

## CASE STUDY

### Adjustments and penalties in pathways

**Amber McLeod, Tim Fish and John Pardy<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Education, Monash University, Australia

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This paper will present case studies of sub-degree pathways course options available at a ‘group of eight’ university to highlight the ways that they both enable and inadvertently can constrain access. The Review of Australian Higher Education (2008) recommended that by 2025, 40 % of 25 to 34 year olds will obtain a Bachelor degree qualification. Access and equity are a key feature of this policy goal and ambition. To facilitate this goal, sub-degree programs represent a key access option for many students who do not immediately and initially satisfy admission requirements. This may be due to a lower ATAR score or no score because of alternative education experiences , e.g VET . Students undertaking sub-degree programs do so with an understanding and expectation that they represent a ‘pathway’ leading to a bachelor destination course. Yet not all such programs provide straightforward access in a consistent fashion. This paper will illuminate how sub-degrees as a model of access and equity can at times operate as proving grounds, representing a less flexible and responsive enabling approach than imagined. In contrast to standard first year undergraduate programs sub-degrees such as the pathways diplomas highlighted in this paper reveal some hidden pitfalls arising from different expectations and course structures and rules.

*Keywords:* pathways; sub-degrees; access; and equity; enabling education

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#### **Introduction**

Sub-degrees and their place in Australian universities are an under-researched area and are subsequently not well understood educationally and in a curriculum policy sense. This paper will present an overview of sub-degrees represented as pathway diplomas as they are delivered in a single university in a multi-campus setting. In the context of the current Australian Government attempts at reform of Australian higher education sub-degrees and pathways, diplomas, as explored in this paper, represent a pivotal curriculum response to present and ongoing strategies for access and equity. To progress changes to Australian

Higher Education three reforms are being pursued. Firstly government is seeking to deregulate fees, secondly there is a desire to impose a funding cut and thirdly there is a policy ambition to uncap sub-degree places. In the public arena, fee deregulation and the associated funding cuts are attracting considerable discussion characterised by resistance and resignation. The resistance to, and critiques of, the proposed fee deregulation centre on the potential of making university education more inaccessible to the under represented and the under prepared. The cutting of funding is being presented as a policy trade-off by the Government combined with fee deregulation and follows a policy trend that has occurred over the past three decades where the under -investment of funds in an expanding Australian higher education sector has become the policy norm.

The third reform to open up, or uncap sub-degree places represents a policy gesture to ensure access and equity in Australian Higher Education. Sub-degrees are presently offered and delivered in a variety of ways in Australian tertiary education. In universities they are usually one year or two year diploma courses developed and accredited by the university, whilst in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) side of Australian tertiary education (TAFE and private colleges) they are competency based diplomas developed by industry stakeholders. The case study research presented in this paper focuses on diplomas as developed and delivered by a university. These diplomas are graded and are presented as an ‘assisted first-year’ program, and successful completion guarantees transfer into the second year of a designated destination degree.

The case study of these pathway diploma sub-degrees currently offered in a high status university are being examined in this paper with a view to highlighting how access and equity are understood and ensured through such course options. Sub-degrees, within the

university, are understood as a “pathway” into an undergraduate degree. The existence of sub-degrees in the university underlines the shape and mass character (Trow, 2007) of Australian university today. These courses can enable access to higher education for students who would otherwise be excluded from admission to the university. In the demand driven system that now characterises Australian higher education these students could most likely secure places at other universities. Yet these students seek access to this particular university because of its campus locations, status and the types of courses they are seeking to pursue.

### **Sub-degrees, access and equity in Australian higher education.**

As tertiary education in Australia continues to evolve and be reformed through government policy that reflect similar changes also occurring in tertiary systems in other countries, the space, shape and intention of sub-degrees will also evolve. In Trow’s (2007) seminal conceptions of the shifts from elite, to mass and then universal higher education, it was highlighted that more flexible or ‘modular’ sequences of courses would emerge in a mass system. Sub-degrees as a pathway and enabler of access to higher education represents just such a flexible and modular course form and form of instruction. The year long sub-degree pathway diploma courses presented in this paper operate at the Australian Qualification Framework level just below that of the degree.

Sub-degrees are very much a key part of the Australian tertiary education scene and are offered by universities and in other tertiary institutions such as private colleges and in TAFE Institutes. Yet in universities that are self-accrediting higher education providers, these diploma are principally designed and delivered as a pathway for accessing degree level studies. Sub-degree diplomas that are vocational are developed and delivered principally as a course of skills training and education for occupational and employment outcomes. In a

university context sub-degrees are curriculum based programs whereas in Vocational Education and Training (VET) context such courses are competency-based and subsequently ungraded. Students do not achieve grades or marks but rather are deemed competent or not competent. The grade score is an important signal and indicator for receiving tertiary institutions of a prospective student's perceived level of education achievement and hence affects admission and access. In Trow's (2007) terms the sub-degree in a university setting would be understood as compensatory and meritocratic.

In the transition from elite to mass higher education, universities operate more as 'multi-function institutions of higher education' (Trow, 2007, p.251). In elite systems access to and achievement in schooling was the principle approach to access, selection, and admission, whereas in mass higher education access, selection and admission includes school achievement alongside other avenues of entry such as sub-degree tracks. Sub-degrees in a contemporary context of mass higher education come to represent a different kind of 'academic enterprise' (Trow, 2007). In outlining the changing characteristics of higher education Trow makes clear that it is the completion of a university degree that represents the prize of higher education, not a sub-degree. Yet the sub-degree represents an inevitable curricula outcome of the shift from an elite higher education landscape to one of mass provision.

At the same time of the transition to a system of mass higher education there has been a growing policy preoccupation with something called 'pathways'. Pathways as a metaphor have grown in popularity with education administrators and policy experts according to Raffe (2003). Raffe proposes that the pathway and pathways operate as popular 'metaphor' that is neither rich in meaning nor an enduringly useful analytical tool. Yet in several ways

pathways operate within the education policy landscape to mitigate ‘academic drift’, to connect or ‘unify’ different educational course options and achievements, and to provide a basis for students with a more tangible basis from which to ‘navigate’ a way through education (Raffe, 2003). In an Australian context the advent in 1992 of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) allowed the notion of pathway to become related to progression through qualifications levels. The diploma is a part of the AQF, considered in relation with other levels of qualifications such as the Certificate IV that precedes a diploma in the AQF and the degree that operates at the next level after the diploma.

The growing prominence of sub-degree programs is a reflection of the changing higher education policy environment since 2008, following, amongst other issues, concerns about the declining domestic participation rate and stagnant changes to equity of access to higher education (King & James, 2014). The Review of Australian Higher Education [Bradley Review] (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) recommended significant reform to higher education to enhance equity and access.

This renewed focus on access and equity was specifically focused upon under-representation of certain groups in higher education, namely, representation of students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders backgrounds, students from rural and regional locations, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In line with this policy push for widening participation modelling, the review suggested Australia faced a shortfall in the number of tertiary qualified people over the coming decade in keeping with the performance of other major OECD countries and concern about meeting future labour market demand. As a result, one of the recommendations from the review was for ‘a target of 40 per cent of 25-

to 34-year-olds having attained an undergraduate qualification by 2020' (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 20). In 2006, 29 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds had attained a bachelor's degree or higher. One suggested way to achieve this significant increase was to raise the participation and attainment of an undergraduate degree from those groups currently under-represented in higher education.

The Bradley Review found that, based on figures for 2007, participation in higher education for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, for example, was 15 per cent compared with the proportion of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the general population of 25 per cent. Importantly, the participation rates of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds had remained static over the previous decade, and indeed had 'remained virtually unchanged' from 1991 to 2008, when the Review was published (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 38). However, by far the most significant recommendation from the Bradley Review was to remove restrictions to the number of students institutions could enrol in their undergraduate courses, introducing a 'demand-driven entitlement system' (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 158). The present policy agenda to uncap sub-degree places extends the policy logic of access and equity as presented in Bradley placing a reconsidered policy focus on the notion of pathway diplomas.

Pathway programs, it has been argued, aim to create a social support network for students where issues of transition are discussed. In such courses as sub-degree pathway diplomas, students are encouraged to recognise that university teething problems are normal and that due to individual differences all students may experience problems adjusting at some point (Munro & Pooley, 2009). The sub-degree diploma provides an opportunity to assist students to better understand the expectations required of them in a university environment,

and to make them aware of the support services available on campus, which may include assistance with assignments or language, an introduction to the library and library services, disability support, social workers, financial or employment assistance; and provide a safe space where students can ask questions of both their classmates and academic staff.

It has long been understood that whether a student persists academically is closely related to the success of their transition to university (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). The existence of different pathways programs at university is recognition that for many students, the transition to university is a difficult one, with studies recommending that universities include some kind of preparation classes for new students (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). For successful university adjustment, high levels of resilience are needed (Munro & Pooley, 2009). The sub-degree pathway diploma offers just such a place for building of these capacities of resilience and a successful transition experience.

In 2011, 41 per cent of university students in Australia were aged 25-64 years (ABS, 2013). Mature age students returning to study experience their own problems with adjusting to university life. Many require significant time management support as they may have to juggle family as well as work and study commitments. It cannot be assumed that mature aged students have had successful study experiences before and they may require support in terms of assignments, note taking, and finding resources as they have not recently been at school. Munro and Pooley (2009) indicate that there is no difference in the success of transition to university for mature age and school leavers.

Students who have left high schools that provided close monitoring of, and assistance with, student work, or those who have physically moved away from a strong social support

network of family and friends, may feel unprepared for the independence of university study, particularly in terms of time management and emotional support (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Navigating these life challenges in the contexts of transition and adjustment to university study represents a defining feature for all beginning students but plays out and is responded to more explicitly in sub-degree courses aimed at forging 'pathways'. While pathway programs have allowed many students to succeed at university and studies show that students have been shown to experience more positive transitions to university when they had social support and more realistic expectations of university is also believed to help with transition (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007), there are also those who struggle and ultimately drop out of their courses.

Nussbaum (1997) maintains that 'if we wish to bring all citizens of a nation to the same level of educational attainment, we will need to devote more resources to those who encounter obstacles from traditional hierarchy or prejudice' (p. 285). This certainly seems to be a major impetus for sub-degree offerings, where the 'pathway' metaphor abounds. Pathway programs, rework and widen the criteria upon which students can be admitted to university, meaning that students who previously would not have gained access to courses are now included. While pathway programs may, on face-value, seem like an ideal way to meet the policy goals, both the government and the institutions need to be explicit about their educational intentions. Being able to resource and respond to the educational needs of a wider selection of students will have real impacts on students' potential for completion and success. This represents a key ethical concern in a mass university system.

### **Case study of sub-degree pathway diplomas.**



This case study draws upon the use of an institutionally de-identified course map, and examples of student experiences and issues from the perspectives of the student advisors involved in leading these sub-degree courses. Student responses in course evaluations are also used to highlight their reflections on the diplomas. This data is documentary (course map) and qualitative (student issues) and is being presented to build a case study of the sub-degree courses as sketch of what a pathway looks like and how it plays out. The qualitative data is drawn from reflections of student advisers teaching within the sub-degree courses. Flyvberg (2006) emphasises that case study research works to develop ‘context–dependent knowledge’. Expert understandings are characterised by context-specific knowledge and experience. And for Flyvberg (2006) ‘Such knowledge and expertise also lie at the center of the case study as a research and teaching method or to put it more generally still, as a method of learning’ (p. 222).

The diploma, as it operates at the university where this case study is generated from, is offered with five streams. These are education, nursing, business administration, business and science. The one year course involves a unit in each semester that aims to build student capacity for successful university learning and understanding university level knowledge along with units that all first year students in their faculty would complete. There are 220 students admitted to the diploma courses each year. The vast majority of these students are school leavers with less than 8% being students who have come through an alternate education pathway. The selection of students occurs through the Victorian Tertiary Admission Centre (VTAC) application process. That many secondary students nominate the diploma as a first preference indicates their awareness of the ‘pathway’ and their willingness to navigate their university study through such a course. The course is delivered on three of

the university's five campuses. These campuses vary in size and mix of students, a factor that also affects student experiences of adjustment and transition.

The course map below indicates the overarching template of the diploma course. The core units seek to build student capacity, while the faculty units define the student stream and signal the destination degree students are seeking admission into at the second year. Diploma students and first year degree students are in the same classes for the faculty units.

<b>Core units</b>	<b>Faculty units</b>		
<b><u>University Learning</u></b>	Nursing Education Business Science	Nursing Education Business Science	Nursing Education Business Science
<b><u>Knowledge at University</u></b>	Nursing Education Business Science	Nursing Education Business Science	Nursing Education Business Science

### **Qualitative student issues**

The diploma student advisors have recounted student issues and experiences presented to them over the past two academic years in which they have had administrative and teaching responsibility. These insights from the student advisors provide a sketch of how the pathway operates to enable students to progress in university study and highlights key issues facing students undertaking the diploma.

## **Cross-discipline opportunities and tensions**

At two campuses, nursing, education and business students participate together in the same core units. As the campuses are relatively small, the role of the diploma student advisor is also more significant and students build up a strong social support network that includes students from several faculties at the campus.

The diploma is a university owned course meaning that there is no home faculty but the core units are delivered by the Faculty of Education. The skills taught and advice given through the core units are relevant to all students, and indeed all first year students may potentially benefit from such orientation focused units. The format of academic writing required, an emphasis on philosophy and the teaching of particular study styles aligns more closely with the content in other first year education units than business or nursing units. In addition, the mixture of education, business and nursing students in the one class means that education students tend to dominate discussions while business and nursing students often feel left out or express concern to tutors that the content is not really relevant to them. Conversely, education students were frustrated by the lack of participation by business and nursing students as illustrated by this comment from the student unit evaluation:

*'I feel I would gain more if the class was all education students rather than a mix of nursing and education'.*

For nursing and business students, however, the core units offer a respite from exams, which are a major source of stress, and there is a safe space to debrief with students from their own faculty away from faculty staff. As not all the topics covered in the core units are

directly or obviously relevant to first year nursing and business students, they also hone their ability to be selective and increase their navigation capacities about what to focus on at university.

### **Value of the core units**

The reasons why and motivation of students entering the diploma also makes a difference to their reaction to the core units. Some students had not achieved the requirements for direct entry into their destination degree because they had had difficulty in their final year of schooling. For example, one student recounted that her mother died in a car accident early in her final year of school. She had not done well in her year 12 exams because she had a lot of time off school and was, naturally, distracted from her studies. If this tragedy had not occurred the student, would have been able to gain direct entry into her Education degree. Throughout the year, the student was organised, confident, and did well in her assignments across all units. There were a number of students in a similar type situations and this was reflected in unit evaluation comments such as this:

*'I feel that the course could have been accelerated at a faster pace, simply because a lot of the skills I already had.'*

This can be contrasted with other students who, although excelling academically, had not had the same support at school. A business student from a small school in country Victoria, had very little understanding of how to structure an essay or use technology to search for resources. For this student the content of the core units was extremely helpful.

While some students questioned the benefit of having to undertake the two core units, other students found their experience in the units to be immensely beneficial. A mature aged student who had enrolled in an Arts degree upon leaving secondary schooling, felt overwhelmed and struggled during her initial exposure to tertiary education, and soon after dropped out of university. This student found support, acceptance and success through her employment in early childhood, and after several years in the workforce, made the decision to return to university and enrolled in the diploma to do the education stream. Her reflections of her time in the diploma which she shared informally with the student advisor was illustrative of not only the academic support the diploma was able to provide, but the social and emotional support that helped build her confidence, something she was unable to acquire during her initial foray into tertiary education. Upon completion of the diploma this student transferred to a blended (delivered in a mix of online and weekend intensive sessions) Early Childhood course having successfully completed the first year on campus in the diploma course.

*It has been a huge adjustment getting used to off campus study and intensive weekend lectures, but I think I have finally found my groove. I feel at a great advantage over the other students doing the course in the city as they have entered 2nd year uni without having completed first year (as they hold a Diploma in Children's Services). Once they knew I had completed first year on campus I was bombarded with lots of questions about uni life, study habits and Monash resources. Of course I have been happy to help and am thankful that I have a year of study behind me and I don't have to think about those things anymore because I already know them really well. I learned so much last year about what works for me in regards to study and assignment prep. I know [the diploma] was a huge help for me*

*and I am so grateful to have done the course last year. I even surprised myself at how well I did. That's one of the main things I love about [this university], the support that I have felt in all aspects of uni life. I have never felt like just a number or that any question I had was silly. That feeling of support has done wonders for my self-belief and has been reflected in my academic achievements so far.*

Second year academic staff report the positive benefits for students who have completed the core units of the diploma. These academic staff have reported that diploma graduates often submit assignments of a higher standard than other second year students as they have a clearer understanding of academic writing, finding resources, referencing conventions, and are not afraid to ask for clarification so that they more clearly understand expectations.

### **Penalties of taking the diploma pathway**

While the diploma offers students access to a degree they may not otherwise have been able to do, the diploma does operate as a proving ground and a number of penalties can apply. Students in the diploma doing the education stream are required to achieve a 60 per cent average for the year and Business students must achieve 55 per cent in each unit. The first year students who are in the same faculty unit classes as the diploma students only need 50 per cent. If a diploma student fails a unit then they no longer have automatic progression to the destination degree and must reapply for the course along with all the other new applicants (school leavers and mature age) for readmission to the university. In addition, diploma students are unable to repeat a failed unit. Their classmates are able to repeat the unit

with no penalty, or, if it is a prerequisite for a second semester unit they may choose a replacement unit.

Diploma students in the nursing stream are required to study two biomedical science units that explore the foundations of human anatomy and physiology. These units cover a vast range of highly complex content and for many first year students, not only in the diploma, these two units are a source of great stress and anxiety. A diploma nursing student became overwhelmed and visibly distraught while in discussions with a diploma student advisor owing to the pressure she and her fellow students faced studying for intensive final examinations required to pass these biomedical science units. However, for the diploma nursing students, they faced the added pressure of having to not only pass these biomedical units, but also achieve a minimum grade of 55 per cent. Other first year nursing students could fail one or both of these biomedical units while still remaining enrolled and progressing through to second year. For the diploma nursing students however, if they failed any one of their units they were ineligible to proceed beyond first year and would have to reapply to the Bachelor of Nursing, competing against other school leavers for a place, in order to continue with their degree.

The added requirements and subsequent stress faced by diploma students that is not reflected in the expectations of standard first year students was also evident for diploma students undertaking the science stream. A diploma science student failed two units and was despondent about not having the option to repeat the units, and his ultimate aim to pursue his desire to do a science degree. The diploma science student continued to participate in the diploma for credits but not as a pathway into a degree. In the science stream students can

choose several electives which operate as a doubled-edged sword, as they may choose units while they do not fully appreciate the impact of not being able to pass. At the end of first year he would have to reapply to the Bachelor of Science and test his luck competing with other school leavers to continue his science degree.

Education students are able to choose between several education specialisations, with different options offered at different campuses. Ordinarily, students would be able to switch between courses at the end of their first semester with no penalty other than catching up on units they had missed in later years. A diploma education student wished to change courses at the end of semester one. In order to do this she became ineligible for automatic progression to the destination degree, even though she had achieved a higher than 60 per cent average for her units. If a diploma student fails a unit in first semester that is a prerequisite for second semester then they are unable to replace this with another unit while their destination degree classmates can.

## **Conclusion**

Pathway courses should be available for everyone, not just those who did not do well. There are some basic first principles – 1) you have the best interest of the students front and centre, 2) an awareness that teaching resources are limited and you sometimes have to make tough choices about what is available (efficiency) - Are pathway programs an efficient use of teaching time and energy? Where is a good compromise?

Diplomas as pathways are short cycle (one year) and provide support and time for students to experience and then reassess their educational aims, so they become informed



navigators. However, the penalties associated with the diploma pathway outlined in this case study serve to disadvantage many students who enrolled in the course with the expectation of progression into their chosen education, science, nursing or business undergraduate degree. In several ways the diploma program does mitigate academic drift and where there are limited subject choices students become better positioned to develop their capacities to navigate courses and coursework after completion. For pathways to become truly enabling in the context of the case study presented in this paper, being able to complete the diploma in full is a key ideal to position students in their future learning prospects. The course rules at this stage prevent this from being a reality for a number of students.

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