



## CASE STUDY

### VET Pathways – an essential element of social justice

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The Bridges to Higher Education (Bridges) consortium was a federal government \$21.2 million funded program, delivered between 2012 and 2014, with the objective of improving the participation rate of students from communities under-represented in higher education. A large initiative within the over 90 projects was the building of pathways and support processes for students studying in TAFEs<sup>2</sup> and colleges to undergraduate places in higher education. The University of Western Sydney and University of Technology Sydney collaborated with TAFE NSW to develop several hundred articulated pathways, build students' aspirations for and knowledge of university study, and provide support processes for them to make the transition. This paper describes the inception, implementation, operations, outputs and outcomes of the Pathways/VET initiative. The project was externally evaluated by management consultants KPMG, and the quantitative data and qualitative data expressed by students and teachers identified that there were significant outcomes.

*Keywords:* widening participation; VET pathways; building aspiration; transition; retention and success

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#### Introduction

This paper will discuss a section of the Bridges to Higher Education (Bridges) program that focused on vocational and educational training (VET) and pathways into higher education. The Bridges program was a collaborative widening participation (Beckley, 2014) program involving a partnership between five universities: Australian Catholic University; University of Sydney; Macquarie University; University of Technology Sydney (UTS); and University of Western Sydney (UWS) between 2012 and 2014. Bridges was awarded \$21.2 million by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), the purpose of which is to support disadvantaged students from communities under-represented in higher education (DoE, 2014) to pursue further study. The high relevance of articulating the importance of the Bridges to Higher Education (Bridges) program within the content of this paper is contained in its origin; that of being a paper presented at a higher education conference with the main intention of emphasising the value of collaborative programs between universities of which Bridges was a good example. More information is available about widening participation in other publications (Beckley, 2014; Beckley, Netherton & Singh, 2015) and about the Bridges program on the website: <http://www.bridges.nsw.edu.au>

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<sup>1</sup> On 1 September 2015, University of Western Sydney changed its name to **Western Sydney University**; the projects mentioned in this paper were delivered prior to that date.

<sup>2</sup> TAFE is an acronym for the state provided *Technical and Further Education* provision – see: <https://www.tafensw.edu.au/>

## Background

In Australia, VET and higher education have been historically distinct sectors (O'Shea et al., 2012) with an uneasy hierarchical relationship (Weadon & Baker, 2014). More recently, the division between the sectors has become increasingly blurred, through pathways from VET to higher education, by close institutional collaboration and by institutions who offer both VET and higher education qualifications (O'Shea et al., 2012; Weadon & Baker, 2014; Cram, 2008). This trend has been encouraged politically by the Australian Qualifications Framework and the Bradley Report with its much cited demand for a 'seamless transition' (Bradley et al., 2008; Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013).

The desirability of pathways is widely accepted (Smith & Kemmis, 2014) for a variety of reasons, including widening participation in higher education, increasing international competitiveness of the Australian economy being "pull-factors" for international students, and the rising demands for pathways and VET students as a recruitment market for higher education providers (Bandias et al., 2011). Articulations and pathways also reduce the overall public cost of a student's education, avoiding the duplication of delivery costs (Smith & Kemmis, 2014).

Although the widening participation agenda is considered an important aspect of social justice in many developed countries around the world, this paper will focus on an Australian approach, first contextualised in relation to developments in the UK, which bear similarities to the way the higher education system operates in Australia. A summary of the rationale for governments to operate a widening participating agenda is provided by Archer (2007, p. 636):

‘...the rationale for widening participation has been framed in both economic and social terms – as a means of revitalising national and local economies, and boosting individual and collective wealth, as part of a ‘civilising’ mission within society, and as a means for fostering greater social equality through the inclusion of ‘disadvantaged’ social groups into higher education.’

The debate in the UK around widening participation can be traced to the Robbins report (1963), but specific mention of pathways was not made until the later Dearing report (1997), which were described by Greenbank (2006, p. 146) as: ‘more flexible routes that facilitate progression between sub- and honours degrees, and between further and higher education ...’. The UK government’s strategic policy on higher education ‘to increase participation in higher education towards 50% of those aged 18-30 by the end of the decade’ (HEFCE, 2003, p. 59) was contained in three documents (DfES, 2003, a, b, c), originating from the major child protection program ‘*Every Child Matters*’ (UK Government, 2003). Good practice and guidance was circulated by the government funding body, Higher Education Funding Council for England and Wales (HEFCE) through a multitude of documents (for example, HEFCE, 2001, 2007, 2008) and the implementation strategy: *Aimhigher* (2008). The format of delivery was based on ‘The student life cycle’ which is of interest to this paper as Stage 1 was ‘raising aspirations’ and Stage 2 was ‘preparations for higher education (pre-entry phase)’ (Greenbank, 2006, p. 152). Despite the plethora of guidelines and calls for adherence to ‘good practice’ it is clear that universities, colleges and schools did not alter their ways of

working as ever-stricter guidelines were placed on how additional government money was spent on widening participation (HEFCE, 2007, 2008). Indeed, one of the authors of this paper was engaged in a review of *Aimhigher* funding during 2007-8 in a major UK city which found poor targeting of resources and little adherence to funding body guidelines (Beckley, 2008); perhaps that was a factor that resulted in *Aimhigher* funding ending in 2011. During its existence, *Aimhigher* was a widening participation program for young people 'in the 13-19 age group' targeted at: 'people from lower socio-economic groups; people from disadvantaged socio-economic groups who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in higher education is low; 'looked after' children<sup>3</sup> in the care system; people with a disability or a specific learning difficulty' (HEFCE, 2008, p. 8). The *Aimhigher* higher education progression framework guide (Aimhigher, 2008) specified many widening participation activities that education practitioners would recognise as pathways programs: campus visits; mentoring; subject enrichment; HEI student ambassadors; summer schools; school-based interventions. Despite the 239.5 million GBP (HEFCE, 2008) spent on *Aimhigher* between 2008-11, the program was not deemed an unqualified success (Beckley, 2008); indeed David (2010, p. 4) stated: '...these policies have not led to fair or equal access to equal types of higher education or outcomes in the labour market'. However, subsequent research placed the main deficiencies for failing to widen participation during these years in England and Wales on 'poor achievement in secondary schools' in young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Chowdry et al, 2013, p. 454). *Aimhigher* was the subject of several reports and evaluations to assess its impact (for example Emmerson, Frayne, McNally, Silva, 2006; McCaig, Stevens, Bowers-Brown, 2006; Passy and Morris, 2010) and its funding had been diminishing over several years; however, the stated reason for its demise was given by the then Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts as: '*Aimhigher* has assisted universities and schools to learn a lot about what works in raising the aspirations of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but we now need to use this knowledge to make much faster progress on social mobility' (Attwood, November 25, 2010). Subsequently that government brought in a new regime allowing universities to charge higher tuition fees.

Subsequent recent longitudinal studies relating to Pathway programs in England have recorded greater success in widening participation to disadvantaged students (Smith, 2016; Wyatt, 2016). Such success was also recorded in the case studies described in this article.

In Australia, the equity aspect of entry pathways from VET to higher education is often linked to an over-representation of lower SES students and other equity groups in VET and an under-representation of these groups in higher education (Bandias et al., 2011; McNaught, 2013; Griffin, 2014). However, low SES VET students are more likely to complete lower level certificates while medium or high SES students are more likely to complete Certificate IV, Diplomas or Advanced Diplomas, thus enabling greater access to VET to higher education pathways (Wheelahan, 2009; Catterall et al., 2014). Where low SES VET students do enter higher education with a lower certificate their retention and success rates are significantly lower than those of VET students with higher level certificates (Catterall et al.,

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<sup>3</sup> Children in 'Out-Of-Home-Care' (OOHC) in the Australian care system.

2014). In order for pathways to be effective equity tools, support for multiple transitions must be considered – for example, from school or work to VET, from lower to higher VET qualifications and from VET to higher education (Griffin, 2014).

Despite their under-representation in higher level VET qualifications, entry pathways from VET to higher education are an important route for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students who completed year 12 of secondary education and who are either ‘late developers’ or did not achieve a high enough ATAR<sup>4</sup> score for their chosen program of study, need a route via VET to build on their learning and study skills to arrive suitably prepared at university. These students, who may have the ability to study at higher education level, but not the means of access, need information, advice, guidance support and assistance to study at university. Pathways programs provide this support and a learning pathway recognised by both VET authorised training organisations (ATOs) and higher education institutions. The purpose of this paper is to describe two such programs delivered in conjunction and partnership between UTS and UWS and identify the impact the programs had for prospective university students.

### **Bridges Pathways Projects**

The Bridges program has four objectives: improving academic outcomes; increasing awareness, confidence and motivation towards higher education; building school and community capacity; and increasing capacity to access higher education. Considerable progress towards increasing capacity to access higher education has been achieved through improving routes to university for prospective higher education applicants who have left school, including working in partnership with vocational and further education. The shared objectives of the UWS and UTS Pathways Projects are building new and strengthening existing pathways and relationships between VET and Universities, increasing students’ awareness, confidence and motivation towards pursuing these pathways and providing academic support to enable students to successfully transition from VET to university.

### ***UWS Pathways/ VET project***

The UWS Pathways/VET project aims to increase students’ knowledge, build aspirations, prepare students and expedite opportunities through accepted and recognised channels for students to access and succeed at university. The project is targeted towards high school students and students studying at VET colleges such as TAFEs. Key components of the project include presentations, seminars and campus tours providing information, advice and guidance for students suited to commence further education in the VET sector and continue or move on to higher education studies at university - for example, many students complete a Diploma at TAFE which entitles them to enter university in the second year of a Bachelor’s degree at UWS. The UWS Pathways project develops and disseminates resources containing information about pathways to university and application for advanced standing, including the development and maintenance of UWS’s Tertiary Education Pathways and Partnership webpage. In 2014, the project implemented *Diploma Plus*, an enhanced student learning

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Tertiary Admission Rank – see: <http://www.uac.edu.au/undergraduate/atar/>

program incorporating university learning methods as part of a TAFE Diploma. Another 2014 initiative within the project was *Let's talk Uni*, a university preparation seminar for VET students designed to support students with their transition to university by increasing academic preparedness, managing expectations and creating a sense of belonging for students.

### ***UTS TAFE Pathways project***

The UTS TAFE Pathways project is centred on collaboration between UTS and TAFE institutes to build TAFE students' interest in university, and strengthen and expand pathways and support processes that will enable their effective transition from TAFE to university. The project is targeted towards current TAFE students, and UTS students who have entered university through a TAFE pathway. The project is designed to establish and consolidate positive cross-institutional relationships, deliver information and aspiration building outreach sessions and university campus visits for TAFE students, develop new resources to support the project's initiatives, support the development of credit recognition arrangements, and improve the quality and provision of student pathways data to inform program design and activities. The UTS TAFE Pathways project includes faculty-specific components, for example the development of new formal articulation pathways and learning support for transitioning TAFE students into the Faculty of Health, and research to understand how former TAFE students fare in Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building degrees, in order to better support their transition and authentically intensify recruitment efforts.

### **Evaluation methodology**

In January 2013, the Bridges to Higher Education consortium contracted KPMG to undertake an external evaluation of its programs, and the Bridges Pathways projects were assessed as part of this evaluation. A mixed methods approach was applied to data collection, and included quantitative and qualitative reporting templates and key stakeholder interviews (KPMG, 2015). Information was analysed at the individual project level and at a project objective level, where due to their similar strategies and approaches, the UWS and UTS Pathways projects were considered collectively. Information was also analysed at a whole of initiative level, assessing evidence of contribution to the overall Bridges objectives.

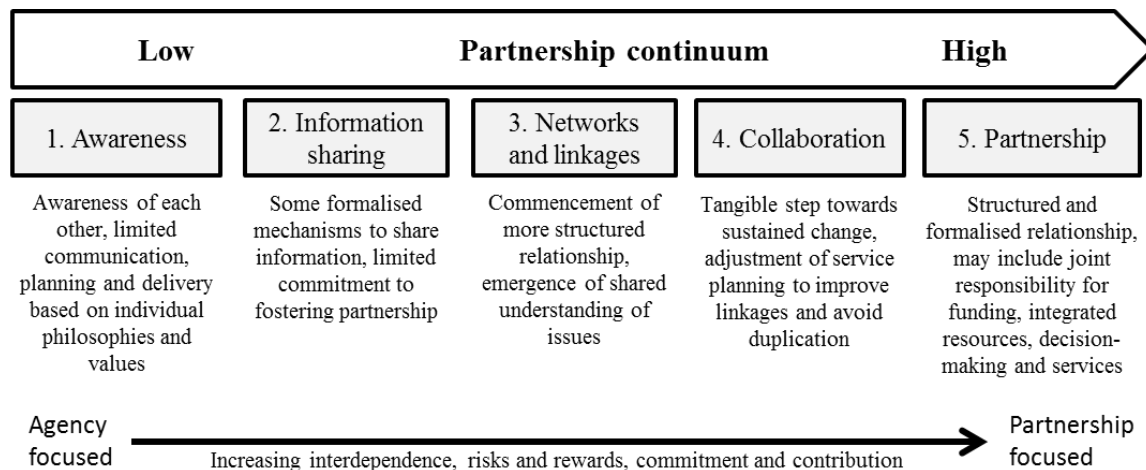
The evaluation required common outcome measures in order to ensure consistent interpretation of data across individual projects. Four common indicators of the benefits of participation in Bridges projects were derived and applied to the Pathways projects. Members of the Bridges Evaluation Project Group supported the UWS and UTS Pathways project teams within their respective institutions to integrate the measurement of these indicators into their evaluative practices and tools. Table 1 lists the common indicators for the Bridges Pathways projects. Where appropriate, Bridges Pathways projects were also encouraged to report on indicators of the benefits of participation related to improving academic outcomes and increasing awareness, confidence and motivation towards higher education. For example, the UTS Pathways project measured the proportions of students reporting greater awareness of what university offers and improved academic preparedness for university.

**Table 1: Common indicators for increasing capacity to access higher education (Source: adapted from KPMG, 2014)**

Outcome area	Indicator of benefit
System change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of new pathways developed</li> <li>Number of credit pathways and articulation arrangements</li> </ul>
Awareness of diverse pathways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number/proportion of students reporting increased awareness and knowledge of diverse pathways (e.g. TAFE)</li> </ul>
Partnership development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The extent to which the institutional relationships between TAFE and Universities are improving</li> </ul>

Partnership development was assessed using a scoring system based on a partnership continuum, with scores ranging from one to five, where increasing scores indicate strengthening of institutional relationships between TAFEs and universities (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Partnership continuum (Source: adapted from KPMG, 2014)**



Reporting took place at the following three time points: July 2013, February 2014, and December 2014. The first two reporting points informed the preparation of the Evaluation of Bridges to Higher Education Interim Report (June 2014) and the final reporting point informed the Evaluation of Bridges to Higher Education Final Report (April 2015).

In August 2014, Bridges commenced work on a case study publication (Bridges, 2015) designed to enhance the Bridges evaluation through an in-depth investigation of the impact of 13 Bridges projects on individual participants. Case studies were focused on the stories of particular students, and were compiled based on analysis of semi-structured interviews with the students themselves, as well as secondary sources such as parents, teachers, careers advisors, principals, peers, tutors, mentors and project coordinators. Interview schedules included questions related to overall program impact on students' lives and aspirations, as well as questions specifically aligned with Bridges objectives. Both the UWS Pathways/VET (*Diploma Plus*) and the UTS TAFE Pathways projects featured in the Bridges case study publication.

## Findings

### *Pathways project reach*

The Bridges Pathways projects achieved substantial reach during the 2013 to 2014 period, through engagement with over one hundred secondary schools and TAFEs and their teachers, and thousands of school, TAFE and university students who transitioned to university from TAFE (Table 2). Increasing participation of schools and TAFEs, students and teachers from 2013 to 2014 reflects the growth of the projects and strengthening of institutional relationships over time. Combined UWS and UTS Pathways project reach in 2013 and 2014 included 10,840 direct interactions with students (student contacts) and 990 direct interactions with teachers (teacher contacts). In addition to project staff, the Bridges Pathways projects engaged volunteers (n=106) and paid helpers such as tutors and student ambassadors (n=39).

**Table 2: Number of participants reached by Bridges Pathways projects, 2013 – 2014**

Participant category	Number reached in 2013	Number reached in 2014
Schools and TAFEs	25	83
Students	905	4017
Teachers	128	424

### *VET-university relationship and partnership development*

The quality of the developing relationships between key VET and university stakeholders is integral to the success of the Bridges Pathways projects. There has been enormous progress in this area since project inception, with firmly established and positive collaborative relationships and partnerships now in place in both UWS and UTS Pathways projects. Importantly, relationships have broadened from peer-to-peer project officer and coordinator level relationships focused on project implementation and delivery to include expanded engagement across organisations incorporating senior management and faculty representation.

A TAFE Faculty Director commented on the importance of maintaining and continuing this partnership in order to increase student capacity for further study:

‘The Pathways project has established a partnership between TAFE Work and Study Pathways and UTS for the articulation of study pathways between Sydney TAFE and UTS. We aim to ensure a strong partnership continues into the future and to expand options for further study. This project has been embraced by students and staff alike.’ (TAFE Faculty Director, 2014)

The strengthening of institutional relationships is evidenced by the assessment of progress along a partnership continuum (Figure 1). Improvements in the status of these partnerships include progression from ‘awareness’ to ‘collaboration’ in the case of the UTS Pathways project and from ‘collaboration’ to ‘partnership’ in the UWS Pathways project (Table 3). Although commencing from a stronger standpoint, TAFE-university relationships within the UWS Pathways project achieved the highest rating on the continuum by the end of 2014, reflective of the establishment of a genuine and formalised partnership (KPMG, 2015).

**Table 3: Status on the partnership continuum, 2013 - 2014**

Project	Status at project inception	Status at end of 2014
UTS TAFE Pathways project	1 - Awareness	4 - Collaboration
UWS Pathways/VET project	4 - Collaboration	5 - Partnership

***Increasing capacity, awareness and motivation towards accessing pathways to higher education***

The Bridges Pathways projects have increased capacity to access university through the creation of 421 new pathways and 370 credit transfer and articulation arrangements between TAFE and university. These projects have also invested in TAFE outreach activities to ensure that information about opportunities to transition from TAFE to university study are disseminated to TAFE students in a timely and engaging manner, often involving university students who have previously transitioned from TAFE. Evaluation of UWS and UTS Pathways projects demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach generally, with 97% (n=505) of students surveyed reporting increased awareness and knowledge of diverse pathways resulting from participation in a range of TAFE outreach activities.

Feedback from students and teachers also demonstrates the impact that Bridges Pathways projects are having on student awareness of the benefits of university study. Of 556 students who participated in UTS TAFE Pathways project TAFE classroom visits in 2013 and 2014, 375 students were surveyed, and of these, 361 (96%) agreed that the visits had given them a greater awareness of what university offers. Students were highly engaged and interested in the sessions, and TAFE staff also reported that the visits increased their students' interest in and motivation to aspire to university education.

‘It’s nice to hear from other students who have survived uni. I think I can do it. It was good to be encouraged.’ (TAFE student, UTS TAFE Pathways Project, 2013)

‘Seriously thinking now about going to UTS - now I feel more confident that it is the right thing for me.’ (TAFE student, UTS TAFE Pathways Project, 2013)

‘The students’ presentations – they were all very engaging and understood the needs of their audience. They presented as positive role-models...our students could relate well to them.’ (TAFE teacher, UTS TAFE Pathways Project, 2014)

During 2014, 172 students attended the UWS Pathways project *Let’s talk Uni* university preparation seminar for VET students. This presentation is designed to engage and prepare students for university, and student feedback shows that participation impacts positively on student confidence and sense of belonging at university.

‘I am less nervous about uni now and hope I am accepted into UWS more than ever.’ (TAFE student, UWS Pathways/VET project, 2014)

‘Thank you for all the helpful tips I got on the day. And thanks to all the staff for being so welcoming and easy to talk to. It made me walk away from this event



and think I would really love to come to uni.’ (TAFE student, UWS Pathways/VET project, 2014)

Bridges Pathways project evaluation shows that VET students and teachers also highly value opportunities to physically experience and explore universities through targeted campus visits and open days. One TAFE teacher observed that ‘some students have never stepped foot on a uni campus, so the occasions when we had an excursion arranged were invaluable’, and suggested that they would ‘like to see more of this, to help students make the transition and overcome any hesitations or fears they may have about university’. Students also described feeling less anxious about their prospective transition from the VET to university environment following on campus experiences facilitated by both UWS and UTS Pathways projects.

‘I found my visit to UTS immensely helpful. Walking around gave me a feel for the campus and allowed me to not feel so daunted by the transitioning to university process.’ (TAFE student, UTS TAFE Pathways Project, 2014)

‘I am now less fearful and insecure about going to university. I still have concerns around the transition to a different learning environment and different assessments, but since I was at the open day I know that there is support available for me to access.’ (TAFE student, UWS Pathways/VET project, Bridges 2015)

Effective dissemination of resources to promote TAFE to university pathways is also a critical outcome of the Bridges Pathways projects. The UWS Pathways/VET project was responsible for authoring, maintaining and promoting the UWS Tertiary Education Pathways and Partnership webpage, a valuable student resource that received 164,000 views in 2014. The UTS TAFE Pathways project developed the ‘Hard Work Deserves Credit’ webpage targeting vocational education and training students. This central location has links to profiles of UTS students who have transitioned from TAFE to university, admission requirements information, fees, additional selection criteria for UAC and how to apply for credit recognition, and houses visual tiles linking to each faculty’s credit recognition pages. Both Bridges Pathways projects have also developed and distributed numerous brochures containing information about pathways to university and practical advice regarding credit recognition, student support, costs and financial assistance, application information and processes around access schemes.

### ***Improving academic preparation and transition support***

Bridges Pathways projects are also contributing to improvements in the academic preparedness of prospective university students transitioning from VET, and of the support required and provided to these students once they commence university study. Significant progress in relation to academic outcomes has been made with UWS Pathways/VET project’s *Diploma Plus*, and the UTS TAFE Pathways project’s faculty-specific initiatives in the Faculties of Health and Design, Architecture and Building.

Launched in 2014, *Diploma Plus* combines vocational and academic elements as part of a TAFE Diploma of Community Services Work. Students gain a broader skill set designed to serve them well in aspects of their career, and facilitate a smoother transition to university. In its first year, *Diploma Plus* has engaged 130 students, with 30% (n=39) submitting an

application to university. Evaluation showed that 80% (n=104) of students surveyed either strongly agreed or agreed that attending the lectures associated with the year-long university style research unit had encouraged them to consider university as their next step. One student highlighted the academic writing and study skills gained during the program and shared that ‘*Diploma Plus* has opened my eyes to the opportunities out there’ and ‘definitely made me aspire towards university’ (Bridges, 2015).

In order to better support their transition to university, research to understand how former TAFE students fare in Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building degrees was conducted as part of the UTS TAFE Pathways project. Students described the experience of transitioning to a more independent learning environment at university compared with TAFE, and some students reflected on the anxiety associated with this distinction. For example:

‘Life at UTS is very different. At TAFE we were hand held...at UTS we are thrown in the deep end. Sometimes it’s a frightening transition.’ (UTS student, UTS TAFE Pathways project, 2014)

Despite these difficulties, results revealed positive student perceptions of their TAFE backgrounds. Students consistently highlighted how the practical skills and knowledge gained at TAFE supported and enhanced the subjects taken on at university level and better equipped them to deal with the different approach to learning. Students reported that ‘TAFE gave me a distinct advantage once I got to uni’, and ‘the practical skills learned at TAFE have allowed me to focus more on my intellectual development.’ A positive outcome of this research is the introduction of a TAFE transition session during which students can openly discuss issues around academic preparedness. Extensive discussion regarding the education of TAFE students before their entry to university has enabled a more complex understanding of their transition issues and an ability to more accurately target solutions, particularly in relation to critical and conceptual thinking, and independent research skills.

The Faculty of Health component of the UTS TAFE Pathways project has developed support processes around enrolment of TAFE pathways students into the Bachelor of Nursing at UTS, and implemented strategies to continue to support these students once they have enrolled and commenced their studies at UTS. Improved awareness of academic support available to students once enrolled at UTS has been achieved through a range of initiatives including additional workshops and assignment support sessions. Students expressed the benefits of increased awareness of support services, suggesting the project ‘played a massive role in helping with our transition from TAFE to university’. All participating students underwent academic language screening in 2014, involving an online assessment, and resulting in feedback including recommendations about how to access support appropriate for their ability and learning needs. A written English Language Framework to support assessment was also developed and piloted, with teachers describing the tool as ‘easy to use’, leading to ‘better consistency within marking’ and allowing for better access to ‘timely and clear feedback to students’ about their writing.

## Discussion

The evaluation of the Bridges Pathways projects demonstrates significant progress towards the program's objectives of building new and strengthening existing pathways and relationships between VET and universities, increasing students' awareness, confidence and motivation towards pursuing these pathways and providing academic support to enable students to successfully transition from VET to university. Firstly, to have achieved 10,840 direct engagements with students and secondly, to have succeeded in passing on appropriate information, advice and guidance on educational pathways to people within the target group of prospective higher education students in the Sydney area is an excellent result. Emerging and consolidated partnerships between participating VET providers and Universities resulted in the successful negotiation of 421 new pathways and 370 credit transfer and articulation arrangements, thereby lowering the barriers and easing the certainty and the passage of VET students into undergraduate study through rigorous and robust sign-posting to success in identified disciplines.

Several issues are revealed in the discussion relating to pathways for VET students in their route for progression to higher education. Although the evidence cited above clearly indicates high levels of satisfaction with a system that provides more effective information, advice and guidance for young people studying from a vocational background to encourage them to progress into an academic field of study, it is important to state concrete outcomes and impact of pathways programs. It has been argued that pathways are promoted by lower status universities that 'recruit' rather than 'select' students (Wheelahan, 2009) although some researchers disagree with this rather elitist argument (O'Shea et al., 2012). The argument that acceptance into university of students from disadvantaged background 'drops standards' has been questioned (Brink, 2009, p. 7); although it has been accepted (Universities Australia, 2008, p. 5) that additional support mechanisms should be introduced to retain students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Beckley et al., 2015, p. 420). Cultural differences should also be recognised in students from non-traditional backgrounds (Munro, 2011), who may have additional requirements or barriers to overcome.

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). As every university tutor knows, the holistic picture for all students (but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds) is more around monitoring progress, supporting retention and promoting success (Catterall et al, 2014; Watson, 2008) through the whole student lifecycle (Beckley et al, 2015, p. 422) rather than simply the process of access. Unfortunately there is disagreement between researchers over methodology and outcomes on retention and success rates which we will not enter into here (Bandias et al., 2012; O'Shea et al., 2012; Weadon & Baker, 2014; White, 2014).

This case study highlights findings from the evaluation of the UWS and UTS Pathways projects that emerged as part of the overall external evaluation of the Bridges to Higher Education programs conducted by KPMG. As such, it is limited to data related to common outcomes measures applied to both projects through the evaluation process. While collective consideration of the UWS and UTS projects provided opportunities to strengthen the

reporting of project outcomes such as the number of pathways and articulation arrangements established, it also resulted in significant limitations in the approach to evaluating more complex aspects of the projects such as partnership development. The partnership continuum methodology of partnership assessment allowed for the demonstration of progression in institutional relationships at a relatively superficial level, without offering potential to explore more complex aspects of partnership development such as commitment to shared goals, trust and willingness to share ideas and resources, approaches to collaborative project planning and implementation, and mechanisms to reflect on and improve the partnership. A deeper exploration of the benefits and challenges associated with VET–University partnerships established through these projects would have greatly strengthened the evaluation process and related learnings. This includes consideration of the vast differences in partnership status reported by UWS and UTS projects at the commencement of the evaluation period. Discussion within the Bridges Evaluation Project Group around the limitations of the partnership continuum methodology applied to the UWS and UTS Pathways projects motivated the group to undertake a deeper assessment into the effectiveness of the Bridges partnership overall. This assessment, including the survey component of the VicHealth Partnerships analysis tool (VicHealth, 2011), reflective workshops and further open-ended questions, resulted in a deeper analysis and understanding of the strengths and challenges of the partnership between the five universities (Beckley, Netherton, Singh & Stoddart, 2015).

Another major factor which impacted upon partnership building with the TAFE sector but is outside the scope of this case study was the introduction in January 2015 of the New South Wales Government’s major overhaul of the VET sector entitled the *Smart and Skilled* reform. Under this reform, TAFE remains the public VET provider, but is now required to bid to run courses along with other providers, and a student entitlement model was introduced which results in government funding following the student to the provider of their choice. The reforms produced strident criticisms from within the TAFE sector and in the public arena about reductions in course offerings, massively increased student fees, under resourcing of buildings and infrastructure, reductions in teaching and support staffing and reduced hourly teacher remuneration rates. These impacts are reflected in student enrolments in TAFE in 2015 declining by around 30% (Needham, 2015; Parliament of NSW, 2015; Smith & Needham, 2015; Ross, 2014).

The literature recognises that there are several barriers for students to navigate to enable successful progression from vocational study to academic study. The first is the historical institutional differences between VET and higher education organisations who view themselves from different perspectives (Bandias et al., 2011). Researchers highlight differences in pedagogy and long-standing suspicion within the education sector (Smith & Kemmis, 2014). Credit transfer and articulation arrangements have been viewed with scepticism by higher education institutions, with admission tutors described as acting as ‘gatekeepers’ (Bandias et al., 2011). On the other hand, as the authors found from feedback from students who used pathways to gain access to higher education, these arrangements are very important to engender confidence and offer a certainty that many prospective students crave. What is clear from the evidence of our studies is that genuine collaboration and partnerships between VET providers and universities are highly advantageous for inculcating

confidence in students to make further and higher progress in their education. When universities and VET training providers can work together to formalise transfer and articulation agreements, this de-mystifies procedures and adds to certainty of decision-making and acceptance of the processes for university offers (Weadon & Baker, 2014). The Bridges Final Report (KPMG, 2015, p. 133) also pointed out that pathways projects ought to be integrated in schools thereby adding a third party to the collaborative working. These agreements offer clear routes for students to pursue study in specific disciplines, setting the way ahead in a defined path. Researchers have identified many examples of good practice in collaborative working in this specific area (Griffin, 2014; McNaught, 2013; White, 2014). The Bridges report goes further and suggests:

‘The learning from this work could inform a clear strategy – applicable across the school, TAFE, university sector and vulnerable youth sector overall. Such a framework could be particularly important in the context of the reforms to Australia’s welfare system that focus on reducing long term welfare dependence and encourage people to work’ (KPMG, 2015, p. 12).

It is accepted in the Bridges program and in the education sector generally that there are myriad opportunities for improvement in the pathways processes. Many students from VET backgrounds, having been comfortable with a particular mode of study, may not be adequately prepared in the literacy and academic skills required to success at higher education (Catterall et al., 2014). If allowed to join an academic program in year two through credit recognition processes, this is a specific, but not insurmountable problem given the availability of support programs (O’Shea et al., 2012). There is also a need for admission registrars in universities to understand and fully accept ‘accredited prior learning’ (or experiential prior learning) from prior knowledge or life experience as a valid measure of learning in applicants.

## **Conclusion**

As discussed above, the Bridges Pathways programs can claim a number of successes within the overall framework of the initiative. Of students surveyed, 97% stated they had increased knowledge and awareness of diverse pathways from their participation in the program. The pathways programs also broke down barriers between organisations delivering VET qualifications and the participating Universities, forging new and effective partnerships.

The relationships, policies, practices and procedures and closer understanding between education providers, students, parents and community influencers has achieved greater sustainability of the pathways from VET study towards higher education and higher levels of qualification and fulfilment. The Bridges Pathways programs can therefore claim success in their achievements but may also aspire towards achievement of government goals of greater social justice, fair access and equal opportunities for all who have the ability to study at higher levels regardless of background.

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