

Research Series

Evaluation of the operation of regional Secondary-Tertiary Links Programs



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Secondary-Tertiary Links program seeks to coordinate and publicise tertiary and career-related events, facilitate links between sectors and develop appropriate information materials. Currently, a Coordinator, Secondary-Tertiary Link Activities is responsible for establishing and maintaining links activities and liaising with part-time project officers in the Northern, Peninsula and Capricornia regions. In 1997, TEPA's Advisory Council requested that a review of regional links programs be undertaken to determine whether these activities had improved Secondary-Tertiary Links and whether any alternations were required to the allocation of resources in these areas.

A survey was developed and distributed within the same week to all guidance officers in each of the three regions and to a range of people nominated as suitable by the regional coordinators. The majority of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that it was helpful to have a local Links Coordinator in their region. Helpfulness ratings may have been influenced by the fact that many people appear to have access to the services provided by the Links Program but have not been informed that TEPA is responsible for the Secondary-Tertiary Links Programs.

Interestingly, there were few significant differences between the three regions targeted by the evaluation. Respondents from the Capricornia region made lower ratings than those from Cairns and Townsville in relation to the coordination of tertiary information events, indicating that they perceived that this had not improved as a result of having a local Links Coordinator. It may be the case that the reference committee in Rockhampton was not sufficiently well established before the completion of the research project by the local Links Coordinator.

When rating a question about careers evenings, respondents from Townsville were more likely to disagree that these evenings were more worthwhile since having a local Links Coordinator than the other two centres. As the responses from Townsville were spread over a relatively large geographic area it is likely that these ratings may reflect difficulties the local Links Coordinator has experienced in travelling between schools for careers evenings, while establishing the Tertiary Information event during 1997.

Based on the results of the evaluation there is a number of modifications which could be made to the Links Program which may improve these services in regional areas.

1. As the Links Program in Cairns seems to be both well received and established, it may not be necessary to maintain a Coordinator in this region, especially as there is currently a well established network in operation. It may be more worthwhile to devote these resources to other regions while ensuring that the Coordinator in Brisbane continues to support Links activities in Cairns.
2. Additional support may be necessary in Townsville to ensure that effective secondary-tertiary information provision and events become an established feature of the region. This may entail increased involvement with the Authority's Information Team regarding careers evenings and school visits.
3. It may be necessary to reassess and identify regional areas which require support from the Secondary-Tertiary Links Program. Centres such as Toowoomba or Rockhampton appear to be in need of support from the Authority when in the process of both establishing and maintaining Links activities.

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1: BACKGROUND

In 1993, the Secondary-Tertiary Links Working Party concluded an investigation into 'university-school' linkages and provision of information to students regarding tertiary opportunities. The recommendation that a Coordinator, Secondary-Tertiary Link Activities be appointed was implemented in 1994 and a program was put in place to facilitate the provision of career information and improve awareness of pathway options at the secondary-tertiary interface.

As part of the establishment of links activities in Brisbane, pilot projects were initiated in the Northern and Peninsula regions. Part-time project officers were appointed in Townsville (July 1994) and Cairns (January 1996). The Townsville officer was appointed for two days a week for a period of approximately eight months each year. In Cairns, the project officer undertakes work on behalf of the Authority for one day each week.

An audit was completed in the Capricornia region aimed at designing strategies to address issues relation to the provision and dissemination of career and tertiary related information. During 1996, further research was conducted two days per week for a period of 15 months to assess the area's needs in terms of the demand for Secondary-Tertiary Links services. The Links Committee in Capricornia, representing the relevant stakeholder groups, is currently responsible for the activities in this region.

As the Links Programs are now an established feature of TEPA's information services, the Advisory Council requested that a review of regional activities be undertaken. The primary aims of this investigation were to determine whether the regional programs had improved Secondary-Tertiary Links and whether any alternations were required to the allocation of resources in these areas.

2: THE STUDY

Measures

A survey was developed based on information obtained from previous reports relating to Links programs and discussions with the Coordinator, Secondary-Tertiary Link Activities based in Brisbane (see Appendix A). The rating scale included questions relating to the coordination of tertiary information events and activities between secondary and tertiary sectors (Alpha reliability = .90). Additional comments provided by respondents were content analysed and are contained in Appendix B.

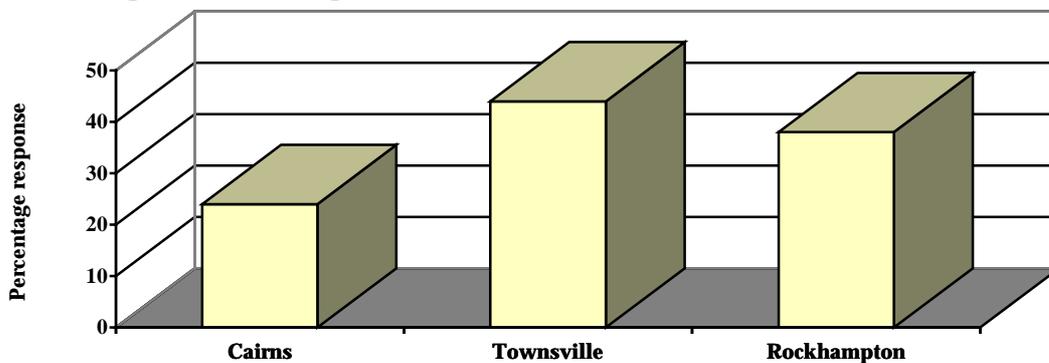
Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed within the same week to all guidance officers in each of the three regions and to a range of people nominated as suitable by the regional coordinators. Respondents were requested either to fax the survey to TEPA or return it in a reply paid envelope at their earliest convenience.

Sample

Response rates differed markedly across the three regions, as shown in Figure 1. Of the 120 surveys distributed to the Cairns region, only 29 (24%) were returned. In contrast, 34 (48%) were received from the 71 distributed throughout the Townsville region and 17 (40%) from the 42 sent to the Rockhampton area.

Figure 1. Response rates to questionnaires.



3: FINDINGS

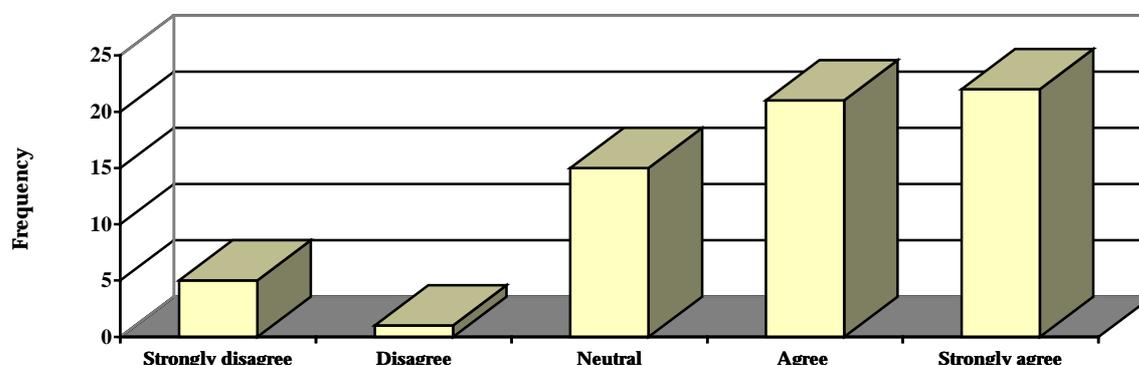
Evaluation of the links program

Overall perceptions of links activities

As can be seen in Figure 2, the majority of respondents either agreed (33%) or strongly agreed (34%) that it was helpful to have a local Links Coordinator in their region. Less than 10 per cent of those who responded did not feel it was helpful to

have a local TEPA representative. It was also evident from the free response comments (see Appendix B) that while some respondents indicated they were unaware of the Links Program in the area, many were able to detail a range of Links Activities. Helpfulness ratings may have been influenced by the fact that many people appear to have access to the services provided by the Links Program but that they had not been informed that TEPA is responsible for the Secondary-Tertiary Links Programs.

Figure 2. Overall ratings of the helpfulness of local Links Coordinator.



Perceptions of aspects of the links program

Ratings made in relation to specific aspects of the Secondary-Tertiary Links Program are detailed in Table 1. On average, respondents agreed that since the introduction of a local Coordinator tertiary information events were better coordinated and promoted, links between sectors had improved, students were more aware of university and pathways options, that it was easier to obtain tertiary entrance information, and careers evenings were more worthwhile. Slightly lower average ratings were made in relation to school and student awareness of TAFE options and whether parent nights and school talks were more informative with a Links Coordinator in the region. It should be noted that all respondents ratings were positive, with no average response indicating a negative perception of any aspect of the Links program.

Table 1. Average ratings of aspects of the Links program.

	Average
Tertiary information events are better promoted	4.0
Tertiary information events are better coordinated	3.9
Schools and students are more aware of university options	3.8
There are better links between schools, TAFE and universities	3.7
It is easier to obtain tertiary entrance information	3.7
Students are more aware of tertiary pathways options	3.6
Careers evenings are more worthwhile	3.5
Schools and students are more aware of TAFE options	3.4
Parent nights and school talks are more informative	3.3

Note: Ratings were made on a five-point scale with 5 reflecting the most positive response.

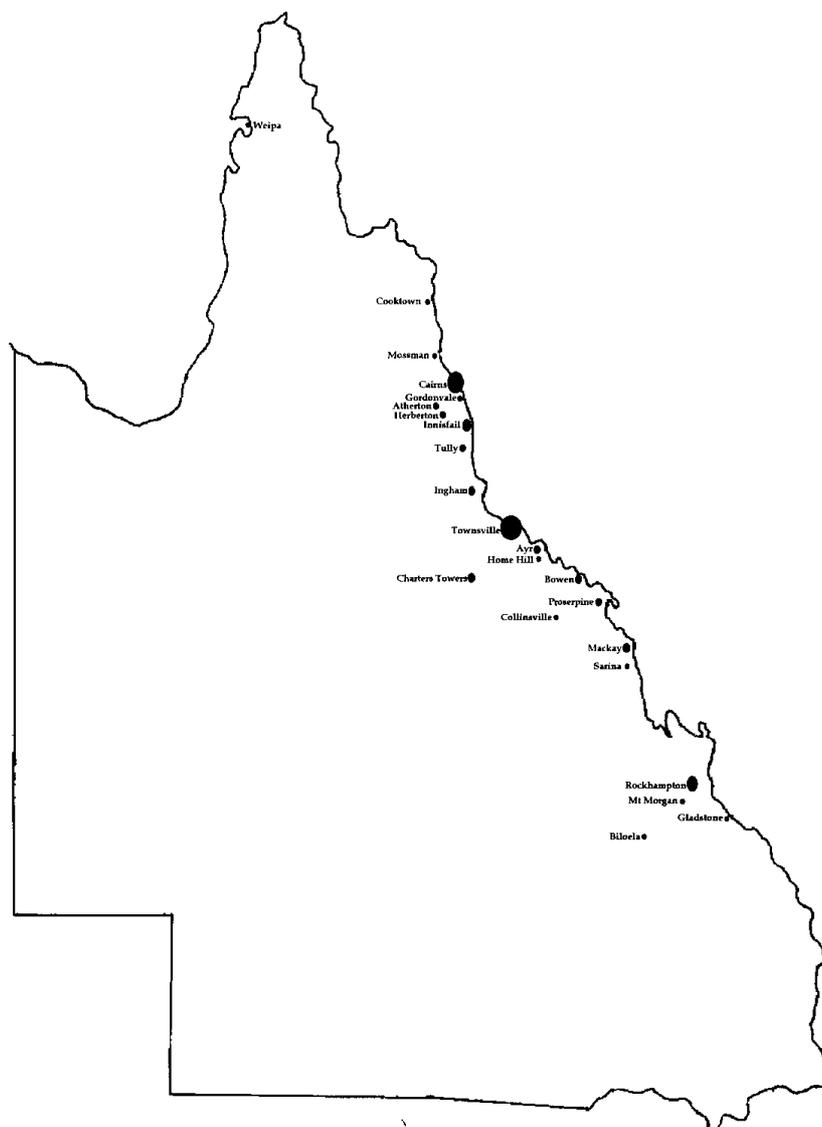
Differences between regions

Despite the fact that the level of service to centres has varied, there were few differences between the three regions targeted by the evaluation. Respondents from the Capricornia region made significantly lower ratings than those from Cairns and Townsville in relation to the coordination of tertiary information events ($F=4.7, p<0.1$), indicating that they perceived that this had not improved as a result of having a local Links Coordinator. It may be the case that the reference committee in Rockhampton was not sufficiently well established before the completion of the research project by the local Links Coordinator.

When rating a question about careers evenings, respondents from Townsville were more likely to disagree that these evenings were more worthwhile since having a local Links Coordinator than the other two centres ($F=4.1, p<.02$). As can be seen from Display 1, the responses from Townsville were spread over a relatively large geographic area. It is likely that these ratings may reflect difficulties the local Links Coordinator has experienced in travelling between schools for careers evenings, while establishing the Tertiary Information event during 1997.

There were no other significant differences between the three groups.

Display 1. Survey responses by location.



Note: Location marker size increases according to the response rate.

4: RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, it appears to be the case that coordination of information and events relating to the secondary-tertiary interface has improved in regional areas since the introduction of Links Coordinators. On average, all respondents indicated that it was helpful to have a local Secondary-Tertiary Links Coordinator in their region.

Based on the results of the evaluation there is a number of modifications which could be made to the Links Program which may improve these services in regional areas.

1. As the Links Program in Cairns seems to be both well received and established, it may not be necessary to maintain a Coordinator in this region, especially as there is currently a well established network in operation. It may be more worthwhile to devote these resources to other regions while ensuring that the Coordinator in Brisbane continues to support Links activities in Cairns.
2. Additional support may be necessary in Townsville to ensure that effective secondary-tertiary information provision and events become an established feature of the region. This may entail increased involvement with the Authority's Information Team regarding careers evenings and school visits.
3. It may be necessary to reassess and identify regional areas which require support from the Secondary-Tertiary Links Program. Centres such as Toowoomba or Rockhampton appear to be in need of support from the Authority when in the process of both establishing and maintaining Links activities.

Appendix A



Evaluation of TEPA's Secondary-Tertiary Links Program [your region]

Survey ID

All information provided in this survey will be treated in the strictest confidence. The identifying survey number will only be used to record differences between regions. TEPA guarantees your anonymity in the conduct and reporting of this survey.

For each of the following statements, please circle one number.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Since the introduction of the Secondary-Tertiary Links Program in [your region],					
Careers evenings are more worthwhile.....	1	2	3	4	5
It is easier to obtain tertiary entrance information.....	1	2	3	4	5
Students are more aware of tertiary pathways options.....	1	2	3	4	5
Parent nights and school talks are more informative.....	1	2	3	4	5
Tertiary information events are better promoted.....	1	2	3	4	5
Schools and students are more aware of TAFE options.....	1	2	3	4	5
Tertiary information events are better coordinated.....	1	2	3	4	5
There are better links between schools, TAFE and universities.....	1	2	3	4	5
Schools and students are more aware of university options.....	1	2	3	4	5
Overall, it was helpful to have a Links Coordinator in [your region]	1	2	3	4	5

If you have any suggestions relating to TEPA's Links Program, please provide comments in the space below.

If you would like to receive feedback about the results of this research or participate in a group discussion about the Links Program, please fill in the following section.

Name _____

Address _____

Phone number _____ Preferred contact time _____

I would like to receive feedback (please circle one) **YES** **NO**

I would like to participate in a group discussion (please circle one) **YES** **NO**

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!

Please fax this sheet to (07) 3234 1508 or use the enclosed reply paid envelope.

Appendix B

Respondents comments

Positive aspects of the Links Programs

- However, I believe local students are quite well served in this area. This may be as a result of this programme.
- However, with the increased work pressure for them it is important to have a Secondary-Tertiary Links Program.
- Some went in private cars and the Education Queensland car and found it very worthwhile
- The Tertiary Information Events are better organised and promoted. It's good to have the representative talk to students to explain how to get the most out of events.
- It is working very well in this region.
- Has been excellent so far.
- Keep up the good work.
- The Secondary-Tertiary Links Program has been extremely worthwhile in the Townsville area. This university has appreciated the efforts of the Links Coordinators.
- It is really useful to have a TEPA representative able to talk/be present for parent information evenings
- Particularly this year the program has run well. A big improvement. I believe the new ideas for 1998 will significantly enhance the information options for students. I am not able to comment on student awareness in comparison with past years because I was not directly involved with students prior to this.
- This year's Secondary-Tertiary Links Program would have to be the best to date. Donna has made an extraordinary effort to contact me and willingly supplies all materials etc.

Unaware of the Links Program or the Coordinator

- As a 'new' secondary guidance officer this year, I've had very little to do with the Links Coordinator - I'm guessing that it's [.]
- Who is the Links Coordinator?
- I was unaware of the existence of this programme.
- Who is the local Links Coordinator? I did not realise there was a Secondary-Tertiary Links Program other than the Tertiary Careers evening which I thought was organised in Brisbane and at the local level by the Cairns Support Centre.
- The Coordinator in Cairns seems to be very low profile.
- Overall, we in Bowen have little contact with the Townsville Secondary-Tertiary Links program. I'm not sure whether it is Townsville doing a lot of coordinating or the statewide TEPA body. Directly, I do not know if Townsville has played any big part in the above situations. I think a TEPA representative (not sure if Townsville based) gave a community talk re OPs, QCS and tertiary entrance in 1996.
- I have completed this evaluation on behalf of Bowen SHS (200 km south of Townsville). As such, the Links Coordinator in Townsville has little or no impact on our school, although we would welcome inclusion in this program.
- I am really unable to comment on the above topics - TEPA itself keeps us pretty well informed, but the above programs have not been readily available in Ingham (120 km north).
- What is the Tertiary Links Program? It seems rural areas are ignored once again. We are aware of functions in Townsville of Tertiary Expo - is this the Links Program?
- I am not really in a position to respond to this survey as I am unaware of this program operating in Rockhampton.
- Sorry, I'm a Developmental GO - no knowledge of the above.
- At present I am not working in the secondary area therefore this has no relevance to my situation.

- I am not personally aware of any extra support, information or coordination from Rockhampton. Please let me know of this service. I must have overlooked the information.
- I'm sorry, but I didn't attend the program.
- I am a developmental guidance officer with little knowledge of TEPA so I cannot comment accurately.
- Not part of this program.

Isolation/Access Difficulties

- A broader service to the Tablelands.
- Distance travelling has meant our students can't always attend - one on the Tablelands would be excellent.
- Should be one [Links Coordinator] in Johnstone area.
- I am relatively new to the Far North Queensland area, so I don't have much basis for comparison. Also I work out of the Cairns area so not as many students have been able to access these facilities/talks. (What would be really helpful would be a subsidy to help pay for a bus to bring the students to the Tertiary Expo!!!). We didn't have enough students to make the cost reasonable.
- Distance is still a problem even between Cairns and Atherton.
- Career evenings are of little use to students outside the Cairns area because of the time and distance. I don't feel the program in Cairns has had any significant impact on information received in school.
- Don't forget students who live too far from Townsville to participate in Townsville-based activities.

Areas for improvement

- TAFE are no longer releasing their course lists until well after Year 12s have left. In fact I have not received a full list of TAFE courses for 1997 at all this year.
- Communication with TAFE colleges has never been really effective and has not improved.
- Information sessions run by TEPA for Careers Teachers e.g. Cairns Market not made available. I would have liked to attend.
- I feel we need to strongly advise the parents of the students what is available. Too often the students don't let them know what's going on.
- Students and parents still seem to be relatively unaware of TAFE and how TAFE fits into pathways. TAFE options appear to be under used and there seems to be an aversion to TAFE study.

Schools Role

- I thought all TEPA information came directly from TEPA. The Careers nights have all been promoted by school-based people. Perhaps I need someone to fill me in.
- Guidance officers and Guidance Services have always provided the information to students and parents.
- Student awareness of tertiary programs is largely due to school based programs.

Suggestions

- A combined schools committee to assist with organising Careers Evenings/Tertiary Expo Event.
- Many Year 12 students had made decisions by the time of Expo. Year 11s found the experience far more rewarding and educational.

- The only obvious contribution is the organisation of the Tertiary Information Event. Of value to me would be a clearing house of TEPA material, updates of course changes, new contacts etc. and regular formal and informal sessions with tertiary contacts.
- Check calendar so dates do not clash with other major events.

Other

- I have not found any change.
- Rockhampton Links Program evolved into a working committee to facilitate ongoing activity in this area. Some gains have been made in better coordination of information and careers expositions. However, the work of the group has been impacted on by other priorities (e.g. Vocational Education initiatives) and the restructuring of Central Queensland University, TAFE and the Education Department.
- The above was not the catalyst but did bring some issues to the attention of organisations. In this region, the promotion of Vocational Education in schools has gone a long way to developing partnerships that assisted the above.
- As far as I know, the Links Coordinator conducted a research project and participated in meetings of representatives of the schools and tertiary sector, including TAFE. It seemed to me that the chief benefit was improved networking.
- The discussions as part of the analysis process were very useful in showing both information and perspectives.