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Tasmania's tertiary education partnership

Is it a new national model for education, ask David Sadler, Stephen Conway and Sue Kilpatrick.

Governments around the world are moving to boost participation in tertiary education. In Australia the participation agenda informed the 2008 Bradley *Review of Australian Higher Education* recommendation that closer alignment of vocational and higher education be implemented as part of a strategy for increasing the proportion of low SES, regional, and Indigenous graduates.

Although in recent years both coalition and labor federal governments have moved away from some of the Bradley recommendations, there remains a broad desire to increase participation in higher education. However, growing budget constraints have forced higher education sector players to pursue innovative partnerships that transcend traditional distinctions between universities and vocational training centres and between federally funded institutions and those resourced by the states.

The evolving partnership between the University of Tasmania and the state's VET suppliers provides an example of successful co-production of education in a previously fragmented policy arena. The partnership's initial success can be attributed to the fact it has delivered what Mark Moore, in 1995, called 'public value' in that it mobilised institutional resources and organisational capability in pursuit of widely recognised policy goals. In these terms, the partnership represents a useful model of relevance beyond the higher education sector.

The Bradley Review outlined proposals designed to raise overall participation in tertiary education with a particular emphasis on increasing educational opportunities for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. These aims are particularly pertinent in Tasmania

given its low rates of participation in higher education and poor performance against key educational outcomes – especially in reading, scientific literacy, and numeracy. Given this context and amid a growing determination to improve tertiary education outcomes, in 2012 the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Government signed a partnership agreement that included a commitment to work together to increase educational attainment in the state.

Much international evidence is emerging on the wider positive social, economic, and health benefits of a more educated population.

Closer alignment

A central element of this strategy has been to promote closer alignment of the university and vocational training sectors. This has involved establishing clear pathways to encourage students to move between the two areas, providing employers with technically trained graduates. These pathways allow students who start in the vocational sector to later build on their practical qualifications at university; for example draftsman are able to go on to study architecture, while child care workers may progress to a Bachelor of Education. Conversely, university students have the chance to add a vocational qualification to their degree – for instance, a physical education teacher could undertake an outdoor tourism guide certificate – or work at a paraprofessional level before they finish their

degree. In short, the partnership provides value for governments, students and employers alike.

The broad support for the partnership can be attributed to the fact it clearly addresses the structural challenges facing Tasmania – and indeed much of regional Australia. First, there is growing recognition that Tasmania's current societal and economic transition will require a corresponding shift in the state's skill base. Secondly, an integrated and effective pre-tertiary system would provide a pipeline of students who can progress to tertiary study. Finally, much international evidence is emerging on the wider positive social, economic, and health benefits of a more educated population.

This was the context for the Simmons 2012 Review of the Role and Function of Tasmania's Public Sector VET Providers. The report, despite finding many positive innovations and new relationships in the Tasmanian context, echoed similar reviews from other states, noting 'the public VET system has experienced a decline in efficiency and effectiveness in recent years and has lost the confidence of some parts of the industry and community it serves'. UTAS' submission noted that although Tasmania's VET sector was large, the achievement of higher-level qualifications – Diploma and Advanced Diploma – had declined relative to lower level qualifications – Cert III. That limited the opportunities for VET students to transition to UTAS as the usual minimum entry profile starts at Cert IV. The submission also reflected on the challenges of governance with two interlocutors in the public VET system, opportunities for joint initiatives in internationalisation, the potential for leveraging funding for shared priorities and the opportunity for further shared infrastructure following the successful co-location of Arts VET and university students.

The Simmons Report's recommendations included the establishment of a new formal VET-Higher Education forum to address multi-dimensional and strategic agendas with 'the aim of becoming a model for Australia'. Further recommendations addressed the possibility of joint work on leveraging funding, on international student enrolments and, critically, to address the question of higher-level VET qualifications.

The partners' shared culture and commitment to addressing Tasmania's education crisis provide a real opportunity to create something unique, something of real public value that will produce graduates with capabilities and characteristics that align with the future world of work. Graduates will be much more independent from the economic cycles and transition processes currently being experienced by the state.

MoU

Reflecting this ambition and shared vision, a Memorandum of Understanding was developed via discussions between TasTAFE and UTAS senior staff. From the outset, the working relationship has been positive, with a shared desire to work for the common good of Tasmania. As discussions progressed it became apparent that collaboration offered many opportunities for mutual benefit. The two institutions had complementary interests and fields of operation, with only limited potential for overlap and competition. The MoU and its wide range of attendant activities are built on five principles: Actively seeking collaboration on infrastructure and resources for tertiary education to increase the number of domestic and international students in Tasmania – including physical, staff, learning environment and support systems;



SIGNING ON Mr Stephen Conway, TasTAFE CEO, left, and Professor Peter Rathjen, University of Tasmania Vice-Chancellor sign the MoU at the shared Inveresk Visual and Performing Arts campus in Northern Tasmania

increasing student numbers on pathways to tertiary education and within tertiary education, focused on completion and attainment outcomes; informing school students about the opportunities in tertiary education; providing flexible tertiary education entry, re-entry and exit points for adults; and delivering tertiary education that meets the workforce development needs of the public and private sectors, working in a transitioning economy.

Collaboration offered many opportunities for mutual benefit.

Results to date include a formalised pathway for engineering students from TasTAFE to UTAS that will this year see students from the two institutions sitting in the same classes in all three state regions, some at TAFE and some at UTAS, while they gain credit in TasTAFE and/or UTAS awards. An increase of more than 20 per cent in applications to UTAS from students with

TAFE qualifications is further evidence of the partnership's impact. 2014 will see discussion about sharing infrastructure that should lead to improved services for students at the same time as increasing the efficiency of both institutions.

All this has been possible because of the formal and informal opportunities to meet and talk fostered by an open relationship of trust. Meetings between senior leaders have been accompanied by multi-level engagement of staff from across UTAS and TasTAFE. Teachers, academics and those in administrative areas have been quick to see possibilities that will benefit students, both institutions and ultimately improve skills available to the Tasmanian economy.

Public value

Mark Moore's work on 'public value' provides a method of understanding the importance of cross-institutional partnerships. The public value framework has three components: the authorising environment; organisational capability; and the public value proposition. Within Tasmania and across Australia the authorising environment for education is one of high regulation and intervention. *Continued.*

The emerging relationship between TasTAFE and UTAS can be seen as a good example of how public educational entities can create capability beyond their own education, financial and business performance. Senior staff members across the two organisations are inherently aware of the unique educational and economic challenges facing Tasmania and their responsibility to do more for their stakeholders, their students, and their clients. In short, there has been a determination to create a value proposition with respect to community and social good. The citizens of Tasmania will gain public value when: their expectations are elevated; their educational aspirations rise beyond the current level of achievement; and their social productivity increases to equal citizens

in other states. The partnership has the potential to overcome the inhibiting factors that characterise the authorising environment in Australia and enhance

Public value is increased when two entities come together with common purpose and develop common goals.

the organisational capability of both institutions. Public value is increased when two entities come together with common purpose and develop common goals.

Through the partnership, both TasTAFE

and UTAS can cooperate to better service the demands of both industry and students. This theory has been proven in the UK, where a series of pilots showed that enterprise and entrepreneurship can drive economies, even those constrained by lack of industry demand.

The parallels for Tasmania are obvious and this partnership can significantly contribute to the state's economic turnaround through the development of graduates who are not only ready for employment but also enterprising and entrepreneurial. ¹

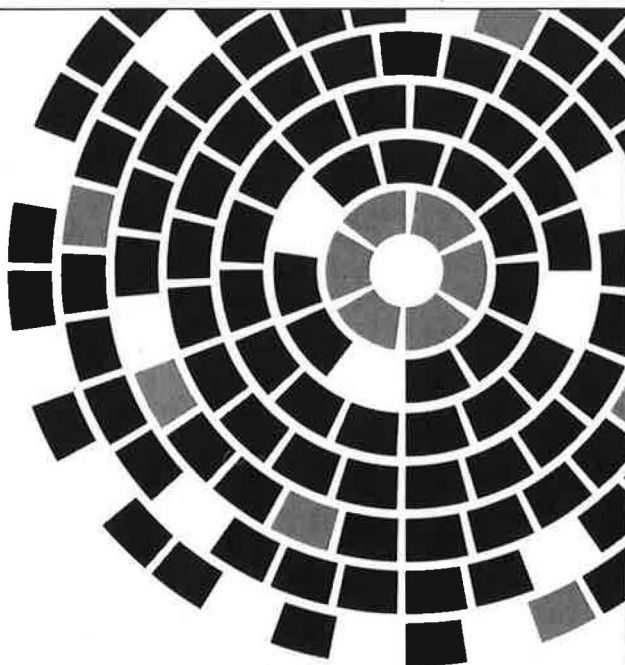
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