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Home Educated Students and TAFE Accessibility

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Abstract

A hidden and unexpected impact of the recent changes to the structure of TAFEs has meant home educated students have lost access to an important educational option and pathway ensuring their right to an education. This submission aims to highlight the importance of access to TAFEs for these students. Australian research on home educated student access of and experience in TAFEs is scarce but indicates that many home educated students typically and successfully enter TAFE. A comparison of learning experiences at home and in TAFE reveals many similarities contributing to their successful entrance into both TAFE and university. Overseas research literature, while not specific to TAFE, also indicates these students are typically high achievers in post school institutions. TAFEs provide important educational opportunities for many conventionally educated students. Many best educational practices found in TAFEs have ensured meaningful employment and access to university for a wide variety of students, including home educated students. Expanded access to and support for TAFEs reaching a wider range of students, including home educated students, in meaningful, more flexible and affordable ways, will ensure students have the right to an education and allow them to effectively contribute to our economy, taxes and communities in the future.

Introduction

Recent changes to the structure and funding of TAFEs (Colleges of Technical and Further Education) in NSW and around Australia have had a number of unexpected and negative outcomes. One of these unexpected and hidden outcomes has seen home educated students, among others, cut out from entrance into TAFEs through the imposition of high fees because they are not viewed as students 'in school' or employment. High fees have created incredible hurdles that are unaffordable for these students, especially as these families typically have one income and there are a growing number of single parent families doing home education (Ross 2015). Home educated students have previously successfully entered TAFEs to train for employment, as a pathway to university, or to broaden their personal interests and skills through a wide variety of courses as way of extending their home curriculum. The learning environments of homes and TAFEs share many similarities that are different to conventional schools and which make TAFE a highly suitable pathway to university and meaningful occupations for a wide variety of conventionally educated students as well as these home educated students.

Home education is a legal educational choice in all states and territories in Australia. Home educated students, as do all children and young people in Australia, have a right to education (Allan & Jackson 2010). Access to TAFE is an effective form of education and an important avenue fulfilling that right to an education.

Australian Research of Home Educated Student Use of TAFEs

There is scarce Australian research into home educated students' interactions with TAFEs and vocational education and training programs. The available research is found in two PhD research projects (Jackson 2009, Reilly 2007) and in a survey of the Victorian home educating community analysed by Harding (2006). This survey was presented to then Victorian Minister for Education and Training when changes were being made to Victorian legislation and regulation of home education in 2006.

The Victorian Survey (Harding 2006) found that out of 120 formerly home educated students, 26% had attended TAFE and 23% had attended university. Reilly's (2009) study of nine home educating families with students who had disabilities identified one family in which a teenager successfully attended TAFE, part time, to improve her employment options and life experiences.

My own research of forty students of all school and later ages (Jackson 2009) included eleven students out of twenty-four aged twelve years old and older who had used the TAFE system at some point of their educational pathway. Two other students were later known to have completed apprenticeships at TAFE. On-line discussion groups of home educators also frequently reveal that access to TAFE is an important pathway option used by home educated students to gain entrance into tertiary studies and/or skilled employment opportunities.

These figures roughly suggest that at least a quarter of home educated students have done or will access TAFE as a satisfactory route to further education and/or skilled employment and the indications are that the percentages are most probably significantly higher.

Courses Used

In my sample of 11 TAFE students (eight males and three females), the courses accessed included:

- general education courses to ensure entry into university,
- agriculture,
- a diploma in early child care,
- mechanics through a school VET program,
- a multi-media course,
- IT subjects
- and welding.

A couple of students completed traineeships in apiary, retail operations, hospitality, security, crowd control and retail cadetship. A further two students were known to have later attended TAFE to complete apprenticeships in carpentry and cuisine. Five of these students later moved to university or tertiary institutions. Home educated students regularly use TAFE as an effective pathway to tertiary studies, to pursue courses of particular interest and complete apprenticeships and traineeships.

Home Educated Student Views and Experiences of TAFE

Home educated students who had also attended TAFE compared their learning experiences between home and TAFEs. Their experiences and views provide an avenue for understanding why TAFE has been such an effective pathway into further education and meaningful employment.

Academic

All students achieved high academic results at TAFE and went on to achieve well at university or in their chosen career, including one who lectured university students when he was eighteen and who completed a PhD in his mid-twenties as well as establishing his own business within that time frame.

Socialisation

Students generally appreciated their social experiences at TAFE with all but two describing positive social interactions with other students. Students did not mind the limited social connection available during low class hours. One student initially found his social experiences with the older students challenging but gained their respect over time, while another student indifferently thought the older students in his course were uninterested in connecting with him because he was a younger student. However, most of the male students commented that they had been the youngest member of their respective courses by at least two to three years but found this age difference irrelevant and their classmates respectful and supportive. These students, when at TAFE, spoke of great teachers, staff, and valued meeting classmates from a wide variety of backgrounds. Home educated students grow up mixing with people from all age groups and therefore integrate readily into TAFE (Honeybone 2000, Thomas 1998).

Autonomy

Home educated students experience a high degree of autonomy about what, when and how they organise their learning experiences while studying at home. Because of this autonomy, they value the adult learning environment commonly found in TAFEs where students are expected to make similar decisions about how they will select and conduct their study programs (Jackson 2009).

Structure

Some home educated students who attended TAFE initially thought the move might be challenging but all found they adjusted well to the different organisation and structure of TAFE courses and its expectations. Transition programs, when they existed, were beneficial for ensuring a smoother transition (Jackson 2009).

Decision to Attend

All home educated students personally made the decision or were involved in the decision to attend TAFE. One student was strongly encouraged by his parents to make the move to TAFE in Year 10 when he was struggling to maintain engagement with his correspondence type classwork at home.

Home educated students are engaged in their learning experiences and involved in major decisions as to the type of education programs they pursue. The TAFE

environment provides a similar more adult learning environment to what is typically experience in conventional schools and as a result TAFE is particularly suited to home educated students (Jackson 2009).

Learning

The learning experiences of home educated students significantly differ from the learning experiences provided in conventional schools (Jackson 2008, 2015). Learning experiences of home educated students include:

- literacy and numeracy skills learnt well
- in contextualized and meaningful ways, often set in real world environments
- self-paced learning according to one's abilities and interests
- self-directed learning opportunities
- learning how to learn
- engagement in interactive and hands on learning in fun and relevant ways
- actively researching projects, sometimes for extended periods of time
- development of independent learning habits
- appreciation of supportive, immediate, 'one-on-one' or inclusive relationships with parents or other more experienced persons
- development of IT skills and some access to distance education programs.

These types of learning experiences are commonly available in many TAFE courses meaning that these students are already comfortable with the type of learning experiences available in the TAFE system (Jackson 2009).

Learning Environment

Students appreciated their home learning environments for:

- personal learning space
- one-on-one teacher/student relationships
- hands-on learning experiences
- quiet working spaces
- ability to focus
- healthy relationships with their mentors.

The smaller classes and more competency based focus of TAFE allow many of these students to learn in a similar environment to what these students have experienced at home (Jackson 2009).

Learning Styles

Home educated students are usually well aware of their best learning styles and appreciate being able to learn effectively as a result.

- Hands-on learning was the most widely commented on learning style in my research and interestingly, most of the students who accessed TAFEs preferred this learning style.

Other learning styles valued by these students included learning through:

- Discussion and dialogue
- Reading and research opportunities
- Demonstration.

The type of learning styles catered for in many TAFE courses are designed to encourage hands-on learning and demonstration, focused discussion and dialogue and this learning styles are another reason this pathway is highly suitable to home educated students (Jackson 2009).

Enjoyment

Students explicitly expressed their appreciation and enjoyment of their TAFE classes and highly valued the opportunity to attend TAFE, whether they attended particular courses of interest, were furthering formal qualifications for career pathways or as access to further study at university (Jackson 2009).

Relationship with Educator/Mentors

Home educated students appreciated immediate and inclusive relationships with their parent educators and other mentors in the broader community. Their appreciation of mentors continued when they moved to TAFEs and universities while they also felt competent to stand on their own two feet when necessary (Jackson 2009, 2015).

Relevant Overseas Research

Although there is no overseas research literature on home educated student transitions into TAFEs, there is research on home educated student transitions into community colleges, four year colleges and universities, mostly in the USA. This research has examined student experiences entering post secondary schools, the experiences of tertiary admissions' officers and their observations of home educated students, and the academic results of home educated students who have entered these tertiary institutions.

Home Educated Student Transition Experiences into Tertiary

Home educated students generally move into tertiary institutions from home as well as their conventionally schooled peers both socially and personally. When students have health or disability issues, they can have the same problems other students have, but when institutions run good programs to support student transitions, home educated students, like any other students, benefit (Bolle, Wessel & Mulvihill 2007, Gloeckner & Jones 2013, Jackson 2009, Krammer 2012, Smiley 2010).

Tertiary Admission Officers Views of Home Educated Students

The views and experiences of the admissions officers of tertiary institutions about home educated students chances of success have changed dramatically from quite negative expectations twenty or more years ago to the current positive ones. In one broad analysis of home educated student transitions into tertiary institutions (Gloeckner & Jones 2013) an analysis of admission officers' attitudes towards home educated students noted that currently more than seventy-eight percent of admissions officers surveyed expect home educated students to do as well, if not better than their conventionally schooled peers. Three-quarters of these institutions now have policies for accepting home educated student applications. Those that did not have policies effectively

missed out on admitting a highly successful group of students (Haan 2006, Jones & Gloeckner 2004, McCulloch, Savage & Schamal 2013, Sorey & Duggan 2008).

Academic Achievements of Home Educated Students Attending Tertiary Institutions

A number of both large and small research projects have examined the academic outcomes of home educated students compared to conventionally schooled peers in both public and private school cohorts. The results consistently show that home educated students do statistically as well, and usually better than their conventionally educated peers (Bagwell 2010, Gloeckner & Jones 2013, Snyder 2013, Zehr 2006).

The overseas research of home educated student transitions into post school institutions consistently shows that these students are well prepared, capable and have the capacity to be high achievers in both TAFEs and other tertiary institutions. The scarce findings we have in Australia so far indicate that Australian home educated students achieve similar positive and strong results.

Summary

Australian home educated students generally make strong transitions into TAFEs and other post secondary school institutions and do well. The type of learning experiences and environments at home appear to equip them with particular skills that mean this transition is a relatively smooth and meaningful process. As a result, these students are able to gain qualifications that enable them to enter the workforce and society as effective citizens and members of the tax contributing community. While there is no real equivalent in overseas research on home educated student transitions into TAFEs, the research of these students transitions into a variety of post school and tertiary institutions indicates these students generally perform as well, if not above average, when they do enter these tertiary institutions.

TAFE Education (Best Practices)

An analysis of research on TAFE education practices and TAFE student experiences indicates there are a number of areas of TAFE education that particularly suit home educated students. Listed below are the qualities of best practices found in TAFEs that provide meaningful experiences to the general TAFE student populations, and more particularly for at risk students, but which also provide a platform from which to analyse those qualities that easily synchronise with home educated student qualities, experiences and expectations.

Student Experiences

TAFE students, especially those who had previously been disenfranchised from conventional schools identified the following features of TAFEs as important positive features contributing to the success of their TAFE educational experiences as 'at risk' students:

- Warm professional practices and relationships especially through low teacher to student ratios
- Relevant curriculum
- Warm educational environments
- Meaningful relationships with peers, professionals and community
- Inclusion of family
- Supportive institutional structures
- Respect of and support for the individual student
- Independence and personal space

(Campbell, McQuire & Stockley 2012, McKeown 2011, Smyth, Robinson & McInerney 2014, te Riele 2012).

Learning Environment and Institutional Structure

Institutional structures known to contribute to positive outcomes included:

- Purposeful and supportive school culture
- Institutional commitment to a vision focused on students, their future pathways and positive outcomes.

These outcomes were achievable because of:

- The careful selection of staff,
- Smaller institutional size
- Low staff to student ratios
- Programs focused on students and skill development
- Less regimentation than conventional schools
- Connection to mainstream educational institutions, families and communities
- Effective support services including financial support where needed (Campbell, McQuire & Stockley 2012, McGregor & Mills 2011, te Riele 2012, Wilson, Stemp & McGinty 2011).

Curriculum

Best practices informed meaningful curriculum design and considered the following elements:

- Relevance to student needs and interests
- Flexibility
- Individual responsiveness
- Holistic learning developed to encourage life long learning
- Hands-on learning experiences
- Connection to community through work experience and community service opportunities
- Subjects covering literacy and numeracy, English language, mentoring, vocational and life skills, culture and the arts, outdoor and sports activities, IT use and media skills, extracurricular activities and community involvement, connection to conventional Year 12 and other mainstream entry pathways (McKeown 2011, te Riele 2012, Wilson et al. 2011).

Professional Practices

Successful professional practices found in TAFEs included the provision of:

- Stimulating and challenging teaching to arouse student interest
- Realistic expectations of outcomes
- Mediated scaffolding
- One-on-one learning opportunities
- Integration of subjects with literacy and numeracy skills in relevant and real life contexts
- Individualised learning programs
- Support without pressure
- Behaviour management focused on educative processes and not punitive practices
- Retention through building students' self-worth, establishment of goals, identifying and supporting 'at risk' students through respect for each student's learning needs, skills and personality (Campbell et al. 2012, Humphry 2014, McKeown 2011, te Riele 2011, Wilson et al. 2011).

Learning Environment

TAFEs engendered a healthy learning environment by providing an environment that:

- Ensured respect of the individual through strong programs and supportive school culture
- Promoted respectfulness for individual cultures, personalities, backgrounds as well as a safe environment
- Was less formal and more adult, without uniforms and where students felt greater equality with teachers, staff and students (Campbell et al. 2012, te Riele 2012).

Relationships

TAFE teachers and support staff using best practice were able to build meaningful programs for students by:

- Building trust and a sense of belonging
- Encouraging students to develop a vision to achieve personal academic, social and personal potentials
- Providing pastoral care, mentoring, role modeling, high staff to low student ratios, support services, and inclusion of families
- Creating connections with community—business, service providers, and other tertiary institutions (Smyth et al. 2013, te Riele 2012 Wilson et al. 2011).

Partnerships with Community

The most effective TAFE programs had strong connections and partnerships with other educational organisations, businesses and services in their local community as these provided realistic second chance opportunities for students through work experience and/or a vision through tertiary education, particularly those who have left schools early (Penesis, Kilpatrick, Broun, Belward, Barnes et al. 2015, te Riele 2012, Weadon & Baker 2014, Wilson et al. 2011).

Democracy and Autonomy

Many of the students who attend TAFEs or other alternative education programs left conventional school because they were challenged by the authoritarian nature of conventional schools. TAFE programs are effective because participation is voluntary with horizontal hierarchies of power and where involvement is thoughtfully constructed instead of the typical vertical hierarchies of power found in conventional schools. A more democratic environment means all students are encouraged to be involved in decisions as everyone's choices – students, teachers, support staff and parents – are respected (Campbell et al. 2012, McGregor & Mills 2011, te Riele 2011).

Autonomy is also encouraged through voluntary attendance requirements, lack of institutional formality, no uniforms and student management of their own learning programs. Student self-worth and identity is tied to one's ability and understanding of the effectiveness of one's own decisions and there appears to be a direct connection between student re-engagement and their freedom to choose to re-engage or not. It is this type of autonomy with a personal vision that is known to contribute to tertiary success over and beyond one's SES (Socio Economic Status) (Campbell et al. 2012, Homel & Ryan 2014, McKeown 2011, Millman, 2013, Phan 2015, Smyth et al. 2013, te Riele 2012, Weadon & Baker 2014).

TAFE—Preparing for Transition to Higher Education

General Student Experiences and Qualities When Transitioning Into TAFE

Students' confidence grows when they complete TAFE courses and students are generally positive, enthusiastic and resilient when transferring to university. When making the move from TAFE to universities students' first year transition experiences include adjustment to workloads, self-directedness and independent learning. Student aspirations are a stronger indication of success than one's SES or indigenous status, and students' motivations and personal self-efficacy are informed by individual learning styles and decision making. All these positive qualities are already part of the home educated student experience prior to entry into TAFE or university (Catterall, Davis & Yang 2014, Homel 2014, Jackson 2009, Millman 2013, Phan 2015, Weadon & Baker 2014).

Best TAFE Practices For Preparing Students for Entry into University

There are a number of actions TAFEs can undertake to ensure all students make a smoother transition to university and these include:

- Being more informed about learner expectations, workloads and learning practices (Catterall, et.al. 2014)
- Providing programs which are holistic, measure outcomes, provide flexibility for individual and group needs, recognise informal learning, embed academic skills including maths support, and give VET teachers a voice (Goldingay 2014, Guthrie 2012, McNaught & Hoyne 2013, Penesis, Kilpatrick, Broun, Belward, Barnes et. al. 2015)

- Developing VET programs that broaden student capabilities and vocation possibilities because they contribute to better student work and employment outcomes (Fredman 2014)
- Best practices blending face-to-face and online learning models to improve accessibility to students and encourage self-directed learning, balanced intakes of mature and younger students, and rigorous student induction—especially academic writing to build student confidence (Weadon & Baker 2014).

Challenges to the smooth transition of students moving from TAFE to university include change in competency based assessment to more self-directed conceptual knowledge requiring research skills, integrity and critical academic skills (Weadon & Baker 2014).

Benefits to Universities

Universities benefit from better connection with TAFEs by encouraging student transitions from TAFE to university because this broadens recruitment practices and student numbers, especially if this were to include home educated students who generally achieve well in tertiary studies (Clemont 2012, Gloeckner & Jones 2013, Sorey & Duggan 2008, Weadon & Baker 2014).

Similarities Between TAFE Education and Home Education

TAFEs offer many similar learning experiences to those home educated students experience while at home. These similar learning experiences include: the adult learning environment where students are expected to make significant decisions about what, when and how to study their particular courses, low teacher/student ratios, respectful and supportive environments, flexibility—particularly of timetables and attendance requirements and for some courses, more hands-on type learning often available in TAFEs.

The positive and different to conventional school experiences offered by TAFEs are not only important for many otherwise disenfranchised young people, but are important for home educated students who are known to achieve very well in post school institutions.

Value of Home Educator Entry into Formal Education through TAFE

As has been illustrated above, TAFE is a highly suitable entry point into formal education and as a pathway to meaningful employment and university for home educated students for a number of very sound reasons—similar learning styles, adult learning environment, greater autonomy and personal decision-making, and more connected and real life learning environment.

Recommendations

Social Justice Concerns with Current Changes to TAFE

TAFEs have historically offered very effective educational programs and practices from which all educational sectors can learn. However, there are growing concerns that recent cost cutting and restructuring of TAFEs are

restricting their significant and important contribution to our national educational landscape. This is particular true for students who do not easily succeed in conventional school programs such as 'at risk' students and other students not so publicly visible such as home educated students. TAFE students, including at risk students and home educated students, have been able to contribute to our national economy through employment, involvement in businesses and by paying taxes. They have helped to create stronger communities as effective community members and citizens and it has been their attendance at TAFE that has been central to their ability to make these contributions to Australian society.

Cost cutting has taken the focus of TAFEs and similar institutions away from good pedagogical practices and this has damaged learning opportunities and pedagogy at TAFEs (Pasura 2014). Our education programs have moved from focusing on process and development to baseline outcomes. This has meant that the types of certification given to students is of a lower quality, is less motivating to students and has been priced out of the range of many of the more vulnerable students in our communities. Home educated students, usually coming from single income families, and in a growing number of cases, from single parent families are just not able to afford these changed fee structures. These generally highly motivated and high achieving students will also be less motivated to undertake the shorter less meaningful programs (Catterall, et.al. 2014, Clement 2012, Fredman 2014, Goldingay, Hitch, Ryan, Farrugia, Hosken et.al. 2014, Guthrie 2012, Homel & Ryan 2014, Jackson 2009, Millman, 2013, Phan 2015, Pasura 2014, Poores, Wildemeersch & Simons 2014, Weadon & Baker 2014).

Particular Recommendations for Home Educated Student Access To TAFE

Home education is legally recognised in every State and Territory in Australia, and home educated students have the right to an education (Allan & Jackson 2010). TAFEs are one of the more effective pathways to careers and higher education for home educated students. Because many home educated students have learning styles, practices, motivations and achievement abilities very well suited to TAFE type educational practices, it is recommended that:

- Home educated students have free access to TAFE courses, especially as their cost burden to public education has usually been non-existent or minimal through the school system and compulsory school years. This would ensure their right to meaningful education is upheld (Allan & Jackson 2009).
- University access through TAFE be ensured to home educated students as these students are known to achieve well at university and the TAFE pathway well suits their learning styles, experiences and needs. These students would benefit from suitable pathways outside of the traditional Year 12 certification route, particularly because of their particular learning styles, abilities and motivations. Universities would also benefit from better access to home educated students who are known to be high achievers in tertiary institutions.
- TAFE courses accessible to home educated students should include general VET courses, courses aimed at transition to university,

- apprenticeships, traineeships, and general and specialist courses for particular interests, both short and long term.
- Home educated student age of access to TAFE courses be reasonably flexible to include younger than typical TAFE student ages as these students are used to interacting with a wider age range of associates and have previously significantly benefited from this integration into TAFEs.

Conclusion

Australian home educated students have regularly accessed TAFEs and entered worthwhile employment and achieved entrance to university and other tertiary institutions through this pathway. Access to TAFEs has ensured these students rights to education in a meaningful way. Although there is scarce research here in Australia, the research we have, together with overseas research demonstrate that these students are typically excellent candidates for post school learning and university study. Their home learning environments have contributed to home educated students developing a strong work and study ethic, high student confidence, self-directed learning abilities and strong motivations to succeed. These are all the types of qualities found by researchers of the TAFE system to contribute to highly successful student achievements and outcomes in both TAFE and later when students transition to university. It is essential that TAFE be accessible to home educated students, among others, as one option to ensure their right to a meaningful education. Access to TAFE will ensure that the growing cohort of home educated students will be able to continue to contribute economically, through taxes and social and personal contributions to community well into the future.

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