The delivery of university and VET fully integrated degree programs

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The University of New England (UNE) and TAFE New England (TNE) commenced delivery of an innovative integrated degrees program in community health in trimester 1, 2014. The degrees will allow students to engage in simultaneous, integrated Vocational Education and Training (VET) and university study leading to both VET and degree qualifications. The outcome of the study program allows students to integrate their study and WIL experience by supporting a sequential, embedded accomplishment of qualifications. The differences in processes and philosophies between VET and Higher Education institutions in relation to WIL have kept the delivery of this kind of study separated, but integration has now become more achievable due to the extension of AQF compliance to the higher education sector. Students in the dual-sector degrees have welcomed the skill-based practical work involved with VET education while learning the theoretical concepts of their university education with a single enrolment. The need for a more seamless engagement with VET and university study is becoming more urgent and there are a large number of possibilities to explore. This paper identifies some of the key issues and proposes some solutions.

Keywords: WIL, work integrated learning, dual-sector degree, AQF

INTRODUCTION

The UNE School of Health in conjunction with TNE, has developed a number of dual-sector degree programs that allow students to simultaneously study VET qualifications and a university degree with a single enrolment. Three different enrolments are possible: Bachelor of Health Practice with the choice of majors in Diversional Therapy or Case Work, a Bachelor of Community Services with majors in Services Coordination or Case Management and a combined degree comprising the Bachelor of Health Practice and Bachelor of Community Services with a double major.

The dual-sector degrees were developed in response to data indicating that there was a current and future need for degree-qualified individuals in the area of health management. The increase in the demand for highly qualified workers in the fields addressed by the new degrees will be driven in the immediate future by the introduction by the Federal Government of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the ageing profile of the Australian population. The Federal Department of Employment, in its 2014 report, supported this coming future demand, identifying health care and social assistance as the largest employer in regional Australia and predicting an increase in employment figures in the five years to November 2018 of up to 16.3% (Australian Jobs 2014, Department of Employment).

The new degrees align with current Government policy, which seeks to increase participation by students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, and to increase the proportion of the overall population who have completed tertiary education by 2025. In a review of Australian higher education, Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales (2008) proposed the need for reform in higher education, proposing a much closer alignment between the VET and university sectors including “content [that] is more strongly driven by the advice of industry” (p. ix).

Training pathways between the VET and university sectors in the past have utilised different models such as concurrent, but separate institution enrolment, and articulation from a VET institution to university to connect both learning domains. The UNE dual-sector degrees are some of the first fully integrated versions of the two domains working together that are delivered via one institution and a single enrolment. These degrees support seamless WIL and facilitate lifelong learning.

Current Australian studies have noted ‘connections between VET and higher education need to be strengthened to deliver successful outcomes for students’ (Langworthy & Johns, 2012, p. 118). Langworthy and Johns (2012) stated that ‘one of the future directions of VET and higher education is development of concurrent and embedded awards in skill priority areas that result in dual qualifications and better WIL opportunities’. Billet (2009) states ‘higher education research supports the need to explore practical learning in a workplace setting.
and join this with the conceptual learning in a university study program to allow for a smooth transition into a WIL and employment outcome. Billet also proposes that ‘higher education institutions need to develop approaches to facilitate integration of practice-based learning with learning in an academic setting’. The new integrated degrees available at UNE meet these requirements and allow students to progressively gain VET qualifications that lead seamlessly to a bachelor degree in three years of full-time study.

HOW THE DEGREE IS STRUCTURED

There are three sets of units in the new degrees, designated by the prefix code HD, HS or HL. The HS and HL units are all AQF level 7 and have been designed as degree-level units. The HD units were developed specifically for the new degrees and are a combination of National Training Package mandated AQF level 4-5 competencies, associated with assessment tasks such as online quizzes and workplace skills checklists (WSC), and AQF level 7 Learning Outcomes associated with assessment tasks such as written essays or reports of 2000-3000 words integrating critical thinking, research and referencing skills. It is the HD-coded units that are the unique feature of the UNE model; the strategic combination of NTP competencies within single units of study creates a powerful learning synergy and the framework for development of higher-order learning outcomes.

At the completion of the degree program students will have successfully completed three different qualifications, two at the VET level and a university degree. Successful completion of the full degree program will result in a student being awarded a Certificate IV at the end of the first year of study, a Diploma at the end of the second year, while the degree qualification is completed at the end of three years. Students are able to exit the program at any time after the end of the first year with a recognised qualification.

TRIMESTER 1 2014 ENROLMENTS AND ATTRITION

A total of 48 students were enrolled in the dual-sector degrees on the first day of the trimester, with most electing part time study plans. Table 1 shows the trimester 1 2014 enrolment statistics for the dual-degree programs.

Table 1. Trimester 1 2014 enrolment data for dual-sector degree programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Health Practice</th>
<th>Community Services</th>
<th>Health Services</th>
<th>Practice/Community</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An examination of the assessment items submitted by students in two core units indicated about 60% of students enrolled in week 2 of the trimester would successfully pass these units. New enrolments in the degree programs for trimester 2 2014 are at a similar level to those in trimester 1.

STAFF CHALLENGES

Individual teachers’ philosophies of the meaning of online learning and distance learning were confronting on certain levels. The extent and frequency of the challenge reported by the two TNE teachers (identified as DI and HT) involved in the delivery of the HD units varied according to their previous exposure to work in the dual-sectors initiative. DI identified a lack of understanding of the project demands on the part of the TAFE hierarchy as contributing to the problem. A specific example cited was the need to combine the existing TAFE work- allocation and the new duties associated with the dual-sector project, where only two hours per week were allocated to the project.

The principal challenge experienced by the TNE teachers from a practical perspective was negotiating the different approach to online learning in the UNE Moodle environment. This included problems of accessibility to Moodle from behind the TAFE firewalls. Professional development and ongoing support by UNE staff had overcome many of these challenges by the end of the first trimester.

A difference in nomenclature between VET and Higher education was one of the most challenging aspects of this project for academics, senior executive and administrative staff alike. The content for the dual-sector units had been prepared by HT, from TNE, and the language used to identify components within the content differed from
that used within the University. For example, a component of a Moodle unit was called both a Learner Resource and a Module. When the content was loaded into Moodle, this dual naming caused a great deal of navigation difficulties. These language issues, while causing some confusion for both staff and students, were corrected through the course of the first trimester and a common language set devised and incorporated into the trimester 2 content.

Devising, validating, delivery and marking of assessment items presented substantial challenges and this remains a work in progress after the first trimester. HT expressed challenges in relation to reconciling the marking of assessment under the competency-based VET system and the criterion-based university system. Further professional development is being organised that will specifically look into assessment design, the integration of VET and higher education assessment and the meeting of all new standards. This will complement detailed examination of learning outcomes, assessment quality and the mapping of training packages, graduate attributes and employability skills.

WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING

Defining the term ‘work-integrated learning’ (WIL) is often challenging. WIL is often used to describe a range of educational activities that incorporate learning within an academic institution along with practical applications in a workplace setting relevant to each individual student's study program or career goals. The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) broadly defines WIL as learning by doing in realistic work situations, where the central practices of industry and community professionals are authentically reflected.

Assessment is considered to be the most important aspect of the WIL activity (RMIT, 2008). An important aspect of the dual-sector degrees is the incorporation of WIL as a mandatory requirement of all HD units. The capacity for students enrolled in the degrees to gain the two VET qualifications during their study required them to undertake mandatory WIL, which was assessed by the use of workplace skills checklists and online quizzes. The workplace skills checklist was required to be checked by a workplace practitioner who possessed qualifications above that relevant to the unit being completed.

The primary challenge in relation to WIL was the capacity of students who were not currently employed in an appropriate workplace to be able to gain the work experience and access to an appropriately qualified practitioner to confirm that the necessary skills were evident. Students who were not employed in the field were expected to gain the necessary experience through volunteering. However, this presented additional problems for those students in rural and remote areas, where these opportunities were limited.

Two possible solutions were identified to meet the VET WIL requirements. These were for students to complete a Senior First Aid Certificate or the New England Award offered by UNE. The New England Award offered students the opportunity to engage in a range of social, cultural, life skills and sporting activities in both paid and voluntary capacities that would satisfy the VET requirements. While this approach met the educational requirements, it does not support a principle aim of WIL, where the overarching concept is to provide students with the workplace and practical experience that will support their future employment.

The distance delivery mode of this course means that students may be located in regional and rural areas where accessing WIL is problematic. The need to provide support staff to facilitate WIL for a widely dispersed student body and to have this process well established prior to commencement of the program is essential. This is considered to be one principal shortcoming of the dual-sector program during its infancy and is still in need of development. These WIL issues and development of employability skills are being addressed. The design and application of the work skills checklist is undergoing continuous improvement with the aim of identifying a diversity of opportunities for students currently not in employment, and living in rural and remote areas, to be able to gain the necessary work experience to support their study. The potential for using intensive schools already running in a range of units at UNE as an option for students to cover WSC requirements in communications, teamwork and physical status assessment is also being considered.

CONCLUSION

The dual-sector degrees are moving forward into trimester 2 and 3 2014 with solid enrolments, having both continuing and new students enrolling. Student engagement is paramount and constant work is being done to
keep the content delivery through Moodle and the WIL both dynamic and responsive to feedback and suggested improvements from both students and teachers. There are opportunities to create additional teaching tools to support student learning and development. There is considerable scope to grow these degrees, introduce new majors, explore variations of the current model and apply the model elsewhere at UNE. There is also a high level of enthusiasm and optimism for the potential of these degrees to make a significant and ongoing contribution to the job-readiness of the future health workforce.

This degree program demonstrates that a student who is keen to develop both theoretical and practical skills to be ‘work ready’ now has options in the health field. WIL is and has always been necessary for employees and employers, but often detached from theoretical degrees. Theory is important, but the application of that theory is how a qualification evolves into a career. The world of tertiary education is changing and the integration of practical skills in the higher education sector through WIL will support employers around the country who will be looking to cutting-edge degrees such as this.

REFERENCES