

# DISSEMINATION REPORT

REPORT AT PROJECT CLOSE OF THE AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL  
DISCOVERY PROJECT 'VOCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, UNDERGRADUATE  
DEGREES' (DP 170101885)



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### SUMMARY

The research contributes new knowledge of the expansion of Australia's higher education system through the growth of bachelor's degrees in state based public providers of vocational education and training, the TAFEs. Identifying the range, scale and distinctiveness of this provision, along with understandings about the students undertaking these degrees and their experiences, the project provides insights for policy and practice at national, state and institutional level to reform higher education into a more equitable lifelong learning system to meet the needs of new students, especially of mature age, to obtain high level qualifications demanded for national innovation and economic restructuring.

### CONTRIBUTIONS TO EXISTING FIELD

The ARC Discovery project funding 2017-2020 has facilitated a substantial investigation into the activities of higher education within government-funded TAFE Institutes. Its major contributions include:

- a richer understanding of higher education (HE) data, particularly in the area of non-university providers but also benefiting the whole sector;
- a novel conception of student choice making decisions, contesting previous ideas of high and low aspirations;
- a deepening of thinking about how occupations interact with vocational qualifications;
- the development of a model of how policy flows between federal and state education and skills systems;
- theoretical consideration of how Bourdieu's concept of Distinction operates in the higher education field in the context of higher vocational education;
- the theoretical consideration informed by Bernstein of an applied student centred pedagogy and implications for student equity and higher education practice in non-university HE settings;
- exploration of the place of Australia's arrangements for higher vocational education in the global context;
- original insights into the nature of bachelor's degrees and their form and function in education and employment.

### IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH CONDUCTED

The mounting importance of a global HE field and the role of HE as the primary producer of knowledge workers for a global knowledge economy, means that studies limited by national boundaries are increasingly restricted in their ability to produce relevant knowledge. The project explores the effects of the growth of degree offerings in vocational institutions on the HE field in Australia and the UK. Australian and UK HE provide good systems for comparison as they share a long tradition of policy borrowing, particularly with respect to social inclusion policy and practices (Gale 2011).

International studies on institutions from similar historical policy frameworks and organisational contexts strengthen the potential to develop concepts, typologies and policy-related knowledge that have wider applicability because they are grounded in understanding the effects of specific system logics, funding arrangements and regulatory frameworks.

### INNOVATIONS

Current data collection measures of equity used in Australia do not support a full understanding of the nature of the cohort who are taking higher education in vocational institutions. The additional instruments developed and trialled in the project relating to social capital and cultural capital are an important discovery, as is the recognition of participation varying by age and institutional type.

The theoretical unpinning of this project, which drew on understanding of reproduction and distinction from Bourdieu with ideas of 'message systems' in education from Basil Bernstein enabled the adoption of an innovative lens in the research design, data collection and analysis. This theoretical framework supported conceptual thinking about the effect of the growth of these degrees in formerly vocational institutions beyond descriptive stances.

The positioning of this research from a close investigation of the Australian condition, which draws on new national statistical data and detailed qualitative multi-case study data, is novel, and its position, not commencing from comparative lens, has enabled a multi-dimensional picture of the phenomena to be developed.

## DISCOVERY PROJECT ACTIVITIES

### KEY STATISTICS

The project has undertaken data collection, generation activities and engaged with academic and policy sector during the first two years of the project. Activities described were undertaken between June 2017 – December 2019.

**17** CASE STUDY SITES AND REFERENCE SITES

**148** INTERVIEWEES

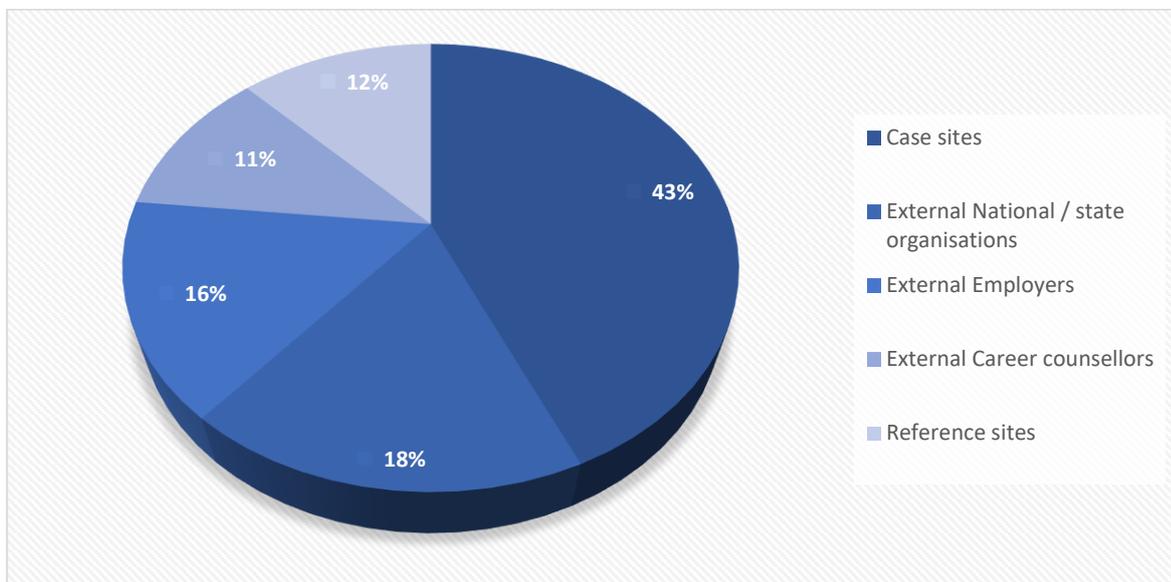
**183** INSTITUTIONAL MARKETING AND ASSOCIATED DOCUMENTS COLLECTED

**534** SURVEY RESPONDENTS ENROLLED ON BACHELOR'S DEGREES IN TAFE INSTITUTES

**424,964** LINES OF STUDENT ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

**43** PRESENTATIONS OF EMERGING FINDINGS

### BREAKDOWN OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT TYPE



## COLLABORATIONS

The project involved collaboration with a wide range of Australian organisations and abroad including within our own higher education institutions.

- MONASH UNIVERSITY
- DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
- GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY
- UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW
- UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
- OISE, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
- UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD
- CURTIN UNIVERSITY
- UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE
- UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL
- GLASGOW CALEDONIAN UNIVERSITY
- FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY
- POLK STATE COLLEGE
- TIANJIN UNIVERSITY

Australian government agencies both Commonwealth and State have supported the Australian Research Council project and have enabled research in their institutions and also facilitated data collection. These include:

- UNIVERSITY STATISTICS DIVISION, AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT
- AISC SECRETARIAT, AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT
- HIGHER EDUCATION SKILLS GROUP, VICTORIAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

- TAFE NSW
- TAFE QUEENSLAND
- TAFE SA
- TAFE WA
- TEQSA

Australian industry representatives participated in the project in a range of ways. Peak industry bodies have been consulted throughout the project and Skills Service Organisations were very helpful in their facilitation of access to Industry Skills Council members who were able to offer the perspectives of industry to support the analysis of data in the project. It was difficult to engage with many direct employers of graduates from undergraduate degree programs in TAFE Institutes and the returns to the national Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching Employer Satisfaction Survey from the TAFE Institutes providing higher education were too few to be able to be released for analysis.

Australian not for profit organisations working within the tertiary education field have been influential in forming our External Reference Group and their generous cooperation throughout the project has enabled its smooth running and ensured its success. Many other not for profits who have not been represented in the External Reference Group have given their time willingly and generously. These include:

- NATIONAL CENTRE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH
- NATIONAL CENTRE FOR STUDENT EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION
- TAFE DIRECTORS AUSTRALIA
- UNIVERSITIES AUSTRALIA
- CAREER INDUSTRY COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA
- CAREERS ADVISORS ASSOCIATION OF NSW & ACT
- MIGRATION INSTITUTE OF AUSTRALIA
- VTAC

## DISCOVERY PROJECT FINDINGS

The findings drawn from the various data gathering methods were validated in a stakeholder exercise in Summer 2019/20 and can be summarised at a high level as follows:

**Research Question 1:** How do TAFE Institutes represent themselves and their degrees through their marketing positioning practices and strategies in relation to other H.E. institutions?

- H.E. offerings in TAFE Institutes have grown from within, in an organic way and the growth has responded to local contexts and institutional strengths;
- TAFE Institutes present degree offerings as part of a continuum of vocational qualifications;
- TAFE Institutes suggest that their degrees are oriented to industry needs and prepare students for employment in specific occupations, often in new areas of para-professional work;
- Degree provision in TAFE Institutes is suggested to provide distinctive learning environments built on experiential and practical pedagogies facilitated by small cohorts and small class sizes.

**Research Question 2:** Which students are choosing V.I. degrees and why, and what messages about TAFE Institutes and their degrees do prospective and current students and employers find persuasive?

- H.E. offerings in TAFE Institutes attract specific cohorts of students, especially those of mature age and from non-English speaking background (NESB);
- TAFE students enter Bachelor degrees via diverse pathways, including previous study in VET and in HE; the majority enter based on a portfolio of assessments and experiences, rather than an ATAR score and progression from year 12;
- Students' reasons for selecting H.E. in TAFE Institutes stress the student experience and learning style, alongside identifying the relevance of the degree for their chosen field of employment.

**Research Question 3:** How are other H.E. institutions representing themselves and their degrees in response to the expansion of TAFE Institutes and possibilities of vocational distinction in the H.E. field?

- Degree provision in TAFE Institutes is suggested by higher education institutions to provide distinctive learning environments for particular purposes, and often different from the environment in universities;
- Higher Education provision in TAFE competes in a complex and precarious market and operates under different funding arrangements from the universities;
- Institutional competition is localised and operates on a program by program basis dependent on distinct institutional missions and the prevalence of universities with dual sector engagement;

**Research Question 4:** How are governments and national H.E. organisations steering and/or responding to the growth of H.E. in TAFE Institutes?

- The lack of a national strategic imperative to expand H.E. in TAFE Institutes impacts equity and access to H.E. in TAFEs because different funding models operate (at state and federal level) for students and institutions in the VET and HE sectors;
- Despite the debates on higher education sector expansion, there is little evidence of policy support across all jurisdictions for horizontal differentiation in HE provision to meet market need;
- TAFE Institutes are providing Bachelor degrees in a national policy vacuum with little influence in higher education policy conversations, in spite of the recognition of the niche role that HE in TAFEs provide indicated by some national organisations;
- Expansion of H.E. provision in TAFE Institutes varies across states and territories and no systematic approach across the country is noted.

The project has aimed to engage with policy, practice and research during its three year data collection, generation and collaboration period. The research team planned and carried out an impact pathway which included engagement with stakeholders on different levels, through varied media. The project's research design included interim findings being published near the end of the second year and the third year's concentration on validating those findings in the field. Therefore, built into the project was a significant engagement with the sector and the interest and commitment to research of those involved in the project have enabled the research questions to be investigated.

The substantive academic contribution of the project will be in the Springer Brief book to be published in early 2021 where the research findings gathered from the data collection and generation in this project will be contextualised in the extant literature.

## PROVOCATIONS

The project's planned impact pathway included exploring how the project is contributing to policy, research and practice, including in the future. The following provocations were developed and tested with a self-selected group of stakeholder representatives, led by the project's External Reference Group. The provocations were developed virtually and then the testing undertaken asynchronously, due to the 2020 pandemic conditions which meant the project's final dissemination activities in 2020 were cancelled.

### PROVOCATIONS: POLICY

#### POLICY PROVOCATION 1

Qualifications produced by Australia's Tertiary Education system have been configured into two markets, which operate to distribute two kinds of products: VET qualifications and HE qualifications, both of which were settled in the 1980s.

*Are there missing products in the mix of qualifications offered in Australia's Tertiary Education System? What would be gained by the emergence of a new market, or a consolidation of the current markets? What opportunities might be lost?*

#### POLICY PROVOCATION 2

Higher education in Australia contains two kinds of publicly funded providers (TAFE and Universities), both of which are committed to equity. One of those publicly funded providers faces disincentives in attracting students through their classification status as a provider in HE and policy mechanisms that flow from this classification.

*What might the policy consequences be if these disincentives were lifted?*

#### POLICY PROVOCATION 3

Today's tertiary education field is framed by policies developed in a Federal system, comprising national level quality assurance organisations, which until recently have focused separately on HE or VET programmes (TEQSA and ASQA), and funding mechanisms and strategic directions being overseen by governments at both the States and Territories and the Federal levels.

*How might a Federal system best facilitate a tertiary education system that can meet the needs of different stakeholders: different types of learners, employers, communities in different locations, different types of providers in order to support education for all at both initial post-school qualification levels and lifelong learning for a highly developed knowledge economy?*

#### POLICY PROVOCATION 4

Australia's higher education system is compared globally in a variety of ways and ranks well in many measures. Many of Australia's trading partners now have dedicated policies and a vision for the future in which Higher Vocational Education has a central place.

*Where might higher education in vocational education sit in Australia's tertiary education system?*

### PROVOCATIONS: RESEARCH

#### RESEARCH PROVOCATION 1

Australian higher education policy defines equity as inclusion, not equality of condition according to Cantwell, Marginson and Smolenseva (2018). Our research (Webb et al. 2019) has highlighted how the policy vacuum with regard to the expansion of higher education in the TAFE sector, creates structural inequalities in status and resources between HE providing institutions, the universities and the non-university providers. Quantitative research (our analysis of DET data – new query) shows that TAFEs are doing no more than universities to increase the participation of those from equity groups. Yet our qualitative data highlights a TAFE student population that is mature aged, with many from migrant family backgrounds.

*How might data be collected and categorised (nationally or institutionally) to understand whether or not degree offerings in TAFEs have the potential to address inequalities in HE participation?*

#### RESEARCH PROVOCATION 2

Our research (Webb et al. 2019) reports that there are no clear differences in student satisfaction between those taking degrees in TAFEs and those taking degrees in public universities and only small differences in graduates gaining employment. Yet, research by Koshy, Seymour, Dockery (2016) reports strong evidence for large and significant field of

study and industry effects on the earnings of university graduates which especially impacts women, noting that these field and labour market effects outweigh the existence of a university effect in Australia, save for a minor effect in relation to regional universities.

*Given that degrees in TAFEs reflect a narrow range of fields of study, often in areas with highly gendered labour markets, how do these fields of study affect the earnings outcomes of graduates from TAFEs? What if any, are the equity implications of TAFE degrees' fields of study? What role can TAFE institutions play in challenging these effects?*

### RESEARCH PROVOCATION 3

HE in non-university providers (such as TAFEs) and in universities are subject to the same quality standards as set by the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA). Although, non-university providers need to be accredited as institutions and each programme needs to be accredited, whereas public and private universities have self-accrediting status giving them more direct oversight of their programmes. At the same time TAFEs are mixed economy providers, with programmes and governance structures that need to relate to different quality assurance bodies TEQSA on the one hand and the Australian Skills Quality Authority on the other hand.

*How do TAFEs manage these mixed economies? What governance arrangements do TAFEs develop to ensure quality in the HE provision? What is understood by the 'higher' ness of offering higher education in TAFEs? What education cultures, practice, bodies of knowledge and qualifications are developing for practitioners teaching in higher education programs in TAFEs? How is higher education pedagogy being fostered among practitioners in TAFEs?*

### RESEARCH PROVOCATION 4

TAFEs are public education providers owned and funded by State governments, although with different arrangements in different parts of the Commonwealth. In this regard they are situated so as to meet the education, training and skill needs of their local regions. At the same time policy changes in the funding of VET has increased market competition for students between these public and other privately funded organisations. Not surprisingly, TAFE HE offerings contribute to the role of education as Australia's "third export industry" by recruiting substantial numbers of international students.

*How are TAFEs understanding and reconciling their contribution to public good through providing access and successfully lifting the skill levels of their local communities traditionally excluded from higher education, alongside contributing to the education export industry? How are TAFE offerings related to the needs of industry?*

## PROVOCATIONS: PRACTICE

### PRACTICE PROVOCATION 1

During our research we received the message that TAFE-developed bachelor degrees offer a way to avoid the limitations of training packages. In other words, designers of individual TAFE degrees were able to be highly responsive to the needs of industries and employers.

*Given that through training reform, competency-based training and training packages were instituted to overcome fragmentation of vocational provision, is there a risk that TAFE-designed degrees will re-introduce this problem? Is there a risk that that the kind of vocational education provided by TAFE degrees will lead to a new form of fragmentation, with students, employers and industries potentially unable to access an education that is on offer in other parts of the country?*

### PRACTICE PROVOCATION 2

Smaller class sizes and closer relationships between students and teachers is seen as a distinctive characteristic of TAFE higher education provision and a key selling point. *But is this characteristic simply a function of the relatively small scale of this type of provision?*

*If government policy shifts so that disincentives are removed and enrolment numbers increase in TAFE higher education programs, how will providers maintain this distinction? Could this distinction disappear and large classes and more remote relationships between students and teachers become the norm?*

### PRACTICE PROVOCATION 3

One of the benefits of VET provision is that the competency-based assessment regime often allows students to re-take assessments until they are deemed competent.

*Given strict TEQSA requirements around assessment of higher education programs, can providers of vocationally focused higher education offer high levels of individual student support through assessment processes? Are students pursuing a pathway from VET to higher education within the one provider aware that assessment processes will not follow the approach they may be accustomed to in VET? How do higher education providers from the VET sector balance rigour with high support through assessment processes?*

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- Webb, S., Rawolle, S., Hodge, S., Gale, T., Bathmaker, A-M., Knight, E. and Parker, S. (2019) *Degrees of Difference, Examining the Scope, Provision and Equity Effects of Degrees in Vocational Institutions*, Interim Project Report, Monash University, Melbourne. Available online [www.monash.edu/hive](http://www.monash.edu/hive).

## PLANNED PUBLICATIONS

### UNDER CONTRACT

- Knight, E., Bathmaker, A-M, Moodie, G., Orr, K., Webb, S. & Wheelahan, L. (Eds.) (2021) *Equity, High Skills and Productivity through Higher Level Vocational Education*. London, Palgrave.
- Rawolle, S., Hodge, S., Webb, S. & Knight, E. (2020) Higher Vocational Education policy tracing. *International Journal of Training Research*, August 2020, Volume 18, Issue 2, pp 0-0.
- Webb, S., Knight, E., Hodge, S. & Rawolle, S. (2020) A degree is a degree. Editorial. *International Journal of Training Research*, August 2020, Volume 18, Issue 2 pp 0-0.
- Webb, S., Knight, E, Hodge, S., Rawolle, S. Gale, T., Parker, S. & Bathmaker, A-M. (2021) *Higher education in Australian Vocational Institutions: Emerging forms of provision in universal higher education systems*. Singapore: Springer.
- Koshy, P, Webb, S., Dockery, M. & Knight, E. (2020) Measures of Equity. *International Journal of Training Research*, August 2020, Volume 18, Issue 2 pp 0-0.
- Sinclair, A. & Webb, S (2020) Academic identity in a changing Australian higher education space: the higher education in vocational institution perspective. *International Journal of Training Research*, August 2020, Volume 18, Issue 2, pp 0-0.
- Webb, S., Orr, K., and Bathmaker, A-M. (2021) *Excellence and Equity in Higher Vocational Education* in Knight et al. (Eds) *Equity, High Skills and Productivity through Higher Level Vocational Education*. London, Palgrave.
- Rawolle, S., Hodge, S., Webb, S. & Knight, E. (2021) *Higher Vocational Education in Australia – What’s Going On* in Knight et al. (Eds) *Equity, High Skills and Productivity through Higher Level Vocational Education*. London, Palgrave.

### MANUSCRIPTS

- Webb S., Knight, E, Rawolle, S. & Hodge, S. (2021) New higher education provider’s marketing strategies, To be submitted to: *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*
- Parker, S., Webb, S., Knight, E. & Gale, T. (2021). *The Role of Students’ Archives of Experience in Selecting Higher Vocational Education*. To be submitted to *British Journal of Sociology of Education*
- Knight, E, Webb, S., Hodge, S. & Rawolle, S. (2021) *Higher Vocational Education – What Does It Mean For Vocational Education? Post Education and Employers’ conference 2018* - to be submitted to *linked Journal of Vocational Education and Training*.
- Webb S., Bathmaker, A-M., Knight, E., Rawolle, S. & Hodge, S. (2021) *Higher education in TAFE Institutes: Australian challenges of providing distinctive contribution that contributes to widening participation*. To be submitted to *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*
- Knight, E., Webb, S., Wade, A., & Rawolle, S. (2021) *Is a geographic line of sight important in making application to higher education? Part of special issue submission to Education Review*.

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Participants in the research have been generous with their time and we thank the over 600 people who have had their views recorded in the development of this report, many of whom are the staff and students involved in higher education in Australian TAFE Institutes. This report uses data from bespoke data requests from the Australian Government Department of Education (and Training) and we are very thankful for the staff of University Statistics careful and innovative work in developing a new query for TAFE Institutes offering higher education courses.

The views expressed in this report represent the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of the funding bodies or any of the participants.

## Further information

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