Pushing the boundaries or overstepping the mark?
Exploring the potential of university courses for final year high school students' career pathways

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Abstract

Australia is currently witnessing a melding of its various education sectors and a gradual erosion of distinctions between school, vocational education and higher education. Such developments are leading toward a 'seamless web' of post-compulsory education, a goal strongly articulated by governments, bureaucrats, business and educators in recent years. University Developed Board Endorsed Courses (UDBECs), which are developed by universities and undertaken by Higher School Certificate (HSC) students as part of their final year of study, are one such initiative. This paper discusses the role and function of UDBECs in the learning patterns and career decisions of final year high school students. A case study of one such course, Springboard into Teaching, is used to highlight the strengths and challenges of such initiatives. The evaluation of this particular UDBEC emphasises the benefits of partnerships between schools and universities, but highlights the need for further monitoring of the effects and longer-term outcomes of such initiatives.

Introduction

Australian school students' final year is still regarded by many as their most important (Smith, Sinclair & Chapman, 1999). Performance outcomes have significant

implications for entry into university and in securing successful employment. However, to view the final year of high school in such narrow instrumentalist terms is to underestimate its potential as a basis for preparing young people for life, not to mention seriously undermining the purpose and value of a broad education. The final year of school should be viewed no differently to the earlier years of schooling in that it is an opportunity to inspire young people to learn and to view learning as something they should value throughout their life. As Ballenden (2001, p.43) points out 'learning does not stop at the school gate'.

Australia has tended to associate particular types of learning with particular education sectors. Universities are viewed as places of higher education offering degrees, schools provide general education, adult and community education centres offer special interest courses while Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges, or their equivalent, train people in vocational skills. Implicit here is a hierarchy around knowledge, skills and understandings, and an assumed trajectory of choice for learners. While higher education is not normally regarded as a provider of vocational education and training, it has long offered courses with vocational orientations such as teaching, law, dentistry and medicine. More recently boundaries between sectors have become increasingly blurred (Lamb, Long & Malley, 1998; James, 2000; Ryan, 2002) with secondary schools offering vocational subjects and industry-recognised training, either in conjunction with TAFE or as part of their senior school program. Whilst traditionally students undertaking vocational subjects were those seeking an industry or trade qualification rather than a university qualification, such delineations are now not so clear. 'Schools, universities, industry and private providers are also constructed as part of VET' (Chappell, 1999, p.2). Recent diversification of the final stage of school curriculum has not simply been to cater for the transition from school to work but also for the transition from school to tertiary study (Kane, 1997). The proliferation of vocational curriculum offerings in and through schools are manifestations of what is sometimes referred to as the 'seamless web' of post-compulsory education, a policy strategy designed to facilitate successful transitions for school leavers.

The discussion that follows provides a review of a university developed course undertaken by school leavers that is consistent with this policy agenda. Whilst the context for this discussion is a NSW initiative, attention is drawn to the underlying principles that are relevant to policy directions in education systems more broadly.

What is a university developed board endorsed HSC course?

University Developed Board Endorsed Courses (UDBECs) have emerged in the NSW education system as a response to two policy-based developments: the NSW Government White Paper, *Securing their future* (1997), which set the scene for the emergence of a number of new and revised curriculum initiatives; and the

development of a 'new Higher School Certificate' (HSC), introduced in NSW in 2001, which opened up considerable debate concerning curriculum conceptualization.

UDBECs supplement the new HSC curriculum in the same way as other Board of Studies Endorsed Courses in that they may be included in a student's pattern of study for the HSC but results are not considered for inclusion in the calculation of the Universities Admission Index (UAI). They are developed by universities for myriad reasons usually associated with meeting local educational needs and providing enrichment opportunities for high achieving students. In NSW the Board of Studies is the statutory body responsible for curriculum development of courses including the HSC. An advisory committee of the Board of Studies assesses applications for UDBECs and makes recommendations to the Board for endorsement of these courses. Consistent with the requirements of *Securing their Future*, the Board of Studies (2002, p.4) requires that university developed courses will:

- Assist in providing for the needs of high ability students in the final stage (Stage 6) of their secondary schooling;

- Extend the new HSC curriculum and not overlap significantly in content with other Board Developed Courses.

- Provide an opportunity for high ability students to undertake a university level course while still at school;

- Provide students with a study opportunity that they may not otherwise have through the Board's Stage 6 curriculum;

- Ensure that students experience tertiary study in a supportive environment;

- Add to the existing flexible pathways to the Higher School Certificate and university;

- Contribute to the articulation of the Stage 6 curriculum and first year courses at University;

- Encourage students' independent, reflective and ongoing learning through engagement with high level, challenging university level courses;

- Give the students a taste of university course content, university course delivery and university life in general;

- Be accredited for the HSC, satisfy part of the university's requirements for the first year of a university degree and attract advanced standing and credit as appropriate;

- Recognise the school (or school system)/university partnership in developing and delivering the courses.

While UDBECs are still relatively new there are now at least eight partnerships between schools or school systems and Universities, which have endorsement by the NSW Board of Studies.

Why blur the boundaries between university and final year high school study?

Schooling has many functions within our society – one of its most significant being that it serves to maintain the economic, cultural, social and political status quo (Crittenden, 1996; Hatton, 1998). Within the dominant economic discourse, students are seen as potential 'workers' who need to be capable, flexible and adaptable in order to help Australia compete in a global marketplace (Pixley, 1993). Creating and enacting policy solutions for post-compulsory education remains very much on the agenda of government and business given issues of retention and alienation (James, 2000). Competition for places at tertiary or technical level, steady unemployment figures and concerted media interest have contributed to increased community awareness concerning the function of schooling and, in particular, the HSC (Smith & Sinclair, 2000). From a policy perspective there remains a perceived need to focus on 'improving young people's foundation skills for lifelong learning, and providing learning environments that are attractive and relevant…' (McKenzie cited in Bye, 2001, p. 126). Such conditions seem to be well met by UDBECs, particularly the *Springboard into Teaching* course that is the focus of this paper because it provides an opportunity for final year school students to engage in vocationally relevant higher education.

Of particular relevance to the emergence of UDBECs is the increasing shift in emphasis in education away from notions of 'market efficiency' and 'competition' so prevalent in the 1990s to discourses about 'learning' and 'collaboration'(CLRA, 2001). Focus is shifting from a concern with enterprise to a focus on networks as a potential solution to education and training provision (Seddon, 2001). Kirby (2000), for instance, perceives networks as a means of refocusing provision more in the direction of young people's educational needs by moving beyond the 'vested interests' that maintain the status quo of educational institutions. 'Achievement of government targets and priorities, and fostering innovation requires educational provision to become more network-like, going beyond the emphasis on the individual school and learner to cohorts of students in a broader community perspective' (Connors cited in Seddon 2001, p.183). UDBECs capitalise on the potential of such networks and, in the case of *Springboard into Teaching*, provide for a collaborative partnership between a school system and university.

A final point in regard to the merging of the final year of school with university study concerns the need to ensure curriculum offerings meet the needs of high achieving

students. Reforms to the NSW HSC meant the previously termed 'Distinction Courses' targeted to gifted students were to be replaced by access to university courses. It was envisaged that such courses should be available to students at no cost and should be designed for highly able students rather than simply be early access to standard undergraduate courses (Farmer, 1999). Flood (1998) also discusses the need for the final year of schooling to take a broader view of the needs of high achieving students, and the importance of a diversity of curriculum offerings. 'Gifted and talented youth need accelerated, challenging instruction in core subject areas…an opportunity to work with other gifted and talented youth... (and) teachers who both understand the nature and needs of gifted youth and are deeply knowledgeable in the content they teach' (Feldhusen cited in Flood, 1998, p.28). Of particular relevance to UDBECs is Flood's conclusion that enriched curriculum will inevitably display elements of accelerated education.

Clearly there are advantages for final year students undertaking university study whilst still at school. Key among these perceived advantages appears to be that studying such courses will provide a 'head start' with future university studies. For students being sponsored by schools or school systems there is the added advantage of financial savings with future Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) payments. For many young people, particularly in rural and regional Australia, access to universities and their facilities is not particularly common so the opportunity to participate in a program of study on a university campus is a significant benefit. In addition, the 'extension' type nature of the learning appears to attract higher achieving students because they expect (and can manage) additional challenge in their study.

Despite strong interest from schools, students and parents in such extension type courses, there are disadvantages associated with these programs. The most obvious disadvantage is the time demands associated with carrying an additional subject in the final year of study, particularly one delivered on a site other than the school. In a later section of this paper it is suggested that further research needs to be carried out to ascertain the longer term impact of the decision to 'fast track' into university.

The springboard into teaching UDBEC

Springboard into Teaching is the result of a collaborative initiative between a non-government school system (Catholic Education Office) and the School of Education at Southern Cross University, both located at Lismore on the North Coast of NSW. The initiative emerged from the UDBEC partners' identification with national and international concerns about the declining status of teaching as a career option, the crisis in public education (Esson, Johnson & Vinson, 2002) and the consequent need to encourage bright and committed young people into the profession. The Ramsay Review (2000) advocated that creative strategies be developed to address both teacher supply and quality issues and UDBECs appeared to offer such potential.

The UDBEC partners consulted closely with schools and the NSW Board of Studies in determining interest and support for such a course, and in developing a proposal that would enable high achieving students attending high schools in the Diocese of Lismore to complete two units of undergraduate teacher education as part of their HSC study. *Springboard into Teaching* was approved as a UDBEC in 2001 and the first cohort commenced studies during the 4th school term of that year following a rigorous application and selection process involving the UDBEC partners, principals, teachers and parents as well as prospective students. Students in this first intake completed in March 2002. Of the 29 students who were selected for *Springboard*, 23 'graduated' at a ceremony presided over by the chancellor, vice-chancellor and other senior Southern Cross University staff in May 2002. A second cohort of HSC students completed study in March 2003 and a third cohort commenced in October 2003. This paper is focused principally on an evaluation of the first cohort's experience.

Springboard into Teaching comprises two discrete units of study, each of approximately 13 weeks duration. These units are approved compulsory units in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) program and one is compulsory and the other an elective in the Graduate Diploma in Education and double degree (secondary) programs. The first unit, *Introduction to Teaching,* provides students with an overview of the teaching profession whilst exploring the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes required throughout a teaching career. This unit involves students spending three days in classrooms in the capacity of a practicum teacher. The second unit, *Educational Information Technology,* seeks to develop knowledge of, and skills and confidence in, the integration of information technology in teaching and learning in primary or secondary school settings, with a clear focus on pedagogical and instructional design issues.

Common to both units is a metacognitive approach to learning which is significant both in terms of its relevance for teacher education generally and for the particular learning needs of final year high school students. Metacognition refers to knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes, and the active monitoring and consequent regulation of these processes in the pursuit of goals or objectives (Flavell, 1976; Flavell, Miller & Miller, 1993). Zimmerman (1996) speaks of the potential empowerment of such metacognitive processes, enabling individuals to become controllers of the learning process rather than victims of it. Both *Introduction to Teaching* and *Educational Information Technology* are informed by a number of theorists' work related to metacognition, including that of Biggs (1985) who highlights that students need to be aware of their motives, task demands and their own cognitive resources to exert control over learning (and teaching) strategies used. Given this metacognitive approach both units explicitly emphasise elements such as time management, practice, mastery of learning methods, goal-directedness, help seeking and a sense of self-efficacy and the importance of lifelong learning. Recent research by Phelps (2001; 2002a; 2002b) on undergraduate students utilising a metacognitive approach highlights its effectiveness in the context of ICT learning.

The UDBEC partners considered that a metacognitive approach would significantly benefit final year high school students, addressing their anxieties and concerns about performing in a university environment, and providing them with skills and insights they could apply in their school based learning. The approach was also consistent with the NSW Board of Studies requirement that UDBECs would encourage students' independent, reflective and ongoing learning (BOS, 2002).

Was the springboard into teaching course successful?

A formal evaluation of Springboard into Teaching was undertaken in 2002. Associate Professor Geoffrey Riordan from the University of Technology, Sydney and Ms Rosalie Nott from the NSW Catholic Education Commission, Sydney, conducted the evaluation. Both researchers brought significant expertise to the evaluation (see Riordan & Nott, 2002).

Surveys were developed for school principals, students and their parents. The student survey asked questions such as whether participation in the course had strengthened their interest in teaching, whether it provided more learning opportunities than they would normally have in Years 11 and 12, whether the course attracted them to Southern Cross University, the importance of advanced standing as part of the course, and the strengths and areas for improvement in the program. Parents were surveyed regarding the timing, workload, degree of challenge and the impact they perceived studying the Springboard into Teaching course had on their son/daughter's study in other subjects, as well as what helped or prevented the course from being successful, and suggested improvements. Principals were asked about timing, demand for the course, timetabling issues, support for students, students' readiness, appropriateness of workload, challenge and transference of knowledge and skills. They were also asked the extent to which the course met its aims and objectives and the extent to which it met the objectives of UDBECs. Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders from CEO Lismore and the School of Education at Southern Cross University, including the academics delivering the course, and the coordinators from the CEO Lismore. Documents that were consulted during the evaluation included the course application to the NSW Board of Studies, student applications, course resource materials, student evaluations and results.

A summary of the findings of the final report informs discussion in the following sections, highlighting the key elements underpinning the successful development and delivery of UDBECs and offering some broad direction for other educational providers seeking to build partnerships in the delivery of final stage school curriculum.

Collaboration between the university, CEO and schools

The evaluation determined that a key element in the success of the program rested on the level of collaboration, communication and co-operation between the university, CEO and schools in planning and delivering the program. Principals commented on the value of the collaboration and communication between the university and the CEO, and also between the CEO and the individual schools in supporting the students' learning. University staff noted closer links between the university and schools may be beneficial. The evaluators, however, indicated that the current arrangements, with the CEO dealing directly with schools in monitoring the progress of the students, contributed to maximum consistency in the delivery of the program, although there was perceived benefit in schools contacting lecturing staff directly if problems emerge. These findings suggest that the cornerstone of a successful UDBEC is the nature and degree of collaboration between the university and the school system (or individual school) that identifies the need for the course. A strong partnership is critical because of the detailed planning that goes into the development and delivery of a UDBEC. Decisions concerning recruitment, selection, in-school mentoring and support, ongoing evaluation and pastoral care of the students require the input, commitment and support of both partners.

Delivery, structure and organisation of the course

The evaluation found that demand for the course was high. Principals reported that students were very keen to participate with one noting that demand would increase in future courses. One principal noted that although the students were well briefed, not all of them fully comprehended the commitment they would be undertaking. The university staff recommended that for subsequent intakes applicants should be required to submit a piece of written work to assist in assessing students' academic suitability.

A key focus of the evaluation was on the timing of the course and its impact on the students' other study commitments. Most principals reported that the timing was appropriate, allowing completion prior to preparation for the final year exam. At times there had been problems for students managing their school and university assessment timelines. Two principals recommended that a solution to this problem would be to complete the course during Year 11 (the second last year of schooling). Eight of the parent respondents suggested that the timing was appropriate with two parents commenting that the timing assisted their children in realising that they must organise and apply themselves for the remainder of Year 12. Three of the respondents noted that the timing caused some difficulty for their children and suggested commencing the course earlier. The university staff, however, highlighted some issues relating to readiness and maturity of students and that, by implication, an earlier starting time would further exacerbate this issue. University staff also highlighted the need for

clarification of their 'duty of care' responsibilities given the number of participants under 18 years of age. Principals reported that there were no significant timetabling issues for their schools arising from students' participation in the course, since the lectures and tutorials were conducted as weekend workshops. The only timetabling issue noted was the need for schools to provide time for in-school mentors to monitor and support students. Students did not identify any issues relating to their school timetables, but they did acknowledge the extra workload demands.

Key stakeholders (including principals and parents) indicated a very high degree of satisfaction with the quality of the teaching, the subject content and support provided by the university. They noted that the staff were 'well-organised', 'good lecturers', 'committed', 'professional', 'supportive' and 'enthusiastic', 'provided help and information' and 'understood HSC studies and demands' and parents perceived these as enabling factors in their children's achievements. One principal suggested that it was essential to have an in-school mentor to assist students with essay skills and research and to monitor workloads and assessment schedules. University staff observed that they needed to further build processes to assist students to manage the workload and pressure and that there were some communication difficulties which impeded their ability to support students. They also noted that they needed to do more 'chasing up' than would be done with regular university students. This highlights important issues concerning equity. Given that the students successfully completing the course gain credit for the units if they proceed to study the relevant degree at the participating university, it is imperative that *all* aspects of the unit, not only content, are deemed 'equivalent' to that studied by first year university students. While the delivery, structure and organisation of the course may need to be tailored to accommodate full time final year high school students this must not be at the expense of adequately preparing the students for the rigour and expectations of university study.

The students

Of the 29 students who were accepted into the program, 23 graduated, with one not commencing and the remainder only partially completing the program. Of these 23, University staff concluded that 3 were academically outstanding and approximately 10 were very capable students and extremely dedicated. A total of 11 distinctions and high distinctions were awarded for the two units, suggesting that the readiness of the students was generally good. Principals' indicated that the group was generally well targeted and that the program was offered at a suitable stage of the students' academic development, although the readiness of students to undertake the course varied somewhat. The majority of students' felt that their decision to undertake the course was appropriate. University staff concluded that students had learnt a great deal about themselves as life-long learners and had developed study and time-management skills that would assist in future studies. Two principals thought that there was a high degree

of 'transferability' of knowledge and skills, noting particularly the development of journaling, essay writing and research skills. Students and parents also commented that the program had a positive impact on attitudes to learning.

Of those students in this first intake who have been able to be monitored by the university through ongoing communication, six were accepted into teacher education programs at Southern Cross University, two others applied for entry but did not achieve the required UAI, three accepted offers into teacher education programs at other universities and four are known to have been accepted into other university courses. Three of these students had decided that 'teaching was not for them' during the course but still chose to complete it anyway.

The content of the units

The evaluation included a strong focus on outcomes for students in terms of the broader objectives of a UDBEC and the specific objectives of the *Springboard into Teaching* course. Data from students' evaluations at the completion of each unit and of the course overall, showed that the aims and objectives of the course were achieved. Parents generally observed that the content and extent of work was challenging, yet achievable and beneficial and student results showed that the students were capable of successfully completing study at this level. Principals were also very positive in relation to content noting that it was challenging but that the students responded appropriately. Students commented favourably on the benefits of their learning experience, saying that it gave them opportunities that they would not otherwise have had, and that they now felt more confident about pursuing university studies. All respondents to the survey said that they were more inclined to consider teaching as a career and that it had confirmed their interest in teaching. It should be noted that the students who withdrew from the course did not complete the final survey.

This data provides evidence that the choice of units comprising the course, with their emphasis on a metacognitive approach to learning, were appropriate for an initiative of this nature. This is an important consideration given the competing demands and priorities on the students' time. It would seem the students perceived that what they were learning was more broadly beneficial to their success in their final year of school and subsequent studies. Fostering a motivation to succeed and to manage the 'risk' of undertaking university study was best facilitated by the metacognitive elements embedded in the course.

The issue of course credit or advanced standing needs to be taken into account in the planning and development of such initiatives. *Springboard into Teaching* students who successfully completed both units and qualified for entry into the teacher education programs, received advanced standing for the two equivalent units. The majority of students saw this as an important consideration, although one commented that the course was so valuable that they would have undertaken it regardless of the possibility

of advanced standing. Universities considering partnerships with schools or school systems need to ensure that their Academic Board or equivalent body overseeing academic programs gives approval for credit to be granted to students successfully completing such a course. If the issues raised earlier concerning equivalence and equity are taken into account then it can be assumed that those school students successfully completing the course will be also be successful in their application for advanced standing for the relevant course.

Conclusion: Will university developed courses make a difference for young people?

The initiative described in this paper, *Springboard into Teaching*, is one case study of a UDBEC. Such initiatives enable school students to gain experience of the tertiary learning environment whilst still at school and, as such serve as an articulation vehicle between school and university. Consistent with the school-university-work transition agenda described by Bye (2001), UDBECs provide potential in supporting the transition to adult identity for young people, since participation in such a course necessarily requires students to position themselves for independent study and self-regulated learning. The evaluation of *Springboard into Teaching* emphasises not only the importance of these transitions but also the inclusion of approaches to learning that will enable students to set achievable goals and understand and value lifelong learning as key elements in their career development.

As university developed courses for final year high school students are still relatively new in Australia, there is a need to ensure further research takes place into their specific medium to longer-term outcomes. Such outcomes may include initial transition to university, future study choices, effects of acceleration on study patterns, personal development in terms of increased self-confidence, as well as longer-term career outcomes. Since collaboration and productive partnerships between school systems and universities are a linchpin in the success of these courses it would also seem important to monitor and document both the dynamics and the outcomes of such collaborative endeavours. In this way it might be possible for partners in education to continue to 'push the boundaries' of the final stage of school learning without 'overstepping the mark' in terms of what these students can realistically manage and achieve.

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