutions in the Australian HE sector determine entry requirements as well as patterns of advanced standing. Details of these arrangements are identified by the Universities Admissions Centre (UAC) as well as the individual universities involved.

In 2010, there were 1.8 million students enrolled in the Australian public VET system compared to just under 1.2 million domestic and international students.
enrolled with HE providers (NCVER 2010; DEEWR 2011). In both sectors, the majority of students are enrolled at publically funded institutions and historically, each sector has been regarded as distinct from the other. As Brown et al. (2011) explain, VET in Australia is perceived as delivering ‘knowledge and skills for particular occupations’ (2) whereas the HE sector has variously been defined as providing ‘a general mechanism for economic and social change as well as...research and teaching to further understanding and the development of knowledge’ (3). However, the distinctions between school, vocational and higher education are becoming increasingly ‘blurred’ within Australia (Cameron 2004; McLaughlin and Mills 2011). Many schools now offer students the opportunity to obtain vocational certificates whilst vocational providers, particularly TAFEs, are being encouraged to offer degree programs. Similarly, HE institutions are affiliating their courses more closely to the vocational environment via industry links and placements (Brown et al. 2011). This is reflective of the European context, underpinned by the Bologna Declaration (1999) on Higher Education and the Copenhagen Declaration (2002) on VET. In varying degrees, both declarations highlight the need for ‘seamless’ or ‘harmonious’ transfer between sectors as well as recognizing the need for widening participation and lifelong learning (EURYDICE 2011; Powell and Solga 2011; McLaughlin and Mills 2011; European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training n.d.).

The numbers of TAFE students enrolled in Australian universities is largely determined by competition for places from school leavers, particularly amongst the elite or sandstone universities (known as the Group of Eight or Go8) in Australia. Aside from the Go8 universities, there is also a group of middle-ranking universities known as the Australian Technology Network and the 1960s and 1970s universities. The lowest ranked universities are usually those that received university status post-1988 (Wheelahan 2009). Wheelahan (2009) notes that in 2007, 62% of commencing students in Go8 universities were derived from high schools whilst only 2.7% were admitted on the basis of TAFE qualifications. In other universities approximately 41.7% of commencing students were school leavers and 12.6% had prior VET qualifications (Wheelahan 2009). Such differentials have been reported across a number of years and indicate stratification in the higher education environment as well as a lack of consistency in the way these individuals are treated across institutions (Watson 2006). However, Australia is not the only country to display such educational stratification. Reay et al. (2001) and more recently, Hoelscher et al. (2008) note that in the United Kingdom the stratification of the HE sector into pre- and post-1992 universities is clear when student entry routes are examined. Students with school-based qualifications largely access the more prestigious pre-1992 universities whilst the post-1992 institutions attract proportionally more students with a VET background. Hoelscher et al. (2008) suggest that this pattern may be the result of either students being ‘pathwayed’ into less prestigious institutions due to organisational affiliations or the result of self-selection whereby individuals actually limit themselves to less prestigious educational establishments.

In Australia, there is movement between the HE and VET sector, the percentage of domestic students admitted to HE institutions on the basis of TAFE results accounts for approximately 9.6% of total commencing enrolments (Karmel 2008). This percentage will increase as current government policy committed to broadening pathways between the two sectors is enacted. It is expected that by 2020, 40% of all people over the age of 25 will be studying towards an undergraduate degree.
Given this political agenda, universities are increasingly expected to ‘cater for a larger and more diverse group of incoming first year students’ (James et al. 2010, 1). Nevertheless, as Watson (2008) cautions, increased access does not guarantee success and the challenge for universities is to understand the requirements of students who enter with advanced standing from the VET sector. In this regard, a recent study by Long, Ferrier, and Heagney (2006) conducted with 14 Australian universities noted that 24.4% of students with a trade, vocational or ‘other’ qualification dropped out in the first year of university compared with 13.7% from the general student population. Whilst good employment prospects in recent years may account for some of this attrition there is no national data on the departure rate of students transitioning from the VET into the HE sector. Individual institutions may make attempts to track this particular student group but they are difficult to identify on entry and ‘exit’ data are limited. Detailed information reflecting the academic progress of students in this category would undoubtedly provide a more solid basis for supporting this group.

Albeit limited, Australian research suggests that at least some of the issues faced by students in transition rest on ‘the contrast between the competency-based orientation of TAFE and the theoretical orientation of the university’ (Heirdsfield, Walker, and Walsh 2005, 423). Associated issues involve the perceptions of university staff and the limited nature of teaching and learning resources designed specifically to support students’ needs (Heirdsfield et al. 2005). These issues are in addition to those typically faced by the broader first year student population and may well lead to increased feelings of isolation and uncertainty for those students from the vocational sector (McInnis et al. 2000). However, this transition process cannot be defined in a universal sense and, as Swaminathan and Alfred (2001) argue, any emphasis on ‘commonality’ can ultimately ‘promote invisibility’ (30). James et al. (2010) endorse this view and emphasise the need to determine the experience of particular student subgroups given that ‘the student experience varies greatly according to students’ backgrounds’ (8).

The current study investigated the experiences of students enrolled in programs offered by the Faculty of Education at an Australian regional university in NSW. The participants had largely entered undergraduate study with advanced standing from qualifications completed at Diploma level within the TAFE system. The institution is not part of the Go8 but was awarded university status prior to 1988 and has been identified as the highest performing public university in Australia overall for ‘domestic graduates’ in the independent Good Universities Guide 2012. The Guide also notes that advanced standing for previous studies at TAFE is awarded to 11% of students enrolling at this institution and that this figure is in the average range when compared with other institutions in the HE sector in Australia.

Identifying each student cohort’s profile and needs in the first year of study is an important task for universities and a basic step in the process of improving the quality of services provided. Rather than locating difference within a deficit framework (Swaminathan and Alfred 2001) the research outlined in this article has the potential to enrich and inform the learning environment, promoting diversity in a positive manner. The research process provided an opportunity for participants to voice their concerns and to raise issues for discussion that were significant for them following their arrival at university. Their stories highlight the ways in which this particular route into university helped shape their higher education experiences.
Compounding problems of ‘invisibility’

Research studies that qualitatively examine transitional experiences of students moving between the VET and HE sectors in Australia are limited, with few studies focusing on specific student cohorts or how this particular subgroup performs academically (Harris 2010; Brown et al. 2011; Tickell and Smyrnios 2004). Reasons for this may include the difficulties academic staff experience in identifying students after their arrival either because of systemic limitations or the reluctance of students to self-disclose regarding their status. Brunken and Delly (2010) refer to students who transition from one type of institution (i.e. vocational) to another (i.e. higher education) as the ‘hidden disadvantaged’ (143) in this regard. This invisibility and the disadvantages they experience as a consequence are compounded by the fact that such students may articulate directly into second year or into subjects at various levels in their first year of study and so effectively miss out on the orientation activities designed for commencing students. In the United Kingdom, there is a growing body of research that aims to understand the transition of various student cohorts into higher education in more depth (Crozier et al. 2008; Christie et al. 2008). Hoelscher et al. (2008) draw on the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) funded Degrees of Success research conducted on learner’s transition between the vocational and higher education sector. This research utilised a combination of large datasets and interviews with both student and academic stakeholders to gain an understanding of what transitioning between these sectors means for those involved. Pike and Harrison (2011) and Penketh and Goddard (2008) have focused on students transitioning from Foundation Degrees, completed through Further Education Colleges (FECs), to honours degrees within a university environment. ‘Work related foundation degrees’ (Pike and Harrison 2011, 56) were established as a response to the government higher education strategy of 2000 and were aimed at enabling underrepresented students to access higher education through a seamless progression route (Penketh and Goddard 2008).

Within Australia, much of the research and findings on this topic reside within ‘grey’ literature, that is, papers presented at conferences rather than via journal publications resting on a peer reviewed process. This factor may well indicate that transition from the VET to HE sectors in Australia is an emerging area of study that warrants more detailed investigation. Cameron (2004), at the University of South Australia, conducted one of the few research projects examining the processes of transition for TAFE students. This particular cohort was defined as older with negative school experiences and significant educational disadvantage. Often the first in their family to enter university, the students in Cameron’s study lacked a fundamental understanding of institutional expectations and practice but were expected to adjust to study at a second year level whilst navigating their initial transition to the university.

The research outlined in this article examines individual student experiences of ‘stepping’ from vocational education to university and reflects Harris’ (2010) suggestion that:

…a quite different, and perhaps even more fruitful, perspective on sectoral relationships might be gained by focusing on learners and asking: what are they doing and what do they think? (19)
Using semi-structured interviews and adopting a narrative inquiry approach provides space for students to voice their reality of transitioning into and engaging with a HE institution.

Narrative inquiry: approach and methodology
This research is Interpretivist in nature and rests on a qualitative approach that encourages participants to construct accounts of their past experiences within the framework of their current activities. Semi-structured interviews present a vehicle for this, providing students with opportunities to make sense of their own particular journey to university. The narratives that emerged from these interviews provide an insight into the experiences of this student group as a whole.

Narrative is a fundamental means of communication and its existence in a variety of forms is well documented (Riessman 2008). The stories that are gathered through this approach are powerful devices, valued by researchers for their ability to convey detailed, complex and often intimate experiences whilst providing a foundation for change. Interpreting the data is ‘a complex and dynamic craft’ that requires many changes and renegotiations both in terms of ‘organising styles and analytic approach’ (Miller and Crabtree 1999, 128–9).

Aims
The aims of this study were to examine the stories of participants to determine their reasons for choosing to pursue a pathway to university and to understand their experiences in the first year of study. By focusing on the content of narratives and the ways in which this content reflects how the speaker makes sense of these events, the intention was to highlight the implications of this particular transition in their life. The ways in which individuals ‘story’ their personal experiences enables connections to be made with broader cultural considerations, not only highlighting what is deemed as ‘storyworthy’ but also what ‘matters’ (Narayan and George 2002, 817).

Design
In this study the focus was on a group of eight students enrolled in two undergraduate courses within a Faculty of Education in 2010. In that year, 35 newly enrolled students, nearly 10% of the cohort in the Faculty, applied for credit on the basis of previous study at TAFE. This figure is slightly below the institution’s average of 11% mentioned earlier. Of the eight students who participated in the present study all had completed qualifications at the Diploma level, typically two years of full time equivalent study. The majority had completed a Diploma in Children’s Services, which provides a qualification to work in the early childhood sector in Australia.

Interviews were semi-structured in nature with a focus on the following broad areas:

• Reasons for coming to university
• Initial experiences of this environment
• Expectations and realities
Factors that assisted or hindered student success

Identity formation

The semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that the flow of conversation ultimately directed the sequence in which questions were asked. The objective was to allow participants the ‘space’ to develop their own stories rather than impose a rigid formula to the interview. Following transcription the interview text was coded in two phases namely initial coding and then focused coding (Charmaz 2006). Initial coding was conducted on a line-by-line basis, examining words and segments of text for ‘analytic import’ (42). These largely artificial and simplistic constructs enable the exploration of particular social phenomena and, as a heuristic device, coding allows greater analytic clarity and a large degree of reflection. Coding was also conducted at an inductive and abductive level, in order to break through the ‘ordinariness of a routine event’ (Charmaz 2006, 53). The techniques utilised to ‘interrogate’ text included completing line-by-line analysis and using ‘in-vivo’ coding with the software program NVivo (Version 8) so that the emerging categories remained embedded within the participants’ discourse (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 65).

Participants

The eight participants were recruited through student emails and advertisements via the Faculty website, as well as snowball sampling where one participant recommended the study to colleagues or friends. While the participants were all female, there was great diversity in relation to background experiences, the pathway each had followed to undertaking study at university and career destinations. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 57 years, with the younger students moving directly from school to TAFE and then to university in a relatively direct manner. The pathway for older students had more diversions and interruptions describing a variety of stages in their educational and employment careers before arrival at university. This non-linear trajectory is not uncommon for women as they re-enter study pathways and the workforce following child rearing in particular (Lysaght 2001; Crossan et al. 2003; Pascall and Cox 1993). A linear trajectory for women traditionally followed a path of education, career and family commitments but in recent decades a more dynamic pattern can be traced. Harrington and Hall (2007), for example, discuss the notion of career for men and women as a series of learning cycles that occur within the broader context of one’s life, encompassing points of change and transitions across the lifespan. Study at the tertiary level at different points across the lifespan allows not only the accrual of additional qualifications but opportunities for new career destinations.

Of the eight participants in this study, none had met university entry requirements when they completed secondary school and initially at least higher education was not regarded as a destination. In broad terms, three groups based in part on ages and similar study/work trajectories emerge from the stories of the eight participants.

In the first group, the movement from school to the VET sector and then to university was seamless or linear in the sense that this progression was not interrupted in any way. The youngest participant, Belinda, left high school at the end of Year 10, aged 16, and immediately began a Diploma in Children’s Services. Whilst younger than most of her TAFE peers, Belinda was 18 when she entered university, the same age as most school leavers entering the HE sector. The pathway she
followed to a degree in early childhood is slightly unusual because of the move from Year 10 directly into the Diploma. Included in this group are Naomi (22) and Anna (24). Both had completed Year 12, the final year of high school, and both had entered the Diploma in Children’s Services followed immediately by entry to the university. Naomi entered a degree in primary teaching and Anna enrolled into the early childhood degree.

Four women in their thirties comprise the second group: Nancy (35), Mary (36), Lucy (37) and Lara (38). In this group and the following, a non-linear trajectory is obvious and the notion of a more dynamic pathway in terms of personal or family life, study and work is evident. Nancy, for example, had moved directly from school to TAFE before working and starting her family. She initially entered an Arts degree at the institution where this study was conducted, completed one year and then transferred into the primary teaching degree. Mary also went directly from Year 12 to TAFE before withdrawing because of illness. She later completed TAFE studies at Certificate and Diploma levels in between working, travelling and raising a family, finally entering the degree in early childhood. Following completion of secondary school, Lucy worked and travelled for several years, eventually enrolling in the Diploma and then entering the primary teaching degree. Lara, the eldest in this sub-group, completed a TAFE Certificate following Year 12, worked and raised her family before returning to TAFE to gain the Diploma and then working again as a teacher’s aide. It was her work in primary classrooms that resulted in her desire to teach and the resulting entry into the primary teaching program.

Alone in the third group is Catherine aged 57 years. Catherine worked initially after leaving school before withdrawing from the workforce to raise her family. In more recent years as her children moved away from home she completed the Diploma at TAFE and gained work in an early childhood setting. She could see that a degree would allow her greater autonomy as an early childhood teacher and enrolled in the degree whilst continuing full time work in a pre-school.

In summary, four of the participants were enrolled in the early childhood degree and the other four in the primary teaching degree. Established pathways exist for students who have completed diploma level study in the VET sector although individual variations reflect personal circumstances. Table 1 (below) summarises details about each participant:

Analysis and discussion
The following sections explore how the students chose to define and narrate their experiences of arriving at university with advanced standing. Whilst the students’ accounts reflect different pathways, commonalities of experience and perspectives on this journey were noted. Some broad themes emerged from their stories and provide a focus for the following discussion, which has been grouped under the following themes:

- Advanced standing and prior learning experience
- Perspectives of vocational providers compared to university
- Knowledge and positionality within the university environment

The quotes that follow are referenced by pseudonyms allocated to each participant.
**Advanced standing and prior learning experience**

Students who received advanced standing perceived it in both negative and positive terms. In all, half of the students interviewed identified negative outcomes associated with this process whilst only one referred to this in positive terms. For some, there was a certain level of confusion about the nature of the advanced standing and why it was awarded. Naomi, for example, observed that ‘advanced standing kind of makes it sound like I stand ahead…’ and yet there appeared to be little advantage, given that she received limited credit transfer into her degree. Lara made a similar point:

[I]…don’t feel that my advanced standing has really given me anything. I don’t feel that there is really any recognition when it is truly looked at [in] the big picture, there really is no advanced standing. (Lara)

Those who viewed advanced standing negatively often perceived it as a ‘loss’ in relation to the range of subjects they could select. Both Lucy and Naomi lamented the fact that electives were no longer available to them; both regarded this as impacting on the quality of their learning experience:

It was actually electives that I got off and I said: ‘well electives is something that I am actually really interested in’ because that is… personal learning. (Lucy)

I don’t wait for electives that are never going to come. (Naomi)

However, while the basis for obtaining advanced standing was described negatively by some, the actual educational experience was not similarly regarded. Instead, attending TAFE prior to coming to university was universally regarded as beneficial. This perspective may have been due in part to a rose coloured glasses syndrome but the nature of these reflections is worthy of further analysis.

On a practical level, the participants explained how attending TAFE had provided foundational knowledge of the discipline, which largely complemented what they were learning at university:

I go and sometimes get out the TAFE stuff to help me try and understand the Uni stuff. (Mary)

So things come up and I’m like: ‘Oh I remember that from TAFE’ (Belinda)

Four of the students refer to their prior VET learning experiences as an opportunity to ‘try things out’ career or study wise. In terms of studying, the students talk about TAFE as providing a ‘taster’ or confirming the area as suitable for a long-term career. For example, Anna explains how she now advises friends and family to use TAFE as a means to experiment with the profession, explaining that this has less financial repercussions than university. Similarly, Belinda explains how attending TAFE made her realise that she has a ‘passion’ for teaching young children but she simultaneously wonders about the commitment of her university peers:

I kind of look at some of them and…I wonder if it’s really what they want to do or if it’s just something they have come to after school.
TAFE was characterised as a safe space to experiment without making the time and financial commitments required of university. The more intimate environment of TAFE acted as an enabler for participants. Lara explains that at age 18, university just seemed ‘too big’ and ‘too academic’ so attending TAFE provided a safer space to learn:

TAFE wasn’t as huge and I think too because TAFE was more hands on or it seemed to be more hands on. (Lara)

Similarly, Nancy explains that she prefers ‘the more tutorial style teaching at TAFE where it is smaller groups.’ These perceived differences extended beyond the structural elements of the institutions and were defined in relation to various facets of both institutions. The next section provides an overview of these differences as identified by the students themselves.

**Perspectives of vocational providers when compared to university**

Participants identified three main areas of difference between TAFE and university namely structural and economic variations, the diversity of learning methods and expectations as well as relational differences. Whilst five of the eight participants entered university after furthering their life experiences, their perceptions of difference were largely similar to those who directly transitioned from TAFE, however an age and maturity perspective was evident.

Similar to Cameron’s (2004) study ‘like high school’ was the comparative used by six of the eight participants in describing the TAFE class structure, timetable and teaching style. Classes were small and stable with all required content presented by the teacher. As Lara explains: ‘you were handfed a lot.’ University on the other hand, with the mass formal lectures and associated academic expectations, was variously found to be ‘confusing,’ ‘different’ and ‘frustrating’ (Lucy, Anna).

Participants in the study perceived the TAFE experience as supported and controlled (Pearce, Murphy, and Conroy 2000), one in which you are ‘never alone’ (Belinda), whilst university was deemed a mass system due to its structure, size and learning perspective. Mary describes how she found university to be ‘such a big place with so much resources and so many different teachers.’ Three students explicitly refer to university in hierarchical terms, perceiving it as being higher in status, using terms like ‘pinnacle’ (Naomi) or ‘way up here’ (Lara). Mary explains that it was precisely this elevated status that made her dismiss this pathway initially as she thought: ‘I would never get into Uni; there is no way….’ Such a sentiment echoes Green and Webb’s (1997) study where the majority of their alternative entrants did not perceive of university as a possibility after leaving school; there was clear delineation around who could attend university and who could not.

It is within the context of expectations around learning methods that the differences between TAFE and university experiences were most distinct. Similar to the ‘recurring, overlapping variables’ reported by Dickson (2000, n.p.), the depth of knowledge required at a university level was described as being well above that of TAFE, which was grounded in vocational experiential learning. Catherine claims university was ‘more in depth…[you’ve] got to be a self-learner…committed to keep reading’ but continues by explaining how it came as a shock to realise ‘there was so much learning to be done.’
The expectation of independent, self-directed learning at university was cited by five participants as vastly different to the competency skills-based learning at TAFE. Assessment tasks at TAFE were reported as outcomes based, focussing on specific skills required for industry work, and were based on pass/fail whilst graded written assignments formed the basis of university assessments. Whilst some written assignments were completed during their TAFE studies differences in marks were noted: ‘coming from TAFE with distinctions to come here to just pulling credits’ (Mary).

Both Anna and Lucy failed assignments during first year university because of referencing requirements. The narratives of these students echo findings from Watson (2006) who found ‘work that received good marks at TAFE was failed at uni’ (28) due in part to the ‘expectations regarding academic literacy…[that involves] skills of critical thinking and analysis’ (Watson 2008, 44).

Mary explains that more depth was required for academic writing in university and an increased complexity of terminology and language usage. She also notes how ‘she wouldn’t have survived [uni] without having gone to TAFE first…TAFE stuff help[ed] me understand the uni stuff.’ This statement echoes the foundational nature of TAFE studies mentioned earlier and frequently referred to by the students throughout these interviews.

While the participants saw value in their previous vocational studies, this value-add was not necessarily acknowledged within the university sector. Mary, Lara, and Lucy, as mature aged students, variously describe a sense of disconnectedness at the beginning of their degree. Lara refers to the age differential within the student cohort, saying how initially she felt ‘like [she] should be at home baking cookies’ whilst Lucy and Mary believed no recognition was given by lecturing staff for prior learning and/or life experiences. Lucy describes an unspoken expectation that she ‘was coming to the university with a blank slate…starting back from scratch again.’ Part of this feeling was attributed to the nature of the relationships between the students and staff, which further influenced the perceptions of participants.

All participants reflected upon the new relationships and networks established within the university environment. For Lucy, Mary, Belinda and Naomi the relationships between academic staff and participants in a TAFE context was summed up as being ‘a lot more personal’ (Lucy) due predominately to the daily face-to-face contact with teaching staff. Relationships with university lecturers on the other hand were more impersonal in part due to lecture/tutorial structure, as well as institutional protocol as Lucy explains: ‘there was a certain level of protocol, not unfriendliness.’ However, Mary found technology enabled her ‘more contact with teachers through SOLS [Online Learning System] and emailing’ along with the open door policy of many of her lecturers. This surprised Mary as she was warned at TAFE that she would need to ‘toughen up and stuff like that’ because contact with staff would be minimal.

The relative youth of university students was also reflected upon by a number of older participants. Lara explains that ‘when I enrolled, that was my old moment, my first ever one.’ Similarly, Nancy describes how:

I felt old, well I didn’t really feel old but I was with younger people who probably thought I was old in their eyes.

Throughout TAFE, the age of fellow students was similar whereas returning to university study as a mature-age student there were ‘not many of us’ (Lara). This
diversity in age cohorts resulted in Lucy feeling that interactions at TAFE were always on an adult level whereas coming into first year university, as a mature-age student, she was still treated like a first year straight from high school. Whilst academic rigor and protocol were key components of lectures she felt the way of communicating with students was dismissive:

There is a blanket way of communicating with students...sometimes that came across for a mature person as slightly demeaning.

The Mature Aged Orientation session at the beginning of her degree was ‘one of the first and nearly last times that I was communicated to at the same level’ (Lucy). George and Maguire (1998) suggest that some lecturers fail to perceive the older student cohort and tend to position all students as ‘recent school leavers’ (422), which further ‘others’ this older cohort.

**Knowledge and positionality within the university environment**

Students who receive advanced standing on the basis of previous educational qualifications may also be regarded as ‘different’ or as a discrete subgroup within an entire cohort, both by themselves and by others. Despite an apparent ‘invisibility’ in terms of the system that may disadvantage them, members of this group may be wary of appearing to stand out because of their previously acquired knowledge. For example, Lucy valued the prior knowledge she had gained but this was tempered by a reluctance to make herself obvious through involvement in open discussions:

I try to keep quiet in classes so that other people’s ideas can come forward [and]... because I don’t want to be a know it all.

She went on to confess that, whilst ‘the knowledge comes flowing in’ when she is writing assignments, she will not involve herself in class discussions: ‘I could put my hand up like this all the time in the lectures, but I just don’t.’ Other participants also mentioned a reticence to stand out in their classes by demonstrating prior knowledge or understanding although they all conceded that this was an advantage at the individual level.

The term ‘mixed progression’ is commonly used within this faculty to denote those who have entered with advanced standing and whose progress will follow a particular pattern. For example, a schedule distributed at enrolment outlines the pattern of subjects that can be taken to complete a particular four-year degree in three years due to the credit that has been awarded. The subjects taken in first year are a mix of first, second and third year subjects, hence the term ‘mixed progression’ to denote the progress of these students through the degree. The students have become known as the ‘mixed progression group’ and refer to themselves in those terms.

Belinda explains this situation very clearly:

We were called ‘mixed progression’...which was the way we went through the course, I guess. And so we had...a couple of first year subjects, a couple of second year subjects, even a third year.

She mentions at a later point that these students have ‘become quite close’ and ‘stuck...together’ but she also pointed out that ‘because it’s such a small group with
advanced standing I don’t feel like I’ve got to meet as many people as I probably would have liked.’ Melissa confirmed this view and referred to the advanced standing group in her cohort as ‘my mixed progression girls’ explaining that ‘like birds of a feather [they] stick together.’ Mary also explains that a division is sometimes evident when students are called on to work together in groups that are not based on this difference in progression:

For one of my [mixed progression] girls, she is in a subject now where she is struggling a bit because no one wanted to work with her.

Whilst members of this ‘mixed progression’ group undoubtedly supported each other, limiting themselves to others from similar vocational backgrounds may also impact on their university experience. Crozier et al. (2008) argue that limited opportunity to mix with students from a range of backgrounds may reinforce ‘low volume social capital and ultimately constrain learning experiences’ (174). This sense of exclusion is echoed by another participant but from a different perspective. Anna describes feeling excluded or ‘othered’ when she heard students talking about a subject that she was not eligible to complete because she had received credit for it. She explained that this ‘…causes a bit of a barrier I guess, in the sense that you feel, I didn’t do that subject and we didn’t do that at TAFE.’ For Anna, there is a sense of being apart from others because of what it is assumed that she knows. This difference in knowledge was a disadvantage ‘especially in group work because of a lack of shared experience.’ Like Mary, Anna believed that this disadvantage is compounded when other students who have not received credit are unwilling to undertake group work with those who have.

Whether because of imagined or real divisions, the pathway for students with advanced standing is not as smooth as it might be. They value the knowledge gained through the vocational education sector, and while recognition is provided formally within the university, they struggle for validation on their own terms and also in the eyes of their peers. With the particular cohort involved in this study, there appears to be little question that their academic performance is satisfactory but their personal and social standing appears under threat, particularly when they are isolated from one another. Their strength as individuals is gained through their acceptance within the ‘mixed progression group’ rather than on their own terms.

Conclusions and recommendations

The size of this study means that the experiences articulated are in no way universally applicable. Instead, the intention of the research was to elicit a subjective response to the lived experience of students moving between vocational and higher education to initiate further discussion in this area.

Based on these interviews, a number of points emerged that are worthy of further consideration. Primarily, the participants seemed confused by the basis on which advanced standing or credit was awarded. This suggests that there is a need for increased transparency within institutions, which would be complemented by common frameworks and approaches across institutions. Indeed, the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education also identified this need suggesting the implementation of ‘…common terminology and common graded assessment across the two sectors’ (DEEWR 2008, 173). While most universities in Australia have
established credit arrangements with vocational providers, particularly the national TAFE colleges, these arrangements are largely ad hoc, with credit agreements varying not only across but also within institutions. The development of some sort of shared academic culture between these sectors would undoubtedly assist the students transitioning between sectors.

Certainly, the recognition of the skills and knowledge that the students bring with them from both the vocational sector and their lived experience, is another consideration for higher education providers, particularly how best to incorporate this within the teaching and learning environment. The participants in this study did not necessarily perceive themselves as lacking knowledge rather the knowledge they had gained somehow differed to what was expected in the university environment. McBeath (2003) describes how her research on cross-sectoral articulation reveals a certain level of ‘suspicion’ held by universities that tasks taught within the vocational sector lack ‘the theoretical underpinning knowledge, and hence rigor, required by university study’ (5). Jackson (2002) suggests that gender discourses may also impact on the value attributed to knowledge and existing learning. Higher education institutions traditionally celebrate objective, neutral and rational knowledge and whilst all participants are positioned as having an equal right to this knowledge in fact this is stratified and what is valued is largely negotiated within a masculinist discourse (Jackson, 2002). For example, the writing in university emphasises detached and objective analysis but such expectations may disempower those whose backgrounds deviate from the ‘norm’ (Reay 1998a). Edwards (1990) highlights how the older women in her study perceived that while public world experiences were acceptable within the university, those located within the private domain were negated and devalued. In this way, an integral part of personal experience was ‘rendered invisible’ (192) such insights suggests that these learners, particularly the older women, may be a particularly vulnerable cohort, requiring validation of the skills and experiences that they bring to the higher education environment rather than their existing learning or experience being overlooked or ignored. Cameron (2004) points out that:

For TAFE students entering university, who are often adult students from disadvantaged backgrounds and who usually left secondary school early…the induction to university can be very stressful. (3)

This stress can arguably be partially alleviated by a consideration and even celebration of the prior learning these students already hold. Such recognition was not something the participants in this study experienced. Indeed, for some, this prior knowledge was deliberately hidden as it was perceived as further alienating them from other student cohorts. Tedder and Biesta (2009) highlight how there is a ‘struggle’ over what constitutes learning and also over ‘who’ is in a position to define what ‘worthwhile’ learning includes (76). These authors suggest that adult educators need to be aware of the exclusive nature of definitions of learning and also, be prepared to acknowledge that learning consists of more than the codified knowledge favoured in the higher education environment.

One final point relates to the nature of the movement between vocational and higher education. Arguably, the expected and desired student pathway is one characterised by continuous service, one of linear progression where students enter the institution and then progress steadily until completion. However, research has
indicated that such assumptions do not reflect the reality of all students returning to education (Giles 1990; Reay 1998b). The assumption cannot be ‘one of unproblematic forward movement from a position of lack to one of gain’ (Giles 1990, para. 4). Crossan et al. (2003) argue that this linearity may be reflective of the learning careers of younger students who come to university after completing school however, it fails to recognise the very different pathways taken by other learners. Instead, the learning careers of adults tend to be ‘complex’ and ‘multi-directional’ (Crossan et al. 2003, 65).

Perhaps a better way of conceiving of these pathways is as ‘swirling’ rather than linear (Harris, Rainey, and Sumner 2006). In the study by Harris et al. (2006) of 49 students, this movement was variously described as ‘stepping stones,’ ‘zigzags’ and ‘crooked paths’ (10). In common with the older women in the present study, their participants all had ‘diverse, complex and interesting’ (38) pathways between and within educational institutions. Ecclestone (2009) argues that such linearity does not consider the ‘ephemeral and fluid’ (13) nature of women’s life trajectories in the postmodern condition. Instead of moving from one stage to another, many women report their life as being ‘a permanent state of “becoming and unbecoming,” much of which is unconscious, contradictory and iterative’ (13). This argument is echoed by Quinn (2009) who also regards transition and movement as being central to life and subjectivity.

However, the current credit transfer and articulation arrangements within Australia do emphasise a ‘time-served’ (McLaughlin and Mills 2011, 78) model where linearity is assumed and also favoured. Such sequential models then do not reflect the disrupted pathways that learners actually take during their studies and this is particularly the case for women. For example, the women in Pascall and Cox’s (1993) study describe how after school, further or higher education was regarded as unattainable, instead ‘marriage was a pre-occupying possibility’ (39); only later in life did the option to study become a choice or possibility. Higher education institutions clearly need to recognise how the expectation of university attendance immediately after school is somewhat gendered, serving only to ignore the realities of certain student cohorts.

Whilst not making any claims for statistical significance, small-scale qualitative research projects such as this do offer the possibility for practitioners and policymakers to make connections to their own institutions and workplaces. As mentioned, this is also an area that is under-researched in the Australian context, whilst small-scale studies do exist, larger national projects would greatly contribute to the overall understanding of this field. We hope that readers can identify with the voices and words of the participants featured in this study, perhaps even perceiving similarities with their own student population and educational contexts. Arguably such recognition facilitates the possibility of instigating structural and educational change for this particular student cohort.

References


Long, M., F. Ferrier, and M. Heagney. 2006. Stay, play or give it away? Students continuing, changing or leaving university study in first year. Melbourne: Monash University, ACER.


Appendix

Table A1. Details of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Pathway to university</th>
<th>Bachelor of Education (Primary) and commencement</th>
<th>Bachelor of Education (Early Years) and commencement</th>
<th>HSC*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>HSC – Diploma in Children’s Services</td>
<td>Y (2009)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>5th Year – work – family duties – Diploma in Early Childhood</td>
<td>Y (2009)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Year 12 – Diploma in Children’s Services</td>
<td>Y (2008)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belinda</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Year 10 – Diploma in Children’s Services</td>
<td>Y (2009)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>HSC – Cert. IV. Community Services – Work (Community services) – TAFE (Diploma in Youth Work) – Work (Teacher’s aide)</td>
<td>Y (2010)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Work/travel – TAFE (Diploma in Beauty Therapy)) – family duties – TAFE (Diploma in Children’s Services)</td>
<td>Y (2010)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>HSC – Diploma in Hospitality &amp; Tourism (withdrew due to illness) – TAFE (Cert IV in Hospitality) – Work/travel/ family – TAFE (Diploma in Children’s Services)</td>
<td>Y (2010)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *Higher School Certificate.