

Case for binary tertiary system

By TOM KARMEL

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The whole tone of the Universities Accord discussion paper intimates that all we need to do is to perfect the higher education sector, improve its links with the vocational education and training sector, and we will be in nirvana.

This is unrealistic: the problems run much deeper and need a more complex solution. It is time to take up the invitation of Mary O'Kane, who chairs the Accord's review panel, to challenge the way we think about tertiary education.

Why start with a supposition that we have higher education on one hand, focused on advanced level knowledge and research, and vocational education, with its applied knowledge, on the other?

Much of what is taught in universities is vocational in nature. So why don't we start talking about Australia's tertiary education sector as a whole?

Different funding and regulatory arrangements in state and federal jurisdictions have given Australia an incoherent tertiary education system. There seems to be a general perception that VET loses out to higher education because of its "lower" status and because VET does not have income-contingent loans (apart from some diplomas).

The presumption that VET could be made attractive in com-

parison with higher education if we could just change public perceptions is misplaced. The real competition between the sectors is at the diploma level and only in certain fields. The idea that students choose between a certificate III/IV and an undergraduate degree is silly. They are not substitutes. VET leads to lower-status occupations: income-contingent loans for certificates III/IV, or an ad campaign extolling VET's virtues, will not address its competitive disadvantage.

It has emerged in recent decades that universities are largely driven by research success and its impact on their rankings. Teaching has been overshadowed by the research endeavour, resulting in the large comprehensive universities trying to be larger, more comprehensive and more research driven. If current trends continue, VET will be left as a provider of lower-level training to meet short-term industry needs and universities, with their emphasis on research and theory, will be the only game in town in the delivery of training for professional occupations. This contrasts with international practice.

Australia needs a new type of tertiary education institution that straddles the VET and higher education worlds – a "professional university" focused on teaching and practice, delivering VET certificates, diplomas, bach-

elor and applied masters degrees. And ideally, pathways from certificates to diplomas to degrees.

However, current structures are unhelpful. We have a qualification classification that separates VET and higher education, two regulatory bodies with quite different ways of operating, funding arrangements that reflect history rather than logic, and fee and loan arrangements that are all over the place.

I am arguing for a new tertiary education system. Reforms needed include: changes to the Australian Qualifications Framework so it is agnostic in respect to whether a bachelor degree is VET or higher education; a single regulatory framework; a rebalancing of government funding; and an emphasis in VET on general education so a student can acquire technical skills but retain the possibility of higher level study. We would be creating a binary tertiary education system within which practice-based professional universities would provide a genuine alternative to research-focused comprehensive universities.

Tom Karmel is director of the Mackenzie Research Institute at the Holmesglen Institute. He is a former managing director of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. Full version: theaustralian.com.au/highereducation