

NATIONAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
AND TRAINING RESEARCH PROGRAM

OCCASIONAL PAPER

Disadvantaged learners and VET to higher education transitions

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NATIONAL CENTRE FOR
VOCATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH



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About the research

Disadvantaged learners and VET to higher education transitions

Tabatha Griffin, NCVER

The vocational education and training (VET) system can provide an entry point to the education sector for people who have experienced disadvantage in their lives. Participation in VET can provide personal benefits as well as lead to further study and/or employment.

How disadvantaged learners participate in vocational education and training is an important consideration. Further study and employment outcomes are more likely to stem from completing a higher-level VET qualification, but disadvantaged learners tend to enrol in lower-level qualifications. Hence, whether or not disadvantaged learners are transitioning from lower-level VET qualifications to higher-level vocational education and training and into higher education is of interest. Based on a review of the literature, this paper synthesises what is currently known about these transitions for disadvantaged learners.

Key messages

Disadvantaged learners tend to be overrepresented in lower-level VET qualifications and underrepresented in higher-level VET and higher education. There is little in the literature that provides student perspectives on transitions from lower-level to higher-level vocational education and training and from VET into higher education. The literature shows that transition from VET to higher education is a viable pathway for some disadvantaged learners, although it is not used as widely as it could be. There are a number of factors that act as barriers:

- Transition from vocational education and training to higher education is more likely to occur from higher-level VET qualifications. However, disadvantaged learners re-engaging with the education sector are more likely to enrol in lower-level qualifications.
- Transition from VET to higher education can be complicated, even for students who are not disadvantaged. This is despite the array of formal arrangements, such as credit transfer, and supports that are in place.
- Support services can make a difference, but there is a tension between providing individually tailored support and system-wide support. Limited resources are an issue, and priority should be given to supports most likely to lead to positive outcomes.

Rod Camm
Managing Director, NCVER

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Introduction

The vocational education and training (VET) system provides opportunities for individuals to undertake training for employment-related reasons, to enable further study, or for personal interest and development. Vocational education and training also often provides an entry point to the education system for individuals who have experienced barriers to participation in education (Curtis 2009). When considering VET for those individuals belonging to one or more equity group, access and participation alone only tell part of the story. How students participate, and the outcomes they achieve, is also important.

For many people in equity groups, lower-level qualifications (certificate levels I and II, for example) may provide an entry point to the VET system. While these qualifications might offer some personal benefits, such as improved self-esteem, the employment and further study outcomes for prime- and mature-aged students have been shown to be limited (Stanwick 2006). There is a question about whether disadvantaged students are using those qualifications as a stepping stone to further study at higher levels.

Graduates of higher-level VET qualifications are more likely to be employed after training (NCVER 2012a) and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) considers a certificate III to be the minimum-level qualification for improving employment outcomes (Council of Australian Governments Reform Council 2010). This trend has been shown to hold true in those equity groups where it has been investigated; for example, Polidano and Mavromaras (2010) showed that the completion of a VET qualification at certificate III or above significantly improved the employment of people with a disability.

In response to the Bradley Review (Bradley et al. 2008), the federal government set an objective to increase participation in higher education for some equity groups, especially those from a low socioeconomic background (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009). Transition from lower-level VET to higher-level VET qualifications and into higher education is one way of meeting government targets and increasing participation at those education levels more likely to lead to employment.

The focus of this paper is to synthesise what is currently published on the access and participation of disadvantaged learners in higher-level VET qualifications and higher education, and their transitions from lower-level VET qualifications to higher-level VET and higher education. Where possible, the aim is to focus on the learners' perspectives.

The paper will consider a number of equity groups: Indigenous Australians, people with a disability, those from rural/remote locations, those with non-English speaking backgrounds, younger people and older people. It needs to be noted that these are not homogenous groups and individuals may experience multiple disadvantage.

Access and participation in tertiary education

Key points

- Disadvantaged learners tend to be overrepresented in lower-level qualifications and underrepresented in higher-level qualifications.
- Compared with all graduates, the proportion of VET graduates who go on to study at university tends to be lower for disadvantaged students.

A national report on social equity in vocational education and training for 2013 (Rothman et al. 2013) provides an extensive overview of the participation, achievement and transitions from the VET system for several groups in the Australian population: Indigenous Australians, people with a disability, people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background; people living in remote areas; people from low socioeconomic (SES) status backgrounds; and women. The report draws together data from a range of sources and research studies with the aim of providing a baseline from which to monitor the future performance of the VET system for disadvantaged learners. The Annual National Report of the Australian Vocational Education and Training System (see Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2012) also includes a chapter on disadvantage in vocational education and training and reports on participation, achievement and outcomes for six disadvantaged student groups: Indigenous students, students with a disability, students with a language background other than English, students from low socioeconomic areas, students from geographically isolated areas, and students with a prior educational attainment of less than Year 12. Readers may wish to access these reports for a fuller picture of the access and participation of disadvantaged learners in vocational education and training than is possible to present in this paper.

A recurring pattern in the data is that disadvantaged learners tend to be overrepresented in lower-level qualifications. Enabling disadvantaged learners access to vocational education and training is important, but the level of VET they are accessing needs to be considered in order to assess the likely outcomes for the individual and the labour market. Table 1 shows the number of VET students by qualification level in 2011 for several groups of disadvantaged students. The data show that Indigenous people, individuals with a disability, those from rural/remote locations and those with a non-English speaking background are overrepresented at the certificate I level when compared with all students. At the certificate II level, higher proportions of Indigenous, those with a disability and those from rural/remote locations are also prevalent. At the other end of the spectrum, disadvantaged students tend to be underrepresented in the higher-level certificate III, IV and diploma qualifications.

Bradley et al. (2008), in their review of Australian higher education, highlighted the underrepresentation of many of these groups in the higher education sector; namely, Indigenous people, people with a low socioeconomic status, and those from regional and remote areas. Table 2 shows the number of commencing and current domestic undergraduate students at university in 2012 for various equity groups.

These tables again demonstrate that disadvantaged learners are overrepresented in lower-level qualifications and underrepresented in higher-level VET and higher education. Lower-level

qualifications may provide an individual with some personal benefits, but the direct employment outcomes of these qualifications are limited. Hence, there is interest in whether or not disadvantaged students use lower-level qualifications as a way to access further study. Table 3 shows the employment and further study outcomes for VET graduates six months after completing their training using data from the Student Outcomes Survey (NCVER 2012a; note that some caution in interpreting the results is required due to small estimates for some of the groups). For those enrolled in further study after training, it is perhaps unsurprising that those who graduated from higher-level qualifications are more likely to be studying at university. The data show that graduates who have completed a diploma or above are much more likely to be studying at university compared with those who have completed certificates I to IV. Conversely, a higher proportion of graduates from certificates I to IV were studying at a TAFE (technical and further education) institute or at a private VET provider compared with those who had graduated with a diploma or above. This is the case across most of the disadvantaged groups and for all graduates.

Compared with all graduates, the level of VET graduates who go on to study at university tends to be lower for most of the equity groups shown, regardless of the qualification level completed. The two groups that appear to confound this trend are those with a non-English speaking background and younger people — these groups had a higher level of enrolment at university. Some groups (Indigenous Australians, people with a disability, those with a non-English speaking background and younger people) showed higher levels of further study in vocational education and training, but it is not clear whether this is at a higher qualification level or not.

Looking at it from the higher education perspective, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER; 2012b) reports that in 2010 around 7% of commencing domestic equivalent full-time students had completed a VET course prior to commencing higher education. An additional 1.4% had an incomplete VET course. Note that these data were not disaggregated by equity group.

It is likely that the low level of transition from VET to higher education by disadvantaged learners is partly due to the level of vocational education and training in which they participate. As shown above, higher-level VET programs — those used more frequently as stepping stones to higher education — are underrepresented amongst disadvantaged students. In combination, these data suggest that disadvantaged learners are taking advantage of vocational education and training as an entry point to the education sector, and that there is *potential* for them to forge pathways to higher-level qualifications and the higher education sector. However, the levels of enrolment at university for people belonging to one or more equity group are still low. The statistics only tell part of the story. To understand how the number of students who make the transition from lower-level qualifications to higher-level VET or higher education might be increased, an investigation into the experiences of students making that transition is required. The following section considers what has been published in the research literature.

Table 1 Number of students by qualification level, equity groups 2011 (%)

Equity group	Qualification level						
	Certificate I	Certificate II	Certificate III	Certificate IV	Diploma or higher	AQF sub-total	Non-AQF sub-total
Indigenous	13.5	28.0	28.4	9.9	5.3	85.0	15.0
Disability	9.7	21.0	27.2	12.8	10.2	81.0	19.0
Rural/remote localities	6.0	21.6	34.4	13.1	7.7	82.8	17.2
Non-English speaking background	7.2	14.0	27.0	15.3	18.6	82.0	18.0
Older	4.6	11.0	22.6	20.1	13.8	72.2	27.8
All students	4.5	16.7	32.3	16.3	13.9	83.7	16.3

Note: AQF = Australian Qualifications Framework.

Source: National VET Provider Collection.

Table 2 Commencing and all domestic higher education students, equity groups, 2012

Equity group	2012	% of total
Commencing domestic undergraduate students		
Students from a non-English speaking background	9 149	3.7
Students with a disability	11 677	4.7
Indigenous	3 866	1.6
Low SES 1	44 634	18.1
Regional 2	52 843	21.4
Remote 2	2 249	0.9
All commencing domestic undergraduate students	246 569	
All domestic undergraduate students		
Students from a non-English speaking background	22 127	3.3
Students with a disability	35 994	5.3
Indigenous	9 441	1.4
Low SES 1	115 903	17.1
Regional 2	138 854	20.4
Remote 2	5 565	0.8
All domestic undergraduate students	679 595	

Notes: 1 Low SES postcode measure is based on the students' postcode of permanent home residence, with the SES value derived from the 2011 SEIFA (Socio-Economic Indexes for Australia) Education and Occupation Index for postal areas, with postal areas in the bottom 25% of the population aged 15–64 years being classified as low SES.

2 Regional and remote categories derived from the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS).

Source: Higher Education statistics, viewed 22 February 2014, <<http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/HigherEducationStatistics/StatisticsPublications/Pages/Students12FullYear.aspx>>.

Table 3 Employment and further study outcomes for graduates six months after completing their training by equity group and qualification level, Australia, 2012

Equity group	Enrolled in further study after training			Not enrolled in further study	Employed after training
Qualification level	Studying at university	Studying at TAFE institute	Studying at private provider or other registered provider		
<i>Indigenous</i>					
Cert. I & II	2.7*	23.3	11.9*	62.1	48.4
Cert. III & IV	6.3*	20.1	11.6	62.0	78.1
Diploma & above	15.6*	10.9*	8.6*	64.9	70.7
All Indigenous	6.4	19.9	11.3	62.4	67.1
<i>Disability</i>					
Cert. I & II	2.6*	23.4	13.3	60.8	34.1
Cert. III & IV	4.1	23.2	9.8	62.9	57.8
Diploma & above	14.0	14.4	7.2*	64.3	67.7
All disability	5.3	21.8	10.4	62.5	52.4
<i>From rural/remote localities¹</i>					
Cert. I & II	4.4*	21.6	12.2	61.8	59.6
Cert. III & IV	4.5	16.8	12.1	66.7	86.8
Diploma & above	14.4	8.7	11.7	65.1	88.2
All rural/remote	5.7	16.8	12.0	65.5	81.1
<i>Non-English speaking background²</i>					
Cert. I & II	3.1	26.8	12.5*	57.5	48.6
Cert. III & IV	6.8	18.2	7.9	67.1	70.1
Diploma & above	21.5	12.7	4.9	60.9	68.7
All NESB	9.4	18.3	7.9	64.3	66.5
<i>Older³</i>					
Cert. I & II	1.4*	18.9	10.5	69.2	50.4
Cert. III & IV	2.2	13.5	10.9	73.3	82.0
Diploma & above	7.1	8.7	12.1	72.1	88.1
All older	3.3	13.0	11.1	72.6	79.9
<i>All graduates</i>					
Cert. I & II	4.0	22.9	16.3	56.8	60.4
Cert. III & IV	6.1	17.6	10.3	66.1	80.9
Diploma & above	16.8	11.3	7.1	64.8	83.2
Total	7.8	17.2	10.7	64.2	77.8

Notes: 1 Rural/remote localities comprise 'outer regional', 'remote' and 'very remote' ARIA+ (Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia) categories.

2 Non-English speaking background is based on whether the main language spoken at home is other than English.

3 Older comprises graduates who are 45 years or older.

* The estimate has a relative standard error greater than 25% and therefore should be used with caution.

Source: NCVER (2012a).

Transitions to higher-level study

Key points

- The transition from VET to higher education is often complicated, even for those individuals who do not belong to an equity group.
- The literature suggests that those students who are using lower-level VET courses to re-engage with the education system are not likely to transition to higher-level VET or university.
- The pathway from VET to higher education is a viable one for disadvantaged students, but because of their lower levels of enrolment in higher-level VET qualifications, the pathway is underutilised.

The National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) identified enabling the transition from lower-level qualifications to higher-level qualifications, and to higher education, as an important area of reform and a way to achieve better outcomes for disadvantaged learners (National VET Equity Advisory Council 2011). This section considers what is known about the transition of VET students to further study, and, in particular, to higher-level qualifications, both in VET and in higher education.

There has been more published in the literature about the transition from VET to higher education than about the transition from lower to higher-level VET qualifications. Curtis (2009), in an overview of student transfer between the VET and higher education sectors, describes a diverse array of situations that might occur. Transfer may occur shortly after participation in the first course, or many years later. The second qualification may be in the same field as the first, or in a different one. In addition, it may follow a complete or incomplete first qualification.

Generally speaking, the transition from VET to higher education is often complicated, even for those individuals who do not belong to an equity group. This is despite the fact that policies — such as credit transfer, articulation arrangements and recognition of prior learning — have been put in place to facilitate transitions between the two sectors (Harris, Rainey & Sumner 2006). Much of the current literature on transitioning from VET to higher education is focused on formal articulation arrangements and credit transfer, and how effectively (or not) they are working. The focus of the discussion here, however, is on the experience of transitioning for the student.

A recent discussion paper prepared by the Community Services & Health Industry Skills Council (CSHISC; 2012) lists a number of practical issues associated with articulation between the VET and higher education sectors. Most of these issues are related to the inherent differences between the two sectors; for example, the competency-based approach of vocational education and training compared with the curricula-based approach of higher education; the diversity of courses in both sectors; and differences in understanding about the quality of training and assessment, especially with regard to vocational education and training. Similarly, Dickson (2000, as cited in Watson 2006) identified six recurring variables in the literature that influence the transition of TAFE students to university. These involved: the theoretical focus of the university course content compared with the practical focus of vocational education and training; differences in teaching and learning styles; higher academic standards and levels of expectations at university; repetition of TAFE content;

contrasts in staff–student interactions and relationships; and time-management difficulties in combining study and other demands, such as paid work and family responsibilities.

On a more personal level, Curtis (2009) explains that many of the barriers to transfer are similar to the general barriers to study that people experience. These barriers include the challenges of managing work, financial, social/family and study commitments. In addition to these barriers, however, students transferring from vocational education and training to university face the additional problem of adapting to the new learning environment. Based on a small survey of students who had moved from VET to higher education in South Australia, Harris, Sumner and Rainey (2005) reported that students found the two sectors to be different with regard to the cost of studying, teaching styles, assessment processes, and the course structure and level of work in the course. While these differences were identified by a high proportion of the students surveyed, the majority of students in this study were comfortable with moving from VET to higher education. Another survey of students who had transitioned from VET to higher education at the University of Western Sydney and Charles Sturt University showed that high proportions found the amount of study and preparation for class was more than expected. These students also found other aspects of university study difficult at first, such as enrolling in the course and academic conventions (Caterall & Davis 2012).

These studies did not specifically consider disadvantaged students and it is possible that the transition from VET to higher education might be more difficult for these students. This could especially be true for those who have used low-level VET courses to re-engage with the education sector, as this probably means an even larger step between the VET course they have experienced and a higher education course. While the access and participation of various equity groups in both vocational education and training and higher education has been well documented, there is limited research on VET students' transition to, and experience at, university (Aird et al. 2010). However, the following examples give some insight into the challenges faced.

Wheelahan (2009) investigated the extent to which VET pathways provide students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with access to higher education. She found that VET pathways do not appear to significantly improve access to higher education for students with such backgrounds. She argued that pathways between the sectors had *deepened* the participation of social groups that were already well represented, but it had not *widened* the participation of those groups who are underrepresented. In terms of low socioeconomic status students, students who had transitioned from VET to higher education had a similar SES profile to other higher education students. It was therefore suggested that articulation in its current form is not an effective mechanism for increasing the participation of students with low socioeconomic status backgrounds.

A study from 1997 (Ramsey et al., as cited in Bandias, Fuller & Pfitzner 2011) followed a cohort of Indigenous students transitioning to university and found that only eight of the 223 commencers had gained admission on the basis of prior vocational education and training. The majority of these students had received no credit transfer. More recent research, conducted by Bandias, Fuller and Larkin (2013), investigated the pathways taken between VET and higher education by Indigenous students in the Northern Territory. Based on data from Charles Darwin University, the research showed that, for those Indigenous students who had completed a certificate IV, the pathway from VET to higher education was a viable one. However, due to the small number of graduates at the certificate IV, diploma and advanced diploma levels, this pathway was underutilised. Another earlier study (Helme 2007), investigating the VET experiences of Indigenous Australians in Victoria, also found that vocational education and training (TAFE specifically) functioned as a stepping stone to higher education for some students. These students included those who had enrolled in TAFE with the

intention of articulating to university on completion of a diploma, or who had gained university entrance on the strength of a TAFE qualification. Helme suggested that a key finding of her study was that success in TAFE served to broaden the horizons of students who had not previously contemplated university study.

It is worth mentioning VET courses that have been designed specifically to prepare students for tertiary study. These are usually aimed at people who have experienced some disadvantage in their education and aim to provide students with the necessary skills to go onto further education. Aird et al. (2010) describe a bridging course to tertiary study offered by many Queensland TAFE institutions, which was established to achieve equity in access to university for people considered to be disadvantaged. While this course was shown to be effective in providing a pathway from vocational education and training to university, it is aimed at students who are already aspiring to study at university before they commence.

To date, there have been very few studies that have focused on the *students' perspectives* of transitioning from lower-level VET courses to higher-level VET or university — and next to nothing investigating the experiences of disadvantaged students. It is therefore useful to consider the barriers reported by students — not specifically disadvantaged students — since those barriers are likely to be experienced by this group as well. In a case study investigating student pathways, Watson (2006) interviewed students about the barriers faced when transitioning from a VET Diploma in Children's Services to higher education degree courses in early childhood education. These students faced a steep learning curve, particularly in relation to academic literacy skills such as writing, developing arguments, self-directed critical reflection and research skills. These students were not identified as disadvantaged, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that disadvantaged students would find this at least equally difficult.

Bandias, Fuller and Larkin (2013) conducted interviews with 29 first-year Indigenous undergraduates at Charles Darwin University and Batchelor Institute. For those who had gained entry to higher education based on their VET studies, some felt that their VET studies had prepared them for higher education and they enjoyed the opportunities presented. Others struggled with the workload, finding a work–life balance and the emphasis on online learning; they also experienced financial difficulties.

There is very little in the literature about the transition from lower-level to higher-level qualifications in the VET sector. Using data from the Student Outcomes survey, Stanwick (2006) showed that around 30% of certificate I and II graduates enrolled in further study at a higher level (six months after their initial graduation). The figure was even lower (less than 10%) for subject-only completers. This study did not report on disadvantaged learners but it suggests that those students who are using lower-level VET courses to re-engage with the education sector are not likely to transition to higher-level vocational education and training or university. A more recent report (Guthrie, Stanwick & Karmel 2011), looking at pathways through the tertiary education sector, shows that substantial numbers of VET students have previously completed a lower-level VET qualification. However, there is scant information on the experiences of disadvantaged students making this transition. Of all the equity groups, the transition experiences of Indigenous students have received the most attention.

Helme (2007) investigated the experiences of Indigenous students in Victoria who had attempted to move from Indigenous-specific courses run by TAFE Indigenous units to mainstream TAFE courses. It should be noted that it was not specified whether these transitions were from lower to higher qualification levels. The students identified barriers, including lack of flexibility in general TAFE courses and a lack of support from some teachers, particularly in relation to absences due to family

and cultural obligations. Helme argues that the VET sector plays an important role for Indigenous learners due to its ability to accept adult students into lower-level programs, which can act as pathways to higher-level qualifications. But students need support to enable them to overcome the barriers identified above. Strategies identified by the author of this study included group enrolments (to encourage peer support), customisation of courses to enable more flexibility, stronger links between the Indigenous support units and other departments, and education for staff about Indigenous culture.

A more recent study (TAFE NSW 2013) followed just over 3000 newly enrolled Indigenous students at TAFE NSW for six years, documenting their pathways through their VET studies. Of the 1126 15 to 19-year-olds who had originally enrolled in a foundation skills course, 73 (6.5%) completed at least one course at certificate III or above during the six-year study. This demonstrates that for some students enrolment in a low-level foundation course provided a viable pathway to higher-level qualifications. However, it should be noted that many students enrolled in subsequent foundation skills courses, with 72 (6.4%) enrolling in four to nine subsequent foundation courses. Dawe (2004) found that it is not necessarily a problem when students remained in enabling courses, since in that particular study many of the students had progressed to a more advanced course within the same level of qualification, or had diversified into other areas of learning. While there might be genuine reasons for and positive outcomes from these courses, the authors of the TAFE NSW (2013) report suggest that more systematic career planning or goal setting for these students may result in a better outcome, one that is more likely to lead to employment.

Given that transition from vocational education and training to further education appears difficult, particularly for some disadvantaged learners, it is of interest to consider what possible mechanisms or supports could be put in place to improve this. This is considered in the following section.

Support services

Key points

- Many support programs aimed at students transitioning to university are focused on preparing students prior to their commencing university and supporting them once they have commenced study. Some attention should be given to true transition programs.
- Support programs to assist the transition from VET to higher education could focus on developing academic literacy, critical thinking and research and time management skills — areas that have been shown to be challenging for transitioning students.
- Personal qualities such as motivation, commitment, understanding and respect are also important in successful transitions but are difficult to foster through support systems. In addition, making the transition to higher education is not enough. The realities of previous educational achievement and the requirements for study can act as a large barrier, especially for disadvantaged learners.

Two broad types of support are of relevance to this paper. The first is support provided to students to assist them to successfully complete their VET or higher education course. The second is support that is targeted at assisting the transition of students from VET to higher education.

Disadvantaged learners are not an homogenous group, and specific support requirements vary, depending on the needs of an individual student. Barriers specific to various equity groups and the supports required to overcome these barriers have been well documented in the literature and will not be elaborated in this paper. It is useful, however, to recognise that, while some barriers may be specific to particular groups and educational sectors, many are commonly experienced by students across the whole tertiary sector. Aird et al. (2010) categorises these into barriers that are structural in nature (related to institutional policies and operations, course content and organisation, teaching quality, finance and work-related) and those that are individual (family commitments, illness, disability, self-confidence, motivation and educational aspirations). Support to help mitigate these barriers might be simple, such as providing timely and useful information, or it could be more complex, like a multi-service intervention (Coates & Ransom 2011).

Recently there has been a focus in the literature on how to incorporate these specific and individual support requirements into more overarching systems of support. In their report to the National VET Equity Advisory Council, Brown and North (2010) suggest that for the VET sector there is no single support model to guarantee an effective and sustainable outcome. Instead, they suggest that a larger support system be underpinned by: local programs that are community-owned and individual-centred; flexible pathways assisted by transition support; incentives that support and encourage both participation and completion; a culture in which equity is embedded and formalised; and outcomes that are monitored, evaluated and reported with rigour and transparency. These aspects would underpin the broader system-level objectives that aim to: reduce systemic barriers; improve students' experiences and outcomes; focus on completions and outcomes; improve cross-sectoral data collections.

The features of effective support models in the higher education sector are characterised by a focus on first-year retention through the provision of pre-entry and post-entry induction activities and support services (Brown & North 2010). Individual support is provided through student-centred active

learning. Students with financial barriers to attending university are supported through financial incentives such as scholarships, bursaries and allowances.

Of particular relevance to this paper, however, are support systems that work to enable successful transition from lower-level to higher-level VET qualifications and from VET to higher education for disadvantaged learners. Spencer (2005), as cited in Aird et al. (2010), described several enablers for successful articulation between vocational education and training and university. These included: articulation as part of the design, not an afterthought; access to clear, consistent, accurate promotional material; easier and fairer processes of articulation and recognition of prior learning; and university staff understanding vocational education and training and vice versa. These elements are not specific to disadvantaged learners, but would assist smoother transitions for all students.

Brown and North (2010) suggest that there is scope to improve how disadvantaged learners transition from VET to higher education, and this could include the use of preparatory programs that focus on literacy, numeracy and foundation skills. Their review of the literature and of current programs found that universities have sought to employ pathways officers and have provided enabling or bridging courses in an attempt to help students overcome those initial challenges faced. These findings have been mirrored elsewhere.

Blacker et al. (2011) provides an extensive list of the targeted transition programs offered by Australian universities, identified by a desktop scan of university websites. The list includes programs aimed at preparing students before transition and supporting students both during and after transition. Most of the programs are elective, and most are open to all students. However, a small number of those programs identified are aimed specifically at certain groups of students, including Indigenous, mature-age students, women, and distance education students. The focus of many of these programs is on preparing students prior to their commencing university and support initiatives accessed once the students are undertaking university studies. Blacker et al. (2011) suggest that, while these programs are important in recruiting and retaining students, attention should be given to developing true transition programs. These would be designed to assist the transition between the two sectors and could focus on developing academic literacy, critical thinking and research and time management skills, areas that have been shown to be particularly challenging for students transitioning from VET to higher education (Blacker et al. 2011).

This line of thought is supported by Caterall and Davis (2012), who argue that VET to higher education students need targeted support, especially prior to and during the early stages of commencing their degree studies. Their report details some strategies that have been implemented by the University of Western Sydney to help students who are making the transition from VET to higher education. The strategies that have been implemented include:

- 'Academic preparation seminars': introductory seminars designed for VET students who have applied for university entrance. The seminars provide VET students with the opportunity to visit a university campus and aim to provide an introduction to aspects of university study and the conventions relevant to their chosen discipline.
- Welcome packs for VET students: containing a letter, flyers on bridging programs and other support services and a 'VET peer guide for VET pathways student' brochure, which clearly explains some of the differences between VET and university and provides tips on how the student might deal with some of the challenges. The pack also contains information on VET pathways and credit transfer sites, where students can check whether they are eligible for credit under formalised arrangements.

- VET transition web page: designed for commencing students, the webpage highlights some of the differences they might encounter. It includes links to other support services.
- VET student peer contact program (under development at the time the paper was published): entails a buddy system for Business students.
- Mentoring program: this is specifically targeted to distance students.
- Education technology program: designed to introduce new students to the online study environment.

While these strategies are not aimed specifically at disadvantaged students, it is not difficult to imagine how they could be designed to be inclusive and helpful for all students, including those who are disadvantaged. Ensuring that input from and information about equity support services is included is one way of doing that. Coates and Ransom (2011) in their paper on student intentions to leave their higher education studies claim that integrating support services into the various faculties is a key concept of support. The multi-pronged transition support approach taken by the University of Western Sydney appears to follow this tack.

The support systems provided by VET and higher education providers are important, but the success of transitioning is not wholly dependent on the system. The individual student needs to take some ownership and agency over forging a pathway. This is illustrated in the study conducted by Walls and Pardy (2010), who sought the perspectives of students who had transitioned from VET to higher education, with a focus on the process of credit transfer. The research showed that, despite systemic and cultural impediments to credit transfer, students who were perceptive and well informed were able to forge a pathway between the sectors. The authors point out the importance of individual qualities such as motivation, commitment, understanding and respect. These personal qualities are difficult to foster, but support systems that encourage, lift aspirations and provide information can be of benefit. Aird et al. (2010) note that an aspiration to enrol in VET or higher education or to make that transition is not enough. The realities of previous educational achievement and the requirements for study can act as barriers, especially for disadvantaged learners. Part of any transition support program needs to increase students' knowledge of the potential pathways and how they can work to achieve their goals.

Discussion

Key points

- The use of pathways from VET to higher education is limited due to disadvantaged learners mostly undertaking lower-level VET qualifications. Supports that enable students to move from lower- to higher-level VET qualifications could lead to better employment and further study outcomes, but it needs to be acknowledged that this would require a long-term commitment for some learners.
- The student perspective on transitioning through the tertiary education sector is largely missing from the literature, particularly in relation to disadvantaged students. This should be considered in the future planning of, and research about, transitions in the tertiary sector.

This paper shows that disadvantaged learners tend to be overrepresented in lower-level VET qualifications and underrepresented in higher-level VET and higher education. Transition from VET to higher education is a viable pathway for some disadvantaged learners, but this pathway is not used as widely as it could be. This is due to a combination of factors, including:

- Transition from VET to higher education is more likely to occur from higher-level VET qualifications. However, disadvantaged learners re-engaging with the education sector are more likely to enrol in lower-level qualifications.
- Transition from VET to higher education can be complicated, even for students who are not considered disadvantaged. This is despite the array of formal arrangements, such as credit transfer, and supports that are in place.

The available evidence points to the limited use that disadvantaged learners are making of the available pathways to higher-level qualifications. As Wheelahan (2009) concludes, VET pathways 'play a modest role in increasing the efficiency of tertiary education in Australia, but they have a long way to go before they contribute to meeting equity and social justice objectives'.

How can these pathways work more effectively? Some of the examples of support programs described in the literature demonstrate ways by which students can be helped to make the transition from VET to higher education. The National VET Equity Advisory Council (2011) argues that the education sector should look at the wrap-around holistic supports employed in other sectors to support disadvantaged learners. The perpetual issue is how to scale up these smaller resource-intensive programs more broadly in the system. There is a constant tension between providing tailored individual support, shown to result in the best outcomes for disadvantaged students, and broader system-wide support measures, which are more economical and can be made available to a broader cross-section of students. This tension is mostly resource-driven. As Coates and Ransom (2011) suggest, an obvious way to improve student support is to increase the resources in this area.

There appears to be a more pronounced focus on helping students to transition from VET to higher education than from lower-level to higher-level VET qualifications. The limiting factor in this, however, is that disadvantaged learners are concentrated in lower-level qualifications. Given this, an argument could be made for putting supports into place that encourage and enable students in lower-level VET qualifications to work their way up to higher-level VET. These higher-level VET

qualifications are more likely to lead to employment outcomes or transition to higher education. But it needs to be acknowledged that this is a long road for many.

Largely missing from the literature is the student voice. One of the main aims of this paper was to investigate transitions from the students' perspectives, but the evidence around this was scarce. The National VET Equity Advisory Council emphasises the importance of listening to the voice of the learner in further designing the VET system, designating it as a reform area in their equity blueprint for 2011–16 (NVEAC 2011). But as Griffin and Beddie (2011) note in their paper about researching VET and disability, accessing disadvantaged learners is challenging. This should be a priority in the future planning of, and research about, transitions within the tertiary education sector.

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