



**Response to**  
**'Varieties of Learning: The Interface between Higher Education**  
**and Vocational Education and Training'**  
**Issues Paper**

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## INTRODUCTION

1. In the longer term there may well be opportunities for, and benefits in, a closer interface between UWA and the VET sector in WA, and the University will take account of emerging possibilities in its regular planning activities. At present, however, the level of interface is limited. We admit a small number of students annually on the basis of TAFE qualifications, and we share capital facilities with TAFE (and other universities) in the Oral Health Centre of Western Australia and in our Geraldton Centre.

Despite the limited nature of the current relationship, we welcome the opportunity to offer a UWA Perspective on some of the key issues raised.

## KEY ISSUES

2. The paper makes the point that "the higher education and VET sectors have distinct but complementary roles." UWA believes that it is important that, as the potential for enhanced collaboration and co-operation is explored, the *core* roles of the sectors should remain distinct in order that each sector can focus primarily on its particular role in meeting Australia's education and training needs. UWA sees no merit and considerable risks in the two sectors encroaching on each other's core roles, as opposed to developing collaborative arrangements which respect the differences in core roles.
3. UWA believes that the primary focus of the VET sector should be on providing high quality practical education and training designed to equip students to meet the needs of the workplace. Universities on the other hand should provide an education with greater depth. Such an education should both equip graduates with a range of skills, specific and generic, to prepare them for employment, and foster in them the ability to handle significant intellectual and cognitive challenges. The key difference between vocational education and training and higher education should be in the purpose and depth of the learning leading to a qualification. It is entirely appropriate therefore that universities offer professional degrees which equip their graduates for specific employment, provided that the courses concerned contain the kind of intellectual depth and challenge which characterise higher education offerings.
4. UWA is pleased that changes in the post-compulsory education curriculum in WA between 2004-2009, under which every subject will contribute to a TER and potentially contain accredited VET skills and abilities, will enable school students to delay decisions on whether to aim for VET or higher education until Year 12. This should enable students to make better decisions about whether the VET or higher education sector will best meet their needs, and hence reduce the number of students who feel that their options for further education have been prematurely limited.

5. The VET and the higher education sectors are engaged in education and training for different core purposes. Given those different purposes and their practical impacts on teaching and learning approaches, as well as the relatively limited level of overlap in content coverage between the sectors, UWA does not agree with the notion that the sectors can, or should, provide a comprehensive range of seamless pathways through the educational continuum of the AQF. However, we fully support collaboration and co-operation and the development of educational pathways where these are appropriate to particular circumstances. In this context, UWA believes that collaborative developments would be facilitated if in every State responsibility for both sectors were located within the same Ministerial portfolio.
6. UWA agrees with the AVCC that the VET sector should not offer degrees. There needs to be a clear delineation between the primary purposes of VET and higher education institutions and while limited areas of overlap between some VET providers and some universities may be legitimate and are provided for by the dual sector qualifications in the AQF, our view is that the bachelor degree is the appropriate level at which higher education should begin. The corollary of this is that universities should not offer VET courses.
7. While there is an overarching commonality of purpose within the higher education sector, there are inevitably, and desirably, differences between the individual institutions in the sector. UWA has consistently stressed the need for diversity and fitness for purpose within the sector, and has argued that Universities must be free to determine their own missions in the context of their particular opportunities and circumstances. It therefore sees differences between Universities as a strength of the sector. The need for diversity is also, of course, a strong argument against attempts to impose uniform, sector-wide policies.
8. Higher education institutions inevitably differ in the quality of the students they attract (and therefore their entrance standards), in the levels of intellectual challenge offered in their teaching and learning, and the extent to which their teaching is informed by research. The nature of the teaching and learning experience offered therefore varies. In these circumstances, UWA believes that any attempt to enforce national policies for articulation and credit based on VET work would be entirely misguided. Each higher education institution must be free to make its own determinations on admission and credit on the basis of VET qualifications. Decisions matched to the variations in individual institutions are not, as some have argued, "arbitrary": rather, they appropriately reflect those variations and are made in the best interests of students. A student with a VET background may be able to make the transition to one programme of study without undue difficulty, but may be completely unprepared for another. UWA believes that the universities concerned are best qualified to make that judgement on the basis of individual assessments, informed by any relevant prior experience. In this context UWA agrees that the use of graded assessments in the VET sector would be of significant help to the universities in making admission and credit decisions. Graded assessments would also be a prerequisite for any project to allocate a TER equivalent rank to VET students.
9. UWA is impressed by the range of creative developments which have already occurred in the interface between VET and higher education, and suggests that commonwealth intervention either to regulate or to stimulate such developments is unnecessary. Once again, the issue is fitness for purpose. Universities and VET providers which see value, in particular circumstances (e.g in remote locations), in developing linkages are already doing so, and will continue to do so. The nature of the linkages will be varied, ranging from sharing of capital facilities, through cross-crediting agreements, to the offering of courses with guaranteed articulation pathways from the

VET to the higher education level. Individual universities should make their own judgements about articulation in light of their own circumstances, and about limits on credit from VET components in light of their own assessments of the minimum level of intellectual depth and challenge which should characterise their particular degrees. For example, the UWA admission philosophy (based largely on academic merit) and the intense competition for places does not permit any guaranteed articulation arrangements. In relation to credit we give careful consideration to each application and give the maximum reasonable credit within our regulations. However, given the very high quality of our intake, the consequent level at which our teaching is pitched, the heavy emphasis we place on the teaching/research nexus, and our view of what completion of a UWA degree should imply, we have been reluctant to give credit for more than one year of a bachelor's degree course on the basis of VET learning. Our limited experience tends to confirm that students admitted to UWA on the basis of TAFE qualifications can find the differences in the nature of the teaching and learning process significant and daunting, and that they can be disadvantaged if given too much credit.

10. There is a suggestion in the paper that one way to enhance credit transfer might be "the provision of incentives to institutions that demonstrate good practice in admission and credit transfer." UWA sees possible problems in this, depending on the definition of "good practice" to be adopted. In our view "good practice" relates to process: for example, clear and well-publicised statements of selection and credit policies; sound, equitable and transparent selection processes; demonstrated adherence to policies and procedures; selection on the basis of likelihood of success in the institution concerned (based on sound research); and award of credit taking into account all relevant factors, including the student's needs). "Good practice" should not be equated with high levels of credit transfer.
11. The paper raises issues of funding differences between the sectors which may result in inequitable outcomes for students. UWA offers no specific solutions. However, we believe that, given the current debate in relation to higher education costs, on the appropriate relative levels of public investment (as opposed to subsidy) and private contribution, it may be timely to extend the debate to include the VET sector.

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