**Uncovering an evolving TAFE NSW Higher Education pedagogical practice**

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**Abstract**

Success in the Higher Education market is a business imperative for TAFE NSW as it relinquishes its dominance as a provider of publically funded vocational education qualifications in NSW. A number of opportunities to recreate organisational relevance and financial sustainability lie in TAFE NSW strengthening its capability to deliver higher education (HE) programs, particularly in general and some specific course areas across industry endorsed disciplines. TAFE NSW HE student performance statistics indicate high levels of retention at the subject level, high levels of engagement with course work, successful completion of subjects and courses and progression to further study and employment.

This research project asks 'what are the key pedagogical and conditional factors of TAFE NSW HE delivery which contribute to successful student and organisational business outcomes?' The research is informed by an interpretive analysis of semi-structured interviews with TAFE NSW HE teachers and managers. The research uncovers teaching practices and organisational conditions which contribute to high levels of student engagement such as a highly supportive learning environment, characteristics of the applied and practical teaching approaches of teachers and the fostering of collaboration between students. This research project makes a contribution to better understanding teacher pedagogies and delivery of HE in TAFE contexts.

**Introduction**

Higher education is a rapidly growing area of business, attracting domestic and international students, for TAFE in Australia including TAFE in NSW. HE in TAFE presents opportunities for broadening participation in higher education among students who may not otherwise have been eligible for, or aspire, to study at university and has potential to make a significant contribution to addressing commonwealth recommendations for increasing participation in HE in Australia ([Bradley et al. 2008](#_ENREF_2)).

TAFE Institutions in other various States of Australia have built sound reputations as leaders in provision of vocational training. TAFE is founded on supportive learning approaches and close industry connections. TAFE VET teaching practice consistently places learners at the centre of the process and utilises current industry practice and business connections of teachers and managers to deliver and interpret training packages and to provide high quality learning experiences for students.

It is these individual learner focussed strategies which appear to be successfully supporting student learning in TAFE delivered HE, where learners are motivated to participate in effective ways, complete courses and gain meaningful employment. The teaching practices which lead to such outcomes are explored in this research project.

Further, the success of TAFE NSW as a provider of HE and the potential that this has for attracting new students and obtaining resources to develop new products is significantly influenced by course design, the success of teaching practices and teacher ability to understand and support student learning in bachelor and sub-bachelor degree level programs.

The TAFE NSW HE pedagogy has been, overall, highly successful in the short time since the inception of HE in TAFE NSW in 2011. The reasons for this, and how the successful features of the pedagogy could be further developed to support business imperatives, are not yet well documented or understood. Anecdotal information indicates, at the outset, an effective approach to teaching but this needs further inquiry to identify the types of teaching practices and contextual conditions which engage students and retain their interest in learning at the HE level. Questions that need to be asked relate to 'how is curriculum being taught?', 'how is learning being assessed?' and 'how is student engagement fostered?'

The premise of this paper is that overall approaches to teaching in TAFE NSW Higher Education critically influences student engagement and learning. This research project argues that the TAFE NSW HE approach to teaching and learning is evolving and changing as teachers and managers gain experience in understanding the needs of students, the HE curriculum, organisational expectations and their own perceptions of what HE teaching should look and feel like in a TAFE mixed sector context. The teaching approaches and pedagogical underpinnings in TAFE NSW HE have not been explored or documented in sufficient detail to enable an accurate evaluation of actual practices. This research project is an early attempt to document experiences of teachers and elements, influences and challenges of the HE teaching approach in the TAFE NSW context. It is anticipated that the research project will improve understanding of the TAFE HE approaches to teaching which could be attributed to high levels of student engagement and successful learning outcomes. The research project also contributes to better understanding how TAFE NSW can develop the scholarship of teaching and learning, staff professional development and ensure academic integrity in HE delivery and assessment.

**Background**

In previous research in 2014 we explored how VET TAFE trained and experienced teachers approached their teaching practice when delivering HE programs offered by TAFE NSW. Six VET teachers teaching four different degree programs outlined their HE teaching practices. We noted their various experiences and found that, on the whole, they tended to blend their VET teaching approaches with what they understood to be the required HE teaching and learning strategy for HE in VET. In the first semesters of delivery in most courses, the TAFE NSW HE teacher pedagogy often reflected their own experience of being a student at university or colleges of advanced education where lectures were presented to large groups of students and tutorials were largely facilitated by tutors who were not lecturers.

The Australian Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) ([2011](#_ENREF_9)) and the TAFE NSW Higher Education Professional Development Framework ([2014](#_ENREF_7)) outline requirements for HE teachers to ensure ongoing development of scholarship in teaching and professional practice. There are few other guides for TAFE NSW HE teachers. Similarly, there are few specific guidelines on how HE curriculum should or could be delivered to students. The structure of TAFE NSW HE governance, however, does mandate regular academic and industry advisory processes which, among many matters, help to guide curriculum development and assessment.

Following several semesters of HE delivery, many TAFE NSW HE teachers began to realise that the lecture and separate tutorial model was not achieving the anticipated level of engagement or expected results from students. The model they adopted did little to build the confidence of teachers who were embarking on teaching HE subjects for the first time.

As a result of these challenges, new models of delivery began to emerge. HE teachers made conscious efforts to implement a model of learning that included higher levels of interaction with students in lectures and tutorials and applying the rigour expected for higher education delivery and assessment. Teachers began combining lectures with hands-on practical approaches with high levels of individual support. TAFE teachers felt that their HE pedagogy and practice leaned towards their VET practice and that this way of teaching proved to be useful and successful for the type of learners entering HE programs (Carter and Ellis-Gulli 2014).

The purpose of this research project is to further explore and uncover the emerging TAFE NSW HE pedagogies and features of teacher practices which effectively support students through their HE studies to achieve completion of subjects and courses. The research also presents, importantly, evidence that there are sound educational and financial reasons for expanding the development and offering of HE programs in TAFE NSW and widening opportunities for learners to enter HE programs in contexts other than university. The evolution of the TAFE NSW HE pedagogy deserves inquiry so that successful features can be replicated and challenges uncovered, reviewed and overcome.

**Review of recent literature**

The TAFE HE pedagogy, including perspectives about the scholarship of teaching in HE in VET contexts has been considered by various researchers such as Williams, Goulding and Seddon ([2013](#_ENREF_12)) and Wheelahan and colleagues ([2012](#_ENREF_11)). Much of the mixed sector HE scholarship is underpinned by Boyer's ([1990](#_ENREF_1)) model of scholarship in university settings and continues as a respected model for guiding teaching and research in Higher Education.

There is agreement in much of the contemporary HE related literature that the nature of what constitutes 'scholarship', 'research' and 'scholarly culture' in mixed-sector institutions are issues which need to be more carefully considered ([Williams, Goulding & Seddon 2013, p. 10](#_ENREF_12)). Williams et al note that this is particularly evident in mixed-sector VET institutions, where the VET culture and teaching practice confronts new expectations about scholarly practice (teaching and pedagogy) which emanates from the traditions of higher education. Williams et al (2013) observe that scholarly practice in HE is both a consequence and an expression of the sectoral distinctions and cultural hierarchies that exist in both higher and vocational education.

The scholarly practice of TAFE NSW HE teachers is similarly influenced by day-to-day VET context and traditions The mixed physical and cultural context of VET and HE delivered in TAFE campuses has meant that TAFE NSW HE teachers tend to simultaneously wear two pedagogical hats as they oscillate between VET and HE ([Carter & Ellis-Gulli 2013](#_ENREF_4)). However, the hat wearing is not equal or necessarily distinct. The pedagogical lines are blurring. TAFE NSW HE teaching practices tend to lean heavily towards a typical VET pedagogy which is characterised by of high levels of academic support and applied approaches to curriculum and assessment ([Carter & Ellis-Gulli 2013](#_ENREF_4)).

*Attrition and retention rates as an indicator of student engagement*

Low attrition rates are often indicators of successful student engagement with course work, successful employment for graduates and benefits for the economy (Scott et al 2008 p.12). Low course attrition rates are important for students, educational organisations and for the economy. Low attrition rates mean that more students continue to further their education and this improves employment opportunities, satisfaction and success in future career development and earning capacity. There are fewer costs in terms of lost opportunities for employment and advancement, less administrative waste and fewer revenue losses to institutions caused by vacant student places ([Scott et al. 2008, p. 14](#_ENREF_6)).

From a student survey and case study conducted at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) exploring causes of student attrition, Scott and colleagues ([2008, p. 12](#_ENREF_6)) note that the main causes for student withdrawals include, courses not meeting student expectations, conflicting employment commitments, difficulties with enrolment, fees and administration, insufficient understanding of assessment requirements, family pressures, insufficient responsiveness from staff and teaching and that teaching and learning methods are un-motivating.

The types of strategies that were implemented by UWS to improve student retention included improving administrative processes, improving peer support, reducing student sense of isolation, ensuring teaching staff are available for student inquiries, improving the quality of orientation programs, access to information technology, libraries and counselling and improving learning methods, course and assessment information, and ensuring clarity about expectations for study at university ([Scott et al. 2008, p. 16](#_ENREF_6)).

But Scott et al (2008) also note that there can be challenges in implementing strategies to improve student retention and engagement. A key challenge is the level of commitment, motivation and understanding among staff to want to put changes into practice. To learn that they have gaps in their expertise and to unlearn old ways of working are critical. They note, however that powerful motivators for change include staff involvement in shaping agreed strategies and their ability to see personally how they can contribute to positive change ([Scott et al. 2008, p. 18](#_ENREF_6)).

*Positive influences of the TAFE context on student learning*

Weadon and Baker note in their 2014 study of student transition from VET to HE that smaller classes, and the nurturing culture of TAFE institutions, allow an academic intimacy and accessibility to staff not usually found in university HE. This is supported by the pedagogy of teachers who were able to provide psychologic and academic support. Weadon and Baker ([2014](#_ENREF_10)) also suggest that the safe and familiar context of the TAFE environment support students learning and that TAFE students would be better placed to continue their degree studies in a TAFE context. They suggest that for many students the thrust of change from VET to Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Level 7 studies in a university can be inhibitive but the variety of teaching modes and the conditions available in the HE/ VET campus may better support non-traditional HE learners.

Similarly, Scott et al ([2008](#_ENREF_6)) note that it is the quality if the total experience that shapes student learning experiences. Key features of this include access to teachers and feedback on learning, a welcoming physical context, clear grading rules about assessment and clear direction and communication and information about facilities and access to effective information technology. The effective leadership of change along with ownership and commitment to the process are also critical ([Scott et al. 2008, p. 19](#_ENREF_6)).

A sense of belonging to the organisation and a connection with a key person within a teaching section are both critical factors in student success. Additionally, the accessibility of counselling services and student activities also supports student sense of belonging. O'Brien ([O'Keeffe 2013, p. 607](#_ENREF_5)) notes that key contributory factors in high student drop-out rates are a sense of not-belonging, not fitting in, non-adjustment to normal academic challenges associated with campus life and a lack of feedback received from staff.

**Methodology and Methods**

This research project adopted an interpretive perspective for data collection and analysis. Semi-structured interviews and review of organisational documents provided primary and secondary data for analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five TAFE NSW HE teachers who currently teach or have recently taught both HE and VET programs. Two HE managers were also interviewed. Data from interviews was analysed to identify recurring themes, individual practices and context related matters which inform and illustrate current TAFE NSW HE teaching approaches. A quantitative approach to data collection and analysis was considered inappropriate for the design and intent of this study. It is acknowledged that in future studies, quantitative data collection and analysis could provide a more substantial volume of information from a wider group of teachers. Such an approach would complement and build on recent qualitative studies.

The intent of this approach is to inquire into, and uncover, the actual experiences of teachers and managers in the TAFE NSW HE context. It is the day-to-day evolution of individual teacher practices which is of most importance to this study. Interview questions asked teachers to describe their teaching practice, in what ways their practice differs or is similar to their VET teaching practice, and what they think are the key contributing factors in achieving high course and subject retention and low attrition rates. Teachers were also asked how they would describe their teaching practice in TAFE NSW HE.

**Findings and discussion**

The TAFE NSW HE pedagogy is evolving and changing as teachers gain experience and develop their understanding of the needs of HE students attracted to TAFE HE programs.

This research finds that key factors contributing to current successes in the HE market are drawn from positive student experiences including a supportive TAFE NSW teacher pedagogy, industry focussed and contemporary course structures and ongoing freedom of teachers to develop course content and delivery methods to suit different student cohorts.

*Growing understanding of HE teaching*

In the early stages of delivery the TAFE NSW pedagogy was very much influenced by teacher’s own experiences of university and what they thought lecturing and tutoring in HE should look and feel like. This is exemplified in reflections from Catherine, a teacher of accounting and finance subjects.

*When we first started we thought we had to deliver a one hour lecture and then a tutor would do the Tutorial. We stood up in front of the class and gave a lecture. There were no questions or discussion from students. They didn’t say anything. We thought that that’s what we were supposed to do. It didn’t really work for some students. There were lots of drop outs and fails....we started to change this after about the first year or so. We started to teach more like we do in VET classes with questions and discussion among students. We timetabled the tutes to follow straight after the lectures….. the classes are relatively small'.*

Teachers explained that they feel their teaching approach and pedagogy has evolved over the past four years to improve both student engagement in subject material and teacher satisfaction with the process of preparing and presenting classes. They found too that assessment processes were more satisfying for both students and staff and this is reflected in student satisfaction surveys ([TAFE NSW Higher Education 2014](#_ENREF_8)).

Kerrie a teacher of a business related program recalls that she felt somewhat nervous about teaching in the first semesters. Kerrie found that the lecture format and tutorial timetabling was not an effective way to engage students. Kerrie explains that students stopped attending classes so she changed the timetable so that tutorials directly followed the lectures. This now improves the continuity of lesson material and class discussions. Kerrie and another teacher Bill now apply a 'flipped classroom' model which requires students to prepare for lessons by reading and completing exercises before classes start and arrive ready for discussion. They note that this works well for most students but that some students still struggle with more self-directed learning processes.

Teachers are beginning to better understand the differences between what they understand about university models of delivery and their own approaches to delivery in TAFE NSW. It is becoming clearer to teachers and managers that TAFE NSW has developed a structure and encourages an approach to HE study that develops both applied and advanced learning strategies through its bachelor, sub-bachelor and post graduate qualifications. This is borne out in teacher development of their approaches to delivery of curriculum and assessment of student learning. This also supports the argument that the nurturing pedagogy and the fostering of conceptions of care toward student learning in HE are some of the underpinning reasons why students choose TAFE NSW HE courses and choose to stay on at TAFE to complete programs. As Burford ([2013, p. 171](#_ENREF_3)) notes in her recent study of student perspectives of care in HE, students have a need for care and the perception that a HE institution cares about student learning and study experiences is important for both student and organisational success.

As noted by a teacher of Early Childhood Education and Care a new interactive method of teaching is proving to be useful in the classroom for building student study relationships. As Emily explains:

*I set up student learner networks in first year classes to encourage development of interpersonal relationships. I used a concept of ‘the circle of security’ in small groups which sets up a network for students. It is an approach which is favoured in early childhood education. This is what has kept students in study...'.*

This strategy has proved to be very successful in fostering a sense of social support within the classroom.

*Challenges emerging from HE delivery*

However not all student groups are easy to teach. Emily cites some difficulties for HE teachers teaching new groups of students who are also challenged by the HE context and the perceptions of how to more effectively teach at the degree level. Emily observes that some teachers find degree student groups intimidating but that they are gradually working through ways to overcome this. The encouragement of peer learning and mentoring is helpful. Emily reported that an older student in one of her classes automatically became a mentor to others who were struggling with the curriculum and the context. Emily notes

'...*.an older learner has now become a class mentor through this process (encouraging interpersonal relationship building) and this is working really well’.*

Bill, a manager of HE programs, recognises that, in the early stages of implementation of a new program. HE teachers need support, particularly if programs are delivered in multiple campus locations. Bill has implemented a process where he sets out time each week to discuss curriculum matters. This has been essential for ensuring consistency in delivery and assessment. Bill notes that:

*'the weekly meetings are going well and teachers feel they are valuable. They are critical for me...I can see where teachers are struggling...and how I can assist.....but one of my teachers wants to teach his own way and has indicated that he does not require any help'.*

Pauline, a HE manager reported that learners who had previously studied TAFE courses felt comfortable in the more intimate and familiar TAFE campus environment. This is consistent with the findings of Weadon and Baker (2014, p.198) who note the benefits of both security and sense of community provided by a familiar and nurturing environment. Pauline also reports that HE teachers in her faculty had implemented some online teaching so that students across the state could participate in the same lecture. Pauline reported that students found this to be useful for hearing questions from others and interacting online, and importantly, that teachers enjoyed teaching this way.

*Characteristics of teacher approaches to teaching HE in a TAFE context*

One senior teacher describes her approach as one which has strong interpersonal relationships helping both students and teachers. Her teaching practice includes specific scaffolding of learning for students, implementing small group work, intensive follow up and the deployment of strategies to foster a sense of ‘friendship and care’ in and outside the classroom. Another strategy she has refined over two years of delivery is to provide high levels of support in the first semester and then reduce the level of support in subsequent semesters. Assessment in early stages is also applied in a way that that is both encouraging and supportive. Assessment is consistent with expectations of the AQF level but feedback to students is provided in a way that encourages participation and recognises effort.

Not all teachers accept, however, the VET focussed approach to HE. Despite being VET teacher trained and long experience teaching VET students there was some evidence that some teachers prefer formal lecture style and separate tutorials which replicate their own experience and preferences for learning in HE. As a consequence, some teachers find it difficult to apply a student centred approach to HE.

Bill, also a teacher and manager of business subjects indicates that his HE teaching pedagogy differs in subtle ways from his VET pedagogy. He expects students to participate in their learning through an appropriate level of pre-reading and completion of set tasks each week but he applies less repetition of content in his HE classes. As a manager Bill also allocates time for teachers to discuss course and student matters each week and encourages teachers to be available for student contact. Students are encouraged to meet with teachers regardless of their level of progress.

All teachers and managers interviewed noted the importance of teacher follow up and the establishment of a safe and nurturing learning environment. These factors are recognised by teachers and managers as key to fostering a sense of belonging and success in HE studies. Teacher interest in students and their learning appears to have direct relevance to student retention rates.

One manager noted also that the involvement of teachers in mandated course advisory processes, interestingly, prompted teachers to reflect on their practice and professional development in a way that was different to any previous reflective processes. Liz, a senior manager observed:

*'the advisory meeting discussions ...raised some really relevant points and the teachers are rethinking how they will address some of these issues in the course delivery'*. Liz

These examples support findings from Scott et al (2008) and Weadon and Baker (2014) who similarly note that responsive staff, peer support and practice-oriented interactive and problem based learning methods are of particular relevance to student engagement and course retention.

**Conclusion**

This research project has outlined some teacher actual experiences in teaching HE in a TAFE context. The research has built on previous work which legitimised the use of VET pedagogy within a HE context. After several years of delivery teacher confidence in this approach has grown. Student satisfaction and course retention rates have improved as teachers develop their teaching practices to meet the needs of TAFE HE learners and learners become more familiar with the expectations of studying at a HE level. Although not the sole reason for high student retention the use of an interactive and personalised teaching style and student conceptions of care and belonging are certainly critical factors. The study revealed other important influences in student retention and success in HE studies such as student access to teachers, provision of constructive feedback and small learning groups. An opportunity for future inquiry may lie in exploring the concept of care in TAFE HE and how teachers are able to further develop the practices of care and caring to improve student engagement and, further, attract new students to TAFE NSW HE programs.

This research project has provided evidence of the correlation of the emerging TAFE NSW HE teacher pedagogy and retention rates. High retention rates are critical for success and growth of TAFE NSW in the HE market. This in turn is pivotal to organisational sustainability in the current competitive tertiary environment. High retention rates also reflect successful student learning outcomes, increases in potential economic productivity and innovation. As Scott et al (2008) note retention in HE matters morally, financially and nationally. Outcomes from this research project further legitimise the TAFE NSW HE approach to teaching and student learning as practical, useful and evolving and one which, to date, has demonstrated success for students and the organisation.

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