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A pathway to enhancing professionalism: Building a bridge between TAFE and university early childhood qualifications

Victoria Whittington
Marjory Ebbeck
Alexandra Diamond
Hoi Yim Bonnie Yim
University of South Australia

It has been argued that a key strategy to improve developmental and educational outcomes for young children is to increase the number of childcare staff with early childhood university degrees (Saracho & Spodek, 2007). In order to upgrade the qualifications of staff, a number of Australian universities provide pathways that enable graduates of early childhood diploma programs to complete a degree. Several impediments, including institutional structures and individual contextual and personal factors, may affect these pathways. Although a range of organisations offer diploma programs, TAFE (Tertiary and Further Education) is a major provider. The aim of the present study was to investigate student transition between early childhood programs in TAFE and university. The research drew on several data sources, including a survey of the perceptions of students at various points of undertaking the transition. The current credit arrangement for TAFE Diploma graduates was found to be satisfactory; however, gaps were identified between the TAFE and university teaching and learning arrangements with regard to curriculum structures, teaching styles and assessment. Graduates of both programs considered that the completion of both awards would have a positive effect on their careers.

Introduction

If development and educational outcomes for early childhood-aged children in non-parental settings are to be optimised, it is essential to have well-qualified staff who are able to critically reflect on and inquire into their practice, constantly working towards quality improvement (McCain, Mustard & Shankar, 2007; OECD, 2001, 2006). Such staff could be expected to be professional in all elements of their role. Yet in Australia almost half of all childcare staff who work with children aged under five years are unqualified (OECD, 2006; Watson, 2006). In many states, qualified staff mostly hold two-year diplomas, while a few have early childhood or other degrees. In a country where it is not possible to begin work as a registered teacher without a four-year-degree level qualification, it is unsatisfactory that the youngest and most vulnerable children are being cared for by such a large number of low- and unqualified staff. It is increasingly being recognised that very young children need the care of qualified staff. As the OECD (2006) Starting Strong II report states in respect to Australia, "The National Agenda highlights the need for development of a skilled and knowledgeable workforce as a key consideration for ensuring an effective and sustainable early childhood system" (p. 273). The development of such a workforce could be addressed in a number of ways. One critical way is to improve the level of staff qualifications.

Watson (2006) has argued that the paucity of smooth pathways is a major barrier to childcare staff gaining qualifications. There is, however, impetus in the early childhood education and care sector to map and improve pathways (Watson, 2006). Helpful to this process is a national policy agenda that acknowledges early childhood education and care as an important education sector with specific characteristics (Elliot, 1997). One established, but sometimes problematic, pathway is that between the specific early childhood qualifications offered by Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education Institutions (HEI), that is, universities. Impediments exist in two areas: first in existing institutional structures, and second in...
contextual and individual factors found in the cohort of students most likely to access the pathway.

Institutions that provide early childhood awards are very different pedagogically (Fuller & Chalmers, 1999). For example, VET programs normally use competency-based teaching methods which require 'the application of ideas to observable performance on pre-specified tasks' (Fuller & Chalmers, 1999, p. 130). In contrast, the conceptual approaches of universities use graded assessment, requiring an intellectual understanding of the discipline (Fuller & Chalmers, 1999), as well as implications for practice.

Any research concerning VET to HEI pathways needs to investigate the institutional structures, as well as student factors, if a credible understanding is to be found of the student experience at various points in the transition between the two institutions. Students involved in making this transition are well-placed to report on these factors. First, however, training and education issues within the field relevant to the capacity of long day childcare staff to provide higher quality of care to children under five, require examination.

There are indicators that current basic levels of care as provided by the Quality Improvement and Assurance System (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2006) are insufficient for the achievement of optimal development in children (OECD, 2006). Cairns (2005) and Fenech, Summion and Goodfellow (2004) argue that achievement of higher levels of quality will require a more widespread and systematic employment of professional approaches to long day care. The distinction between a task performed at a basic skill level and the same task performed at a professional level is central to the offering of quality care. Critical reflection on practice and enquiry go hand-in-hand, and these are qualities more often found in a HEI teaching approach.

In South Australia, the desirability of a pathway between TAFE and university early childhood programs has been recognised since the early 1980s with the setting up of an exclusive and longstanding credit arrangement between the two institutions. This exclusive agreement does not extend to graduates of non-TAFE colleges. It allows one year of credit for a mixture of first and second year courses and is consistent with the Australian Qualification Framework Agreement (Keeling, 2005).

Students who graduate with the TAFE Diploma often begin with low school exit scores and gain confidence in an environment where staff–student and peer relationships support learning. While some students deliberately embark upon the TAFE Diploma • credit pathway to university, others begin to realise while studying at TAFE that they have the capacity and motivation to complete a university level qualification. Broughton (2005) and Abbott-Chapman (2006) argued that this is a viable pathway to university for those with low socio-economic status, or educational disadvantage. With pay, status, conditions and career opportunities often perceived as unappealing in child care it is not surprising that a percentage of TAFE Diploma graduates look for opportunities to extend their career paths and income with a university qualification (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2000).

One area of pressure for students making the TAFE–university transition is the difficulty of studying under a university model, a challenge also found internationally (Dukakis, Bellm, Seer & Lee, 2007). Another area of pressure concerns the amount of credit allowed for prior study. Some TAFE entry students express concern that their two-year TAFE award is given only one year of credit against the university program. Pressure also comes from students who live in regional or remote locations and study the program externally. The intent of this external offering is to provide access and equity to recognised disadvantaged groups (NCVETSA mission statement on equitable access, 2008), however, it should be acknowledged that the equity aspect of this mission is not as easily achieved as access (Whittington, Glover & Stephenson, 2006).

Distance students use print materials posted to their homes, usually accompanied by some online provision. Library materials and other university resources are provided by post or via the web. Although providing flexibility, external study adds another layer of difficulty to what is already a challenging transition for this cohort (Whittington et al., 2009). External study is acknowledged as a risk factor to program completion (Dickson, Fleet & Wiest, 2009).

A recent initiative to improve the TAFE-SA–HEI pathway
Recently, the University of South Australia offered competitive grants to staff of programs with existing and significant TAFE credit arrangements. This initiative was designed to broaden the university's student feeder pool and build improved pathways for TAFE-SA students. The goal was to provide an opportunity to investigate and improve current arrangements between the two institutions. For a number of years, the early childhood program team had been concerned about the difficulties transitioning students encountered, so the program team could tailor the program to scaffold this cohort into the program.
Consistent with the post-school education and training structures found in the UK and North America, the initiative recognised that, rather than being end points (Dukakis et al., 2007; Keating, 2008), together VET/TAFE and university programs perform complementary functions in producing professionals. In respect of the early childhood field, TAFE provides a relatively fast and supported route to qualified status in childcare services, while the university program offers a degree and the opportunity to extend work opportunities into school and kindergarten/preschool settings with the accompanying increased income and professional status. The initiative from the University of South Australia provided support for the development of an improved approach to the education of early childhood professionals.

One possible benefit of increased cooperation between TAFE and university awards is a reduction in attrition rates for both institutions. The TAFE-SA diploma currently has difficulty filling its quota and student attrition is high (Anderson, 2007). This may be because of the low pay, status and conditions offered upon graduation. In addition, students who are ill-suited to early childhood are sometimes advised to take this career direction and then find options better suited to them. Such career advice may also contribute to the high TAFE diploma attrition rate.

Together these arguments indicate that one desirable strategy to professionalise early childhood education and care may be the creation of an authentic and close working partnership between TAFE and university early childhood programs. Such a relationship may help break down the binary model (Dukakis et al., 2007; Keating, 2008), moving towards the closer collaboration and smoother pathways between the institutions as seen in Canada, the UK, New Zealand, the US and some Australian states. While stakeholders may perceive the differences between pedagogies of the two institutions to be an obstacle, it could be argued that, when well-coordinated, the two programs are complementary. Following the sociocultural idea of scaffolding—where high support on a task is provided initially then gradually reduced as the student takes increasing responsibility as s/he gains confidence and skill—a smooth pathway between the two institutions seems a desirable and achievable goal.

The Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (MBCE) team applied successfully for funding, and with TAFE-SA Diploma in Children's Services staff developed a project to investigate student experience of transition between the two institutions.

**Review of the methods literature**

Relationships between TAFE and university programs in Australia have been studied using a variety of data-gathering approaches, including surveys (Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Fuller & Chalmers, 1999; Lamb, 2001), focus groups (Abbott-Chapman, 2006), telephone interviews (Elliot, 1997; Uren, 2001) and personal interviews (Abbott-Chapman, 2006). Each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses, so a strategic decision was made to offer a range of options to participants in this study. These options are described in following sections. Logistics also had to be considered, as the project team recognised that reaching their target sample numbers would be challenging but necessary for a robust study. With many potential participants located in regional and remote areas in both the TAFE and university systems, the efficacious online data collection method TellUS survey was employed to maximise participant numbers.

The following research questions were posed for investigation.

1. **How effective or otherwise are the current credit arrangements?**
   a) Should the amount of credit be maintained, reduced or increased?

2. **How satisfactory are the current teaching/learning arrangements for students?**
   a) What are the differences in curriculum structures, teaching styles, and assessment arrangements for these two programs? (Curriculum structures are concerned with course content, teaching style is the pedagogy employed, and assessment arrangements are the tasks students must successfully complete to pass the course).
   b) How complementary are the programs?

3. **Given poor industrial conditions and status in early childhood, and the need for structures to provide opportunities for career progression, what does the current credit arrangement offer?**

**Methodology**

The investigation used a cross-sectional design which drew on both survey and recorded discussion data, and the dual structures of two other early childhood programs.

**Participants**

A total of 82 TAFE-SA and university students and graduates participated. This response rate was deemed satisfactory, with the TAFE-SA students comprising 38 per cent (n=31), all female, and n=24 in the 19-35 age group and the remainder either in the 18 or less, or 31 or older age groups. University students (Year 2 to Year 4) comprised 50 per cent of the sample (n=51, 49 females and 2 males [1 missing case], 23 in the 19-25...
age group, 6 in the 26-30 age group and 22 older than 31. Together the university students comprised 31 per cent of the total early childhood TAFE entrant population. Twelve per cent (n=10) of the total sample comprised graduates of both programs. This fourth group was the most difficult to access and recruit.

Regarding study mode, eight TAFE-SA students were external, and 23 internal. Of the TAFE entry university students, 25 studied on campus and 24 externally. Four TAFE students and 17 university students were part-time.

Twenty-three TAFE and 24 university students (57 per cent of the total population) said they had deliberately chosen the diploma so they could gain entry to university under credit arrangement, indicating that the diploma was seen as a pathway to university by a majority of participants.

Method

Using a cross-sectional design, the project team investigated student perceptions at four different stages of the transition:

1. Current TAFE Diploma students contemplating entry to the university program, henceforth called 'TAFE students'.
2. TAFE entry students in their first year of study at university, henceforth called 'university students'.
3. TAFE entry students in their second or final year of studies, henceforth called 'university students'.
4. Graduates who had completed both programs and were working in the field, henceforth called 'graduates'.

Other data-collection sources also included:

- Cross-institutional staff discussions, including a curriculum workshop and a moderation meeting to compare content and pedagogy, with a particular focus on assessment
- Compilation of an annotated bibliography
- Visits by two team members to universities where, in different configurations, best practice TAFE-university early childhood awards were offered.

The project received university ethics committee approval.

Procedure

To recruit the TAFE-SA sample, lecturers explained the aims and objectives of the study to all students, and those considering enrolment in university studies were invited to attend a meeting at a metropolitan TAFE campus. Rural TAFE students were also recruited from regional TAFE campuses. Eligible UniSA MBCE students at first, second or third level of their MBCE study and recent graduates of both programs, identified from university data bases, were sent emails that explained the study and invited them to participate. On-campus students were recruited at lectures.

Participants were given the following options: (i) an individual interview, (ii) focus group participation or (iii) completion of a questionnaire. TAFE-SA students nominated to respond by completing the survey, either manually in a specially arranged lecture room at a central metropolitan TAFE campus, or individually in the case of country TAFE students. Surveys were mailed to relevant lecturers at regional TAFE-SA campuses, distributed personally, and returned by each participant in a reply-paid envelope.

University students and graduates opted for the online TellUS questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed via email with a covering letter to all eligible students, and graduates identified via university databases, with two follow-up invitations/reminders. Later, to increase the sample size, a meeting for university students was held on campus and hardcopy questionnaires were distributed for immediate completion. The questionnaire consisted of both open- and closed-ended questions. The online TellUS version was available to students for six months, November 2005 to April 2006.

Analysis

The survey data was compiled using either TellUS data processing, or manually for hardcopy data. Frequencies and percentages for identified response categories were calculated.

Results and discussion

Data analysis provided for the following information related to the three research questions.

Question 1. Current credit arrangements

Results related to the effectiveness of current credit arrangements revealed two issues. First was the amount of credit and second the specific coursework for which credit was granted. The amount of credit currently given was found to be satisfactory, that is 36 points or 25 per cent of the program (one year equivalent) should be maintained. This finding was based on student responses, benchmarking with other university early childhood programs recognised as examples of exemplary practice, and a curriculum workshop which examined content, assessment and teaching practices of both programs (UniSA and TAFE-SA). In addition, a moderation activity examined in detail assignments and assessment practices of both programs.

This result is consistent with current AQF credit agreements for TAFE diploma and four-year degrees (Keating, 2008). All data sources except students still at...
TAFE supported maintenance of the status quo. Almost all TAFE students responded that the credit given was unfair (72% yes, 28% no), in contrast with those enrolled at university. University students who thought it was fair outnumbered those who thought it to be unfair (9% yes, 55% no), indicating that the experience of undergoing the transition affected how students responded.

Student respondents saw their TAFE studies as a kind of stepping stone or preparation for university:

The TAFE qualification is a foundation to test the ability of a prospective student as to whether they will be able to make the adjustment to higher study.

What is covered at TAFE is totally different to what is covered in uni and only complements it.

Regarding the courses for which credit is given, university students' responses indicated that there may be a case for change. A majority (n=29 (64.4%)) of participants who answered this question supported current credit arrangements; however, a minority (n=16 (35.6%)) considered that change was needed. One student wrote:

In some subjects it's fair but then in others it's not, such as [Course] and [Course Y]. We had already learned about this.

Of interest is that 45.1 per cent (n=37) of participants did not answer the question, perhaps indicating considerable uncertainty about course credit. Data produced from the moderation discussion also indicated that two of the currently credited courses could be substituted with two others.

Student responses also indicated that Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was an issue for them:

I think status should be given to students who have prior study and can prove quality prior experience, i.e. practiced [sic] what they learned in TAFE for a period of time, rather than straight from TAFE to MBCE and getting more credit... those who have had experience on top of study may apply for more credit.

Although it is a contested issue in more traditional universities, UniSA has policies in place for students to apply for RPL. In the early childhood award, students must prepare a document that shows how they have previously addressed the aims and content of a course, then the relevant course coordinator decides if it is to be awarded. Universities which do not have RPL provision could perhaps consider it as an appropriate approach for granting diploma graduates credit for workplace learning. The student application process, however, needs to be streamlined as lack of rigour in the process could diminish the perceived and the actual quality of an early childhood award. The introduction of national RPL standards for the diploma-university pathway may assist as it is critical to maintain graduate quality at a time when there is increasing interest in professionalising the field.

Although most university students were satisfied with credit given, almost half (n=24 (48%)) of those responding to this question also stated that their transition was not smooth. They experienced a gap between the TAFE and university programs, especially concerning assignments and assessment procedures; however, this decreased the longer they spent in the program. Dissatisfied responses were at 30 per cent (n=9) for new entrants, 28 per cent (n=6) in their second year, 24 per cent (n=5) for final year of university study, and 16 per cent (n=4) for graduates from both programs.

The gap was not unexpected, as TAFE participants stated that they anticipated differences in teaching and learning between the programs. The following selected comments illustrate this point:

The format for assignments is very different from TAFE to uni: referencing (Oh, how different my year one grades would have been if I knew how to Harvard reference!!!), essay and report format ... the assignments are very different.

Consistent with Abbott-Chapman (2006), university TAFE entrants in the later years of their program expressed a gradual reduction in performance anxiety and a growing sense of confidence in their university studies.

Question 2. Student satisfaction

The second research question concerned student satisfaction with current teaching and learning arrangements, focusing on curriculum structures, teaching style, and assessment arrangements.

All TAFE participants answering this question expected that study at university would be different from their TAFE experiences in terms of curriculum structures, teaching style, and assessment. Students were asked to describe their studies in the MBCE. The most frequently used words which could be classed as positive were 'challenging', 'exciting', 'interesting' and 'knowledge and pedagogy expanding'. Of all the words used, 90 were categorised as positive and 43 as negative. Most frequent negative words were 'stressful', 'frustrating' and 'isolated'. Such feelings are often expressed by external students (Whitington, Glover & Stephenson, 2006), and such students represented half the university sample in this study.

Of the 40 responses, 82 per cent of students (n=33) stated strongly that they were satisfied with teaching and learning arrangements at university. Developing professionalism was a key theme in their comments:
I have much knowledge and experience I can apply to the workforce. I feel confident in my ability to work with this degree behind me.

Many of the courses in the MBCE have prepared me to be continuously reflective in my work which is important.

The finding may not be valid for TAFE entry students who were beginning their studies in the UniSA early childhood program, as 39 per cent of the sample (n=32) did not respond to the question.

a) Curriculum structures

University students' most frequent responses regarding their experience of the university curriculum were "rich and cohesive in content", "well designed" and "developed competence". These findings were consistent for all university students across different academic levels. The TAFE-SA cohort indicated that they expected differences in curriculum, in assignment requirements and standards. Key program contrasts included the university requirement to study more independently, and to develop knowledge of older children. The words 'more in-depth' were widely expressed by university students in relation to university study compared with that at TAFE-SA.

As one wrote:

"Study is more in-depth at university. For example, when I studied at TAFE we breezed over child development and various theorists, whereas at uni it goes beyond knowledge of a theorist and their theories, it is about why, how, where."

b) Teaching style

Differences in teaching style were found between the two institutions. The small and stable group characteristic of the TAFE-SA program resulted in a high level of student satisfaction, probably because of the strong staff and peer support it allowed. Words such as 'happy/enjoy' and 'fun/interesting' were frequently chosen by TAFE students to describe their current studies.

These two categories of positive 'feeling' words, however, were not commonly found in university students' responses, and they employed a greater number of negative feeling words than did the TAFE-SA cohort. University students stated that the major differences in university teaching styles were "the lack of personal relationship with lecturers", "more formal class structure", "bigger class sizes" and "higher academic expectations". These findings were consistent for all university students irrespective of level. For example, students wrote comments such as:

"Not as much one-on-one contact. Relationships with [university] lecturers are not formed as quickly or easily ... I feel I do not know the lecturers at UniSA."

Nevertheless, participants from both programs still identified lecturers as one of several valuable sources of support for their studies, with peers/friends (chosen most frequently by recent entrants) and the university library (chosen most frequently by university students later in their program). This pattern of support choice may be related to their changing emotional, social and academic needs as they progressed through their program.

c) Assessment arrangements

Students who had experience of both programs perceived there to be a strong difference in the assessment style and grading between TAFE-SA and UniSA programs. Those with only TAFE experience knew there would be higher academic requirements at university but lacked detailed knowledge of the differences. The competency-based, non-graded approach of TAFE-SA contrasted with the school-in-a-syllabus demanded at university. Upon entry to the university program, many students said they felt at a loss regarding essay writing. This contrast was also evident when the research team discussed assessment in the curriculum workshop and moderation activity. To illustrate this point, an extract from a student response follows.

"Uni has lots of assignments and they are very academic focused and theory focused whereas TAFE has lots of hands-on assignments. At uni you have to write about 2500 words and have the correct referencing. Practical assignments are better."

Students identified changes which would result in a smoother pathway between the two institutions, most focusing on changing some assessment practices at TAFE. They suggested that students should be asked to include citations and properly-presented reference lists in their assignments, to gather content from a range of sources rather than information simply being given to them, to write some essay-style assignments and have some of their work graded. Students suggested:

"Make less assignments, grade them like university style and encourage TAFE students to reference both direct quotes and paraphrasing."

"TAFE needs to empower students with the skills to find their own information from journals, online etc. rather than 'spoon-feeding' and giving it all to students."

In summary, while students expressed moderate satisfaction with current TAFE and university teaching and learning arrangements, they identified the gaps between the two programs, and the difficulties they experienced in bridging them. Students appreciated the greater depth of curriculum at university, but indicated that support to cope with the high level of independent study would be useful. Likewise, the more distant and less supportive university teaching style also required
greater degrees of personal agency, although students did say that they found most university lecturers helpful when they requested assistance. Assessment was perhaps the site of greatest contrast between the two programs, with university essays considerably more complex and challenging than assessments students had previously encountered. Once they had learned the necessary skills, students said they felt proud of themselves. Reaching that goal, however, was a very stressful, anxious process that could be better supported by both TAFE and university programs. As already offered by some universities, a detailed induction program into assignment preparation would be invaluable to this cohort.

In more general terms, consistent with the findings of Dukakis et al. (2007) for early childhood students in California, data analysis indicated a need to provide TAFE-SA entrants with targeted information, face-to-face and web-based advice and counselling, and skill-based support when they begin university studies.

**Question 3. Career progression**

The third and final research question concerned career progression. It is important to note that the TAFE-SA participants in this study were those who had an intention to further their studies at university. The comments in this section of the results and discussion are thus not applicable to the wider TAFE-SA diploma community.

The investigation identified a relationship between participants' academic choices and their career progression views. All students considered that the academic choice to undertake a degree would have a positive impact on their career paths. Graduates of both programs said that their qualifications had strengthened their knowledge base and employability. Consistent with national data (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2000), most TAFE students thought that diploma study had helped them to acquire basic practical experiences and knowledge of early childhood, and to identify their career interests in the early childhood field, thus providing a kind of stepping stone to a professional career.

Similarly, university students considered that TAFE had provided a pathway to university. All of the participants (n=44) who answered this question expressed the views that a degree in early childhood education would widen their career opportunities.

Participants stated that this deliberate academic choice could help them to achieve their career goals. The most frequent career goal expressed by both TAFE-SA (n=31 [62%]) and UniSA (n=49 [83%]) participants was to be a teacher in a junior primary, kindergarten or preschool setting. This finding was consistent amongst all TAFE-SA participants across regions (Adelaide city and country), and UniSA participants across different academic levels and regions.

The career choice of both TAFE-SA and UniSA students may be explained by the common community perception of the increased professional status associated with holding a degree and the higher income of a four-year-trained early childhood teacher. Support for these two possible explanations was found in the responses of all participants.

The data shows that 79 per cent of TAFE students (n=23) and 47 per cent of university students (n=24) deliberately chose TAFE-SA Diploma of Children's Services as a pathway to gain university entrance. All participants were aware that the pathway involved in total another year of study, two years of TAFE followed by three years of university, in contrast to the usual four-year degree. The data also indicates that 62 per cent of TAFE-SA participants (n=18) thought that the completion only of the Diploma of Children's Services would not give them the career opportunity they were ultimately looking for. With salary levels ranging from $14.16 (beginning unqualified) to $20.44 (top-rate qualified) an hour, there is little recognition or value placed on this work—vital as it is. Many participants stated that university study would give them the opportunity to move out of child care and into kindergarten/preschool and junior primary teaching. Although some university staff in education faculties may see this diploma-to-university credit pathway as a 'back door' entry into teaching, it makes sense and is justifiable for capable diploma graduates to enter early childhood programs with a birth-to-eight years scope. It would not be so, however, for other teacher education programs because there is no comparable overlap between the ages of children at which they are focused. Such credit arrangements are also found in other fields such as nursing, social work, and engineering, so long as the programs are robust, and contain no threats to the status of early childhood graduates. The main problem of the pathway is that it reduces the overall numbers of qualified staff entering the long day childcare field. However, these numbers are usually depleted well before students complete their diploma, a result of poor industrial conditions rather than the university pathway. One positive effect of the TAFE-university pathway is that graduates of both programs have the experience on which to become strong advocates for improvement in the whole early childhood field.

**Future research possibilities**

In the present study the following limitations were noted. Students did not respond to all questions and so for some questions, as noted in the results section, missing data was an issue. In the analysis of data the study did not separate data from internal and external
mode students. Previous studies (Dickson et al., 2000; Whitington et al., 2006) indicate that external mode brings increased study difficulty and higher attrition rates than for internal students, so further investigation of the external mode is warranted. Another significant area for future research relates to the specific group of participants in this study. Only graduates and students currently enrolled in either TAFE-SA or UniSA early childhood programs were invited to participate. Recent calculations indicate that the attrition rate from TAFE diploma entrants to the UniSA early childhood program may be approximately 30 per cent (UniSA data). Nothing is currently reported in the literature about the transition experience of these students. There were also considerable difficulties obtaining the sample, and the study would have been more robust had a higher percentage of the population of university students participated.

It should also be acknowledged that students' personal factors were not investigated, including time management, study skills (essay-writing and exams), ICT competence and personal issues (family, health and financial problems) (Abbott-Chapman, 2006). Nor were enabling factors such as personal motivation and a desire to succeed, support within the university (from student services, lecturers and peers) and support within the family.

Conclusion

The findings of this investigation of early childhood students' transition from a TAFE diploma to a university degree indicated that, although a pathway is established and many students complete both programs, the transition could be improved. The provision of specific transition activities upon entry, followed by ongoing support, particularly around assignment preparation and study skills, is recommended. In addition, staff from both institutions should work together to reduce the gap between the programs. For example, raising expectations of student independence and assignment preparation in the second year of the TAFE diploma may prepare students for the particular challenges of university work. As Broughton (2005) stated, much can be achieved when staff in complementary TAFE and university programs work together in collaborative partnerships.

Consideration also needs to be given to placing TAFE entrants in a mixture of first- and second-year university courses rather than giving credit for the entire first year, so that they can access the study skill support offered all commencing students. * 

In the current national early childhood policy environment, the demand for teachers from four-year university programs will increase exponentially and this pathway could assist in providing quality graduates. The early childhood field in Australia is moving towards professionalism. A range of pathways is needed, with exit points and entry and re-entry points so those working in the early childhood field can improve their qualifications, professional standards and overall career opportunities. With increasing numbers of families using childcare programs, and preschools for four-year-olds becoming increasingly available nationally, this opportunity to improve quality through improved staff qualifications should be seized. In the long term, the implementation of the recommendations of this investigation will contribute to the long-term goal of professionalising early childhood staff and improving outcomes for children in their care.

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