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MOVING TARGETS AND CHANGING LANDSCAPES

THE SECONDARY-TERTIARY TRANSITION: STAKEHOLDER EXPERIENCES
AND CURRENT ISSUES IN QUEENSLAND

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TEPA

Moving targets and changing landscapes

The Secondary–Tertiary Transition: Stakeholder experiences and current issues in Queensland

The following paper summarises the results and recommendations from a range of research projects relevant to Careers Counsellors and Guidance Officers. These studies were conducted by the Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority (TEPA) from 1996–1999 and involved consultation with school principals, Guidance Officers, school and university students, parents, teachers, employers, and staff from universities and TAFEs. Based on these investigations, further questions have been developed to focus future research and service provision activities.

What is TEPA?

The Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority (TEPA) is a Queensland statutory authority that oversees the transition of students from Year 12 to tertiary education. TEPA has specific legislated responsibilities, including a responsibility to confer and collaborate with universities, school systems, schools, the Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies (BSSSS), the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) Ltd, Education Queensland (EQ), the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration (BTR), and the Department of Employment, Training and Industrial Relations (DETIR) (TAFE Qld) *(Education (Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority) Act 1990).* This is achieved in various ways, including research and consultation with these groups, informal interactions with relevant groups, and through TEPA's Advisory Council and the Authority itself, both of which are representative of all stakeholders.

Finding out what's going on—what stakeholders want to know

Originally, TEPA focused on providing information to school students regarding state-based alterations to the senior certification process and entrance to tertiary study. Recently, it became evident that the role of schools was changing, as were student information needs. Due to the limited research in this area and the pursuit of new federal and state policy directions, it was vital that TEPA determine the requirements of all stakeholders prior to developing or modifying information services for these groups.

In 1997, a review of TEPA's suite of written publications revealed that students required more information about post-school options other than attending university. Many requested additional information on pathways to further study and methods by which they could improve their OPs to gain entry to university or TAFE in the future.

As part of TEPA's investigation into access to information about the transition to life after school by students from equity groups, it was apparent that school Guidance Officers were regarded as the primary sources of relevant knowledge. As such, students expected that Guidance Officers would be in a position to provide them with detailed information about employment, university, TAFE,

and other post-school options in an easy to understand, integrated format. It was also expected that information would be readily available regarding financial assistance for further study, apprenticeship/traineeship programs, HECS, links between tertiary courses and careers, and job availability on completion of further study. It was also anticipated that Guidance Officers should be aware of the complete range of special entry and equity-based assistance programs available for students.

During the last five years, developments in relation to vocational education in schools have necessitated improved understanding of the training sector and the associated implications for secondary and tertiary students. Recent research by TEPA has highlighted the difficult position many Guidance Officers and Careers Counsellors are placed in when attempting to assist students who are making decisions in an environment where policy directions change rapidly.

In Queensland, schools have actively pursued a convergence agenda, with many substantially increasing the number of vocational education subjects and experiences available to their students. These educational opportunities have become particularly important as retention rates have increased and schools are required to cater for an increasingly diverse group of senior students. These issues have been further complicated by the introduction of New Apprenticeships into the school system and the commitment by Education Queensland to actively promote school-based apprenticeships and traineeships.

An analysis of the state and federal policy in relation to New Apprenticeship in schools (Porter, 1998) found that Queensland had initiated major policy changes in a very short timeframe. The research revealed that decisions to engage immediately in the provision of New Apprenticeships at school, in the absence of well-developed implementation guidelines may have disadvantaged some students. It was apparent that the overarching policy directions had been well publicised, encouraging the interest of many schools and students, but that operational instructions in relation to New Apprenticeships had been virtually absent. It was also evident that school personnel, such as Guidance Officers, experienced some difficulties understanding the relevant terminology and, in some cases, the definitions were inconsistent. Further analysis suggested that the obvious intersection of vocational education and equity issues ensured that many disadvantaged schools would be unable to provide students with access to these new opportunities.

Questions for TEPA

How can TEPA better communicate to Guidance Officers and Careers Advisers student views on information needs?

What is the best way to update Guidance Officers and Careers Advisers regarding policy changes which may affect information and service provision?

How can TEPA facilitate the flow of information between schools and tertiary institutions?

How can the provision of information regarding the full range of post-school options be improved?

Getting information to the right people at the right time

One of the most significant challenges faced by client-focused, information provision organisations is ensuring that all stakeholders have access to relevant assistance at the most appropriate time. For TEPA, ensuring that resources are understood by the target groups, received at the 'right' time, and found to be useful when decisions are being made regarding post-school options is of paramount importance. During the last three years, TEPA has sought extensive feedback in relation to the services provided by its Information Team.

Concerns were initially raised in 1997, when the review of the suite of information materials indicated that parents, in particular, experienced difficulty remembering whether they had received or read the resources. Many indicated that they were unaware the materials existed until they received the survey. While it was recommended that additional distribution strategies be pursued, such as attempting to mail information directly to parents, TEPA is still attempting to resolve this problem.

It also became apparent during 1997–98 that additional information was required to cater appropriately for the needs of all groups in the student population. As part of an evaluation of a new video, it was found that students who were not eligible for an OP were significantly less likely than OP-eligible students to recommend the video. Taken in conjunction with student comments, this suggested that it may be necessary to develop a targeted resource for students who may not necessarily proceed directly to tertiary study.

With regard to timing strategies, previous research completed by TEPA had suggested schools were distributing some publications at an inappropriate time of the year. Further investigation revealed that, in many cases, the wrong target group was receiving the resources. To ensure that the correct students were provided with the materials at a time when they would be of most use, publication titles were altered and the intended group for each publication was clearly marked on the cover.

A further study was undertaken to determine whether the changes to the resources had improved the situation. TEPA's distribution schedule was mapped against information from schools regarding the timing of their subject selection and careers evenings. Based on this feedback, it was confirmed that Year 10 publications were needed towards the middle of the year for senior subject selection and it was appropriate to send Year 12 publications throughout the year until applications for tertiary study closed. It was also suggested that a detailed resource for Year 10 students be developed for use at the time of subject selection. This recommendation was made in response to the finding that Guidance Officers and Careers Advisers were providing some Year 10 students with complex publications intended for those in Year 11, as a comprehensive resource was not available on this topic.

Findings from a study regarding access to information on post-school options has also suggested that many students would have preferred more assistance when in Year 10. These students, surveyed after they had completed school, commented that they felt Year 12 was too late to be making course and career-related decisions.

Questions for TEPA

What information is most appropriate for students to receive at various stages through their senior years?

Do the resources cater adequately for all stakeholder groups?

How can dissemination strategies be improved in relation to target groups that are accessed indirectly (such as parents)?

School-based information networks

Many of the studies conducted by TEPA suggest that students primarily seek information regarding senior schooling, further studies and careers from within the school. Students interviewed as part of the longitudinal research into subject selection and career decision making indicated that they consulted with a wide range of school personnel including teachers, Careers Advisers, past and present students, Heads of Department, Principals, Year Coordinators, Guidance Officers, and Deputy Principals.

While school Principals and Guidance Officers appeared to have access to the majority of TEPA publications, based on the findings of the 1997 review of information materials, teachers surveyed requested they be provided with information on matters relevant to the secondary–tertiary transition. One outcome of this research was the recommendation that all teachers be provided with pre-service and professional development opportunities relating to tertiary entrance information.

In response, a resource development and evaluation project was initiated by TEPA. It was intended that all pre-service school teachers in Queensland would be provided with a basic understanding of the responsibilities and associated procedures with the Board of Senior Secondary School Studies (BSSSS), the Queensland Tertiary Applications Centre (QTAC) Ltd and TEPA. A resource package consisting of a workbook, discussion activities and presentations was compiled and trialed in all Queensland universities in 1998.

Based on the findings of the evaluation, intending teachers expected to be asked questions by students regarding post-school options. This was thought to be most likely to occur when professional staff were difficult to access, as may be the case in large or remote schools. Intending teachers were also aware that their role in relation to information provision was primarily to support the work of the Guidance Officer or Careers Adviser. Responses from the pre-service teachers suggested that they did not feel as though they should be able to provide detailed information on senior schooling and tertiary entrance but they wanted to have a general understanding of the relevant processes and procedures. The results also indicated that, for intending teachers, knowledge about senior schooling and tertiary entrance matters was relatively limited, as was confidence in relation to discussing such issues with students and colleagues. Interestingly, in some cases where knowledge and confidence was high, there was often a degree of inaccuracy. This was most likely to be the case when intending teachers were referring to their personal experiences and relevant procedures or processes had changed after they had left school or university.

Due to the success of the pre-service teacher training package, Queensland schools were asked to participate in a trial of a professional development module

for use within schools. While the initial response to the trial was extremely favourable and the feedback from schools regarding the material positive, few had the opportunity to use the package with staff. Many cited timing difficulties as a major barrier, while also acknowledging that it was important that all teachers in schools have a basic understanding of issues at the secondary-tertiary interface.

Recent research conducted by TEPA indicates that teachers are widely consulted by students about post-school options. Responses suggested that many students felt that their teachers had a better understanding of their personal skills and abilities than a Guidance Officer or Careers Adviser whom they may have only met on a limited number of occasions. It was also found to be the case that students in schools that only had access to an itinerant Guidance Officer found teachers to be an invaluable source of information.

Questions for TEPA

How can information be effectively disseminated to all relevant school personnel?

How can TEPA ensure that teachers have a basic understanding of procedures relating to the secondary–tertiary transition?

Technology: Making your life easier?

Since its inception, TEPA has attempted to provide information to all stakeholder groups in a range of formats suitable for the widest possible audience. Currently, the majority of the resources are in the form of publications, supplemented by videos, presentations, and our Web Site.

Suggestions at various TEPA meetings and forums frequently relate to the use of technology to provide information regarding tertiary entrance and careers matters. As part of the evaluation of information materials in 1997, it was recommended that a watching brief be maintained on the use of emerging technologies. This was primarily in response to the low level of interest in the use of Internet or CD ROM-based methods of information dissemination shown by students, parents, and school personnel. It was agreed that while there may not currently be a demand for such resources, this may change in the near future as an increasing number of schools have access to the relevant technology.

In 1998, an evaluation conducted in conjunction with the distribution of a new video intended for parents and students (*OPs and tertiary entrance: The facts)* indicated that the resource was not being used to its full potential. Based on feedback from students and parents, it was apparent that the video was not used as part of an integrated session of information provision or as a starting point for discussion about further study and career issues. In response, a small publication detailing appropriate places to pause the video for discussion and links to supplementary TEPA resources was produced.

Due to increased demands on TEPA Information Officers to attend school subject selection nights and careers evenings, it was decided in 1998 to provide schools with copies of PowerPoint presentations used at these events. Three presentations were developed for Years 10, 11, and 12 covering all aspects of the transition from senior schooling to tertiary entrance and beyond. As there were some concerns that school personnel may not have access to the necessary

equipment or may not have the skills to use the software, feedback was sought when the presentations were released. The major finding of the research was that those who responded to the survey were most likely to indicate that they had insufficient time to read or use the resources. This reinforced the view that provision of such information was unlikely to be of use to Guidance Officers if their other responsibilities prevented them from investigating new materials.

As part of an evaluation of new and updated information resources in 1998, it was recommended that, when materials are not supplied to individual students, they be made available on the TEPA Web Site to be downloaded as required. Ensuring that the resources on this site were current would also allow interested parties access to the most recent version at all times. This recommendation was extended to include all information and research publications of interest to stakeholder groups.

An evaluation in progress (*1999 Evaluation of Information Materials)* is seeking to obtain feedback in relation to the Internet site. Currently, TEPA is unsure of the extent to which the information in accessed by electronic means, if client groups are aware that the information is available for downloading, and if there are ways to improve this aspect of TEPA service provision.

> **Questions for TEPA**
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> How can technology assist with providing information to schools in an equitable manner for all students?
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> How can TEPA ensure that Guidance Officers and Careers Advisers are in a position to obtain maximum benefit from using emerging technologies to provide information?
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> Should additional resources be directed towards use of new technologies or should current resources be improved?

Concluding comments

The research conducted by TEPA during 1996–1999 has focused on some of the moving targets and changing landscapes that have been experienced by all members of the education community in recent years. These issues are particularly relevant to Careers Advisers and Guidance Officers attempting to ensure their knowledge remains current. Increased education opportunities in the secondary and tertiary sectors have resulted in students requiring information regarding a wide variety of issues and pathways to facilitate the decision making process. The diverse needs of stakeholder groups, and identifying the most appropriate time to disseminate information to ensure relevance and usefulness, continues to challenge TEPA. Extensive use by students of information networks within the school has highlighted the need to provide accurate information and training to school personnel, especially teachers. Technological developments allow for new approaches to the presentation and dissemination of information but may not be suitable for, or accessible to, all stakeholder groups.

Overall, it is evident that changes in the secondary and tertiary education sectors have necessitated alterations to the content and format of the information provided by TEPA in relation to tertiary entrance. TEPA also needs to continue to improve service delivery while considering recent developments at a macro-

policy level. In this environment, ongoing collaborative consultation with all stakeholders is vital to ensure that information and services needs are fulfilled.

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