Chapter 9

Inclusive Growth in Higher Education: The Development of Pathways from Vocational Education and Training

Mike Brown
La Trobe University, Australia

ABSTRACT

Much effort has been expended on developing pathways, articulation, and credit for Vocational Education and Training (VET) graduates seeking access and partial credit within a Higher Education (HE) course. In this chapter, the author discusses whether the policy settings of “inclusive growth” associated with the post-Bradley era in Australian higher education provides an opportunity to enact the recognition of fair and just learning equivalence for VET graduates who are seeking to participate in further studies within higher education. It is argued that VET graduates have not always been considered equally and consistently by HE providers; however, the operationalizing of current policy settings may rectify this through the implementation of fair and consistent processes. It is proposed that the inclusion of VET graduates into HE has the potential to make a positive contribution to a more inclusive and broader notion of knowledge and which leads to a richer educational experience for all.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive growth is used here to describe the post-Bradley era of higher education in Australia, and provides the backdrop to this investigation into opportunities unfolding for students wishing to develop learning pathways from Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses through into Higher Education. The concept of “inclusive growth” describes the three-way convergence that is occurring between (1) the demands of the knowledge economy and job growth at professional level (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013); (2) the neoliberal agenda of growing the higher education (HE) market – justified through the adherence to human capital theory (Ball, 2003, 2012; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010); and (3) the social justice agenda.
of equity, with contemporary moves to broaden participation in HE (Devlin, 2013; Gale, 2012; Gale & Parker, 2013).

The demands of the knowledge economy are creating new jobs at the top end of the labor market – in the professions (Brinkley, Fauth, Mahdon & Theodoropoulou, 2009). Professionals currently make up 22.3 per cent of the Australian workforce. This amounts to more than 2.5 million workers and that number continues to grow. Nearly forty per cent of all new jobs are being created in this category. This amounts to around 370,000 new professionals taking up new jobs in the last five years (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013). To accommodate these demands, student numbers in higher education (HE) need to keep pace and increase also. Following Australian government initiatives student numbers in HE have increased by 43,600 or 21.3 per cent for the four years of 2009 to 2012 (Edwards & Radloff, 2013). This type of increase is part of a worldwide trend. In many countries around the world, particularly those associated with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it is argued that there is a movement in HE from mass participation (16 to 50 per cent) to universal participation (above 50 per cent) (Trow, 2006).

This chapter argues that these convergences that constitute the “inclusive growth” in HE may provide an opportunity for students graduating from the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector and who are looking to continue their learning. What initially appears as an unlikely partnership between contrasting agendas may in fact pave the way for VET graduates to negotiate credit for entry into, and towards partial completion of, degree programs like never before. After a clear articulation of the argument and a setting of the economic and social context, a later section will review some of the contemporary studies of pathways, articulation arrangements and credit transfer between these two sectors. This review will concentrate on understanding the current state of the articulation arrangements and practices and the potential opportunity that is currently arising. While much of the literature and studies reviewed are about the Australian context, this is because specific context is important when considering these issues. However the way that inclusive growth provides opportunities for the development and utilization of pathways and articulation between VET and HE in Australia is seen as holding relevance and applicability to this area of sectorial transition in other countries, particularly within other national VET systems across Europe, South Africa and Asia.

This chapter looks at the research around VET graduates as they negotiate pathways to attend Higher Education (HE) and become knowledge workers. However this current stocktake of research on articulation and pathways from VET to HE appears to contrast with the stipulations of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). The AQF (2013) states that the decisions being made around giving students credit need to be evidence-based, equitable and transparent. The decisions need to be consistent and fair; recognize learning regardless of how, where and when acquired; and the learning needs to be relevant, current and related to the learning outcomes of the qualification.

For the purposes of this chapter, the body of research that makes up this discussion on pathways and articulation arrangements is contextualized and located within the “inclusive growth” agenda. In turn some initial and very tentative effort is also made to associate the discussion with an emerging project to develop a southern theory of higher education (Connell, 2007; Gale, 2012; Gale & Parker, 2013).

For clarity, it is important to ensure shared understanding of the key concepts of pathways, articulation arrangements and credit transfer. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) stipulates that pathways “allow students to move through qualification levels with full or partial recognition of the qualifications and/or learn-