

Transitioning between the vocational and university education sectors in Australia: the impact of vocational education teachers upon students' self-belief and experiences

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Abstract

Research was undertaken to understand the experiences of students entering university through vocational education pathways, with the aim of improving transition support for these students. A theme which emerged was the pivotal role played by the students' vocational education teachers in facilitating their students' self-belief that they had the capacity to succeed in their studies. This, together with increased academic skills and knowledge, provide students with the confidence and capabilities to continue on to university. The theoretical framework of institutional habitus and Gale and Parker's conceptualisation of transition are utilised to analyse findings about the impact of the vocational educational learning environment upon students' transition to university, and how the students experience and manage the transition between the different education sectors.

Keywords: transitions; student experience; university; vocational education; learning environments

Introduction

Pathways between the vocational education and training (VET) and university sectors are now an established component of the post compulsory education environment in Australia, providing access to those who otherwise would be excluded from university education. This situation reflects the Australian Government's ten year education reform agenda following on from the 2008 *Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education*, which advocated widening access to higher education and increasing the participation of key groups that are historically underrepresented; that is, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (SES), students with a disability, Indigenous students, students from remote and regional areas, and students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

VET qualifications at the diploma and above levels provide access to most University of Technology Sydney (UTS) courses, with around 10 per cent of the student population admitted on this basis. The vast majority of these students have undertaken their VET studies through a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college, hence the use of the term TAFE throughout this study when referring to VET pathway students. The remainder are graduates of other private vocational education providers. The university has implemented policies and processes to improve the quality and increase the number of pathways between VET and UTS courses, with a particular focus on increasing the participation of students from low SES backgrounds and Indigenous students. Working with the Sydney Institute and other TAFE Institutes, the university implemented a range of projects from 2012 to 2015 to widen access and strengthen student support, including: outreach in targeted areas to build VET students' awareness of and aspirations for university education; developing new online information resources; expanding the number of formal articulation pathways between VET courses and UTS undergraduate degrees, and developing credit recognition arrangements that accurately acknowledge and give credit for students' prior learning.

The research reported here was part of a wider project investigating students' experiences of transitioning to university through a VET pathway, and ways in which pathways and support processes could be strengthened to improve student outcomes. There is a need to extend our understanding in this area because '[r]elatively little is known about VET students' transition to, and experiences of, university' (Aird, Miller, van Meen and Buys 2010, p.22) and the student perspective on transition is largely missing from the literature (Griffen 2014). What research there is indicates barriers to successful transition, including: differences in the aims, learning and assessment approaches between the VET and higher education sectors; academic literacy issues; cultural differences; time management issues in combining study, work and family commitments; staff-student interactions and relationships, and credit

recognition issues (Ambrose, Bonne, Chanock, Cunnington, Jardine and Muller 2013; Beddie 2014; Cameron 2004; Griffen 2014; Jackson, Dwyer, Paez, Byrnes and Blacker 2010; PhillipsKPA 2006 and Watson 2008).

The UTS research found that students entering through TAFE pathways were experiencing many of the challenges previously identified in the literature. However, another key element which emerged in the survey stage of the research project was the benefits of studying at TAFE when it comes to readiness and confidence to continue to university. As reported previously (Barber, Netherton, Bettles and Moors-Mailei 2015), the survey findings indicated that overall VET students believe they are adjusting positively to life at university, with nearly 90 per cent of sampled students agreeing they are ‘adjusting well to being a university student’ and reporting positive findings on measures of social adjustment; for example 77.5 per cent of sampled students agreed they ‘feel confident they fit in at university’ and 79.8 per cent that they ‘have made friends at UTS’. Responses to the academic measurements were lower although still strong, with the majority of participants reporting good academic adjustment to university.

The literature on transitioning VET students does to an extent identify these positive aspects of a TAFE pathway to university study. For example, Cameron (2004) notes that participants would never have made the journey to university without having first attempted and succeeded at TAFE. Aird et al (2010) acknowledge the importance of TAFE as ‘second chance’ education, enabling students to enter the workforce for the first time, re-enter or retrain, or provide access to higher education. O’Shea, Lysaght and Tanner comment that attending TAFE prior to coming to university was ‘universally regarded as beneficial’ (2012, p.268). Catterall, Davis and Yang’s research into the transition of TAFE students to university observes that ‘many students saw the new learning context as a positive factor and responded to challenges with enthusiasm and resilience’ (2014, p.242).

The focus group stage of the research provided the opportunity to explore these themes in greater depth. In doing so a key factor in students' descriptions was the influence of the TAFE learning environment and their TAFE teachers upon their aspirations, confidence and self belief. The conceptual framework of institutional habitus is used to analyse the impact of the TAFE learning environment on students' transition to university, as this framework provides a useful language for identifying and interpreting elements of the students' lived experiences and the interplay of agency and structures in the transition process. Institutional habitus is an adaptation of Bourdieu's theory of habitus, which he describes as systems of durable, transposable dispositions, produced through the structures of a particular type of environment (1977), that function on the 'practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles, as well as being the organising principles of action' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 13). These *dispositions* – tendencies, propensities, inclinations - act as the lenses through which we interpret and act in the world (Bourdieu 1977).

Through an *institutional habitus*, a particular cultural group or social class impacts upon and shapes an individual's thinking, feeling and behaviour through an intermediate organisation such as a school or workplace – or in this instance a TAFE college or university. Reay (1998), for instance, employs the concept of institutional habitus to conceptualise the ways in which the organisational cultures of schools and colleges are embedded in broader socio-economic cultures, through processes in which schools and their catchments mutually shape and re-shape each other. Reay, David and Ball (2001) suggest that while there is a degree of overlap and blurring of boundaries between peer group, family and institution, there are specific effects from attending a particular educational institution, with the 'school effect' interacting with class, gender and race to impact upon secondary school students' lives and further education decisions.

The analysis also draws upon Gale and Parker's (2011, 2012) concept of transition to analyse the student experience, and in particular their conceptualisation of *Transition as Becoming*. Gale and Parker stress the mutuality of agency and structure in transition – it is '*the capacity to navigate change*' which includes 'the resources to engage with change, without having full control over and/or knowledge about what the change involves' (2011, p.25). The conceptualisation that navigation 'evokes agency in relation to structure' (Gale and Parker 2011, p.25) can be likened to Bourdieu's understanding that the agent is predisposed, but not predetermined, to certain actions or understandings through the habitus (1977). *Transition as Becoming* includes transition occurring in response to turning points and significant events as well as through setbacks and periods of routine and stability. It may involve anxiety and risk, potentially leading to profound change and providing impetus for new learning.

Research methodology

The research consisted of two phases: an online survey, and follow-up focus groups. The survey was distributed to all students entering UTS on the basis of a VET qualification, and was designed to investigate their transition experience. This included the influence of participants' VET backgrounds on their university experience, how well participants felt they had adjusted to being a student at UTS and their suggestions for improving support for transitioning students based on their own experiences.

Of the 1,351 students who received the survey link, 124 (9.2%) returned a completed survey. 97 (80.8%) of these had completed their VET studies at a TAFE Institute, and 23 (19.2%) at a private training college prior to transitioning to university. The sample included students who had previously completed Diploma (56.9%, n=70) and Advanced Diploma qualifications (17.9%, n=22), as well as a range of Certificate qualifications including the Tertiary Preparation Certificate (25.2%, n=31).

All survey participants were invited to participate in focus groups to discuss further their transition experiences. The aim of the focus groups was to explore in more depth the lived experience of transitioning from TAFE to university, and provide a deeper understanding of themes emerging from the survey regarding how particular aspects of the TAFE pathway influenced transition.

A total of 26 survey respondents chose to participate in the focus groups, comprised of 17 females and 9 males, aged between 20 and 51 years. Participants were studying in the disciplines: Business (5), Nursing (8), Midwifery (1), Education (3), Communications (3), Information Technology (1), Engineering (2), Architecture (2), Science (2). Four focus groups were held over a six week period, with groups varying in size according to students' availability. One student unable to attend a focus group session participated in a one-to-one interview. Details of focus group participants are provided in Appendix A.

The focus groups were semi-structured around a list of questions (Appendix B) designed to explore themes from the survey. The questions served as a guide and were flexibly utilised according to the participants' interests and flow of discussion. Focus group sessions were approximately 90 minutes in length. The discussions were taped and recordings were transcribed. Thematic coding of the transcriptions was then undertaken.

Analysis and Discussion

The following key themes emerged from the focus group discussions regarding the TAFE learning environment and teacher impact:

- Success at TAFE studies is a powerful confidence booster and affirmation of students' capabilities.
- TAFE teachers and the TAFE learning environment play a pivotal role in instilling self-belief in students that they can succeed at university.

- TAFE studies lead to improved academic skills, not just increased content knowledge, and this contributes to students' successful transition to, and ongoing experience of, university.
- TAFE students demonstrate an awareness of the different learning environments, and that they consciously adapt to these different environments.
- The experience of student transition is shaped by the institutional habitus of the TAFE college and the university, and the mutuality of agency and structure can be identified in the ways in which students experience and manage the transition.

The power of succeeding at TAFE

Focus group participants were asked to think back to before starting at university, and how they felt about becoming a university student. A consistent response across the focus groups was a mixture of feelings, involving excitement, fear, uncertainty and doubt about their capabilities when they were accepted. For example Student 2 (focus group 1) responded:

Scared for me...I didn't finish high school, didn't finish year 10, so uni for me was a big thing! So scared for me, apprehensive.

Student 9 (focus group 2) replied:

....every day I'd go past [UTS] and I wanted to go there! I wanted to come so bad....I was so scared – oh my God I'm going to fail!

Nevertheless, despite the fear, these students continued on to university. A combination of factors appeared to motivate them to do so. Firstly, succeeding at TAFE studies was experienced as a huge achievement - 'the fact that you've graduated from TAFE – I've done that' (Student 19, focus group 4). Student 8 (focus group) explained that:

I was so nervous [starting TAFE]. I'd suffered a lot of depression before that so I really didn't know if I could function or not. Going to TAFE was a challenge...I did really

well in the course, I came first in the campus and second in the state...I worked really hard. It was a lot of effort.

From this success, they develop the beginnings of ambition that they might be able to succeed at university.

The TAFE teacher impact

A core factor in students' success at TAFE, and in their decision to then continue to university, appeared to be the support and encouragement they received from a TAFE teacher. For example Student 9 (focus group 1) explained that:

I had to work hard, after one year I was so good, it prepares you, the teachers are so flexible, they are so kind to you...you know, I was just so happy in TAFE, I was learning heaps, without going to TAFE I don't think I would have done anything at uni....The teacher will help you, in a good way, not make you feel bad about it'.

Student 9's description highlights elements of the teacher's behaviour that were regularly referred to – kindness, acceptance, and responsiveness to the student's needs. The student's experience of TAFE overall is a positive one – she refers to being 'just so happy at TAFE'.

There was general agreement from the group that the nature of the teacher support was helpful 'in a good way' and enthusiastic agreement that 'yes they're lovely'. This was common across the second focus group participants, which included students who had all studied different courses in different TAFE colleges.

Reflecting upon her ambition to continue on to university, Student 2 (focus group 1) explained that:

I thought 'how am I going to be able to handle that' and it didn't help when family were like 'no you won't be able to'...I thought uni was going to be hell....but I had a TAFE teacher who said 'no no no you have to go to UTS, you'll be really good.'

In this situation, the student's primary support came from her teacher at a time when she was receiving negative feedback from family members about her ability to succeed at university. This suggests the potential of the TAFE habitus to disrupt broader social reproductive forces conveyed through the family habitus.

Student 8 asserted that:

I'll be forever grateful for the teachers' belief in me when I didn't believe in myself....

They just keep you going one bit at a time.

This is an extremely powerful statement of the ongoing impact of the TAFE teachers' belief in their students, one for which this student carries a lifetime's gratitude. Student 8's expression is consistent with Thomas's observation that if 'students feel that staff believe in them, and care about the outcomes of their studying, they seem to gain both self-confidence and motivation, and their work improves' (2002, p.432). They carry their teachers' belief in them into the university field.

Later in the discussion Student 8 reiterates that 'I'm so grateful to be here, I'm loving it so much!.... I was very very lucky to get in...I feel blessed.' She explained that she was attending the focus group 'because I feel so strongly about the course,' referring to the Tertiary Preparation Certificate course that she had studied at TAFE, which enabled her to attend university and achieve her lifelong dream to become a midwife.

The positive impact and experiences of the TAFE learning environment

Participants' descriptions of their TAFE experiences suggest that supportive TAFE teacher-student relationships are embedded in a wider environment through which participants come to feel secure, valued and encouraged. Student 26 (interview) put it quite simply that 'things at TAFE make you feel comfortable.' The following comments by Students 18, 26 and 24 (focus group four) indicate particular elements of the institution's habitus that combine to produce this experience:

Student 18: Teachers at TAFE have a better understanding of your progress whereas you are just a number at university, so it's up to you.

Student 26: Because of the smaller numbers the TAFE teachers were more approachable, if you were struggling at TAFE you didn't feel like a small fish in a big pond, like sometimes in lectures [at university] I won't understand something, I'm still a bit shy, like in practicals and tutorials I don't really have the courage to say I'm struggling with this, it's like they expect you to already know and understand what's being talked about.

Student 24: TAFE was such an enclosed environment it's so tiny, compared to university where there are hundreds of other students in a lecture.

The supportive teacher-students relationships are thus mediated through whilst reinforcing a TAFE habitus of acceptance and security, where the individual student is known and acknowledged. Similar comments are voiced by Student 4 and Student 5 (focus group 1):

Student 4: Having such a good quality teacher pore over your essay for an hour and a half, just giving that level of attention... Yeah like now at uni you're lucky if you get five minutes in a tutorial you know, you might not even get your lecturer... but we would have this class time, it was so rich with, I don't know how to explain it, it was amazing... I'd kill to go back there now (general laughter).

Student 5: Yeah, teaching at TAFE was really personalised... but yeah like here it's hard to get with your tutors and stuff because they have a class of thirty and with your lecturer like 200, but you've got HELPS and stuff.

The contrasts between the TAFE and university environments were explicitly described in a conversation between focus group 3 participants. Student 13 noted that TAFE was a 'balanced' and very supportive environment, and explained that at TAFE he had learned 'how to organise my time, and manage my work load':

Student 13: TAFE was a lot more positive. A lot more positive than university, because at uni they critique you, at TAFE they don't really critique you, so it's a positive, it builds up our skills which you can then bring forth into university.

Student 11: Is that a problem though? If everyone gets told they're good...does that mean that people who aren't good still think they are? (laughter)

Student 13: I think we need that in life, I think people need to hear [...]

Student 11: Like the compliments?

Student 13: Yeah.

The comments above reflect the findings of O'Shea et al that TAFE was experienced by students as a 'safe space' and more personalised, with smaller tutorial style teaching, and a supportive learning environment where you are 'never alone' (2012, p.269). In discussing the ways in which the values and practices of higher education institutional habitus impact upon student retention, Thomas (2002) observes that relationships between students and teaching staff are of fundamental importance, in particular staff attitudes and relationships with students which 'minimise the social and academic distance between them, and enable students to feel valued and significantly confident to seek guidance when they require it' (p.439). Thomas (2002) suggests that if a student feels that they do *not* fit in, that 'their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early' (1992, p.43). The students' descriptions of the TAFE environment demonstrate a very different scenario, one in which there is a good fit with the habitus.

An interesting distinction made between TAFE and university teaching staff by Student 14 (focus group 3) was that:

The TAFE teachers and tutors were very invested in the students passing, in a way that's very contrary to my experience at university, at university very much it seems

that there's a standard and that no one wants, no one needs 50 per cent of the class to pass, it doesn't seem to matter, it's very much a standard you have to reach...

TAFE teachers and tutors are perceived as having a personal investment in their students and their individual progress and achievements – that it actually matters and makes a difference to them if the student passes or fails. University teachers on the other hand are perceived as not caring or having a sense of personal responsibility for how well their students do because students' performance is measured against external, objective standards. This is a curious perception about assessment in the two different education systems that would be interesting to explore further.

It is important to note that overall focus group participants spoke positively about their university teaching staff, describing them as friendly, helpful and approachable. The big distinction between TAFE and university appears to be the capacity for relationships that are 'really personalised', a situation made possible by the smaller classes and learning environment of the TAFE college.

Improved academic skills through TAFE studies

A further primary motivating factor in TAFE students' successful transition into the university environment was the academic preparation that enabled participants to progress to university. The groups were generally in agreement that there were aspects of a TAFE background that prepared you better for university than coming from school. This is clearly expressed by Student 1 (focus group 1) that:

I think if I'd come straight from school I would have been terribly underprepared. I was just a mediocre school student and then as soon as I got into something at TAFE, for me was a trial run at HR [...] then I did my Certificate IV and I was like 'yep I'm really enjoying this'. I needed that break in between [...] I got the confidence from TAFE that

I needed whereas if I'd gone straight from high school I would have just crashed and burned.

Student 26 (interview) explained that 'If I hadn't done TAFE before I couldn't have stuck with it [...] TAFE eased me into it.' The academic benefits of TAFE are also evident in Student 8's (focus group 2) explanation:

It's a complete package the TPC¹. It isn't just maths and English. They teach you about dealing with stress, managing your time, working out ways you learn, teamwork, conflict resolution, just a huge array of stuff [...] if I'd come to uni without that I wouldn't have been able to do it, I would have been lost without TAFE beforehand [...] I feel so strongly (about TAFE). When I first started uni as we went through things I thought 'oh they taught me that at TAFE....I can do that, I know about that', it gave me confidence I can do it.

Student 4 and Student 5 similarly described that they would have been '*woefully underprepared*' if they had gone straight from school:

Student 4: My ability to understand what my teachers expect of me with regards to assignments and exams [...]I had a clearer understanding of what criteria needed to be met.

Student 5: TAFE really taught us how to write academic essays and things. We had a fabulous teacher who helped us craft our essays and showed us how she would go about it and I think without that I wouldn't have been able to complete the essay.

The focus group 4 participants agreed that TAFE better prepared them for university in some respects, with the following representative example:

Student 24: I felt better prepared in a way (coming from TAFE than from school). I saw TAFE as a stepping stone, it was still tertiary study...it wasn't like school to university,

¹ The Tertiary Preparation Certificate (TPC) is a one year Certificate IV level course offered by TAFE New South Wales which prepares students for university study.

it was like take little steps to get to university, so yeah, you feel better prepared for the environment you're walking into.

Student 24 provides a graphic image of his pathway to university, with his metaphors of the 'stepping stone' and 'little steps' that TAFE provided. The descriptions give the impression that university was less daunting than it would otherwise have been.

It is important to note that not all focus group participants felt well prepared through their TAFE studies for university. Some felt that they had not developed crucial skills such as essay writing and referencing. Unsurprisingly, the gaps in preparation appeared particularly large for students whose TAFE and university studies were in different disciplines, for instance one student who studied Design at TAFE and Education at university commented on the level of difficulty in language and thinking which she had great difficulty coping with and that 'the first semester was a big shock really'.

Adapting to the university habitus

An interesting element which emerged from the focus group discussions was participants' articulation of their adaptation to university learning. As can be seen from the earlier statements, participants described differences in the TAFE and university learning environments, such as access to teaching staff and their engagement with and knowledge of their students, and the safe and secure environment of the TAFE classroom. In addition to this though participants articulated the ways in which *they* needed to change to adapt to the new environment, with their comments suggesting their agency within the structure of the institutional habitus, and further their awareness of their agency. A simple summation was provided by Student 3 (focus group 1) when she commented that 'at TAFE the help comes to you, at uni you have to be proactive'.

It is noteworthy that while TAFE teaching was experienced as very supportive and directed, it simultaneously encouraged students to develop responsibility for their learning. Students

articulated the onus was upon them to be proactive in both seeking assistance and putting in the work required. Student 7 (focus group 2) for instance noted that:

The thing I learned from TAFE is the fact that you have to put the effort in, to get the results. I apply that now to uni and it pays off eventually.

This is further demonstrated by Student 14 (focus group 3):

I didn't have to think too much or plan too much at TAFE, things went along sequentially, one thing followed another thing (at university), the onus is put on to me to reach in, to find the resources, do what I have to do to reach that standard...no one really wanted to molly coddle or help or assist...every time I asked for help I got it, it's not that...but definitely there's a very different sense, and initially it was very daunting, it was a challenge to work out the library, the IT system.

It is suggested that his statement that 'the onus is put on to me to reach in, to find the resources' indicates his awareness of and acceptance of responsibility for his performance, and even if it is challenging it is up to him to work it out. His explanation that 'every time I asked for help I got it, it's not that' reflects other students' experiences that the help is there, but it is up to the student to access it.

The same understanding of needing to take ownership for learning is conveyed by Student 13 in his explanation that:

Teachers work with you at TAFE, but here it's like your own work, they challenge you, what's wrong with it, blah blah blah, and from there you keep on working, working, working, yeah, and you add your skills and you adapt from the critique and then you put that critique together, and that's how you move forward.

Student 13 and Student 14's explanations illustrate Gale and Parker's conception of transition as the 'capacity to navigate change' through the mutuality of agency and structure (2011, p.25). Both students articulate their agency to act within the structures of their new

institutional habitus, and that this is an ongoing process, ‘you keep working, working, working, yeah.’

The process of adapting to the university habitus is embraced by the students, but it is not an easy journey. As Student 14 notes above ‘initially it was very daunting, it was a challenge’.

The degree of difficulty involved in this transition process is graphically described by Student 13 in his description of receiving feedback on his work:

I had one tutor, he totally ripped me apart at the start, but he supported my ideas, and worked on it, and from there he deconstructed me, basically really into how I should be thinking in class, he sort of realigned it, which was the best thing he’s done for me, because if I’d kept thinking in the same mindset I would not be doing really well. So I accepted his critique and the way he taught.

The tutor’s challenge to Student 14 catapults him into new learning. His choice of descriptors - being ‘ripped’ apart, ‘deconstructed’ and ‘realigned’ suggests the process is experienced in an embodied way, and also that there is sometimes a brutality in the transition process.

Student 14 accepts this and the shift it brings in his thinking – it is the ‘best thing’ the tutor could do for him, and sets him on a different trajectory with his work. This is further conveyed in Student 14’s summation that:

I grew accustomed to TAFE, now I’ve grown accustomed to university, so it’s sort of like I grew into the culture, grew into how things are done, sort of adapting to it.

This again suggests the embodied nature of the transition process, with the description of growing and adapting to the new learning environment.

Conclusion and recommendations

There is limited qualitative research into the transitional experiences of VET students into higher education, and an absence of the student’s voice in the literature (O’Shea et al 2012; Griffen 2014). The findings from this research contribute to understanding the experiences of

students moving between the institutional habitus of the TAFE college and the university setting, in particular by drawing directly upon the voices of those who have made the transition. The findings suggest the potential power of a TAFE education in building learner confidence and resilience for further study, and developing their academic capabilities so they can realise their aspirations.

Further, the findings suggest that the impact of the institutional habitus of the TAFE college may also potentially counteract social reproductive structures. This can be seen in the stories told by participants about their teachers supporting their studies at TAFE and inspiring them to continue their studies at university. Participants' descriptions of TAFE as somewhere they feel comfortable and safe indicate that they are experiencing a good 'fit' between themselves and the institution's habitus. The importance of this TAFE effect cannot be underestimated, both in terms of the individual student's education and life experiences, and as a mechanism for challenging the traditional social reproduction of inequality through the organisational cultures of schools and colleges.

The findings also provide useful insights into how TAFE students manage their transition to university and the ways in which their TAFE background is carried with them to the new setting. It appears that while students experience the shock of the transition, they accept this and successfully manage the adaptation to new learning styles. The participants' awareness and acceptance of agency within the structures of the university setting is important because autonomous learning is continually identified as one of the defining features of university education. The finding is notable as it is not generally reflected in the literature. Catterall et al for instance found that while students from TAFE backgrounds 'welcomed the challenge of new social and learning conditions' (2014, p.253), they 'had difficulty identifying differences in learning orientation', and struggled to reposition themselves as critical learners in the university environment (2014, p.252).

These findings lead to a number of recommendations. Firstly it is suggested that it is important to acknowledge and communicate to the wider community the importance and impact of the TAFE learning environment, and TAFE teachers in particular, on inspiring and enabling their students to transition to university study.

Secondly, it would be useful to share with both TAFE teachers and TAFE students, the experiences of those who have followed the VET pathway to university and how they have managed the transition. This could contribute to the preparation that TAFE teachers provide to students, especially in tertiary preparatory courses such as the Certificate IV in Tertiary Preparation. Describing the transition from the students' perspective – what they see as major challenges and differences in the TAFE and university approaches to learning and teaching – is likely to resonate with and provide valuable insights for prospective students. Overtly addressing these could support students in navigating these differences by articulating the significance of their agency in the process.

Thirdly, it is recommended that further research is needed to deepen and consolidate the themes emerging from the focus groups. It would be worthwhile to understand from TAFE teachers' perspectives the nature of their relationships with students – to hear the voices of these teachers, and how they conceive of their role and of the role of TAFE more broadly in providing students with education and employment opportunities. Qualitative research which investigated in more detail the qualities of the TAFE learning environment through which dispositions are conveyed, shaped and created would be particularly useful in developing a fuller understanding of the ways in which TAFE learner identity develops.

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Appendix A

Details of focus group participants

Student number	Gender	Age (years)	Pathway to university	University course
Focus Group 1				
1	F	25	Diploma Human Resource Management	Business
2	F	20	Diploma Librarianship and Information Management	Communications
3	F	25	Diploma Nursing	Nursing
4	F	25	Tertiary Preparation Certificate (TPC)	Communications
5	F	21	TPC	Nursing
6	F	26	Diploma Information Technology	Science
Focus Group 2				
7	F	34	Cert IV Design Studies	Education
8	F	51	TPC	Midwifery
9	F	30	TPC	Nursing
10	F	39	Cert IV Nursing	Nursing
Focus Group 3				
11	F	25	Cert IV Performing Arts	Business
12	M	48	Diploma Nursing	Nursing
13	M	27	Diploma Architecture	Architecture

14	M	47	Cert IV Information Technology	Info Technology
Focus Group 4				
15	F	29	Diploma Business	Communications
16	F	31	Cert IV Nursing	Business Management
17	F	24	Dip Nursing	Nursing
18	F	29	Dip Business	Business
19	F	26	Dip Architecture	Architecture
20	F	34	Cert IV Design Studies	Education
21	M	33	Advanced Diploma Accounting	Business
22	M	24	Cert IV Business Management	Science
23	M	36	Diploma Engineering (Technical)	Engineering
24	M	25	Advanced Diploma Engineering and Technology	Engineering
25	M	32	Diploma Fashion Design	Education
26	M	24	Diploma Nursing	Nursing

Appendix B

Focus group discussion question

The purpose of this discussion is for us to learn more about your experience of entering university on the basis of your VET qualification and how it might have influenced your transition, as well as any ongoing effects it may have had on your study at UTS. We'd like to discuss the benefits and possibly difficulties you've experienced, and your thoughts and advice regarding how UTS can better support students.

1. Please think back to just before you started at UTS. How did you feel about becoming a UTS student?
2. How do you think entering university through a TAFE pathway influenced your early experiences of university? Did you experience any difficulty in making the transition from TAFE to university?
3. How well do you feel you have adjusted to being a student at UTS (academically, socially, balancing life/study/work)?
4. What has been your experience of academic staff at UTS? Do you feel they have been supportive of your learning? How have they been most helpful to you?
5. Do you feel that coming from a TAFE background has influenced your relationships with UTS staff and students?
6. What is your experience of the different areas and spaces at UTS – are there some that you prefer to learn in or feel more comfortable working in?
7. What suggestions do you have to improve the support and resources provided to students who enter UTS through a TAFE pathway?
8. Based on your own experiences of transitioning from TAFE to uni:
 - How would you describe UTS to a current TAFE student *considering* coming here?

- What would be your advice to a newly transitioning TAFE student?