‘We’re In This Together’: Higher Education and VET Relationships

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Some background

UWS is a multi campus university currently comprising of six teaching campuses or seven if you choose to separate the two distinctive locations at Penrith of Kingswood and Werrington. In 2001 UWS commenced operation as one unified university following a massive restructure of its former federated model which consisted of three members, each with their own courses, academics, administration and student associations. Over the past six years an enormous amount of effort has been made to rationalise and harmonise courses and units, as well as revising business processes, policies and procedures to establish logical workable structures in both teaching and administration of the university. It is also evident that most areas have been reviewed at least once again in this timeframe to allow individual units the opportunity to streamline and design their staffing structures and business processes to ensure the provision of service is continually improving.

UWS has a student population of approximately 35,000 with the large majority comprising of undergraduate students enrolled across

This kind of change as you can well imagine has seen the university experience a number of impact phases which has required the need for it’s staff, both academic and general to have a capacity for resilience, energy, flexibility, problem solving, creativity, co-operation and of course the need for a high level of endurance. In the early stages of the new university it was difficult for many staff and students to see the benefits with what can only be described as a reduction in service with skills and knowledge in key areas significantly affected with staff losses, centralisation of business processes and administrative units which resulted in numerous staff members being placed in new roles without experience and in many cases being managed by staff who were in the same situation. It was a long and difficult time for the university and its people.

Whilst this paints a less than attractive picture it is nonetheless a realistic account of what was happening at that time. But the good news is: six years on we are now regarded as one university, we operate as one university and there is a much more positive vibe or feel within the organisation. The hangovers and holding on to former practices and debates and conversations about who did what best between members has all but disappeared as people see the benefits of change. The ability to plan effectively and take a pro-active approach is refreshing for staff particularly when they see notable improvements to the service and teaching they are providing.

So where does VET or Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education fit into all of this? The background I have just explained provides the contextual scenery in which to fit the history of VET relationships and the impact endured and how the role I am now in came to be established.

Prior to the university’s amalgamation each member had established solid working relationships with its local TAFE colleges. A prime example of this was UWS Nepean and Mount Druitt TAFE who in the nineties had, with the assistance and tenacity of a former staff member (in a role similar to mine) forged a number of linked partnership arrangements in IT and Engineering. For anyone who has heard of Degreelink programs these were the original ‘Degreelink’ partnerships where TAFE teachers and Academics designed linked programs which offered students an arrangement where they could commence studies in TAFE and complete a Diploma course and study specific streams and units, some being at the University to give students a taste of University study and the environment. The Diploma was followed by an agreed period of
study at the University comprising of a timeframe between 1 year or 18 months which would then allow the student to gain a Bachelors Degree. This arrangement was highly successful and a great marketing opportunity for TAFE and the University. In later years the ‘Degreelink’ nomenclature means something quite different and is now a TAFE NSW brand for articulation packages with universities.

These kinds of arrangements and negotiations were not unusual amongst VET providers and faculties across the university members at the time. But as was the case with many pre-established relationships and understandings between entities, TAFE teachers and academics, the 2001 restructure claimed a casualty in relation to individual agreements and resistance was often experienced when attempting to expand the arrangements UWS wide. These relationships were not regarded as a high priority during the initial stages of the restructure as many other issues were being pursued and resolved at the peak structure implementation phase.

**Why establish a specific role of Relationships Manager for UWS and VET?**

UWS has the second highest intake Australia wide of VET students coming from TAFE and private VET providers using their VET qualifications as a basis of entry to the University. Twenty percent of students are from this source which can equate to between 2,000 and 3,000 students depending on the overall offers made in a typical main admissions period. This number is derived from UAC admissions data which is transferred onto the UWS student record system. We also have records of Advanced Standing applications received in each admissions period which shows even greater numbers of students applying for recognition of their VET qualifications. Unfortunately we are not able to further break this information down to specific providers or locations at this stage however there is work being undertaken to further develop the way in which this information is stored to allow more detailed data to be captured for analytical, reporting and planning purposes. What we do know however from sheer volume of academic advice session attendance and applications lodged for recognition consideration that we have large cohorts of students in the following disciplines coming from the VET sector.

- Business
- Nursing
- Engineering
- Children’s Services
- Information Technology

It is recognised that UWS offers a series of alternate entry paths for people in the Greater Western Sydney community to provide access and pathways to optimise education and employment goals. Potential students have become aware of the often informal arrangements that exist through word of mouth from former students or TAFE personnel. Enquiries to Academic staff and Administrators also provide information about pathways and recognition to potential students. It is fair to say however, that we have not proactively communicated this information in a standard format or openly advertised our pathways actively or transparently in the past.

There had also been concern about ad-hoc arrangements that were contained only in people’s heads and when that person moved on so did the arrangement. The risk elements of inconsistent credit arrangements and potential inequity in what students are awarded for prior learning also becomes high risk when the impact has financial consequences with students paying for units that may be eligible for credit or resulting in additional attendance time required. This is even more significant for international students given the fees and Visa implications. The other major issue revolves around workload for academics at peak enrolment times. In the past we have seen gallant attempts by schools in the university to cope with the many hundreds of students who seek advanced standing for prior VET studies often duplicating the same assessment many times over and needing to sign off on all applications.

Other contributing factors in identifying the need for this position included the desire for a single point of contact for providers and academic staff when enquiries or ideas were generated. The lack of a standard procedure and policy to provide a consistent framework meant there was no real understanding about who was responsible for what and this discouraged people from wanting to pursue possible opportunities for articulation pathways. It wasn’t until I came into this role that I could see the many months of planning and
discussions that occurred to have the role approved and established in its own right. It is a 3 year contract with several set objectives and is funded as part of the Learning and Teaching Project, known in the University by its acronym - LATP.

I commenced in the role in mid April this year. My biggest challenge was coming from a high volume broad based position of Manager – Enrolments and Student Finance responsible for approximately 20 staff and major processes in an environment which has several key administrative units co-located – to a very different environment where I have no staff – which I understand can certainly have it’s benefits but nonetheless is a major shift in how one operates. I have the luxury of operating with autonomy and creativity and am supported to pursue ideas and interact with many key stakeholders, which I really enjoy, but occasionally the realisation hits that if the project goes pear shaped there is nowhere to run, there is nowhere to hide, and there are no excuses - which can be rather scary.

What does the role actually do?

The title of Relationships Manager is a very accurate descriptor for what this role does in practical terms. It is a role that is totally reliant on relationship building to enable negotiations and collaboration between VET providers and the university to occur. It is necessary to build and develop rapport and confidence within the University with Academic staff as well as other key areas such as the Admissions, Marketing and Communications units. Establishing a solid reputation for the University in the VET sector is also paramount to the success of this role and it’s purpose. From April until now there has been a lot of work in getting our house in order, formalising and standardising arrangements, developing support systems and frameworks to work within and communicating these to all relevant parties. To date we have formalised close to 60 pathways arrangements and have them published on our website for potential students and the community to access. There is now standard operating procedures and new draft policies for articulations and advanced standing which incorporate MCEETYA Best Practice principles. We also have developed centralised processing systems to ensure students coming in under a pathways agreement do not have to seek assessment and sign off from Academic staff but are acknowledged as Pathways students from the outset and are required only to confirm their credit electronically at this stage. There is still room for improvement but this is a vast leap forward from where we were.

So what now?

All of this change and improved process is just the tip of the iceberg. The ability to establish some effective partnered relationships, not just articulations with VET providers is the next step.

I have decided to concentrate on five questions which I think are pertinent to this discussion in the environment and context in which I work. These are:

How much do we want to engage and interact and collaborate with VET providers?

And following on from this

How does having our own RTO – UWS College impact on these relationships?

Do we want to consider operating as a dual sector university such as RMIT or VU and what are the associated benefits and risks?

To what extent do we want to partner with VET providers?

How do we continue to offer alternate entry paths and provide access and inclusivity whilst at the same time develop and maintain a sound reputation as a quality provider of higher education?

What about transition and the student experience of VET students entering university - often for the first time? What is the real deal for students and what can we do collectively with VET providers to assist a smooth and seamless transition?
So, in response to the first question asking how much do we want to engage, interact and collaborate with VET providers?

There is no doubt that the University has a vested interest in maintaining productive and effective relationships with VET providers. After all, this source of students is valued in terms of student numbers and the associated financial benefits that are clearly important to all higher education providers and we, at UWS are transparent in our acknowledgement of this. But with these relationships and the associated benefits comes a high level of responsibility and careful thoughtful planning to ensure the best possible outcome for the student and ultimately the university. In negotiations with VET providers thus far it has been equally important to their organisation’s reputation to ensure the student not only is able to have a clear and logical pathway but has the necessary knowledge, skills and attributes to cope and succeed at University level. For UWS we are keen to develop new and innovative relationships with VET providers including specialist private providers who are emerging as setting the benchmark when it comes to innovation, responsiveness, flexibility and accommodating industry needs.

How does having our own RTO (UWS College) impact on these relationships?

Having a Registered Training Organisation as part of the University can only be regarded as an advantage. The scope for dovetailing and designing programs to prepare students and train them in vocational skills to either seek employment or stream them into UWS degree courses will of course be seen as providing more flexibility and options as well as the additional opportunity of the university increasing student numbers. It also offers an alternative to potential students who don’t quite gain the entrance rank to be admitted after completing their HSC for example. The impact on other VET providers offering similar courses to my mind will not be remarkable, given there will be a number of VET providers with students who choose to use the UWS pathway entry which will remain an important part of the university’s alternative entry and recruitment strategy. We currently offer all VET students with a Diploma level qualification that is part of a pathways agreement guaranteed entry and early offers. This may change depending on student numbers and overall course planning logistics etc but for the time being I do not envisage UWS College will impinge greatly on established VET Relationships. This will depend on how UWS College evolves over the coming years and if UWS considers the option of becoming a dual sector provider – which leads into the next question.

Do we want to consider operating as a dual sector university such as RMIT or VU and what are the associated benefits and risks of this?

To date, this question has not been formally posed to the University Executive as UWS College are still settling into their new structure and establishing themselves as a new entity. To operate as a dual sector provider and have a series of qualification levels to suit a variety of students, industries and their needs from Certificate to PHD is a notion that as yet has not largely been taken up by Sydney based providers as opposed to our interstate institutions such as RMIT and VU. These dual sector providers have taken the lead for offering market driven vocational skills as well as academic competencies to provide greater employability attributes and options to their students. If you peruse the RMIT website it is an interesting and different approach where in the Future Students page it gives course information links for Year 9 and 10 students, Years 11 and 12, Traineeships and Apprenticeships and Postgraduate and Research Students in the same listing. That simple list shows the diversity and capability of RMIT to deliver a suite of education and training options to its clients. In an article written by VET analyst Dr John Mitchell which discusses dual sector advantages Allan Ballagh – Director of TAFE, RMIT University describes an example of an RMIT graduate who had obtained a range of qualifications and skills from the organisation. From a personal experience Allan Ballagh comments,

“Two weeks ago I engaged a consultancy firm to install my new whiz bang inverter technology split heating and cooling system at home. The young man who turned up to do the installation was a graduate engineer from RMIT. He also had appropriate trade licences required to do the installation himself. He was in fact a self contained engineering consultancy business with both the design capabilities and the practical licencing needed to be a total business. That is an example of the type of person we are more likely to see more of in the market: professionals who are picking up skills across the sectors to meet their aspirations and needs. Was this person a higher ed student or was this person an RMIT VET student? In fact he’s both. Why should we think of him as other than an RMIT student, packaging together his needs?”

This example demonstrates the benefits of increasing employability skills as a result of combining higher education and VET training and skills together. In my visits across the University to our colleges and schools this notion is one that
has been mentioned several times when discussing VET relationships. Looking at how we can provide the best possible outcome – employability wise for our graduates.

Associated benefits in being a dual sector provider is the ability to offer a full range of options for lifelong learning with people being able to move in and out of the organisation as they need in either direction – packaging their qualifications and training to maximise their career options and employability. But the question here is, what does it take to become a dual sector provider? The infrastructure and resources to establish a truly functional and high quality dual sector system warrants careful planning, foresight and major financial commitment as well as a willingness and courage to move into unchartered territory. The dual sector option is most probably an unlikely direction for UWS but nonetheless – a possibility.

To what extent do we want to partner with VET providers?

The opportunity to provide more rounded and comprehensive skill sets to students can be achieved through partnered arrangements with specialist VET providers. This can have the same outcomes as that of dual sector providers with students having the ability to obtain para-professional qualifications as well as higher education attributes with specially negotiated packages being offered. There are many examples of successful partnering arrangements between universities and VET providers. In speaking with VET providers about partnered relationships the response has been very positive considering the range of courses UWS offer and the niche areas we could consider for partnering. One idea I floated recently which was not received with the most enthusiastic of responses was to look at courses where we had eight free electives and consider working with VET providers to offer a number of Cert IV’s or Diplomas that students could do in place of the electives that we would then consider for credit toward the degree. As I said – I am still working on that one. One of the responses I had from this idea was directly related to the loss of funding this would create if the student was at a VET provider rather than the university. This is a valid point but I do not see it as fundamentally different from a student coming into the University under a pathways agreement in terms of funding and the possible benefits for the student combined with a sense of valuing and recognising VET courses could be an attractive option for some students. Currently we are looking at possible partnerships with Nirimba TAFE College in the areas of civil engineering and music. The ability to work directly with individual TAFE colleges and private providers to develop some innovative study options for our students is an exciting and motivating chapter in my current role and I see this as a natural progression following pathways relationships we have established.

How do we continue to offer alternate entry paths and provide access and inclusivity whilst at the same time develop and maintain a sound reputation as a quality provider of higher education?

In the minds of some academics I have met there is a perception or should I say misconception that students coming to the university from the VET sector have been admitted ‘through the back door’ and have not been exposed to the same level of rigour as those students coming in from the HSC. The idea that students who study a Diploma or Advanced Diploma are not university ready or able to participate at the level required is no more arguable than students entering the university generally. We see some students hit the ground running and never look back whereas others do not settle as easily and have problems with the transition to University. I believe it is more about the way in which we arrange pathways for students and how their pattern of study when they commence is arranged to prevent a situation where students are ‘dropped’ into a second year program without any first year components to ease them in and provide basic underpinning for their studies. In mapping negotiations this year with Vet providers and Academics, dialogue between the sectors focused on the student experience and the need to design a pathway where students are still provided with a significant ratio of first year units to allow smoother transition and maximise the student’s opportunity to succeed, progress and complete their university course. It is futile for all concerned to appear generous with credit and offer students entry directly into a second year program if they are not at the same academic level of existing second year students. History and experience has taught us that students in this situation can struggle with the combined pressures of a different, more self directed learning environment and the increased academic requirements of second year unit studies. Progression is a key stumbling block and what credit and cost saving that was initially an attractive benefit for the student is lost when units need to be repeated in order to progress. Anecdotal evidence suggests the greater percentage of VET students entering UWS with advanced standing do in fact complete their course but the progression factor can be an issue. This has been the catalyst for a more customised approach to determining what credit is to be awarded. It is imperative that the student coming to our university under a pathways agreement experiences success whilst also gaining the benefits intended for recognition of their prior learning. This is equally as
important to the VET provider as the student who succeeds on the basis of their Vet qual is a good advertisement for their organisation.

What about transition and the student experience of VET students entering university - often for the first time? What is the real deal for students and what can we do collectively with VET providers to assist a smooth and seamless transition?

It has been quite difficult to gain an accurate account of the transition of VET students to the Higher Education sector at a local level. Whilst numerous studies have been undertaken to assess and identify the issues- these have often been focused at particular cohorts where student performance was deemed to be of an unsatisfactory level. There has also been evidence of transition related issues raised by Student Services who often are the first port of call for students experiencing difficulty. A special project has been initiated looking at student retention and as part of this project-transition is being looked at in general terms – not just in relation to VET students. I have also been liaising with our Student Learning Unit who provide support to students needing additional help and support with managing aspects of their learning for example, maths or academic literacy etc. And then we have feedback from academic staff who interact with the students at the coal face and have provided their perspective on transition of VET students into the university. The longer term effects of reviewing the way in which VET pathways students are awarded credit for prior studies is yet to be experienced and may not be obvious for some time however this is just one of many facets where some work can be done to make a difference to the students transition. For example, it would seem to be of benefit if a group of representatives from the University and VET sector ranging from teachers, counsellors and administrators came together to discuss the issues that are commonly experienced in relation to VET students transition. To work collaboratively to provide a series of mechanisms to assist students to move and settle easily from VET to Higher Ed could provide a strong framework for implementing ideas that could strengthen perceived transition weaknesses. For example as a collective group perhaps a group of units could be developed specifically for students seeking to move to higher education that can prepare VET students for the Academic environment. If this was included in the TAFE curriculum as an elective option students could be exposed to expectations of university life earlier and gain an understanding of the difference between environments. If the units were prepared collaboratively this could then be given credit from the Universities. Another option could be to create an electronic transition session which could contain interactive exercises and information to provide students with an insight to University in general. A further step could be to customise these for pathway degrees in the university and give very specific examples and information pertaining to that course to the student at a time they choose.

The think tank mentioned earlier would no doubt produce plenty of ideas and innovations for addressing transition issues and could be a very useful tool to think about when looking at practical solutions for ensuring the VET student has a positive experience and outcome in their Higher Ed course.

In closing, I would like to emphasise that my paper and thoughts are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UWS or its management. I am not a researcher nor an academic and have written my paper as a practitioner and manager of relationships with the VET sector and UWS from the coal face. I hope it has demonstrated the synergies between the two sectors and given some food for thought. We have just embarked on this journey in earnest and will continue to work closely with our VET colleagues to provide access and opportunity to the people of Greater Western Sydney. After all ‘we are all in this together’!