Integration requires radical thinking

A guaranteed VET/higher education pathway backed by a transition program shows signs of working for Swinburne, writes Shirley Leitch.

Meeting ambitious Commonwealth targets for low SES participation presents significant challenges for metropolitan universities. I’ll be the first to admit that the initiatives introduced this year at Swinburne to achieve these targets have required both radical thinking and radical changes.

In last week’s Campus Review online TAFE NSW deputy director-general Pam Christie argued current pathways and approaches integrating VET and higher education won’t meet Commonwealth targets and new arrangements needed to be explored (TAFE, universities and business explore new degree model, March 28).

I agree that new approaches need to be pioneered. I also believe dual sector universities are uniquely suited to higher education programs and are currently better placed than single sector organisations to meet these targets.

Currently about one third of Australian universities are achieving the federal government’s low SES enrolment target of 20 per cent. Of the 14 universities achieving this target, only two are metropolitan. And not surprisingly, one of those two universities is a dual sector institution – Victoria University.

The national average for low SES domestic undergraduate enrolment is currently 15.7 per cent (The Good Universities Guide 2010).

Based on 2008 figures, articulation rates between VET/TAFE and higher education at Australia’s five dual sector universities – Victoria, Ballarat, Charles Darwin, RMIT and Swinburne – range from about eight per cent to almost 30 per cent. Swinburne has the highest articulation rate of 29.7 per cent.

In order to improve low SES participation rates the discussion has centred on pathways that will enable students currently clustered in the VET sector to move through into higher education. There is no doubt that approaches to pathways can be – and need to be – improved.

So, why not take the concept of pathways one step further and make the pathways guaranteed? Guaranteed means that success at one level of study guarantees students entry to the next level, just as it does in secondary school. If you successfully complete your TAFE Diploma course, then you have a place in an undergraduate degree.

Swinburne introduced its Guaranteed Entry Scheme (GES) this year. The GES gives current Swinburne TAFE Diploma and Advanced Diploma students guaranteed entry into at least one Swinburne undergraduate program. The students automatically receive this offer when they enrol in TAFE.

There is no need to apply because the scheme operates on an opt-out rather than opt-in philosophy.

Not every degree is available but there are multiple options for all students. We are the first Australian university to introduce such a scheme and have now mapped 2749 pathways for our students. Our aim is to continue developing the scheme and expanding the choice of pathways on offer.

I won’t pretend that implementing the Guaranteed Entry Scheme has not been – and continues to be – immensely challenging.

Mapping the pathways, given the different assessment measures deployed in TAFE and higher education, is a massive undertaking. Providing effective support to students transitioning from TAFE to higher education presents yet another challenge. The natural resistance people often have to change has been another factor.

However, in saying that, it is interesting to note we began taking GES enrolments one year earlier than planned due to the enthusiasm of both our TAFE and higher education divisions. Faculty and TAFE staff members have worked – and continue to work – determinedly and collaboratively to develop and implement the program.

To support GES students, we have introduced the Tertiary Transition Education Program – a two week intensive course to build generic academic skills around critical analysis, writing, argument and research. It also aims to increase understanding of the university environment. The program has been developed by both the faculties and TAFE, and is delivered by TAFE. Our research shows that these transition skills are critical, not just to the academic success of students, but also to their retention in higher education.

Based on the success of our other pathway programs, I believe the Guaranteed Entry Scheme will increase enrolments and participation from students from low SES backgrounds. It is the certainty of a guarantee, underpinned by a concrete offer, which will enable students who may never have considered higher education to view it as a natural progression and a real choice.

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