

The integration of study and work-integrated learning experience through the sequential, embedded completion of tertiary qualifications

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A number of different models have been developed to integrate both Vocational Education and Training (VET) and university study with a view to producing work-ready graduates. This paper describes one joint initiative which allows students to integrate their theoretical study and WIL experience by supporting a sequential, embedded accomplishment of qualifications across both VET and university with a single higher education enrolment. 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. 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, particularly relating to the differences in processes and philosophies between the VET and university sectors. This paper identifies some of the key issues and proposes some solutions. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, Special Issue, 2015, 16(3), 175-184*)

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The existence of a theory-practice gap has been recognized for a substantial period in higher education generally (Nuthall, 2004), and in the health education sector in particular (Corlett, 2000; Green, 2000; Rafferty, Allcock, & Lathlean, 1996). This gap is demonstrated in situations where graduates from higher education institutions possessed of a high level of theoretical knowledge are limited in their ability to apply this theory within the practices required in the workplace. The onus for universities to 'show how theory and practice combine in undergraduate and postgraduate degrees to generate graduates who are work-ready' (Patrick et al., 2006, p. 3) is still relevant in the current tertiary education environment. The attempts to address this theory-practice gap are evidenced in the Australian higher education sector by both universities, which include practical learning activities based in the work place (Patrick et al., 2008), and technical and further education (TAFE) institutions, which now offer qualifications up to and including degree level (Kloppenborg, 2010).

The requirement to make tertiary qualified individuals more work-ready through the development of both theory and practice is also accompanied by current Australian Government policy that seeks to improve equity of access and increase participation by students such that "all people with the desire and capability to attend university have the opportunity do so, and succeed in their studies, regardless of their background" (Department of Education and Training, 2015). The Government aims 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).

One joint initiative involving the UNE School of Health and TNE has involved the development of a number of dual-sector degree programs that allow students to

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simultaneously study VET qualifications and a university degree with a single enrolment. Three dual degrees have been developed to meet perceived emerging needs within the health management area: 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. This paper will report on the first 12 months of delivery of the dual-sector degrees. The experience of the TNE teachers and UNE academics working jointly on the program will be described, including the challenges associated with the different philosophies and teaching pedagogy associated with the different institutions. The student experience of coping with concurrent study and assessment across two different institutions will also be reported.

BACKGROUND

The Federal Department of Employment, in its 2015 report, identified health care and social assistance as the largest employer in regional Australia and predicted an increase in employment figures in the five years to November 2019 of up to 18.7% (Department of Employment, 2015). The introduction by the Federal Government of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2013 and the ageing profile of the Australian population in the immediate future will result a substantial increase in demand for appropriately qualified candidates in the health management area. The dual-sector degrees were developed in response to these data indicating that there was a current and future need for degree-qualified individuals in the area of health management.

There have been a number of different approaches utilized to facilitate study in both the VET and university sectors, including concurrent, but separate institution enrolment, and articulation from a VET institution to university to connect both learning domains. Universities have also attempted to incorporate more practical and hands-on learning by the incorporation of VET practices through the use of work-integrated learning (WIL). 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 (2008) broadly defines WIL as learning by doing in realistic work situations, where the central practices of industry and community professionals are authentically reflected. 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.

Langworthy and Johns (2012) have noted "connections between VET and higher education need to be strengthened to deliver successful outcomes for students", (p. 118). The inclusion of VET based practices, which incorporate WIL within university programs, gives students the opportunity to link theory with work practice (Patrick et al., 2008). One future direction that has been proposed to incorporate VET in higher education is the use 'of concurrent or embedded awards in skill priority areas, resulting in both VET and a higher education qualification' (Langworthy & Johns, 2012, p. 118). Billett (2009) also supports this view, where he proposes that 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. He 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.

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 in a substantial number of the units in the dual-sector degrees. The capacity for students enrolled in the degrees to gain the two VET qualifications during their study requires them to undertake mandatory WIL, which is assessed by the use of workplace skills checklists and online quizzes. The workplace skills checklist are required to be checked by a workplace practitioner who possesses qualifications above that relevant to the unit being completed.

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 Australian Qualifications Framework (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 2,000-3,000 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 recognized qualification.

2014 ENROLMENTS AND ATTRITION

The dual-sector degrees were made available to students for the first time in trimester 1, 2014. A total of 48 students were enrolled in the dual-sector degrees on the university census date of trimester 1, with most electing part time study plans. Table 1 shows the trimester enrolment statistics for 2014 for the dual-sector degree programs. The statistics for trimesters 1 and 2 were those applicable at the university census date, while the trimester 3 enrolments were those at 14 Nov 2014, which was the end of week 3 of the trimester.

An examination of the assessment items submitted by students in two core units in trimester 1 indicated about 60% of students enrolled in week 2 of the trimester would successfully pass these units. No changes in the enrolment statistics for the units were recorded for the period from the university census date at the end of week 5 to the end of the first trimester in week 12. Similar outcomes were demonstrated for the second trimester cohort. The steady increase in enrolments indicates that the demand for the dual-sector programs has continued throughout the first 12 months the program has been offered.

TABLE 1: Trimester 1 and 2 enrolment data for 2014 UNE dual-sector degree programs

Date	Health Practice	Community Services	Health Practice/Community Services	Total
Trimester 1	13	8	27	48
Trimester 2	22	14	34	70
Trimester 3	24	17	45	86

METHODOLOGY

Following the successful granting of ethics approval, data were collected from two academics from UNE and two teachers and one manager from TNE who were actively involved in the delivery of the HD units that involved both AQF level 4-5 competencies and AQF level 7 learning outcomes. Data were collected from these participants using semi-structured interviews, each of about 45 minutes duration. The interviews were held in the last two weeks of trimester 1, 2014. Semi-structured telephone interviews were also conducted with eight randomly selected students enrolled in week eight of the second trimester, 2014. Each student interview was about 25 minutes in length. All interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. Each transcription was checked for accuracy by the participant. All data was de-identified prior to analysis with identifiers being randomly generated. Interviews were analyzed using interpretational analysis (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007), where content was coded and then grouped into categories “that adequately encompass and summarize the data” (p. 467).

FINDINGS

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 TNE teacher 1 and TNE teacher 2) involved in the delivery of the HD units varied according to their previous exposure to work in the dual-sector initiative. TNE teacher 1 identified a lack of understanding of the project demands on the part of the TAFE hierarchy and the time required to prepare for teaching in the program as contributing to the problem.

I was sitting at [my supervisor’s] desk, and saying now I’m wondering whether you’d would like to. Yeah, and I’m all excited, yeah, yeah that would be fantastic. By the way, you’re starting next week. HT will show you what to do. You know, that’s how it started. And, it was exciting and, um, I quite quickly found, that because I didn’t know what I was doing, I was wasting so much time. (TNE teacher 1)

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.

. . . embedded in probably the fifty hours of work I do a year, I’ve then got to put my UNE stuff in. So I mean I don’t always do it well. I’ve tried to set myself up times and reminders to make sure I do my UNE stuff but even that, the, the responsibilities

around this job here mean that they're pushed and shoved around. Oh, I could still be sitting at midnight on the computer trying to catch up with stuff . . .

I was feeling pressured that I had to be on this every day and it had to be this and that every day but just, you know, with the poor allocation of time that we get, don't have that capacity to do that. (TNE teacher 1)

Differences were also identified between the two TNE teachers in relation to their experience of working with the university staff. Because of the limited time available prior to the commencement of the trimester for TNE teacher 2 to develop relationships with the other non-TAFE staff involved, she described substantial challenges in working as a part of a combined team.

There is a lot of tension between the two groups and, um, I don't know how actually that tension's been but times I'm told 'don't say anything', 'don't say anything, just go with the flow, and don't say anything'. And that was very much something that was happening up front because people didn't want relations impaired, I think. And so, it's probably only been the last four to five weeks I've really started to get to know [T, one of the university academics], say for arguments sake, and, you know, starting to feel I'm developing a relationship. (TNE teacher 1)

This contrasted with the view expressed by her TNE colleague who had been working in the project for a substantial period:

. . . think the fact that we're working very pretty well together . . . I think, you know, that basically [T] and I work, and CH, um, work very well as a team and, um, are able to get over most of the problems, um, and, um, a lot of the problems I guess have been around things like data wasn't, wasn't entered properly when it was loaded into Moodle. (JE)

When CH was prompted in relation to when the teamwork started to improve, a time of six to eight weeks was stated.

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. As TNE teacher 1 said, "Just from a teacher perspective, I've, I've had some settling in problems into the, into the Moodle and how that's delivered." Whereas the other TNE teacher said:

I've been struggling to, um, to work how to use the SRM, um, even though I did training. Um, once again, it won't run or even let me in . . . a few times. Um, (laughter), just little things like that and having multiple passwords. (TNE teacher 2)

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 TNE teacher 2, 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. TNE teacher 2 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 organized 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.

Student Challenges

The analysis of the data available from student participants indicated that a major difference existed in the experience of the dual-sector programs based upon whether the student was currently enrolled in employment in a field relevant to their program of study.

Accessing WIL presented substantial challenges for those students who were not currently employed in an appropriate workplace to be able to gain the work experience and access to appropriately qualified practitioners to confirm that the necessary skills were evident. A particular issue within the WIL requirements was the completion of work skills checklists containing a list of specific competencies that were to be demonstrated by students in the workplace. The requirement following satisfactory demonstration of competence of the required skills was the signing off of the documentation by an appropriately qualified practitioner who possessed qualifications which were at least at the Certificate IV level and that included the competencies being assessed. Students who were not currently employed in the field were challenged trying to complete this assessment requirement.

I guess it just comes back down to the whole practical placement issue. That was really the bulk of my concern. I was told pretty much just to contact community services organizations and ask for volunteer placements. Um, however, most organizations are only willing to complete my university checklist within the scope of a volunteer. Um, so they kind of said a flat no. (student 1)

The people I talk to who are already in the field, it's, it doesn't even rate a mention for them because they have the benefit of it being right there...I think we wouldn't be able to do the diploma unless we were actually employed. It just wouldn't be possible. (student 2)

One participant expressed the view that they had not completed sufficient WIL to be able to be successfully employed in the field after their first year of study, even though she would have qualified with a Cert IV.

But had I done that directly through the TAFE sector, I would have done a mandated two hundred hours of practical placement um, whereas so far this year I've not had that mandate, I've only had a couple of checklists. There's been no other requirement or anything. So I feel like if I've worked there trying to find employment at the moment I wouldn't really know what I was doing. I would be thrown into the deep end, like I haven't had enough experience. (student 1)

This issue arose due to the lack of any requirement in the AQF in relation to a minimum number of hours of WIL. Due to the requirement being competence in the targeted skills, the skills competence checklist was used to meet the legislative requirements. However, this issue has been rectified in 2015 as the requirements have been updated to include a mandatory requirement of 120 hours of work experience for a Cert IV and 240 hours for a

Diploma. The VET assessment requirement for the dual-sector programs has now been updated to include this workplace requirement. The workplace skills checklist has been retained as a measure of the student's competence in the targeted workplace skills.

A focus of the semi-structured interviews, due to the non-traditional nature of the students, was the challenge experienced during the transition into university study. A number of participants described their challenge in developing their basic academic skills to cope with university academic requirements after many years away from formal study and the challenge of incorporating university work into already busy lifestyles.

It's been distracting when you're at home and you know there's a load of washing that needs to get done but you know you have to write your assignment. Um, it's a different mindset but, I guess being a working mum there is always a constant juggle so you just have to make the time to do. (student 3)

When asked how long it took before the requirements of university study had been incorporated well into their lifestyle, participants described substantial periods of up to 10 weeks. The same student said, "Quite a while, quite a while, yes. I don't know, like a full trimester, like 10 weeks or something like that but around week 10 (laughter) I was thinking I was sort of getting the hang of it." (student 3)

...the big challenge has certainly been just getting my head around the, ahh, academic dialect and it's more time management because I have a very full-on job...[I was comfortable fitting things in] probably half way through Trimester 1. It was quite a while. You know, because my current position here, working at ***, it's not, it's not a nine to five job so it changes quite dramatically sometimes so you have to be quite lateral for things to change, you have to be prepared for that. (student 4)

Two participants described times when dropping out or deferring was considered. The support provided by the academic staff was identified as the reason why the participant had decided to continue his/her study.

I was about to give up and defer but the contact from, phone calls and emails to encourage me to keep me to stay worked, not just keeping trying and to show that they're a phone call away or email away if I need to. (student 5)

I've been fortunate because I've been here and have been able to have quite regular contact with [an academic staff member], of course, which has really, really helped me. It's been fantastic. I don't know how I would have been had I been at a distance. (student 4)

It should be noted that this contact was identified by one participant as having been initiated by the university staff. This personalized university initiated contact was considered to be an important positive contributor to the student experience. As student 5 stated: "I didn't have that experience before like when I went to . . . to uni back years ago. But no support, there wasn't any support but this time around I felt a great deal of support, like there was just me". Another student said: "I think I'm ready and finding that the support at UNE is absolutely fantastic. The students support, the tutor support. I think, yeah, genuinely support, I'd call it genuine and that sort of helps me as well". (student 6)

The importance of rapid and personal responses to student requests for assistance in the online environment was emphasized by one participant's comment in relation to a situation where her request had not been answered promptly.

I guess you're just sitting there waiting because you, you might have a question to see if you're on the right track and you don't want to advance anymore because if you're completely on the wrong track, you've got to go back to square one. (student 7)

All student participants were asked whether they saw themselves as a university or a TAFE student, considering that they were enrolled in a dual-sector degree program. All students stated that they considered themselves as university students and considered their enrolment in TAFE to be a part of the process of them achieving an undergraduate degree.

DISCUSSION

Based upon the analysis of the data available it is apparent that the dual-sector programs offered in the Health Management sector have met an existing need in the workplace. Enrolments to date have been strong and appear likely to continue in that vein. The success of the dual-sector program demonstrates that VET and university study are able to be integrated within the same program, as recommended in the literature (Billett, 2009; Langworthy & Johns, 2012).

The principle challenge at the program level reported by academic staff was the challenge associated with assessment marking and managing reporting requirements within a single unit of study that addressed outcomes from both the VET and university. The initial process of assessment marking, which involved members from both institutions, proved too cumbersome to be maintained. During the closing weeks of the second trimester of the program a number of meetings were held to identify an alternative method of managing assessment that would meet the needs of both institutions. The result of these meetings was that TNE was to develop defined in-depth benchmarks describing the performance standards for all assessment tasks involving VET competency outcomes. All assessment would then be marked by a single VET qualified marker from the university who would use the benchmarks to ensure the TNE requirements were met. Staff from TNE would then ratify the marking prior to return of marks to students.

The principle challenge reported by student participants was in relation to the challenges with accessing relevant WIL opportunities. Students who were not employed in a field relevant to their program of study 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 work place 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 considered 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. A requirement to meet the minimum hours of workplace learning required by legislation in 2015 is also being included. 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 substantial enrolments in the dual-sector degrees, the success of the majority of students in successfully completing the initial year of study and the success of the teaching staff from both UNE and TNE in working together in delivering the program and supporting students has demonstrated that feasibility of the model being employed. The dual-sector degrees are moving forward into 2015 with solid enrolments, having both continuing and new students enrolling.

The need to improve and support student engagement is being addressed through an ongoing effort to keep the content delivery through Moodle and the WIL experiences 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. Considering the expected increase in demand for degree qualified health management professionals in the near future, there is considerable scope to grow these degrees, introduce new majors and explore variations of the current delivery model. The opportunity also exists to apply the delivery model elsewhere at UNE and other tertiary institutions who have the opportunity to partner with a VET institution. 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.

The dual-sector degrees present students, who are keen to develop both theoretical and practical skills and to be 'work ready', with an excellent opportunity. The demand for workplace experience, considered an essential requirement to produce a work-ready graduate, but often detached from theoretical degrees, is being addressed in this initiative. 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 dual-sector degrees that incorporate WIL will support employers around the country who will be looking to cutting-edge degrees such as this.

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