Why a positive transition experience for VET students entering higher education can be a recipe for success: but what are the ingredients?

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Abstract

In recent years higher education institutions have responded with renewed vigor to calls to widen participation and create seamless pathways between the Vocational, Education and Training (VET) sector and higher education. A project team from the University of Western Sydney (UWS) has investigated the transition experiences of students entering the university on the basis of VET qualifications and has developed and piloted a suite of strategies designed to facilitate a positive transition experience. This session will provide an opportunity for participants to discuss the value of these strategies for VET cohorts and to contribute additional ideas and practices. The desirability of targeting support strategies to particular cohorts of students will also be debated.

Introduction

A recent ALTC funded project that investigated the transition of students from the VET sector into the University of Western Sydney found that many students welcomed the challenge of adapting to a new learning environment and were remarkably resilient in the way that they recovered from transition experiences that were often initially difficult and stressful. Yet, for some students challenges in transition can cause ongoing problems that undermine satisfactory progression and in some cases lead to withdrawal from study. The project team found that some students experienced difficulties with information overload, in adjusting to the online environment, understanding academic literacy conventions, and balancing their work, family and study commitments. This was despite the considerable progress made at the University through the appointment of a VET Relationships Manager who has been responsible for the establishment of a coherent and planned pathway structure. A number of adjunct strategies were developed and implemented to facilitate positive student transition experiences. These included VET VIP Days held in the semester prior to enrolment, improved access to bridging and preparation programs including educational technology preparation and targeted web and paper-based resources. Despite a measure of success, no strategy was without pitfalls, particularly
when aimed at this extremely time poor cohort of students. This session will lead participants to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the various support options, and tackle the question of the whether it is possible and/or desirable to target support strategies to specific cohorts of students.

**New Horizons**

The Bradley Review into Higher Education (2008) emphasised the economic imperative for an increasing proportion of Australians to attain bachelor degrees, and set a target of 20% for the proportion of these graduates that would come from currently under-represented low socio-economic backgrounds. This ushered in a period of heightened interest in the pursuit of ‘seamless’ pathways between further and higher education both as a route for lifelong learning and as a tool in the recruitment of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. While some universities have had considerable experience in recruiting students from diverse educational backgrounds, others have continued to recruit selectively from traditional pools of students.

In the years prior to the Bradley Report, the percentage of students in undergraduate education who had completed a VET qualification had fallen from 14% in 2003, to 10% in 2007 (Wheelahan, 2009). Contrary to this trend, the University of Western Sydney increased enrolment of VET students has from 8.9% in 2001 to 20% in 2010. Wheelahan (2009) has challenged the assumption that increased articulation from the VET sector will necessarily lead to greater participation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

This is because students from low socio-economic backgrounds are under-represented in the higher level VET qualifications (diplomas and advanced diplomas) that are most often used as the basis for admission to university (Wheelahan, 2010). UWS is a recruiting university partly because of its relative newness, but also because of its mission to provide access to higher education to the population of greater western Sydney. At UWS students are admitted on the basis on both higher level and lower level VET qualifications (for example, on the basis of certificate level qualifications. It is therefore more likely that educational opportunities will be afforded to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Potential Markets**

While some students see their VET studies as a stepping stone to higher education, there does seem to be a considerable untapped market that universities may be able to access. In a recent report that looks at the potential of innovative pathways in NSW, PhillipsKPA (2010) use the numbers of students completing Certificate 1V and above as the number that could potentially move from VET to HE. In 2008 this was around 35,000 students in NSW. However, the proportion of students who do undertake university studies is relatively low. In 2007, for example, only 6.9% of all those who graduated from VET studies were estimated to have begun studies at university (Aird, Miller, van Megen, & Buys, 2010).

**Quality and standards**
Other important agendas that are impacting on higher education institutions are the focus on retention, progression and with the advent of TEQSA, the attention on those teaching and learning standards that “establish the pre-conditions for the achievement of learning and teaching outcomes fit for the awarding of a higher education qualification.” Learner support is a critical responsibility that comes with the opportunity to expand higher education beyond its traditional horizons. PhillipKPA (2006) identify the provision of specific support strategies for students in transition as one of the key enablers of successful credit transfer. This is echoed by a large study in the UK which found that VET students had a greater need for support and guidance than students entering higher education through the school system (Ertl, Hayward, & Hoelscher, 2010).

Summary of Project Methodology and Findings

A total of 529 students from Nursing, Business, Law and Early Childhood responded to surveys conducted in 2009 and 2010. A smaller number of students (N=63) participated in focus groups or telephone interviews. In the survey 59.5% of students reported that the study workload was more than they had expected. Other areas in which expectations differed from actual experience were in the grades achieved (lower than expected), the contact with lecturers (less than expected), the learning orientation (more analytical) and the amount of support (less than expected).

More than 40% of students surveyed reported a degree of difficulty with online enrolment procedures, assessment tasks, academic writing, academic conventions and balancing the demands of work and study. However, less than 20% of students continued to experience difficulty with these items after the first couple of months of study. Data gathered from focus groups and interviews revealed that many students experienced high levels of stress and frustration during transition and many students suggested improvements to the transition process. One frequently reoccurring theme was the desire for a range of information prior to the enrolment and orientation period. Despite these challenges many students named the new, more sophisticated learning environment as the best aspect of university life.

Adjunct targeted strategies

As a result of student feedback a number of strategies were developed and piloted.

VET VIP Days

Three information seminars have been held for prospective students in the semester before they receive their offer. These seminars ranging from half to a full day have covered a range of administrative and academic information including program and subject specific information that is provided by academic staff from courses.

Mentor Program
A small mentor program was trialed for commencing students in 2011.

**Information Packs**

In 2010 students who had received offers on the basis of VET qualifications were mailed information packs with a range of information pertaining to differences between the sectors and promoting bridging and learning support programs including academic literacy and mathematics workshops and the Peer Assisted Study Session Program.

**UniStep Enabling Programs**

These free programs are offered in February and July each year and offer extended preparation (40 hours) in mathematics and/or academic literacy. A variety of promotional strategies were used to increase the proportion of students from VET pathways who attend these programs.

**Educational Technology Preparation**

This orientation workshop was jointly developed by the Student Learning Unit, the Teaching Development Unit, the Library and IT services. It was offered to VET student entrants in face to face workshop mode.

**Session Plan**

**Introduction: Who are our students (10 minutes)**

The presenter will give an overview of the project findings and outcomes. Participants will be given the opportunity to identify levels of VET pathway activity at their institution.

**Discussion (10 minutes)**

Participants will be given a worksheet that identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the strategies trialed at UWS. In small groups participants will discuss these strategies and add existing strategies from their institutions and/or their own ideas.

**Conclusion (10 minutes)**

Presenter will bring together participant discussion and seek opinions about the effectiveness and desirability of targeting support strategies to particular cohorts of students. Other options will be canvassed.
References


