Identifying Strategies for Promoting VET to Higher Education Transitions for Indigenous Learners

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# Table of Contents

Table of Contents .............................................................................................................. 2

List of Tables .................................................................................................................... 3

List of Figures .................................................................................................................. 3

Executive Summary ......................................................................................................... 4

1. Introduction ................................................................................................................... 5

   Background .................................................................................................................. 5

2. Approach ....................................................................................................................... 6

   Aim and Objectives ...................................................................................................... 6

   Key Research Topics and Question Addressed ............................................................. 6

      Element 1 – Undertaking an integrative literature review about Indigenous VET to higher education (HE) pathways ....................................................... 6

      Element 2 – Exploring Indigenous student perspectives about VET to HE pathways .... 7

      Element 3 – Exploring VET and HE teaching staff, academics and decision-maker perspectives about strategies for enhancing VET to HE transitions among Indigenous students ................................................................. 7

   Methodology ................................................................................................................ 7

      Literature Review Methodology and Scope ............................................................... 7

      Survey ....................................................................................................................... 7

      Focus Groups .......................................................................................................... 8

   Limitations .................................................................................................................... 8

3. Literature Review ......................................................................................................... 9

   Introduction .................................................................................................................. 9

   Methodology ................................................................................................................. 9

   Background ................................................................................................................. 10

   Pathways ....................................................................................................................... 11

   Transition ..................................................................................................................... 12

   Mainstream VET to HE Pathways Issues ..................................................................... 14
List of Tables

1. A typology of student transitions into higher education
2. Commencing domestic higher education students and equivalent full-time students by basis for admission to current and higher participation prior to commencement, 2010

List of Figures

1. Cross-sectoral links
2. Indigenous students’ evaluation of factors behind choosing VET
3. Indigenous students’ evaluation of factors behind choosing HE
4. Indigenous students’ ranking of sources of advice when choosing education option
5. Indigenous students’ answering the question ‘to what extent do you agree or disagree that you received enough advice concerning your learning and career pathways?'
6. Indigenous students’ perceptions of teaching quality and assessment in VET and HE
7. Indigenous students’ experiences in relation to VET
Executive Summary

Indigenous1 people participate in Australian Higher Education (HE) at significantly lower rates than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Behrendt et al. 2012). National data indicates that Indigenous students are less likely to complete Year 12 compared to non-Indigenous students and that Indigenous students are less likely to gain an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) deemed necessary for HE admission (Wilks & Wilson 2015). Indigenous people are more likely to enter HE later in life (tending to be mature age students aged over 25) and less likely to gain admittance into a university based on their prior educational achievement; while their average rates of completion of HE courses are at least twice as low as those of their non-Indigenous peers (Pechenkina 2015).

More Indigenous students enrol in Vocational Education and Training (VET) than in HE (Wilks & Wilson 2015). Transitions and pathways into HE are often convoluted and far from straightforward. Supporting the transition of Indigenous students from VET to HE promises to increase Indigenous HE participation (Anderson 2011; Bandias, et al. 2013), which is particularly crucial for regional and remote Indigenous students who have completed a VET qualification (Bandias, et al. 2013). Unfortunately, VET to HE pathways are relatively uncommon with only 4.9 per cent of Indigenous students currently making this transition (Wilks & Wilson 2015). While enabling programs have received significant recent attention, the potential of the VET to HE pathways to increase Indigenous HE participation remains largely unexplored. Our research project expands on this gap by moving research beyond the investigation of enabling programs, towards a deeper examination of additional practice-based (and evidence-informed) strategies being developed by dual-sector universities in Australia. Our research found that there is significant potential to increase VET to HE transitions among Indigenous students, if supportive tertiary education environments are present. Key factors enabling such supportive environments include:

- targeted outreach and engagement work
- support of a clear vision where pathway options are concerned
- enhanced and well-aligned policies and practice.

The issue of the VET to HE pathways and transitions can no longer be ignored as a viable pathway option for Indigenous students. Further action is required to support such transitions.

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1 For the purposes of this report the term ‘Indigenous’ is used to refer to Indigenous people and/or Australian first nations people.
1. Introduction

Background

Australian Indigenous participation in Higher Education (HE) is significantly lower when compared to that of non-Indigenous students, with more Indigenous students enrolling in Vocational Education and Training (VET) than in HE. Supporting the transition of Indigenous students from VET to HE promises to increase Indigenous HE participation, which is particularly important for regional and remote Indigenous students who have completed a VET qualification. Unfortunately, VET to HE pathways remain relatively uncommon with only 4.9 per cent of Indigenous students currently making this transition (Wilks & Wilson 2015). While Indigenous enabling programs have received significant recent attention, the potential of the VET to HE pathways to increase Indigenous HE participation remains largely unexplored. This project identifies and examines strategies likely to increase the number of Indigenous students making a VET to HE transition in Australia.

National data indicates that Indigenous students are less likely to complete Year 12 compared to non-Indigenous students, and that Indigenous students are less likely to gain an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) deemed necessary for HE entry (Wilks & Wilson 2015). Indigenous people are more likely to enter HE later in life (tending to be mature age students aged over 25) and less likely to gain admittance into a university based on their prior educational achievement; while their average rates of completion of HE courses are at least twice as low as those of their non-Indigenous peers (Pechenkina 2015).

This research is contextualised by recent key Australian Government reviews that highlighted the urgent need to improve Indigenous Australian education outcomes. These reviews were: the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al. 2008); the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (Behrendt et al. 2012); and Creating Parity: The Forrest Review (2014).

This research strategically builds on a recent National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) grant led by Fredericks et al. (2015) which focused on identifying best bridging practices supporting Indigenous students’ participation in regional dual-sector universities. Our research expands on Fredericks et al.’s (2015) findings by moving beyond investigation of enabling programs, towards deeper examination of additional practice-based (and evidence-informed) strategies developed and utilised by dual-sector universities.
2. Approach

Aim and Objectives

This project sought to identify practical strategies for enhancing VET to HE transitions for Australian Indigenous students. The research team achieved this by:

- producing an integrative literature review of relevant national and global scholarship about VET to HE pathways and transitions for Indigenous learners in Australia
- facilitating focus groups to explore the experiences and perspectives of teaching staff, academics and decision-makers tasked with supporting Indigenous students transitioning or wishing to transition from VET to HE. Successful strategies and challenges of transitions were a central aim of inquiry
- administering a survey with staff and Indigenous students to gauge experiences, intentions and difficulties of VET to HE pathways

This research identified the most likely potential approaches to enhance systems, policies and practices that dual-sector universities can develop and implement to increase the prospects of:

- Indigenous student transition from VET to HE
- Indigenous student participation in the HE sector
- more strategically aligned investments to increase Indigenous participation in HE
- improved Indigenous education trajectories and outcomes in Australia.

Key Research Topics and Question Addressed

In partnership, Charles Darwin University (CDU) and Swinburne University of Technology (SUT) delivered a project of national relevance in order to build a stronger evidence base concerning the barriers and enablers to improving Indigenous VET to HE pathways. The project involved three interrelated elements:

**Element 1 – Undertaking an integrative literature review about Indigenous VET to HE pathways**

Relevant project objectives were to:

- conduct a review of literature (academic and ‘grey’) concerning VET to HE pathways and transitions
- compare and contrast key learnings from national and global evidence about VET (or equivalent) to HE pathways
- critically examine current datasets and scholarship to identify key themes and areas for action/strategy development based on contemporary literature.

This review is presented in Section 3 of this report. This has also been published in *International Studies in Widening Participation* (Frawley et al. 2017c). Key themes that emerged from the review of literature informed Elements 2 and 3.
**Element 2 – Exploring Indigenous student perspectives about VET to HE pathways**

The relevant project objective was to:

- examine the perspectives and experiences of CDU and SUT Indigenous students who have either transitioned from VET to HE, or are planning to make that transition.

This aspect of the study involved an online survey of Indigenous students who have successfully transitioned from VET to HE; and students who were planning to make that transition. Such issues as aspiration, motivation, support mechanisms (both within and external to the university) and challenges encountered, were explored.

**Element 3 – Exploring VET and HE teaching staff, academics and decision-maker perspectives about strategies for enhancing VET to HE transitions among Indigenous students**

Relevant project objectives were to:

- examine the perspectives and experiences of CDU and SUT teaching staff, researchers, administrators and other external stakeholders about high potential strategies for enhancing VET to HE transitions
- identify key actions and strategies most closely aligned with current Australian policies and program contexts.

This aspect of the study involved focus group discussions with various stakeholders, internal and external to CDU/SUT, and an online survey combining quantitative and qualitative components administered with university staff employed in either support or teaching roles working with Indigenous students. Such issues as facilitators and barriers for developing and implementing strategies aimed at promoting/enhancing VET to HE transitions were explored. Qualitative data collected during focus groups and surveys were analysed using inductive thematic inquiry, using NVivo software.

Ethics approval was received by both the CDU Human Research Ethics Committee and the SUT Human Research Ethics Committee.

**Methodology**

**Literature Review Methodology and Scope**

The integrative literature review serves to update the current evidence base about trends associated with, and strategies used to support, Indigenous learners transitioning from VET to HE in Australia. The integrative review methodology is consistent with that outlined by Whittemore and KnafI (2005), in order to capture the context, processes and subjective elements of the topic. The methodology is particularly useful in research studies developing evidence-based practice initiatives, such as this project. The research team also used existing datasets, such as the 2014 NCVER dataset and Department of Education and Training student outcomes datasets, as well as internal CDU/SUT student data to analyse current trends.

**Survey**

Online surveys were used for Elements 2 and 3 of the project. The Staff VET to Higher Education survey consisted of 11 questions, six of which were open-ended, generating rich
qualitative data (see Appendix A). The staff survey was distributed among all staff at CDU in 2016 and SUT in 2017. This included 38 responses (CDU n=31, SUT n=7). The Student VET to Higher Education survey consisted of 16 questions, three of which were open-ended (see Appendix B). The CDU student survey was distributed in 2016, whereas the SUT student survey was sent out in 2017. This included 28 Indigenous student responses (CDU n=18, SUT n=10).

**Focus Groups**

Focus groups were used as primary data collection method for Element 3 of the project. A total of three focus groups were conducted throughout 2016-17 (two with CDU staff and one with SUT staff). Focus groups were small in size (averaging at five to seven participants), lasting between one to one and a half hours and providing a collective narrative voice in relation to VET to HE transitions. This included two regional and remote focus groups (CDU only n=10) and one metropolitan focus group (SUT only n=7).

**Limitations**

This research project’s main limitation was small participant sample sizes for both students (n=28) and staff (n=55) (including focus group participation). This was due, in part, to ethics approval taking longer than originally expected in one institution and the timing of the data collection, which was delayed and took place towards the latter part of 2016. Due to internal communication restrictions at SUT, the student survey was not sent out until early 2017.
3. Literature Review

Introduction

The Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al. 2008) strengthened the national focus on improving HE outcomes, particularly in regards to transition and participation of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. Indigenous students, who are more likely than their non-Indigenous peers to be from low SES backgrounds, emerged as a specific equity group of interest. An important element of a successful transition into HE and achieving national attainment and participation goals for students from equity groups, as identified by the Bradley Review, is the connection between Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE). Similarly, the Behrendt Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Indigenous People (Behrendt et al. 2012) emphasised the importance of collaboration across educational sectors to enhance Indigenous student pathways between VET and HE.

This integrative literature review investigated relevant national scholarship about VET to HE pathways and transitions for Indigenous learners in Australia and compared and contrasted key relevant learnings, including some consideration of international perspectives. The review critically examined current scholarship and identified key themes and areas for action and strategy development based on contemporary literature. As an integrative literature review, it identified the key concepts and offered analyses and critiques of the literature, as well as creating new understandings of the topic through one or more forms of synthesis (Torraco 2005). The conceptual structure of the literature review drew points of view and research about VET to HE pathways and transitions, both in the mainstream and in Indigenous education contexts. As a result, establishing transition pathways from VET to HE for Indigenous students is envisaged as one of the key strategies to not only improve Indigenous access to HE but also to contribute to Indigenous human capital and socioeconomic wellbeing (Anderson 2015).

Methodology

The review’s primary focus was on the literature dealing with VET to HE transition and pathway issues for Australian Indigenous students. The review included grey literature, especially theses, reports and conference presentations, as well as research literature from books, book chapters and peer-reviewed journal articles. The review used several key search terms including: pathways; transition; vocational education and training; higher education; tertiary education; further education; Indigenous students; cross-sectoral transfer; widening participation; remote students; regional students; university access; barriers; dual-sector; and student equity. The search also uses several combinations of keywords, for example: ‘VET to higher education pathways’; ‘Indigenous students and transition to higher education’; and ‘cross-sectoral transfer and Indigenous students’. The electronic databases and other sources searched for journal articles, theses, book chapters and books included: the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER); the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER); Google Scholar; A+Education; AEI-ATSIS; EBSCOhost;

An abridged version of this literature review was published in International Studies in Widening Participation. Editorial permission was granted to reproduce elements in this report. The article can be accessed via http://nova.newcastle.edu.au/ceehe/index.php/iswp/article/view/45/pdf_20.
The articles ultimately selected for inclusion in this review were those focusing on the pathways and transition nexus, especially within the VET, HE and Australian Indigenous contexts. The review first provided a brief background of the two sectors of further education in Australia, and then investigated the concepts of pathways and transitions in a mainstream sense before taking a deeper view of these concepts in the Indigenous contexts. The review then concluded with a synthesis of the main pathways and transitions themes.

Background

Two significant sectors within Australian further education are Higher Education (HE) and Vocational Education and Training (VET). The Australian HE sector consists of 43 universities, including one specialist university and two overseas universities. Six of the 43 universities are dual-sector institutions, which provide both VET and HE (Good Universities Guide 2016). The VET sector consists of 57 public Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes, together with a large number of private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). In 2015, there were 4,609 RTOs in Australia, 3,440 of which were privately operated (Department of Education 2015).

Each sector provides a set of qualifications (Figure 1). In the HE sector, qualifications range from diploma to higher degree courses, the latter usually of three to six years’ duration. In the VET sector, qualifications range from certificates to vocational graduate diplomas with courses lasting usually one to three years (Harris 2009). The Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) serves as one comprehensive framework for post-secondary qualifications, aiming to deliver “flexible pathways to assist people move more easily between education and training sectors, by providing the basis for recognition of prior learning, including credit transfer and work and life experience” (Bandias et al. 2001, p. 585).

Figure 1. Cross-sectoral links

Source: Harris 2009, p. 70.
Harris (2009, p. 71) employs a metaphor of ‘tectonic plates’ to describe the VET and HE sectors, whose:

… interactions slowly form a convergent boundary, where the plates move towards one another, and either one moves beneath the other or a collision occurs. In the case of higher education and VET in Australia, there are many examples of such movement, such as the formation of five dual-sector institutions (offering both higher education and VET); institutions from different sectors sharing the same location and facilities while remaining organisationally discrete; some programmes comprising studies offered by both sectors; and individuals simultaneously enrolling in both sectors.

Curtis (2009, p. 22) notes that in the past, student inter-sectoral movement, specifically that from VET to HE, has been “student initiated, systematic in few providers, and limited despite credit transfer arrangements designed to facilitate it” (Curtis 2009). While this movement is growing, it remains complex and involves a number of stakeholders (Harris, Rainey, & Sumner 2005; Karmel 2009), on first impression appearing more like ‘crazy paving’ than ‘orderly pathways’ (Harris, Rainey & Sumner 2006).

Pathways

The ‘pathway’ metaphor has been used for several years to describe the inter-sectoral movement of students, usually from VET to HE, and to a lesser extent from HE to VET. Guenther et al. (2017, p. 255) critique the ambiguity of the pathways metaphor, outlining how:

[it] now has a life of its own, so much so that it has become part of the vernacular and has produced other metaphors like ‘barriers’ and ‘road blocks’ which even local people in remote communities use to express a concept that is just a metaphor without substance.

However, for a lack of a more suitable alternative, this review will use the pathways metaphor with caution. There are various alternative pathways to HE programs for students who do not gain direct entry into university (Andrewartha & Harvey 2014). Kinnane et al. (2014) provide a list of Indigenous entry options and pathways in Australian universities and note that most universities having at least one or more programs. However, these pathways are complex, “neither seamless nor consistently applied”, and consist of “policy and institutional barriers” (Bandias, Fuller, & Pfitzner 2011, p. 584). While pathway programs address some concerns about equity and social inclusion—particularly with regard to low SES groupings—they:

… can be difficult for students and their families to navigate. They are rarely linear. There can be multiple entry and exit points, and there can be many enablers and barriers that impact upon what pathways look like and how they are experienced. The centrality of pathways can depend on the sense of community within a university; access to adequate support structures; and the provision of a safe study environment in which students feel confident to learn and grow. (Frawley, Larkin & Smith 2017a, p. 8).

Generally, inequality has been born long before students’ transition from school to higher education. In terms of school leavers, universities’ low SES recruitment initiatives engage with an already reduced cohort: these are the low SES students who have successfully completed secondary school, whose attainment is at a suitable level, who understand the relevance of tertiary education and have confidence in their ability to succeed. This is a
relatively narrow band of students and to focus only on these students as a way of addressing inequality is to avoid the main challenge. Many, maybe most, low SES students do not get to this point of ‘choice’ and are effectively lost from the ‘pipeline’ long before the final years of schooling (James and Johnson 2016). Those that do make it into the university sector via various special entry schemes will more likely than not require specialised support such as “early and consistent review of progress with their studies”, academic skills assistance, “formal mentoring support from senior Indigenous students” and access to more tailored student events to create peer and mentor networking opportunities and plan for their academic future (Day & Nolde 2009, p. 157). Another recent study into the VET HE nexus, however, has dispelled some of the ‘myths’ surrounding VET students’ academic ability: “students admitted to higher education on the basis of previous VET perform as well if not better than all other student populations” (Langworthy & Johns 2012).

Nevertheless, pathway programs are viewed as a mechanism to redress disadvantage because of the potential for the second chance they provide. However, Wheelahan (2009, p. 262) warns that this “reinforces the notion that students need a second chance because of their presumed deficits, rather than the institutional practices of universities and the extent to which they are prepared to accept such students”. The challenge for universities is to create socially just pathways. This includes opportunities, resources and support that enable capability, build confidence and foster belonging for students from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds (Burke et al. 2016). With support argued as an integral part of any parity-focused initiative (Engstrom & Tinto 2008), it is also important to take into account students’ perceptions of support—formal and informal—as institutional provision of support through various channels is woven into the discourse of Indigenous academic success in general, in particular for students who did not enter HE through ‘traditional’ pathways but via special pathways like entry and bridging programs (Pechenkina 2015).

Transition

In the summary provided by Gale and Parker (2011, p. 25) of several Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) projects, transition is defined as the capacity to navigate change, including “the resources to engage with change, without having full control over and/or knowledge about what the change involves”. Gale and Parker (2011, p. 25) discern three distinct ways in which transition is conceived:

… as induction: sequentially defined periods of adjustment involving pathways of inculcation, from one institutional and/or disciplinary context to another; as development: qualitatively distinct stages of maturation involving trajectories of transformation, from one student and/or career identity to another; or as becoming: a perpetual series of fragmented movements involving whole-of-life fluctuations in lived reality or subjective experience, from birth to death.

Gale and Parker (2011) summarise these three distinct ways by providing a typology of student transition which includes transition metaphors, types of transitional change, and the dynamics of transition. Examples of transition activities are also given.
Research by Jackson (2003, p. 341) shows that the transition to university “represents a period of disequilibrium as students move from a familiar environment into an unfamiliar one”, resulting in “significant life changes” and discontinuity, which can pose threats to self-identity. Ottmann (2017, p. 96) concurs noting that the change processes highlighted by Gale and Parker (2011) should be recognised processes that function on constant flux:

Constant flux is fluid change, a reality where the dynamic relationship between order and chaos, and is the birthplace of creativity and innovation. As complexity theory teaches, this zone is the liminal space between the old and new way of being and doing, an energy-filled place that holds the potential for profound discoveries in the midst of time—past, present and future—that is definitely not linear but woven into each other.

Transitions into the academy require developing the capacity of students to change, and students seeking support to enable that change. Students entering the academy require a sense of purpose and engagement with their peers and university life (Naylor, Baik & James 2013). Gale and Parker (2011, p. 36) conclude that the issue of “student transitions into HE should be cognisant of students lived reality not just institutional and/or systemic interest”. There are clearly issues relating to social inclusion and social justice in opening up higher education to a wider section of society while promoting egalitarianism (Catterall et al. 2014). Attention to monitoring progress, supporting retention and promoting success is equally important (Catterall et al. 2014; Watson 2008). That is, accessing the pathway is only the first step in navigating change – in Tinto’s words, “access without support is not an opportunity” (Tinto 2008; Engstrom & Tinto 2008).
Mainstream VET to HE Pathways Issues

Bradley et al. (2008) identified the connection between VET and HE as an important element to achieve participation and attainment goals. They also note that this connection is an evolution of dual-sector universities (Bradley et al. 2008). This connection has created valid and viable pathways but this does not come without issues. Research by Harris (2009) found that VET to HE pathways can be: direct (linear) or indirect; multi-stepped; inter-sectoral or intra-sectoral or combinations of both; one-way or two-way in direction or combinations of both; and between same or different fields of education or combinations of both.

The policy rhetoric that emphasises ‘seamless pathways’ does not often match the practice. Bandias et al. (2011) believe that pathways are complex, as they involve multiple stakeholders and are overlaid with barriers at institutional and policy levels. These barriers include issues like finance, transport and work, but also issues that students potentially face within the institution such as inadequate or inaccurate information, recognition of prior learning, credit transfer, advanced standing or course outcomes (Harris, Rainey & Sumner 2012). The research by Harris et al. (2009, p. 83) concluded that:

[T]he findings reflect a diversity of learning trajectories which are not as easy, seamless and linear as policy desires. They have shown that the reality of experience for a proportion of tertiary students is quite different from the rhetoric of policy. One may well ask to what extent linear or ‘traditional’ pathways survive? The findings here clearly support those of other research that learning careers of young people tend to be more erratic than linear and are rarely the products of rationally determined choice.

Mainstream VET to HE Transition Issues

The transition from VET to HE is often complicated, not just for those from equity groups (Griffin 2014). Bandias et al. (2011) suggests that there are two cohorts of students who undertake the transition from VET to HE. The first consists of students who complete their vocational education qualifications and move into the higher education sector, and the second are mature learners who are generally older and are returning to undertake a further qualification. Nevertheless, the literature suggests that students who have completed lower-level qualifications (Certificate I and Certificate II) are less likely to make the transition from VET to HE, than those who have higher-level VET qualifications (Diploma and above) (Griffin 2014). Regardless, the number of students who make the transition from VET to HE remains small (Table 1). Data show that a VET qualification as the basis for admission to a HE course in 2010 was 7.4 per cent, slightly above mature aged admission at 5.3 per cent, and well below secondary school at 32.2 per cent and those from previous higher education courses at 41.8 per cent.
Table 2: Commencing domestic higher education students and equivalent full-time students by basis for admission to current and higher participation prior to commencement, 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basis for admission to current course</th>
<th>Equivalent full-time students (’000)</th>
<th>Other complete and incomplete qualifications (includes complete final year of secondary education) (’000)</th>
<th>No prior education (’000)</th>
<th>Other, including not known (’000)</th>
<th>Total (’000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complete higher education course</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>84.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incomplete higher education course</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete VET course</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incomplete VET course</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>&lt; 10</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional qualification</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>&lt; 10</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education course</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>&lt; 10</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary education</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>237.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Even so, transition from VET to HE is viable although it is not used as widely as it could be. An opportunity exists for students belonging to equity groups to take advantage of VET as an entry point to the higher education sector. Indeed, there is potential for them to "forge pathways to higher-level qualifications and the higher education sector" (Griffin 2014, p. 7). Watson et al. (2013) called for institutional policies and practices that focus on how VET to HE pathways are constructed, as well as to provide support that is both academic and pastoral especially for VET graduates during their first year of HE study. More importantly, the authors highlighted that universities that address these issues may be more successful in supporting these students through to the completion of a degree. More positively, their research indicates that "universities appreciated the challenges of an increasingly diverse undergraduate student body and many are offering an increasing array of support services that may assist VET award holders who are struggling to make a successful transition" (Watson et al. 2013, p. 61). Nevertheless, there are barriers to overcome, summarised by Bandias et al. (2011) as being academic, personal and institutional. To this can be added issues related to low levels of English Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) proficiency.

Indigenous Australian VET to HE Pathways Issues

Pathways for Indigenous students into higher education can be complex because of the social, cultural, economical and educational challenges they present (Frawley et al. 2017a), and because of the practical and systematic challenges and restraints they face (Thomas et al. 2014). In remote communities "it is little more than a myth" where:

"[T]he 'pathway' metaphor is conceptually linked to a different set of philosophies that superficially may offer some explanation for imagined futures, but it may be that for many people from remote communities, it does not resonate with what is important for them … If we were to consider an aspirational response to the issue of increased participation in higher education, we need to be mindful that"
externally imagined outcomes, and externally imagined pathways from communities to higher education institutions, may not have relevance (Guenther et al. 2017, p. 255).

Research shows that the factors that impact on pathways into higher education for Indigenous people are varied (Behrendt et al. 2012; Kinnane et al. 2014). However, while there is research around transitions issues for Indigenous students per se, as well as research that focuses on the regional and remote Indigenous contexts, there is a research gap in the experience of urban Indigenous students. Smith et al. (2017, p. 39) argue that there are four key factors that can impact on pathways into higher education for Indigenous students, which include redefining community engagement from Indigenous standpoints; appropriately resourcing Indigenous community engagement activities; continuing to build an evidence base to learn from recent Indigenous community engagement investments; and the need to move beyond the rhetorical language used in many policy documents and frameworks.

Despite this, there are developments and initiatives that address these issues at institutional and local levels. Smith et al. (2015) view the presence of six dual-sector institutions that offer programs from VET through to higher degrees by research, as a positive opportunity for students to undertake cross-sector skill electives, articulated pathways and dual qualifications. Kinnane et al. (2014) note that two dual-sector universities, both in Victoria, had the highest transition of Indigenous students from VET in 2010, which indicated a stronger pathway. Transition from VET to university has been problematic for more than 25 years because of incompatibilities in “curriculum, pedagogy and assessment” (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR] & Bradley 2008, p. 179). The Behrendt Review (p. 37) identifies the continued problems and limited transition from VET, and recommends clearer definition of pathways to higher education (Kinnane et al. 2014, p. 43).

Pitman et al. (2017, p. 245) believe that enabling programs “play a distinct, important and growing role in providing an alternative pathway to higher education for Indigenous students” and that these programs are “central to the subsequent undergraduate participation of Indigenous students, and are indeed the most prominent means by which these students access university”. Focusing on a heterogeneous cohort of Indigenous students in a Group of Eight (Go8) university, Pechenkina (2014; 2015; 2016) found that students who were accepted into an undergraduate arts degree via an enabling program had the same high rates of success and low attrition as their Indigenous peers accepted through a ‘mainstream’ entry pathway; with the entire Indigenous cohort in this university demonstrating consistently higher completion rate than their non-Indigenous peers. However, the way enabling programs support and/or enhance the likelihood of pathways between VET and HE sectors is under-researched. In addition to scholarships and tutorial assistance for Indigenous students, mentoring, cadetships and work experience were also suggested as mechanisms by which professional associations could increase the take-up of professions by Indigenous students. Contracts between universities and governments for raising outcomes for Indigenous Australians, which would include targets and rewards for exceeding targets, were considered to be the most effective. Evidence-based evaluation requires good data to identify critical factors explaining the higher education success of Indigenous Australians (Karmel et al. 2014, p. 58).

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3 At present there are six dual-sector universities, four of these in Victoria, one in the Northern Territory and one in Queensland.
Indigenous Australian VET to HE Transition Issues

On the surface, the importance of VET for Indigenous people is reflected in the fact that 3.7 per cent of all students in 2014 were Indigenous (NCVER 2014), which is above the parity rate, although the majority of completions are at the Certificate I and Certificate II levels (NCVER 2012). Further, Guenther et al. (2017, p. 263) questions the validity of the pathways metaphor in that it presents an idea ‘that anyone can progress through Certificate levels through to higher education’ but this is not happening in remote communities:

> The problem is not that students do not enrol or start courses, it is rather that they do not complete. Attrition rates of 100 per cent have been observed for some training programmes in remote communities and across all remote Australia, attrition on average is about 90 per cent (Guenther & McRae-Williams 2015). Not only is VET not working as a transition vehicle, but it also is not working as a training vehicle in remote communities, and it is not assisting people who are currently unemployed, to gain employment. One of the challenges for VET and higher education is to convince community members that gaining a qualification is worthwhile. This requires not only collaboration between service providers, but also, with community members (Guenther, et al. 2017, p. 263).

This is supported by Wilks et al. (2017, p. 212) who note that “very low numbers of [regional] and remote students transitioned to higher education, although higher proportions of [regional] and remote students accessed VET, with low transitions from VET to university”. Dockery (2009) states that the lower access to VET impacts upon Indigenous Australians with stronger cultural attachment, although from an equity perspective, the results also reflect positively on the sensitivity of Australia’s education and training system to cultural needs. Generally, for Indigenous students, VET to HE remains problematic with only 4.9 per cent of Indigenous students making the transition in 2012 (Kinnane et al. 2014). However, little is known about why this might be the case. One barrier may be insufficient investment in English and academic literacy programs for Indigenous students. Another set of factors focuses on uneven distribution of resources and services based on students’ geographical location (a situation known as spatial inequality) and an assortment of socio-technological factors, such as internet connectivity, ownership/sharing of devices, and digital literacy influencing Indigenous educational achievement (Prayaga et al. 2017).

Literacy and numeracy consistently feature strongly in debates and policies in school education. However, adult literacy and numeracy as an underpinning thread in lifelong learning and education is not afforded the same attention (Boughton & Durnan 2014). In line with the Equity Blueprint produced by the national VET Equity Advisory Council, all adult learners should have the opportunity to undertake foundation skills development regardless of location, socioeconomic status and any other barriers to access. This involves removing systematic barriers and designing the system to meet diverse learning needs (SCOTESE 2012). Adult basic education is a foundation for gaining self-esteem and self-confidence to lead an independent life. Yet, the Standard Australian English oracy and literacy of the

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The Office for Learning and Teaching fact sheet, Can't be what you can't see: The transition of Indigenous students into higher education provides two explanations of population parity: the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al. 2008) and the Behrendt Review (2012) use a population parity rate of 2.2 per cent, reflecting the proportion of the population between 15-64 years of age that is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (based on 2006 ABS population statistics). The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) used a parity rate of 3.1 per cent to estimate the proportion of Australian students expected to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander “... if Indigenous peoples were represented according to their proportion of the higher education aged population” (Panel for the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Indigenous people, 2011, p. 3).
majority of Indigenous students, especially those from remote areas (particularly in the Northern Territory) has been problematic for decades in relation to enabling full participation in further education, training and employment (Northern Territory Department of Education 1999; Wilson 2014). Indeed, only 24 per cent of people in remote (Indigenous) communities have a school that goes up to Year 12; just 29 per cent of remote communities have a school that goes up to Year 10; and less than 36 per cent of people in remote communities have access to a library (Indigenous Literacy Foundation 2016).

Several recommendations from the Behrendt Review (Behrendt et al. 2012) stress the importance for collaboration between educational sectors, Indigenous organisations, and government agencies, to enhance Indigenous participation. However, inconsistencies in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment have resulted in problematic transitions and clearer definitions are urgently required. Griffin (2014) and Bandias et al. (2013) distil the challenges as follows:

- While transition from VET to higher education is viable it is not used widely by all learners.
- The transition from VET to higher education is more likely to occur from higher-level VET qualifications.
- Transition from VET to higher education can be complicated for all students, despite arrangements such as credit transfer.
- Support services for transition can make a difference, with tension between providing individually tailored support and system-wide support.
- Because of the differences in teaching and learning, some students are not prepared for the more academic environment of higher education.

**Synthesis**

The literature review has highlighted the continued requirement to strengthen VET to HE pathways and transitions for Indigenous students. The need to facilitate students’ post-school transitions by developing student resilience, institutional responsiveness and policy reflexivity through transformative education is required at national and sub-national levels (Abbott-Chapman 2011). This can be realised by dual-sector universities taking the lead in strengthening pathways and transitions. There is also an urgent need for greater community engagement and partnerships, as well as enabling programs that develop academic preparedness and the strengthening of self-efficacy in students (Pitman et al. 2016, 2017; Frawley et al. 2017b).

**National Challenges**

The recent 2015 national forum, *Engagement at the interface: Indigenous pathways and transitions into Higher Education*, facilitated by Charles Darwin University, highlighted the multiple and diverse strategies and programs aimed at addressing VET to HE transition and pathways for Indigenous students. The forum presented a criss-cross of strategies and programs that were provided by national and state/territory governments, government departments, agencies and sectors. This suggests an underlying issue:

> [T]he lack of any centralised repository or coordination of all the different types of programs that are aiming to improve Indigenous training and employment pathways (including for states and territories) makes it a complex and overwhelming task to identify programs, funding regimes and associated evaluations or research studies. This complexity and duplication can also
confuse employers, service providers and clients. It makes it difficult to set up comprehensive and robust evaluations (including the use of control groups) to come to any definitive conclusions about the things that do or do not work. Without such good information about the impact of interventions, there is the risk of continuing with programs that are not worth the funds expended on them, or cutting short programs that have the best chance of success. (Karmel et al. 2014, pp. 51-52).

There are also underlying systemic issues, primarily the challenge of education systems to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students which in turn affects pathways into VET and HE, and VET to HE transitions and pathways. Transition outcomes are better for Indigenous students who complete Year 12, than for those who do not complete secondary studies (Deloitte Access Economics 2012). However, poor attendance and low literacy and numeracy skills combine to affect school participation and completions (Biddle & Cameron 2012). Compounding this are factors around geographic location, low socioeconomic status, gender and remoteness (Curtis 2009). Although VET provides a viable role, the structures and pathways of provision need to be rethought:

This rethinking cannot be limited to schools or to the VET sector, but must seek to integrate the roles they play into a more effective and coordinated suite of programs, which cater for the needs of all students, including the most disadvantaged, and which create consistent and clear pathways into further education, training and the world of work. (Polesel 2010, p. 423).

Data from NCVER (reported in Wilks & Wilson 2014) show that there has been a decline in the number of Indigenous students continuing on to higher education through the VET system. In 2012, 33.6 per cent of Indigenous students were enrolled in further study six months after completing VET studies, down from 35.9 per cent in 2006. Pitman et al. (2016, p. 17) state that “empirical research undertaken since 2000 offers, at best, limited support for the proposition that VET represents an effective pathway into higher education for disadvantaged students”.

Dual-Sector Universities Leading Role

Due to their intra-organisational structure, dual-sector universities are well positioned to strengthen VET to HE pathways and transitions by building partnerships with industries, engaging with communities and developing internal strategies and initiatives that provide for streamlined movement between the two sectors. Effective institutional partnerships with schools, communities and industries require universities to apply four key principles of commitment, coordination, interdependence and trust (Gale & Parker 2013). Universities that create partnerships and liaise closely with schools and communities before students make the transition to HE create opportunities for students to do better especially if they “provide induction and orientation programs at the beginning of the first year, and continuing study support throughout the degree or at least in the first year” (Abbott-Chapman 2011, p. 64). It is essential that universities “reach back into the school years to assist school students through programs designed to boost familiarity with higher education and build confidence in aspiring to go on into higher education” (James and Johnson 2016).

Dual-sector universities, especially those with a reach into remote communities need to address the belief that:

… pathways from school to university in remote communities [are] flawed. Even if there was something akin to a pathway, questions remain about how students get
onto the path and perhaps more importantly, if they want to get onto the path (Guenther et al. 2017, p. 266).

Guenther et al. (2017, p. 261) further state that:

… if attempts to increase higher education participation are driven by the relatively simple assumptions about education pathways in urban communities, we contend on the basis of the above, that they will not work. Strategies must take into account the context and its assumption … [and that] … the foundational assumptions about what education is for in remote communities are not necessarily the same as we might expect in urban communities.

It is suggested that to develop meaningful and strong pathways, particularly with remote communities, there is a need to improve Indigenous community engagement work (Smith et al. 2017). As Guenther et al. (2017) contend, this work must challenge the simplistic assumptions about pathways and transitions, because “positioning VET as part of a continuum of learning and development opportunities that together offer some hope of transforming lives … is crucial” (Young et al. 2007, p. 11).

Indigenous students who complete higher-level VET programs are more likely to make a successful transition into higher education (Griffin 2014), but this pathway is under-utilised because the majority of completions are at the Certificate I and Certificate II levels (NCVER 2012) leading to a low pool of graduates at the Certificate IV, Diploma, and Advanced Diploma levels (Bandias et al. 2014). This may require universities to explore initiatives to encourage and assist students to step-up to the next level, and may also require them to consider some of the fundamental problems between VET and HE such as: the competency-based focus of vocational education compared with the theoretical focus of the university course content; differences in approaches to teaching and learning; higher academic standards and levels of expectations at university (Griffin 2014); and credit transfer issues (Bandias et al. 2014; Frawley 2017). Bandias et al. (2014) states that:

… differences in language and terminology are often used by vocational education and higher education to describe themselves and their programmes … [and that] … has also been identified as an important barrier to the achievement of a closer degree of cohesion between vocational education and higher education in dual-sector universities.

(Bandias, et al. 2011, p. 587)

Bandias et al. (2014, p. 587) believe that credit transfer is an important factor in attracting VET qualified students into HE but because of fundamental differences with philosophy, policy, funding and administration this “can act as impediments to the collaborative pathway process” and that there is a clear need to “mainstream and systematise credit transfer arrangements in order to improve efficiency and transparency and to ensure its sustainability”. Frawley (2017) asserts that tensions can be experienced in highly regulated VET and HE credit transfer policies processes and structures, and so VET and universities need to be better aligned for a more seamless approach.

Dual-sector universities are well placed to take the lead in improving VET to HE pathways and transitions, but critical to effectiveness and sustainability are strong leadership, a comprehensive strategic plan that includes community work and partnerships, and institutional buy-in (Kilpatrick & John 2014, p. 16).
**Enabling Programs**

An element of universities’ role in growing VET to HE transfers is the provision of enabling programs. Enabling programs often focus on developing academic literacy skills, critical thinking, research and time management skills. As noted earlier, the approach to teaching and learning between the two sectors are quite distinct: VET with a focus on individual acquisition of a multiplicity of competencies, while in HE there is a focus on critical thinking and inquiry and a tendency for group work. Therefore, enabling programs could be better designed to assist the transition between the two sectors and could focus on the HE teaching and learning issues that are particularly challenging for students transitioning from VET to HE (Blacker et al. 2011). Kinnane et al. (2014) believe that because the VET sector attracts more Indigenous students, there needs to be a greater focus on preparing Indigenous students for transition to HE, and this could be addressed through the provision of free enabling programs within their VET studies program. For Indigenous students, enabling programs:

… play a distinct, important and growing role in providing an alternative pathway to higher education for Indigenous students. The proportion of Indigenous undergraduate students who utilise this pathway is larger than that of any other equity group recognised in Australian higher education policy. Furthermore, Indigenous-specific enabling programmes are almost unique in the sector in providing a tailored programme for a distinct group of students. (Pitman, et al. 2017, p. 245)

Research shows that individual motivation, commitment and aspirations (Griffin 2014; Homel & Ryan 2014), and individual wherewithal (Harris 2009) are critical enablers for individual students to become ‘the builder and architect of his or her own learning and self-development’ (International Labour Organisation [ILO] 2002, p. 13). Homel & Ryan (2014, p. 7) believe that aspirations have a substantial effect on educational outcomes and that there are:

… significant interactions between aspirations and real and relative academic performance, which suggests that high-achieving individuals are more likely to realise their aspirations. Furthermore, those who considered their performance to be average or below average were less likely to realise their aspirations than those who considered their performance to be well above average.

This call for building motivation, commitment and aspiration has parallels with the concept of self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy. Enabling programs that build self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy present possibilities for Indigenous students (Frawley et al. 2017b) to be better supported and prepared for VET to HE transitions. Self-efficacy is defined as beliefs about one’s own ability to be successful in the performance of a task and includes mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and emotional arousal (Bandura 1977). Academic self-efficacy is defined as personal judgments of one’s capability to organise and execute courses of action to attain designated types of educational performance (Schunk 1984; Zimmerman 1995) and confidence to performing various academic tasks (Bandura 1997).

**VET in schools**

VET in Schools (VETiS) programs provide secondary school students in Years 10 to 12 with the option to undertake vocationally oriented subjects or a nationally recognised VET qualification from a training package or an accredited course. Shah et al. (2015, p. 92) note that:
Although the majority of students enrolled in VET qualifications are in Years 10 to 12, VET units and full qualifications are also being undertaken by students in Year 9 or lower levels. The relevant regulatory authority plays a major role in approving VETiS ‘subjects’ and approving standards. Arrangements vary by jurisdiction, and continue to change, but generally, senior students may enrol in units from one or more certificates concurrently, and they may not be required to complete a full qualification to gain credits towards the relevant Year 12 school certificate.

In 2014, 14.6 per cent of young Australians aged 15 to 19 years participating in education and training were enrolled in VETiS programs (NCVER 2015). In 2006, the uptake of VETiS for Year 11 and 12 students was higher for Indigenous students at 54 per cent than non-Indigenous students at 39 per cent (ABS 2015). In 2012, 5.5 per cent of all enrolments in VETiS were by Indigenous students, with a higher tendency to enrol in Certificate I qualifications (28.8 per cent) than non-Indigenous students (22.8 per cent), and a lower tendency to enrol in higher-level qualifications. At the Certificate III or higher, it was 12.4 per cent for Indigenous students and 19.0 per cent for non-Indigenous (Shan et al. 2015). Polesel (2010, p. 415) concurs that although VETiS is an important curriculum reform:

It is usually offered at the most basic qualification levels within the subject model paradigm of senior secondary certificates. Its heavy use by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds raises concerns regarding social selection and it suffers from problems of low esteem and variable quality, with its place often questioned within the traditional academic culture of secondary schooling (Polesel 2010, p. 415).

Other issues of concern are around the role and purpose of VETiS, the complexity of allocating credits, the lack of appropriate workplace learning in the VETiS programs, and quality issues (Shah et al. 2015, pp. 104-108). To this Clarke (2012, p. 29) adds the lack of “coherent and strong pathways to occupational outcomes”.

**Recommendations and Further Research**

This literature review has identified recommendations and research gaps in relation to VET to HE pathways and transition issues, especially pertaining to the Indigenous experience. It has underlined the continued requirement to strengthen VET to HE pathways and transitions at a national and at state/territory levels. It has also identified dual-sector universities as being well placed in addressing this matter. At a national level, there is a call for improved coordination, while at state/territory and regional levels, the review has highlighted the requirement for improved Indigenous community engagement work to meaningfully connect with both urban and remote communities.

The review has also highlighted significant gaps in the research. These are:

- the student perspective on transitioning through the tertiary education sector
- learners’ actual experiences in their educational journeys
- the educational pathways of students moving between sectors
- whether remoteness from providers and low SES act separately or in concert as barriers to tertiary participation
- the pathways experience of urban Indigenous students
- gender as a factor within the remoteness context
- the transition from lower-level to higher-level qualifications in the VET sector
• the VETiS experiences and outcomes of Indigenous students.

It is critical that further investments are made in regard to research, policy and practice contexts to better align VET to HE pathways and transitions for Indigenous students. Anecdotally there have been many programs that have supported Indigenous VET to higher education pathways. These have usually been nested in sector-specific programs tailored to Indigenous student needs, most notably in the education sector. However, there is relatively little information and peer-reviewed evidence about the process, impact and outcome of such programs. Research on these issues will provide a more complete picture in which to inform these investments.
4. Results and Discussion

This section provides a report on three sources of data: student surveys; staff surveys; and staff focus groups. For the student surveys, a summative content analysis involved the counting and comparison of content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context.

Student Survey Results

The Student VET to Higher Education survey consisted of 16 questions, three of which were open-ended (see Appendix B). The survey was distributed among all Indigenous students enrolled at CDU and SUT. The total number of responses received was 28. This included 18 students from CDU, and 10 students from SUT.

Age and Gender:
Just over 71 per cent were female (20 students), 25 per cent (seven students) were male and one student chose ‘other’ as gender. The largest age group were comprised of Indigenous students over 30 (64.29 per cent, 18 students), followed by the 21-25 age group (21.43 per cent, six students), the 25-30 age group (10.71 per cent, four students) and one student in the 16-20 age group. This age and gender distribution in our sample is consistent with the overall trend for Indigenous students in universities tending to be mature age women (Wilks & Wilson 2014).

Geography:
We endeavored to find out whether our students had to relocate from elsewhere to attend their studies. The majority of our combined cohort (16 students, 57.14 per cent) did not have to relocate; while three students had to relocate from a remote community (10.71 per cent), three from a regional area (10.71 per cent) and another three had to move interstate to pursue their studies. One student each from either a regional town of a city suburb different to where their education provider is located had to move as well. Finally, one student in our sample was studying fully online.

Nature of Study:
In response to Question Four of the student survey, 11 respondents identified as VET students, comprising of seven students from CDU and four students from SUT. In addition, two students identified that they had completed VET studies at CDU and were planning to enroll in a HE course at CDU, while another two also completed their VET studies at CDU and were now enrolled in a HE course at CDU. Yet half of the respondents (n=14) opted to respond as ‘other’ and provided free-text responses in the way they identified as a student. These more detailed responses are shown below:

- “I completed VET studies elsewhere and am now enrolled in a HE course at Swinburne”.
- “I completed VET studies at Tasmanian RTO and now studying HE online with Swinburne”.
- “I completed VET studies with another provider now enrolled in [a] higher education course at Swinburne”.
- “I completed VET studies at Careers Australia and I am currently studying an Higher Education course at Swinburne”.
- “I completed VET studies in NSW on electrotechnology. Completed a diploma in NSW and WA on Civil Construction Design. Now studying at Swinburne on Engineering Product Design Honours”.


• “I completed VET studies through workplace training but have now enrolled in HE at Swinburne”.
• “Currently enrolled in higher education”.
• “Currently doing Tertiary Enabling Program (TEP)”.
• “Completed VET studies at CDU and completed HE at CDU”.
• “DE student. Previously completed VET course in Bourke NSW, undergraduate course at CSU Wagga NSW, currently enrolled in Psychological Science CDU (DE)
• Externally enrolled in Bachelor of Health Science with CDU”.
• “Completing a Bachelor of Education Early Childhood Teaching through ACIKE (Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges in Education)”.
• “Did an apprenticeship via employment with CDU, currently enrolled in undergraduate degree”.
• “Completed VET studies through New England Institute and now enrolled in HE course at CDU”.

These responses highlighted that pathways are different and varied for each Indigenous student.

In summary, this cohort of students had experience with VET education and have either transitioned or were planning to transition into HE. Due to a small size of this cohort, we decided to analyse the answers collectively across both institutions rather than as smaller sub-groups. As both universities in the sample are dual-sector institutions, there are some similarities to student experiences which allow us to draw general conclusions for both institutions. However, staff survey answers (outlined in the next section of this report) help elucidate any institution-specific differences.

Factors of Choosing VET or HE

Students were asked to evaluate the importance of each factor affecting their choice to pursue VET qualification, on a five-point scale, using the responses ‘Very Important’, ‘Important’, ‘Neither’, ‘Unimportant’ and ‘Not Very Important’.

Factors such as: ‘personal interest in the course’ (66.67 per cent ‘Very Important’ and 29.63 per cent ‘Important’); ‘future employment opportunities’ (59.26 per cent and 40.74 per cent respectively); and ‘costs (including study costs and living expenses)’ (57.14 per cent and 28.57 per cent respectively) were the top three factors. This suggests that Indigenous students are pragmatic when choosing VET as they are motivated by the affordability of the course and future ‘pay-out’ in the form of employment when choosing VET. As VET qualifications are shorter than HE degrees and many VET qualifications are in constant higher demand, it is understandable why VET could be more attractive to some. Further, pertaining to the ‘length of studies’, the majority of students in this sample also found it an influential factor, with 61.54 per cent finding it ‘Very Important’ and a further 19.23 per cent ‘Important.’

Other factors that Indigenous students found influential over their decision to choose VET were: ‘support from family and friends’ (42.31 per cent; 42.31 per cent); ‘type of teaching (the practical, competency-based teaching associated with VET education); (36.36 per cent; 54.55 per cent); ‘opportunity for RPL or credit transfer’ (33.33 per cent; 25.93 per cent); ‘reputation of the institution’ (30.77 per cent; 50 per cent); and ‘distance from your place living’ (25 per cent; 35.71 per cent).

There were no strong trends in the ‘negative’ answers (‘Unimportant’ or ‘Not Very Important’), confirming the findings of other studies into VET experiences of students and highlighting similar factors as affecting student study decisions (Kinnane et al. 2014).
Similar factors were assessed in the context of Indigenous students choosing HE. For example ‘personal interest in the course’ (77.78 per cent found it ‘Very Important’ and further 18.52 per cent found it ‘Important’) and ‘future employment opportunities’ (70.37 per cent and 29.63 per cent respectively). The ‘costs’ factor was ranked third by importance to students, with 62.96 per cent finding it ‘Very Important’ and further 25.93 per cent saying it was ‘Important’. Other factors were deemed somewhat less important compared to the prior three, but were still deemed significant to the students in their choosing HE for studies: type of teaching (the academic type of teaching); length of study; opportunity for RPL or credit; distance from your place of living; and support from family and friends.
Noteworthy, is that the top factors of choosing either VET or HE were the same (‘personal interest in the course’, ‘future employment opportunities’ and ‘costs’), indicating that while students’ motivations for either choice are identical, it is their personal circumstances that are more likely to play the deciding role, like finances and perceived employability.

**The role of advice**

As literature exploring Indigenous experiences with transitions into HE demonstrates, advice from family and friends can be perceived as more important and therefore more influential in decision making by Indigenous students than formal advice or information from an education provider (Smith et al. 2017; Frawley et al. 2017b). This could be especially problematic because family advice may be ‘out of date’ or ‘factually incorrect’. In our study, we asked students where they received the most important advice when choosing an educational pathway.

**Figure 4**: Indigenous students’ ranking (from one to six, where one is most important and six the least) of sources of advice when choosing education option (n=28)

Of the following people, who was the most important in providing advice on choosing an educational pathway? Rank you answer in order of preference.

![Figure 4: Indigenous students’ ranking](image)

For 39.13 per cent of students in this survey, ‘parents or someone in your family’ was ranked as the number one source of advice about education, while 34.78 per cent of students ranked it as second. However, ‘none of the options’ was the most common response to be ranked first (55.56 per cent), suggesting something has changed for Indigenous students and they are no longer relying on family as their first source of information and advice on where to study. A smaller number of students marked a career counsellor (13.64 per cent) and a teacher (12.50 per cent) as their first option, though more people marked either option as number three or four, hence identifying it as a less important factor.
Students agreed that they received advice from: the VET and/or HE institution (14.81 per cent ‘Totally agree’ and 44.44 per cent ‘Agree’); from friends who have undertaken VET and/or HE studies (22.22 per cent and 40.74 per cent); to a somewhat lesser degree from their school (14.81 per cent and 29.61 per cent); and from career counsellors (7.69 per cent and 30.77 per cent).

The dominant source of information students relied on when choosing their educational path was ‘internet and online service’, with 92.31 per cent choosing this answer. The same percentage of students also indicated they relied on themselves to search for relevant information. Noting that students could choose multiple answers to this question, in order of number of responses the following sources of information were chosen:

- family: 46.15 per cent
- friends: 38.46 per cent
- experience from a placement or part-time job: 38.46 per cent
- teachers: 34.62 per cent
- institution open days: 23.08 per cent
- career counsellors: 23.08 per cent
- newspapers: 19.23 per cent
- television: 15.38 per cent
- radio: 11.54 per cent
- school fairs: 3.85 per cent

These responses indicate that while input and advice is still important to Indigenous students when making decisions about education, the internet and their own personal research are the preferred options. With friends, professional experience, teachers, institution open days and career counsellors also being important in this process, it is still essential that online information about offerings and transition options and pathways is up to date and easy to access and interpret, as searching the internet is what Indigenous students do most frequently when choosing their education options.
Quality of Teaching and Assessment

In regards to their educational experiences, students were overall positive about how they were treated by teachers on the basis of their cultural background. Students also were primarily positive about expectations teachers placed on them as well as about understanding and interpreting assessments. However, 14.29 per cent of students did not think their teachers communicated their expectations clearly.

Figure 6: Indigenous students’ perceptions of teaching quality and assessment in VET and HE (n=28)

Career Opportunities

When asked about certain statements pertaining to either VET or HE studies, 25 per cent Indigenous students agreed that VET offered better career opportunities than higher education while 42.86 per cent agreed and 17.86 per cent strongly agreed that higher education offered better career opportunities than VET.

There were 33.33 per cent of students who agreed with the statement that after completing VET they are more likely to find a job after their studies than those who complete HE, while 37.04 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement and 25.93 per cent disagreed. At the same time, 11.11 per cent of students strongly agreed and 25.93 per cent agreed that completing HE is more likely to result in a job after studies than completing VET, while 55.56 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement and 7.41 per cent disagreed. These findings indicate that students are not only pragmatic but also slightly pessimistic about career prospects, regardless of whether it is for VET or HE graduates. In regards to wages, most students believed HE graduates are likely to earn higher wages compared to VET graduates, with 18.52 per cent strongly agreeing and 37.04 per cent agreeing with this statement.

Admission into Studies

In regards to the ease of admission into a program of study, 50 per cent of students felt it was similar between VET and HE, while 28.57 per cent felt it was more difficult to get admitted into a HE course. A small percentage each (7.14 per cent) felt it was either ‘much
easier’, ‘easier’ or ‘very difficult’ to be get accepted into HE compared to VET, suggesting there are some hidden, perhaps personal factors, that influence this process for Indigenous students.

Various Aspects of VET Experience for Indigenous Students

Students were asked to address a number of statements about VET experience, their answers located on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from ‘Totally agree’ to ‘Totally disagree’, including a ‘neither/neutral’ answer. The statement that resonated the most with students was ‘it is important for institutions to have a range of services to support learners’, to which 74.07 per cent students strongly agreed; followed closely by ‘positive learning experiences are important’, with 69.23 per cent of students strongly agreeing with this statement. The only slightly negative experience was reported when answering to the statement ‘VET has helped me to get on with other people’, with 50 per cent of students agreeing but 34.62 per cent being neutral about this and 3.85 per cent (one student) totally disagreeing.

Figure 7: Indigenous students’ experiences in relation to VET (N=28)

Challenges and Recommendations

The final two questions of the survey were open-ended questions concerned with challenges and recommendations from students.

Twenty-three students (out of 28) responded to this write-in question, two reporting no challenges. The rest however identified various challenges associated with their studies which can be grouped across five key groups: personal health; financial; academic; support; and cultural factors. At times, these challenges were intertwined, suggesting a complexity to the situation.

Named as significant by 11 students, personal and health challenges included a variety of medical issues, death in the family, depression and caring for an ill family member. One student spoke of “time constraints while working full-time and being a single mum with little family in NT”, while another reported experiencing domestic violence through her ex-husband which resulted in living in a women’s shelter prior to relocating interstate. Another student told a story of perseverance:
I have had to overcome many challenges from large scale family and personal issues arising through to being motivated to ‘water the garden’ everyday... by that I mean doing a little bit work each day so it does not become a struggle when assessments are due. At particular points, I have had to defer study and also take one or two subjects only. It is important to know when to have a break; it’s not about the end achievement, it’s about the journey.

Academic challenges were the second most common response, with eight students naming such difficulties as “understanding the learning material” and expectations, not having any face-to-face contact when studying online, dealing with “disorganised teachers” and “outdated information” such as scientifically disproven neuromyths:

[Outdated information] for things like technology, or trying to cite sources that are factually incorrect e.g. ‘you’ll connect with someone better if you look into their left eye because this is connected to the right brain, which is the emotional part of the brain.

Lack of clear pathways and articulation options were also named in this category as challenges. For example, one student said “I got rejected from my chosen degree because I didn’t finish high school in 2012. I have to complete a degree in criminology to be able to hopefully get into law (no guarantee I will even get in)” while another mentioned that due to health issues, their “only pathway has been to defer at one point and drop [their] studies to part-time.”.

Financial challenges were the third most common response, with five students naming it when responding to the survey, often naming related factors like being a mature age student and experiencing issues with Centrelink payments and difficulties finding a job.

Lack of appropriate or timely support was named as another set of challenges faced by Indigenous students. Some specifically mentioned their encounters with the Indigenous Unit in their respective university: there was a “lack of support from the the Indigenous Unit. So much so that I met with the Indigenous support teams of the two local universities to gain advice, which is embarrassing for [university]”. However, another student acknowledged the importance of asking for help at the right point of time: “I have faced some difficulties along my learning journey. I feel they were mainly based on communication breakdowns and inability to communicate clearly my needs. However I found there was always someone I could turn to help out with this so it was short lived mostly”.

Finally, three students named cultural issues as challenges they have faced while studying. One student commented on having to deal with “students who are uneducated on Indigenous culture and how it is different from [theirs].” Another recalled a certain incident of an online instructor mishandling a racist attack by a fellow student:

An incident in the first year of my studies of another student posting a disgusting discussion for the whole learning group to see whether she was racist to Aboriginal people, which I then responded to asking for proof of her absurd claims. I was highly offended and distressed and the teacher simply deleted everything and never ever addressed it again.

The fact that such racist situations still occur and that instructors may not always be best prepared or trained to deal with these successfully, indicates a continuous need for cultural sensitivity training, not just for staff but also for all students.
In general, challenges identified by the students included:

- personal challenges in adjusting with studies for example single parent, time management, work and study balance, travel, finances
- navigating the higher education and VET systems
- inability to clearly communicate needs
- some racism from fellow students and an inability of academic staff to address such instances.

In general, students' advice to VET providers and institutions included:

- ensure that Aboriginal staff are at the forefront of teaching and support services
- provide support services to cater for emotional wellbeing and for LLN assistance
- establish a mentor program
- build meaningful relationships with students
- provide scholarships and cadetships
- provide clear advice about pathways

Combined Staff Survey and Focus Group Discussion Results

The Staff VET to Higher Education survey was different to the Student VET to Higher Education survey and consisted of 11 questions, six of which were open-ended (see Appendix A). The same questions were used in the online survey and focus group discussions. Of the 38 survey respondents, 31 were from CDU and seven were from SUT. Of those, two worked in academic support, 19 taught in VET, eight taught in higher education, and four taught in both VET and higher education. Five opted not to comment on their current work arrangement. Seventeen staff participated in one of three focus groups (two with CDU staff and one with SUT staff). This included two regional and remote focus groups with CDU staff (n=10) and one metropolitan focus group with SUT staff (n=7).

A different approach to analysis was used with the staff survey and focus group data in comparison to that used with the student data. This involved coding both sets of data thematically. Working collectively, team members identified three key themes emerging from both the focus group discussions and surveys, the coding categories coming directly from the text data. Key themes were:

- **Outreach and Engagement**: this theme centred on comments made in regards to the outreach and engagement activities involving schools, communities, organisations, government, non-government organisations and individuals. The engagement topic focused specifically on suggested and current strategies, initiatives and processes ranging from challenges to what works.

- **Vision for Change**: this theme encompassed comments, perspectives and aspirations articulated around values, goals and objectives potentially informing and progressing institutional policies and practices concerned with VET to HE Indigenous transitions.

- **Enhanced Policies and Practice**: this topic included comments and suggestions on the ways to develop and/or maintain best practice with a focus on university-wide systems, Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) supports and assessment, case management, and cultural competence training.

We now discuss each of these themes in greater detail.
Outreach and Engagement

Outreach and engagement activities surfaced as an important strategy to promote VET to HE pathways for Indigenous students. This was discussed in different ways. University engagement with schools was a prominent feature of this discussion and often related to explaining the different pathway options, including the intersection with VETiS. As one participant stated “if you want to get outcomes at ‘this end’ start down the bottom. We’ve got to start with the school kids.” Direct engagement with communities and families was also deemed as important. With respect to school engagement, one participant commented:

*When we would go out and do our school visits, like we dropped that a few years ago, we would advertise the different pathways, direct and Year 12 to undergrad, or through the VET pathway, alternative entry program when it was operating.*

Another respondent reflected:

*So in my experience having gone and done some little talks, different talks at the schools is that I’ll go in and I’ll say–so we were talking to Year 10s or 11s and say–what are you planning to do? There’s probably a small percentage that have a plan, they know the course that they’re going to do and they’re going to do that. The others haven’t really got much idea where they might want to go or what they want to do … There’s a lot of young people who don’t know what to do and they’re often anxious about that too.*

And another said:

*So I talk to the students about Cert I all the way up to Cert IV, higher ed, this is what higher ed is, this is what you can learn here…so I do those conversations with the schools, generally Year 10, sometimes Year 11.*

These excerpts highlight the important role that school engagement and outreach work plays in (a) promoting pathway options; and (b) recognising that students need guidance in planning for such options. An important element of the discussion about school engagement also related to how schools are engaged. As one participant mentioned:

*It is important to work with schools rather than on schools. At the moment I believe that this is the issue. Many researchers have identified problems of practice within the research literature, but rather than bring[ing] these problems to real world settings for discussion and debate, they arrive with a ready-made solution or intervention. This does nothing to facilitate partnership or engagement. Before a partnership can take place a relationship must be forged – this is often the missing step.*

However, what universities were promoting was also seen as important. The extent to which direct entry from school is promoted in favour of VET pathway options was repeatedly mentioned, although it was difficult to ascertain from the data whether this was perceived positively or negatively. This was particularly evident in the way that Southern universities were perceived to approach school engagement. This is highlighted in the following commentary:

*I’ve looked at a few schools down south just for my own kid and there’s so many schools now that have got partnerships with universities when it comes to different programs. Now they’re probably looking at more, obviously, direct entry. They may be not looking at it through the VETiS to higher ed pathway but I was*
just curious. I thought gosh there’s so much work being done in that space down south at different schools.

In addition to school engagement, discussion about working with families and communities was a key feature of survey responses and interview discussion. In particular, providing information about VET and HE options. Less was explicitly said about providing information about VET to HE pathways. As one participant mentioned:

We want to have an information evening in the culture centre where the families can come along. I think we need to get to the families to support [them] if their child has an aspiration [to pursue further education]. How they can support them, and encourage them, you know. It’s going to be a long journey, a three- or four-year degree.

However, working with communities, in a general sense, to find workable solutions for Indigenous students was also identified as being important:

Challenges should be identified in conjunction with communities and solutions to such challenges should be refined and developed with communities. The university needs to invest in outreach and engage with communities rather than expect communities to engage with the university.

A key element in working with communities that was frequently expressed was to develop trust over time. It was perceived that development of trust increased the potential to develop a strong relationship with families and communities. For example:

We have some lecturers who have seen up to three generations of some families come through their classes over time. Building trust is essential – not making promises we can’t keep, or coming into communities promoting short-term programs with no long-term outcomes in study or employment. On-site educators, tutors and mentors are essential in remote areas. The university has to have an outreach capacity and a regional or local presence.

Such data suggests that strategies aimed at retaining the VET and HE workforce over extended periods of time are likely to benefit Indigenous students aspiring to make a transition between VET to HE. It also means RTOs and universities need to devise employment strategies that commit to long-term positions, in contrast to the more commonly reported short-term contracts. This appears to be particularly important in regional and remote settings. Indeed, one participant explicitly stated “having permanent staff in the regions is very important for maintaining partnerships and engagement”. The importance of “purposeful engagement” was also articulated. Therefore, services and support offerings need to be well-aligned between VET, HE and external stakeholders such as employers.

In addition to commentary about engagement with schools, families and local communities, there was a parallel discourse about a responsibility to provide student ‘support’. Staff recognised the need to both identify and support students who were contemplating or undergoing a transition from VET to HE. As one participant stated there are a “lack of communication and engagement opportunities to allow for support and engagement of services that the student may need for a successful transition.” However, the term ‘support’ was often used in a nebulous way to mean different things. This included: ‘reaching out’ or ‘outreach’ activities in a proactive way (as explained above); the provision of pastoral care; academic support; and financial support. As one participant explained:

Confidence levels and support structures are the key. Indigenous students generally do not come from a home culture that envisages or expects HE
involvement. Therefore, the university has to provide what the family cannot in terms of guidance and support. This is not a problem confined to Indigenous students and they should not be singled out for special treatment in the way that enclaves have tended to do in the past. This can be a source of embarrassment and/or alienation [if not done well].

However, the most prominent concern raised by staff in relation to VET to HE pathways was the lack of responsiveness by universities towards students or potential students. As one participant claimed “we sort of sit back and say come to us, come to us, come to us, but we don’t go to them”. This concept was echoed by other participants who claimed “we kind of expect [them to] come to us … and do a degree with us … but we should be going to students”, and “[We need to] identify students and reach out to them. Not expect them to understand they have to approach the institution and ask for help”. Generally speaking, the lack of propensity to engage with students to discuss pathways was seen as a system failure to support Indigenous students to transition from VET to HE. Therefore, a key purpose of outreach activities must be to raise awareness of Indigenous learners’ options where VET to HE pathways are concerned. Provision of up-to-date and correct information is also key.

**Vision for Change**

There was an articulated need for a cultural shift in how dual-sector universities position, perceive and cater to the needs of Indigenous learners. This was expressed as a clear vision for change. This is summed up nicely by the following participant:

> Not only are the pathways unclear, and the curricula, learning approaches and assessment measures seemingly viewed as inappropriate by would-be Indigenous students, the language, rigidity and purposes of academia are viewed as irrelevant to their way of life.

Likewise, another participant claimed:

> This is not to say that universities need to compromise their standards, but the university does need to rethink the ways in which these standards are achieved, and undo some of the pointless and prohibitive protocols, language, etiquette and archaic ritual which have in the past been used to maintain academia access uniquely for the privileged.

Making education and training options relevant and meaningful for Indigenous students was frequently described as an important factor in facilitating positive pathway and transition options into, and between, VET and HE courses. There was widespread agreement that dual-sector universities were particularly well positioned to address this concern. However, most participants found it easier to identify current deficits in VET and HE systems, than strategies and solutions to address such concerns. As one survey respondent noted:

> As a dual-sector education institution, we may be uniquely able to overcome some of the inhibitors for Indigenous students where vocational education (VET) or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) programs, which have distinctly different and much less unfriendly, intimidatory, judgmental and sanctimonious approaches and protocols, entry requirements, codes of teaching and assessment [than higher education].

Whilst there were often acknowledgements that VET and HE systems were different, and that both had their limitations, the need for “place-based and community/country solutions” were offered as a way to strengthen transitions between the two sectors. Indeed, understanding and respecting “Indigenous intelligence” in all of the interactions between
institutions, lecturers/staff and current and prospective students, was deemed as vital. This is consistent with recent calls for whole-of-university approaches to Indigenous education (Universities Australia 2017).

Participants also spoke about the way in which transitions and pathways between VET and HE are dichotomously constructed. This discourse was perceived to be too simplistic and problematic to identify and describe tangible solutions that supported a vision for change. In particular, VET to HE pathways were perceived to be part of an uneasy nexus between dual-sector universities, schools and potential workplaces. For example, Indigenous school leavers were frequently identified as a group where additional ‘support’ was required to help drive a vision for further education – whether that be through VET or higher education. In some instances, this was expressed as a missed opportunity:

*I teach VET in schools … You’ve got a big catchment in these schools … You’ve got all the schools across the Northern Territory. Somewhere in that transition from high school to either VET or higher ed there’s some sort of direction, something that could be worked on I believe.*

Understanding the role and function that VETiS can play in supporting the promotion of pathways into higher-level VET courses (i.e. Cert IV and above) and HE was often raised as a priority by participants, particularly during focus group discussions. The potential to promote such pathways as a legitimate way to keep Indigenous students engaged in education was also raised from time to time. As one participant commented:

*I know there are Indigenous school students expecting [to participate in] and capable of Cert III studies who are not offered this [option], and who have to wait until they leave school to get their Cert III. These students would be excellent candidates for a VET to HE transition in the long run if the school system had higher expectations of them and provided appropriate VET levels of training before they came to university (which they currently are unlikely to do).*

Some participants considered that Certificate III courses should be a more prominent feature of the current VETiS model adopted in schools, specifically in the NT. This was considered a key strategy for supporting Indigenous learners’ vision of pursuing further education. Similarly, conveying alternative education and training options, and respective pathways, to students that are ineligible to transition into university from either school or lower-level VET qualifications was also deemed to be important. As one participant claimed:

*SATAC or admissions will send us a list, and if they’re [students] on that list that means that they may not have the qualifications to be accepted to the higher ed. So we then ring around and if they don’t, then we suggest they either, you know, do a Cert IV or a TEP [Tertiary Enabling Program] or a PTS [Preparation for Tertiary Success]. So that’s where, you know, some of the students will take that pathway on.*

Remoteness was also perceived as a barrier to support transitions from VET to HE. It was generally considered that the VET system was better tailored for face-to-face delivery in remote Indigenous communities than that of the HE system. One participant who spoke about current business and management pathways claimed that:

*Once a person’s finished a Cert IV in business they’re then expected to go to Darwin to do their Diploma and/or the higher ed. And this is where it stops … That’s where you get the block because they are used to having people on the ground here and … the presence of people, face-to-face, in their regions makes all the difference to you getting students’ butts on seats.*
For many students completing VET courses there is also an intentional vocational end-point. In some instances, HE was perceived to be unnecessary, irrespective of the capability of Indigenous learners to transition into tertiary study.

For me, with the Indigenous students, I think the ones that are doing the Cert III and IV higher and are capable of doing higher ed are normally already in the workplace. So they receive those like the Diploma of Management program that we have with the NT government. They receive the qualification and because they are already AO4s in the workplace getting a degree doesn’t really seem to – they don’t see it as enhancement of where they’re going, just more work. And generally, they advance on their own merits without the degree. Yeah there’s no value of doing any further study because they’re already in the workplace. They’re already proving themselves. They’re already getting promoted on their own merits.

Similarly, there was a perception that once studying within the HE system, that pathways and transitions back out were inflexible. In particular, options for reverse articulation back into the VET system were seldom promoted, and in some instances did not exist as an option for many Indigenous learners. When speaking of a teacher education program, one participant mentioned:

In higher ed you do your assignments, you do your placement, you get a tick, everything’s hunky dory, here’s your certificate, good luck on your own, out the door. But in VET unless you’ve ticked every single box that you came to work and then you left and then you shut the door and you did this and what have you, and if those things aren’t ticked you don’t get your assessment. So people from higher ed cannot come back into thingo [VET] without some really strong workplace assessments where you can RPL. There is no trip back to VET.

While there is evidence that there are many articulation pathways within both of the dual-sector institutions that were part of this study, it appears that staff and students may not be aware they exist. This suggests that awareness raising with staff and Indigenous students about potential articulation pathways needs to improve.

Enhanced Policies and Practices

Building on the discussion from the previous section, it is clear there is room for enhancing institutional policies and practices to achieve a vision for improving Indigenous VET to HE pathways. A need to strengthen structural alignment between the accreditation of both VET and HE courses to identify more logical, “clearly defined” and “structured” pathways for Indigenous students was frequently mentioned. As one participated summarised:

The pathway should be clearer with VET being communicated as part of the process to commencing in higher education. At the moment they are two separate entities and that is how they are perceived. They need to be communicated as one pathway with two separate exit points depending on your goal and what you hope to achieve. The pathway should be a shorter pathway into higher education.

In addition to having clear and structured pathways in place it was also deemed as important to invest in specific programs to identify and support potential pathway students at the VET level. Indeed, one participant claimed:
So if we’re going to get any of these students, whether they’re Indigenous or not, through their VET course and then hopefully into a higher ed course or directly into a higher ed course … there’s got to be more of a coordinated approach.

However, some participants indicated that positive reforms to institutional policy and practice aimed at enhancing VET to HE pathways for Indigenous students are highly dependent on the framing and currency of state/territory and national education policies and systems. There was widespread agreement that state/territory and national education policy contexts were often incompatible with, and subsequently hampered, the development and implementation of innovative reforms at the university level.

So I mean it’s obviously a much bigger issue than any of us can address in our positions – but some of the barriers for the students in general going between VET and higher ed, let alone Indigenous students, is really the system. They’re systemic issues that relate to the whole VET system in general … both the higher ed and VET system.

Some participants considered that policy-makers were too distant from practice on the ground and that this stifled the development of useful policy frameworks and strategies. This was often mentioned in relation to supporting Indigenous students from regional and remote locations. As one participant claimed:

I see the transition from VET to HE for the great many of the students we have as totally unattainable given the current policies of both the NT and Federal governments. Too many bureaucrats have no idea what is actually happening on the ground in many of the remote communities we visit.

One issue that was repeatedly mentioned was the need to bolster Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) support for Indigenous learners. This has been echoed in recent advocacy efforts in the NT, such as the recent release of an Action Statement on Indigenous Adult English LLN; and the report on Aboriginal Adult English LLN in the Northern Territory: A statistical overview (Shalley & Stewart 2017). The following excerpt is indicative of such concern:

I just feel like there needs to be more programs aiming at trying to improve literacy and numeracy for Indigenous students … we see it quite a lot … students are enrolled at a Cert III or a Cert IV level and they’re nowhere near that level. They’re getting pushed through and then they’re getting encouraged to then apply for higher ed. And so you know yourself, if they’ve completed a Cert IV then that’s, you know, an entry into higher ed … so then once they get into that higher ed, they just need a lot of support. A lot of them withdraw because it’s so overwhelming and it’s just basically out of their league.

However, tensions were evident in the way these concerns were raised. Whilst many participants were firm supporters of ‘high expectations thinking’ in relation to Indigenous education, they also spoke of a different reality – where many current Indigenous students were not fully equipped or supported to participate in higher-level VET courses or HE. This often led to conversations about the need for LLN assessment to support pathways and transitions into and between VET and HE. For example, one participant commented:

People should be assessed before they’re allowed to enrol on a course. It kind of sets them up for failure and they feel a failure if they can’t understand.

Whereas another participant spoke about using the enrolment process as a proxy LLN measure in the absence of having a formal LLN assessment process:
Trainers find that the student enrolment form is a good test of what level you’re at, and obviously what literacy you’re at. Rather than doing a full-blown assessment, it’s a very simple indicator of where you’re at.

Yet, others claimed that the enrolment process in and of itself was a deterrent for pursuing VET to HE pathways, and that more streamlined enrolment systems and practices were needed to better support such processes. When talking about the online enrolment system at one dual-sector institution the participant claimed:

Difficulty in online enrolment and finding course information discourages potential students at VET and HE levels in this university. The system is confusing, clunky, in some cases downright wrong (for example VET Fee Help rules), and it is impossible for prospective students to get clear guidance from staff who are equally confused or ignorant (I include myself in this category). I have colleagues and highly qualified friends who have enrolled in other institutions because they could not successfully navigate their way through [our] online enrolment system.

Establishing a case management approach to both enrolment and ongoing support for every Indigenous student enrolled in Certificate III and above, was one strategy offered:

[We need to] develop a Case Management approach for students enrolling in a VET course who identify as Indigenous. Include the Indigenous Liaison Officer and a career practitioner from an area such as Swinbume Start in the Case Management team. I am aware that we do have students who identify as Indigenous on enrolment but this information does not necessarily appear to be readily available and/or used to build support services around Indigenous students.

In discussing what case management approaches might, or currently, look like one participant suggested:

If you’re going to take people through to the higher ed, to transition to the higher ed they’re going to need some mentors like tutors, mentors, really tie them with them. The right ones to go with them.

The concept of “right ones” or the “right person” was raised intermittently. This generally related to employing Indigenous staff to provide mentorship and academic support, although it was also acknowledged that if non-Indigenous staff were perceived to be culturally competent, they could also fill such roles. As one participant mentioned:

If you were going to do more community stuff and get more of the Indigenous guys in there [VET and HE] you need the right people for the job. Like you need to be careful about who you hire and it’s not someone that’s looking for somewhere to retire or an easy job, but someone with some very clear goals and some very clear understanding about what needs to happen.

Similar discussion arose in relation to teaching staff. One participant asserted:

For teaching students in HE we need competent staff who know how to respectfully support Indigenous students. Intention is not enough, Talk to the failing students or any preservice teachers? Indigenous students need more learning support to assist them with academic work, to build skills and empower them.
There was a general consensus that whole-of-university approaches focused on enhancing the cultural competence of staff, would be beneficial for improving Indigenous pathways and transitions, and Indigenous student education experiences more broadly.
5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research has identified several issues in promoting VET to HE transitions for Indigenous learners, including:

- When deciding between VET or HE, such factors as costs, employment opportunities and support remain the same regardless of whether a student is going into VET or HE. Yet, the reputation of the HE institution is significantly more important when choosing to go to a university.
- VET to HE pathways are often poorly promoted despite articulation pathways being in place. Investment in sustainable program supports to raise awareness of such pathways is critical. This is particularly relevant to Indigenous students, where enrolments in VETiS and VET are higher than those noted in HE. This is considered an unmet need.
- Schools, families and local communities are often consulted and considered to be influential in supporting educational pathway decisions between VET and HE (and vice versa) among Indigenous learners. Yet, concerns were raised about accurate knowledge and (the lack of adequate) education about pathway options. Indigenous family and community engagement strategies, and associated marketing strategies and support programs, that aim to promote a collective understanding of VET to HE transition options among Indigenous learners and their families have high potential to increase and enhance transition experiences. Investment in community engagement staff, in addition to trainers and lecturers, is required to do this effectively.
- Teaching staff who held respect for Indigenous students’ culture and made their expectations of students clear were highly regarded by students.
- Students held a perception that it was slightly more difficult to be admitted into a HE course was than a VET course.
- The importance of an institution to provide support services in order to build students’ confidence, knowledge and skills was emphasised.
- It was indicated that further investments need to be built on the real-life experiences of Indigenous students and staff.
- Further qualitative research examining the lived-experiences of students that have successfully transitioned from VET to HE will assist in identifying which strategies are most important and why.

In summary, there is significant potential to increase VET to HE transitions among Indigenous students, if supportive tertiary education environments are present. Key factors include:

- targeted outreach and engagement work
- support of a clear vision where pathway options are concerned
- enhanced and well-aligned policies and practice.

The issue of the VET to HE pathways and transitions can no longer be ignored as a viable pathway option for Indigenous students.
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7. Appendices

Appendix A – Staff Survey Questions
Do you work in a position that supports Indigenous students to complete a VET or higher education qualifications? Do you teach Indigenous students in VET, Higher Education or both? If so, we are keen to hear your views. This research has been approved by the CDU Human Research Ethics Committee. The survey should take about 15 minutes to complete.

What is the project about?
The project is about identifying strategies for improving Vocational Education and Training (VET) to Higher Education (HE) transitions for Indigenous learners.

What is the project doing?
This project recognises that very few Indigenous people currently transition from VET into HE. We would like to see this change. We are seeking the views of Indigenous students who have either made this transition or who want to make this transition. We are also seeking the views of support staff, teaching staff, academics and decision-makers who work with Indigenous learners. We think that the combination of these views will help VET and HE organisations to better support Indigenous students to make this transition more smoothly and successfully.

The research team is James Smith, Wendy Ludwig, Christine Robertson, and Jack Frawley (Charles Darwin University); and, Andrew Gunstone and Katya Pechenkina (Swinburne University).

What will happen during the project?
We will gather information through this online survey, and if you are further interested through focus group discussions and/or interviews. You can indicate your interest at the end of this survey.

The research seeks views and perspectives about university supports and structures, the influence of friends and family, accommodation options, language and literacy support, scholarships, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), current pathways and programs, career pathways, and Indigenous academic support. Participation in this survey is online and your anonymity is assured.

Thank you for participating in our survey. It is very important to us.

The project is funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education based at Curtin University.

1. At which university do you work?
   - Saturday Darwin University
   - Swinburne University
   - Other (please specify)
2. Which best describes your involvement and experiences with Indigenous adult students at this institution?
   
   - I work in Academic Support.
   - I teach in VET.
   - I teach in Higher Education.
   - I teach in both VET and Higher Education.
   - Other (please specify) ____________________________

3. What could be done at the policy level within your institution to improve Indigenous VET to HE transition?

4. What could be done at the program level within your institution to improve Indigenous VET to HE transition?

5. What do you consider are the key enablers for successful transitions?

6. What do you consider are the main constraints for successful transitions?

7. Are there any activities you undertake that are unfunded but you believe are important to improve Indigenous VET to HE transition?
8. What strategies do you believe need to be implemented to support successful partnerships and engagement with communities?


9. What strategies do you believe need to be implemented to support successful partnerships and engagement with schools?


10. What strategies do you believe need to be implemented to support successful partnerships and engagement with Indigenous organisations and businesses?


11. What strategies do you believe need to be implemented to support successful partnerships and engagement with government, non-government organisations and the private sector?


Staff - VET to HE Transitions

Option to participate in focus group discussions and/or interviews.

What will happen?
For focus group discussions and/or interviews it is important that we properly record the discussions and the information that people share. We will write down or record what is said and done during focus group discussions/interviews. What you say will be heard by, and shared with, others. This means that you may be identifiable and unable to withdraw data you have shared. During the research, project staff may also take photos, and voice and video recordings. If you don’t want your photo taken, please let project staff know. The focus group discussions/interview will take about 1 hour.

The information that people share will be used in research papers, reports and in the development of case studies that will assist tertiary institutions to better support Indigenous students making a transition from VET to HE. You can choose whether you want us to use your name and whether you want us to keep the information you give us. We will acknowledge that Indigenous knowledge has been shared with us when we write papers and the strategy.

Benefits and Risks
If you choose to participate, the information you share is likely to be used by researchers,
government workers and service providers. This will help them understand what strategies will work best to better support Indigenous learners to transition from VET to HE, and vice versa. It is hoped this will improve policies and programs implemented by VET and HE organisations. There are no specific risks for you to be a part of this project. If you choose not to participate, it’s OK.

Who can I contact if I want to participate in a focus group discussion/interview, have a question or want more information?

If you are interested in participating in a focus group discussion or interview, or if you have questions about this research please contact either Associate Professor James Smith, at CDU on (08) 8946 6328 or via email at james.smith3@cdu.edu.au; or Professor Andrew Gunstone at Swinburne University on (03) 9214 5101 or via email at agunstone@swin.edu.au.

For any other concerns about the project, you can contact the Executive Officer of the CDU Human Research Ethics Office on (08) 8946 6823 or via email at ethics@cdu.edu.au.
Appendix B – Student Survey Questions
VET to HE Transitions

Welcome to the survey on VET to Higher Education Transitions

Are you an Indigenous student who is currently completing or has recently completed a VET qualification? Are you an Indigenous student who is interested in completing further study or who has recently made a transition from VET to higher education studies? If so, we are keen to get your views. The survey seeks the views of Indigenous students who have either made this transition or who want to make this transition.

What is the project about?
The project is about identifying strategies for improving Vocational Education and Training (VET) to Higher Education (HE) transitions for Indigenous learners.

What is the project doing?
This project recognises that very few Indigenous people currently transition from VET into HE. We would like to see this change. We are seeking the views of Indigenous students who have either made this transition or who want to make this transition. We are also seeking the views of support staff, teaching staff, academics and decision-makers who work with Indigenous learners. We think that the combination of these views will help VET and HE organisations to better support Indigenous students to make this transition more smoothly and successfully.

The research team is James Smith, Wendy Ludwig, Christine Robertson, and Jack Frawley (Charles Darwin University); and, Andrew Gunstone and Katya Pechenkina (Swinburne University).

What will happen during the project?
We will gather information through this online survey, and if you are further interested through focus group discussions and/or interviews. You can indicate your interest at the end of this survey.

The research seeks views and perspectives about university supports and structures, the influence of friends and family, accommodation options, language and literacy support, scholarships, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), current pathways and programs, career pathways, and Indigenous academic support. Participation in this survey is online and your anonymity is assured.

Thank you for participating in our survey. It is very important to us.

The project is funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education based at Curtin University.

1. What is your gender?
   - [ ] Female
   - [ ] Male
   - [ ] Other
2. What is your age group?
- 16 to 20
- 21 to 25
- 25 to 30
- 30+

3. If you had to relocate for your studies, where did you previously live?
- Remote community
- Rural area
- Regional town
- City suburb
- Interstate
- Not applicable
- Other (please specify)

- Currently enrolled in VET studies at Swinburne.
- Currently enrolled in VET studies at CDU.
- Completed VET studies at Swinburne and plan to enrol in a Higher Education course at Swinburne.
- Completed VET studies at CDU and plan to enrol in a Higher Education course at CDU.
- Completed VET studies at Swinburne and now enrolled in a Higher Education course at Swinburne.
- Completed VET studies at CDU and now enrolled in a Higher Education course at CDU.

Other (please specify)
5. When you decided to follow a VET pathway, how important were each of the following factors for you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Unimportant</th>
<th>Not very important</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distance from your place of living</td>
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<td>Costs (including study costs and living expenses)</td>
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<td>Reputation of the institution</td>
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<td>Personal interest in the course</td>
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<td>Future employment opportunities</td>
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<td>Length of study</td>
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<td>Opportunity for RPL or Credit Transfer</td>
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<td>Support from family and friends</td>
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<td>Type of teaching (practical or academic)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

6. When you decided, or if you are deciding to follow a higher education pathway, how important are the following factors for you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Unimportant</th>
<th>Very unimportant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distance from your place of living</td>
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<td>Support from family and friends</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
7. Of the following people, who was the most important in providing advice on choosing an educational pathway? Rank you answer in order of preference.

- Parents or someone in your family.
- A teacher.
- A career counsellor.
- An employed friend.
- An unemployed friend.
- None of the above.

8. To what extent do you agree or disagree that you received enough advice concerning your learning and career pathways?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Advice</th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From family</td>
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<td>From your school</td>
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<tr>
<td>From friends who have undertaken VET and/or higher education studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>From career counsellors</td>
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<tr>
<td>From the VET and/or Higher Education institution</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
9. Which of the following sources of information, if any, have you used to choose your educational path?
Choose as many as you like.

- Internet and online services.
- Newspapers.
- Television.
- Radio.
- School fairs.
- Institution open days.
- Teachers.
- Career counsellors.
- Family.
- Friends.
- Experience from a placement or part-time job.
- Personal choice.

10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching staff respected my cultural background</td>
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<td>Teachers made it clear right from the start what they expected from me</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching staff had excellent knowledge of the subject content</td>
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<tr>
<td>The way I was assessed was a fair test of my knowledge and skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>I received useful comments on my assessments</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
11. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VET offers better career opportunities than Higher Education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher Education offers better career opportunities than VET.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students who complete VET are more likely to find a job after their studies than people who complete Higher Education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students who complete Higher Education are more likely to find a job after their studies than people who complete VET.</td>
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<tr>
<td>VET graduates earn higher wages than Higher Education graduates.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher Education graduates earn higher wages than VET graduates.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

12. Compared with VET, do you think that it is easier or more difficult to be accepted for a Higher Education course?

- Much easier.
- Easier.
- Neither.
- Difficult.
- Very difficult.
13. To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Through VET I have identified ways to build on my current knowledge and skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>VET has helped me set high standards for work and life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>VET has motivated me to pursue studies in Higher Education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>VET has helped me to get on with other people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I look for my own resources to help me learn.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is important for teaching staff to respect my background and needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I have pushed myself to understand things I found difficult to understand.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive learning experiences are important.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am confident in my studies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is important for institutions to have a range of services to support learners.</td>
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14. Have you faced any challenges on your learning journey, and if so what have they been?  


15. What would your advice be to VET providers/Universities to facilitate a successful transition from VET to Higher Education for Indigenous students?  


16. What would your advice be to indigenous VET students who are considering to enrol in Higher Education courses?
VET to HE Transitions

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