

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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(Re)building Higher Education in an 'Age for Everyone'

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Abstract: The UK Augar review (2019) argued for post-18 education to take the system beyond 50% accessing higher education in an 'age for everyone'. How might this be achieved? What are the implications for technical, professional and vocational higher education? This paper addresses these questions through analysis of empirical research in Australia focused on the nation's tertiary education system undergoing profound change at the intersection of vocational education and training, and higher education. Multiple methods were employed to generate and analyse national quantitative data, qualitative case studies of TAFE institutes (similar to the UK's further education colleges) and the perspectives of employers and education policy actors. Theoretically informed by the work of Bourdieu and Bernstein, the paper highlights how TAFE offerings from certificates to bachelor degrees cater for new types of students and leverage connections with industry; the paper also suggests a redefinition of what makes a vocational degree distinctive.

Paper: New forms of higher vocational education (HVE) are growing rapidly across a range of countries. These have evolved as a response to two key policy concerns: an emphasis on high skills as a means to achieve economic competitiveness and raise productivity; and the promise of open access for adults previously excluded from higher education (Knight *et al.* forthcoming). Reflecting these developments, the UK Augar Review (2019) called for post-18 education in an 'age of everyone'. As higher education provision grows in institutions such as further education (FE) colleges with a 'vocational' heritage and orientation towards offering qualifications for occupations, the paper contributes to understanding the following questions (1) What, if anything, is distinctive about this form of vocational higher education; and (2) Are new forms of equity and distinction between institutions and student opportunities and outcomes, appearing as a result of this expansion in HVE?

In answering these questions, the paper draws on analysis from an Australian project that examined new HVE qualifications offered by Australia's TAFE institutions (the equivalent of UK FE colleges). The project explored how these awards contribute to social equity and to a knowledge-based workforce. It aimed to determine how bachelor degrees in these HVE institutions are represented in institutional practices and how they are received and responded to by prospective and current students, employers, other tertiary institutions and feeder schools.

A multi-method approach was employed to generate and analyse national quantitative data, qualitative case studies of TAFE institutes and the perspectives of employers and education policy actors. Data included interviews and a survey with current students and employers, vocational institution managers and teachers, and publicly available marketing messages and statistical data. These data contributed to deep case studies of HVE institutions in Melbourne and Sydney located within a wider context of TAFE practices across Australia derived from interviews with leaders and analysis of the marketing strategies of universities in the 'line of sight' of TAFE providers, prospective students and employers, and policy documents from government and national organisations.

The paper contributes to literature arguing that parallel post-18 pathways of HE and vocational education and training have produced two different conceptions of distinction. System theory and neo-institutional theory posit an account of the distinctiveness of HVE in an expanding/expanded HE system responding to new and different students who have different needs, by offering distinctive curriculum and pedagogy (Clark 1960; Teichler 1998, 2008; Parry 2015). In contrast, accounts influenced by Bourdieu (1984) offer a different understanding of distinction that relates the development of taste for degrees from vocational education providers to the bounded choices available to these new and different students and the power of other social groups and institutions to reproduce their influence through the devaluation of HVE degrees in an expanded HE system (Gale forthcoming). Both conceptions of distinction offer models of reproduction, but the mechanisms of this reproduction differ widely.

The paper specifically addresses how messages about HVE degrees may come to signify taste to students considering entering the field, and how their distinctiveness might be conveyed to students. While Bourdieu's notion of distinction provides a broad language to understand the relationship between HVE degrees and those offered by universities, these insights are usefully complemented by other concepts offered by Bernstein and neo-institutional theory which elucidate the practices of TAFE institutions. Using this combination of frames, the paper shows that higher education at TAFE provides a valuable route to high skills for some disadvantaged students, particularly those with a 'taste' for more applied and vocational curricula and personalised pedagogies with small group cohort-based teaching and learning. In these ways, TAFE practices are making a difference to the lives and career opportunities of many students by catering to new types of students and leveraging connections with industry. On the one hand, this analysis stresses the equivalence of the baccalaureate degree across an expanded HE system and suggests a redefinition of what makes a degree distinctive. On the other, the distinction of university education, and particularly that from elite institutions in sustaining the reproduction of powerful social groups, may be *misrecognised*.

The project on which this account is based was completed in 2020. As other countries, such as the UK, expand the role of FE providers offering HVE, this analysis of the distinctiveness or distinction of baccalaureate offerings in Australian TAFEs provides a useful comparison and basis for further research, given that these two countries share a long tradition of policy borrowing, particularly with respect to HE and social inclusion policy and practice (Gale 2011).

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