

The Credit Matrix: Building Bridges between Qualifications

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Many universities have policies on non-Year-12 admission and credit transfer which enable students to be admitted to, and gain credit towards, qualifications on the basis of their previous relevant study. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) also has guidelines for determining how much credit can be granted from a Vocational Education and Training qualification to a university qualification; however, these processes can be onerous for both the admissions officer and the student, particularly where a student has completed a mixture of learning from school, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and previous work experience.

The Victorian Qualifications Authority is a statutory body in Victoria with responsibility for the regulation and reform of qualifications in the senior secondary, vocational and adult education sectors. One of its statutory objectives is to ensure and support appropriate linkages between qualifications as a means of encouraging lifelong learning pathways. It is therefore working on a credit-based framework—the credit matrix—to create a common means for describing and comparing all learning, regardless of where it occurs. In this way, the credit matrix could help to improve credit transfer processes and make it easier for people to re-enter education and training and acquire qualifications throughout their lives. Designed to work with—and enhance—the AQF, the credit matrix would work by allocating a level (for complexity) and points (for volume) to all the units available in the post-compulsory sector. This paper will explore some of the ways the credit matrix could be used to improve credit transfer and admissions processes, and some of the issues associated with developing a working model for Victoria.

1. Introduction

The Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA) is working on a credit-based framework—the credit matrix—to create a common means for describing and comparing all learning, regardless of where it occurs. This common basis for comparing different types of learning would be useful because students are increasingly studying qualifications or parts of qualifications which draw on curriculum from a variety of education sectors. In a context of lifelong learning, students are also seeking recognition for learning achieved informally, such as learning they may have gained in the workplace or community, in order to provide a basis for admission into, or credit towards, formal qualifications. By providing a common means for describing and comparing all learning, the credit matrix could help to improve admissions and recognition processes and make it easier for people to re-enter education and training and acquire qualifications throughout their lives.

Designed to work with—and enhance—the operation of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) in Victoria, the credit matrix, like credit-based frameworks overseas, would work by allocating a level (for difficulty) and points (for volume) to all the units available in the post-compulsory sector.

This paper will explore some of the ways in which the credit matrix could be used to improve credit transfer and admissions processes, and some of the issues associated with developing a working model for Victoria. The paper will firstly review current patterns of learning and current issues in credit transfer and admissions processes. It will then provide an overview of the development of a model for Victoria, including its potential to recognise different mixes of learning.

2. Patterns of Learning and Credit Transfer and Admissions Processes

Student movement is increasingly cross-sectoral, with more students obtaining qualifications, or parts of qualifications, from a range of different sectors. The movement of students from higher education to Vocational Education and Training (VET) and vice versa is a case in point and has increased over the past decade. For example, the proportion of 33–44 year olds who are degree qualified with a VET qualification grew from 4.7 per cent in 1993 to 11.4 per cent in 2001, and those VET qualified with a degree grew from 2.7 per cent to 7 per cent over the same period. In fact, all age groups showed an increase in the proportion of people with qualifications from several education sectors over this period (Karmel & Nguyen, 2003). Overall, the number of people enrolled in VET who had a degree or higher qualification has grown from 3.4 per cent in 1995 to 4.8 per cent in 2001 (DEST, 2002).

The decision to study courses and subjects from both Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes and university is a deliberate one on the part of many individuals, with university graduates citing a need to build industry-specific skills as their main reason for study at TAFE (National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1995, p. 46). Thus, the challenge of creating pathways between VET and higher education is as much about pathways from university to TAFE as it is about pathways from TAFE to university. Indeed, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, in its submission to the Higher Education Review, wrote that:

The imbalance in qualification linkages needs to be addressed... *Varieties of Learning* is strangely hesitant about this issue, listing a number of difficulties that, as it acknowledges, equally apply to VET as to university pathways. An effective set of pathways has to operate on the basis that movement in all directions is worthwhile, overcoming assumptions of a necessary path "upwards" to university. (AVCC, 2002, p. 57).

Indeed, given changes in Australia's labour market, it is likely that more students will need to study qualifications, or parts of qualifications, from different education sectors in order to supplement existing skills. This trend is already being reflected in the student profiles of universities. For instance, changes to the mix of students' mode of study to include more part-time and external study have led to an increase in the median age of student populations (AVCC, 2002, p. 7). From 1992 to 2000, the proportion of non-overseas students who were admitted to a bachelor pass qualification on the basis of senior secondary education shrunk to 56 per cent (DEST, 2001, p. 5). Thus, universities can expect demand for higher education courses to come increasingly from students who are not coming directly from school.

Further, at the senior secondary level, schools are increasingly promoting alternatives to the traditional pathway from senior secondary school straight into university. Senior secondary certificates now allow different types of learning from different sectors to count towards the one certificate, and this flexibility is very popular with students. For instance, in 2001, 22 000 students undertook VET qualifications or modules as part of their Victorian Certificate of Education (Polesel & Teese, 2002, p. 6). The new Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, which incorporates curriculum that can be drawn from a number of education sectors, has also enjoyed a growth in student uptake, from 5300 students enrolled in 2003 to over 8000 in 2004. These mixed styles of learning may therefore result in students pursuing higher education later in life, bringing with them prior learning achieved in TAFE and through work experience.

Additionally, the recent higher education reforms may put pressure on institutions to facilitate articulation from TAFE to university, and to increase the blurring between the two sectors. The reduced number of Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) places in universities may result in more students undertaking study at TAFE to complete a diploma or advanced diploma, and attempting to use that to count towards a degree program. However, at the moment, the transparency of credit transfer leaves much to be desired, and credit transfer and admissions decisions can, as Leesa Wheelahan observes, 'be based on discriminatory (and often ignorant) attitudes to VET' ('Credit Transfers', 2004). While the same accusation could equally be levelled at VET, the problem partially emerges from the different approaches to assessment between the sectors, and the lack of ability to compare the different types of learning. A

common system to measure learning could therefore go some way to improving the consistency of credit decisions.

Further, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is not used as extensively in universities as it could be, despite calls by state and federal education ministers to the contrary. In 2001, only five per cent of university students received any credit for learning that they had achieved outside the education and training system. This compares with eight per cent of students in the VET sector. Indeed, the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board last year found that only 26 out of 38 universities had developed an RPL policy ('Unis failing', 2003, p. 1). In a context of lifelong learning, and where the individual is increasingly expected to fund that study, student demand for institutions to recognise all relevant achievement will increase. However, while there remains no means to compare different types of learning, processes for recognising learning achieved informally or through other education sectors will remain inconsistent, non-transparent and difficult to administer.

3. A Credit-based Framework—Could It Help in Victoria?

New Zealand, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, England, South Africa and the European Union have—or are looking to develop—credit-based frameworks. While they differ in approach, each has the objective of creating a seamless education and training system that is easier to use and easier for the student to navigate, reducing the need for repetition of learning already successfully achieved.

The VQA contends that a credit-based framework could work in Victoria to achieve similar ends to those of the overseas models. By providing a common means to describe and compare different types of learning, the credit matrix should make it easier for students to move into and across different education sectors, and to receive recognition for the learning they have already achieved.

For universities, this common means to compare learning could provide a useful starting point for determining whether a student should be granted credit for prior learning, regardless of where that learning occurred. Naturally, students will still need to provide supporting documentation in order to obtain credit, and their previous learning would still have to be relevant to the unit/s for which they seek credit; however, by providing the capacity to compare the levels of complexity and the amount of learning at the unit level, the credit matrix will provide a clear and transparent basis for credit decisions. It should also make it easier for selection officers to determine whether a student has the necessary prior education to undertake a university qualification no matter where that education was completed, thus improving pathways from TAFE to higher education. And, as mentioned earlier, for those students moving from higher education to VET, credit decisions will also be more transparent.

4. Progress and Issues for Development

So far, the VQA has engaged some external consultants to develop a detailed model of the credit matrix. The work has mostly focused on coming up with a set of level descriptors that are meaningful and do not contain language that is tied to particular education sectors or learning contexts. This has been accomplished by avoiding basing levels on the existing AQF, but rather investigating the aspects of learning that make one unit or module harder than another. The resulting level descriptors have been trialled by practitioners who were asked to apply them to units with which they are familiar. The results, which are based upon a sample of over 250 units and modules drawn from Certificate I to Doctoral level, showed that the level descriptors are reliable and useable, although more large-scale testing will still need to be done.

The consultants have advised that learning should be defined in terms of average learning time—the time it takes, on average, for a student to successfully achieve the unit outcomes, including contact hours, research, information retrieval, practice and assessment. In the VET sector, defining volume could be a little challenging, because it operates using nominal hours, which define a unit in terms of teaching time. There is, then, more design and testing work to be undertaken.

5. Conclusion

A common means to compare different types of learning could make it easier for students to move into and out of education throughout their lives, and it could provide a level of transparency in credit and admissions decisions. Although it will not reduce the need for documentation and supportive evidence in order to obtain credit, the credit matrix, will, at least, provide a starting point for comparing different kinds of learning.

Given the increasing numbers of students who wish to study in a number of education sectors, as well as obtain recognition for all the learning they achieve, whether formal or informal, it is more important than ever that a common system for measuring and comparing all learning is developed.

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