

**Series of articles by John Ross Campus Review Higher Education Journalist of the year 2010.
Story 1.**

Articulation problems: has Dawkins bitten off more than he can chew?

[27 Apr 09](#) by John Ross | [Print this story](#) | [Send this story to a friend](#)

Education minister Julia Gillard channelled Australia's "equal but different" binary system of higher education when she responded to the Bradley panel's recommendations for a more integrated tertiary sector. "Two systems, one shared vision: a stronger and fairer Australia," she trumpeted at the Big Skills conference in Sydney in early March.

Gillard wasn't talking about universities and colleges of advanced education. She was talking about universities and vocational education and training (VET). "Two great systems of education, equal in value, driven by separate missions but with a common purpose of preparing Australia for a new age of human capital development," she said.

Gillard also channelled the man who had sounded the binary system's death knell. "The government will commission the Australian Qualifications Framework Council to improve the articulation and connectivity between the university and VET sectors to enable competency-based and merit-based systems to become more student-focused," Gillard said.

In other words, the AQF council – chaired by the 1980s education minister John Dawkins – was being given the job of resolving once and for all the apparently insoluble problem of articulation between VET and universities.

It's not the first time someone's tried. "Many people have looked at it over the past few years," says Erica Smith, professor of education at the University of Ballarat.

But maybe Dawkins is the man for the job, says Ballarat vice-chancellor Professor David Battersby. "In his tenure as a federal education minister, he sought to address some of these issues, and when he looks back he'll probably judge they weren't able to make the headway he wanted. I think he's personally very committed to making sure the qualifications framework is much more robust, more seamless in pathways and credit arrangements."

Dawkins is certainly keen, according to Craig Robertson, a senior VET manager with the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and a fellow AQF council member. "John Dawkins is relishing the opportunity of getting back into the education space and playing a key role," Robertson told a VET researchers conference this month.

Dawkins demonstrated this when he addressed the Australian higher education congress in Sydney in late March. He also demonstrated – if anybody doubted it – that he wasn't shy of a scrap. "The new thing is that we are viewing these barriers to mobility and progress through the eyes of the student or learner. In the past we have placed perhaps too much weight on the institutional point of view.

"We have found that where it suits the institution, pathways will emerge. But where there is no institutional imperative, it's all too hard. The fact that it can be achieved somewhere raises the question: why can it not be done everywhere?"

Dawkins said the AQF council was developing a national policy and guidelines on credit arrangements, to replace the existing guidelines on recognition of prior learning. "The council is also working with Universities Australia to update the joint policy and guidelines on cross-sector qualification linkages for formal connections between qualifications issued within secondary education, VET and higher education," he said.

“These connections will be based on articulation and credit transfer arrangements, but also extend to integrated cross-sector qualification arrangements. The guidelines support a diversity of organisational models. The council will be focused on how to create smooth pathways across the tertiary sector, and in doing so, turn policy into practice.”

Dawkins was clear on his destination, but less so on how he was going to get there. “The idea is fine, but how you go about it – that’s the real issue,” says Geof Hawke, senior research fellow with the UTS education faculty.

Smith agrees it will be no easy road. “The general consensus over the last few years has been that in the end, articulation arrangements are agreed between providers. Although that seems extraordinarily messy, it’s the only thing that people have confidence in.”

Universities don’t take a “messy” approach to school leavers, with admission procedures generally standardised through state-based admissions centres. Yet school leavers now represent less than half of the students admitted to Australian universities, according to Dr Leesa Wheelahan, senior lecturer in adult and vocational education at Griffith’s School of Education and Professional Studies.

That leaves a big opening for VET as a higher education feeder. But VET isn’t a major feeder, Wheelahan says. Australian universities admit only one TAFE graduate for every four school leavers, she says, with most going to the non-elite universities. The Group of Eight universities admit one TAFE graduate for every 23 school leavers, she says.

While this could suggest some sort of prejudice keeping VET graduates out of universities – particularly the sandstones – there are logistical factors at play. Smith says unclear descriptors of qualifications are a big problem. “At many levels it’s very unclear what programs are supposed to achieve. That makes it difficult to think sensibly about articulation pathways – because you’re moving from one thing that’s unclear to another thing that’s unclear. It’s difficult for the sectors to have conversations with each other when there’s a lack of clarity.”

The problem is exacerbated by universities’ self-accrediting status, Smith says. “VET qualifications are usually the same at most providers – not in terms of quality, but in terms of content – because they’re normally based on training packages. But university qualifications can vary a lot among universities, unless they’re very closely tied to a professional body’s requirements.”

Smith says quality concerns are another issue. “To achieve more uniformity – so you could know that if you did a diploma in X, you’d get Y credit – people would have to be very confident in each other’s quality. If you could fix the quality problems with a magic wand things could move along a bit more quickly. But I don’t think the AQF Council can do that.”

Administrative challenges are also holding back articulation, Hawke says. “Dawkins has been talking about a national database, a huge great repository of all results. He’s conceptualising that at least a part of the problem is that there’s no way everybody can easily access the data. There’s some truth in that.”

But the core problem, Hawke says, is that the systems are simply incompatible. “As long as the two systems work on incompatible logics, I find it hard to see how they’re going to get around it,” he says.

“In higher education you’re conceptualising attainment as something which stretches out along a continuum. In a competency-based system there might be a continuum, but you only deal with whether it’s above or below a particular cut-off point. And there may not be a continuum – it might be something that you either can do, or you can’t. Lots of people in industry talk about it in exactly those terms. I think that’s where the problem lies – I don’t think you can easily translate one to the other.”

But Smith says it’s too simplistic to portray one system as merit-based and the other as competency-based. “The assessment method is quite a small bit of the whole curriculum framework in each sector. Universities tend to have a merit-based assessment system to some extent, because they offer

grades. But if you really get down into university practices, they usually have criterion-referenced systems – the grades are attached to criteria.

“There’s no doubt that the pedagogies are different between the sectors. VET is obviously competency-based and its pedagogy teaches to outcomes. But many people in universities would argue they teach to outcomes as well. And with VET being so firmly based on outcomes that are usually skill-based, it’s hard to articulate to a system which is much more knowledge-based. But if you do VET properly, there’s a lot of knowledge in there as well. It’s all very complicated.”

But assessment methods are still a key problem, Wheelahan says. “At one stage competency-based training wasn’t graded, and in many places it’s still not graded. That means universities can’t choose among the students when there’s demand for places. That puts VET students behind the eight ball.”

And while many TAFEs are reintroducing graded assessment to overcome this problem, Hawke says this has caused outcry in industry circles. “People are seeing this as betraying the essential nature of the wonderful developments of competency-based learning,” he says.

So prejudice, quality concerns, unclear descriptors, autonomous accreditation, lack of data about results and fundamentally incompatible systems are all conspiring against articulation. What are the solutions? And more particularly, what can the AQF Council do about it all?

Hawke says the council may be able to be able to make inroads into the systemic incompatibilities – by reintroducing graded qualifications into VET – so long as it isn’t industry-dominated. He says the council needs to be stacked with educational specialists, as opposed to industry representatives or specialists in unrelated fields such as law, engineering and science.

Smith says the national review of training products currently being undertaken by COAG and the National Skills Council (CR, 17.02.09) could also help resolve the incompatibilities by injecting more knowledge content into VET training packages. And if the AQF council is eventually absorbed by a new national tertiary regulator – as Skills Australia has recommended (CR, 21.04.09) – it might be in a position to do something about quality.

But Wheelahan says the council will only be able to solve articulation if it wields a big stick. “In some US states they mandate the level of articulation, so that X students in the top Y per cent get into the doctoral universities. And if they’re in the top 30 or 40 per cent or something, they get into the state universities.

“That results in the elite universities admitting many more students from community colleges. In some states, the elite universities admit one community college student for every two admitted by state universities. In Australia, the Group of Eight admits one TAFE student for every four the rest admit.

“Where universities are bribed or forced, you have high levels of credit and articulation. That’s the lesson.”

Dawkins doesn’t appear averse to waving a stick. So far the AQF has “acted as a guide to those who care to use it,” he told the Australian higher education congress. “The AQF currently has a light touch approach to regulation. Its authority, to the extent it exists, derives largely from an array of Commonwealth and state legislation. We are watching with interest the proposal for a national regulatory authority for the tertiary sector – and the role the AQF may play within this structure.”

Dawkins also said the council was considering a national register of VET students’ results, similar to one being developed in the UK. And he signalled he may move on graded VET qualifications. “Consideration is being given to whether Australia’s framework should, like many overseas, be based on a taxonomy of learning outcomes including a levels-based system,” he said.

Hawke says that at the very least, the AQF Council will take a consultative approach. “Given Dawkins’s history, it’s likely that it will be a more open process than some in recent times in VET – where the policy consultations have been held between the Commonwealth and the state authorities,

and maybe some of the stakeholders and industry people, and some sort of fait accompli has been decided.”

But Hawke remains unconvinced that anything much will be achieved. “I think they’ve identified a problem and committed themselves to it, without really understanding what the challenge is,” he says. “I think it is possible for there to be a sensible system. But it involves so many people and such fundamental changes – I’m not sure how they’re even going to conceptualise what they have to do.

“This is not the first time we’ve seen this. I think they’ll go ahead, set up committees, all those sorts of things. I suspect the appearance will change. But unless somebody’s prepared to tackle the fundamentals, we’re going to have a long drawn out and unsuccessful process.”

Thin edge of the wedge?

[11 May 09](#) by John Ross | [Print this story](#) | [Send this story to a friend](#)

Teaching-only universities have become a non-issue. The Bradley panel settled that by lining up behind the research-teaching nexus. Universities should conduct research in the areas where they offer degrees, the panel found.

But does that mean the research-teaching nexus has to be replicated in every individual? Should every academic conduct research as an intrinsic part of his or her role?

It’s a reasonable question. We have research-only staff. Why not teaching-only? Several universities have reportedly been grappling with the idea, including the University of Sydney which was recently brought to the brink of industrial action largely over this issue.

It’s also a timely question. There’s a widely held view that education minister Julia Gillard’s ambitious higher education completion targets – 40 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds with bachelor degrees by 2025 – can only be met with a helping hand from TAFEs and other non-university higher education providers which generally don’t conduct research.

This prospect has already produced controversy, notably in nursing. Unions bitterly attacked Holmesglen Institute of TAFE’s approval to offer Commonwealth-supported nursing places, claiming the profession would be devalued by allowing non-researching teachers to deliver the program ([CR, 30.03.09](#)).

Nevertheless, most commentators seem comfortable with the idea of degrees being delivered by non-research institutions, so long as they don’t call themselves universities. But what should their teachers be called?

If these are questions for the sector generally, they’re particularly pertinent to university HR departments facing yet another threat to staffing numbers. “As private providers move into associate degrees, they will be a natural place for some of our teaching-only staff – especially those who don’t want to do research,” says UTS vice-chancellor Professor Ross Milbourne ([CR, 14.04.09](#)).

Australian Higher Education Industrial Association executive director Ian Argall agrees some staff could be attracted to non-university providers. But for Argall it’s more than a staffing issue. It’s about productivity.

“Academics are generally employed as if they are active researchers, and we know that this is not true of all of them. We’re paying them as if they’re doing this work, and some of them are not doing it.”

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) senior industrial officer Ken McAlpine has a different view. “Academics know they have to do research. Otherwise their career is dead. When you talk about

teaching-only academics, you're saying we're going to increase your teaching load by one third. We know you'll still do the research – but you'll do that on Saturday and Sunday.”

But Argall argues that publication and research grant statistics show that some academics simply aren't researching. Some, he says, came into the universities in the 1980s during the mergers following the Dawkins reforms. “They were originally employed by the colleges of advanced education with no expectation that they do research,” he says.

Union figures concede that such ex-CAE, teaching-only academics exist, but say most of them have already retired. And if academics aren't hitting home runs in terms of research grants or journal articles, that doesn't prove they're not researching. “People have moved away from defining research as only about published articles in Nature,” says Associate Professor Simon Barrie of the University of Sydney's Institute for Teaching and Learning.

“It can be about a piece of music, or other things that are different, depending on your discipline.”

Another view is that metrics can stifle research. The union says it's relatively easy for established researchers to churn out the requisite number of publications to keep the system happy, but question whether this approach necessarily produces worthwhile research. Measurement to weed out non-performers can also foster a counter-productive atmosphere of surveillance and mistrust, they say.

But Argall argues researchers who aren't scoring in the research metrics may as well not be researching. “Unless it gets out into the public domain, it doesn't exist in a sense. It doesn't exist until it starts affecting the sum total of human knowledge.” Argall says one of his member institutions, like Sydney, recently considered changing teaching loads. “Their basic line is, if they're not doing any research, maybe we should be allowed to increase their teaching,” he says.

“But they're constrained by their enterprise agreement. That university's been arguing about whether the unions will let them change the agreement to enable them to provide more teaching load to non-research-active staff.”

Argall also says bans on teaching-only staff exacerbate casualisation. “If you can't employ someone only to do teaching, then you employ casuals to do it. That's the only way you can easily, readily and cheaply employ people to do that teaching.”

But it was Sydney's attempts to limit casualisation that inflamed the recent conflict at the university. The university wanted to shift casuals onto fixed-term contracts “to create a more stable relationship with our quite large army of casual staff who are essentially in teaching-focused roles already”, according to vice-chancellor Dr Michael Spence.

“They don't have a formal employment relationship of the kind that you need to ensure security for them, and also to provide the kind of stability that is important for our students.”

Spence says the move would also generate administrative savings by enabling these staff to be paid on a year-long rather than a “turn-up” basis. But along with pay and union rights, the prospect of formalised teaching-only roles led the NTEU to threaten a strike last Tuesday. “A teaching-only academic is an oxymoron – it's like a non-treating doctor,” says McAlpine.

“We would see it as taking the whole sector downmarket – provincialism in Australia. The idea that you can have teaching-only academics is not one that would have much international currency.”

That's a “very odd” reaction for a union, Argall argues. “The union complains that casuals have insecure employment. There's a proposal that we give them more secure employment, and the NTEU is opposing it.”

But McAlpine argues the answer to casual employment isn't "creating an army of relatively low-paid, ghettoised, full-time employees with no career opportunities. Academics have not only a right to do research, but an obligation. It's an obligation to their students."

No arguments from Spence. "We are committed to the notion that the difference between university and high school is that universities are not just an environment where understanding is disseminated, but where it's created. Students at a research-intensive institution like this need to be in close contact with people who are conducting research. That's an article of faith for us."

But the question, says Spence, is whether those people need to be researching all the time. "Whether it might be possible to say to your line manager, I'm interested in developing a new course, or focusing on teaching in a particular way, over the next year or two."

"Maybe it works with a member of staff because of their pedagogical interests. Maybe because of their family or personal situation. Maybe they're in a research transition. Maybe they're coming to the end of their career and they don't want to power on in their research until the very end."

"That happens informally, but when it happens, staff are in breach of their obligation to spend 40 per cent of their time on research. We think it is perfectly appropriate that a member of staff should be able to come to an agreement that she'll spend a period focusing on teaching rather than research. It is more honest and open in the way it relates to staff, and it more patently values the teaching strand of an academic career."

McAlpine agrees. "Let's say a person is 59 years old. They're not necessarily at the cutting edge of their research any more. And they only see themselves being in employment for another three years. They don't want to commence some big new research project. And they're considered a really good teacher."

"We recognise that universities are under a lot of financial pressure. We also recognise that it's perfectly reasonable to have flexible arrangements that allow people, by agreement, to move their emphasis into teaching for a period in their career."

So what's the argument about? Points of detail rather than underlying philosophy, according to Spence. "The union tied itself in knots on the difference between a teaching-focused position and a teaching-focused role," he says.

But McAlpine says Sydney originally wanted to "establish a new category of employment of teaching-only positions that would go for three or five years, and then you get the flick. Here's the job, take it or leave it, it's teaching only. That's different to people sitting down in their department and looking at how the interests of the university and students can best be served by different mixes of duties. It's the idea that it can be a condition of employment that you're not entitled to do research."

Sydney University's branch president of the NTEU, Michael Thompson, says the issues were also around the duration of the teaching-only arrangements, whether staff would have an automatic right to resume research, and whether the roles could be advertised. But Spence says advertising is a minor issue. He says the important measure was the university-wide 5 per cent cap on "teaching-focused roles".

This cap was included in the MoU signed by the university and the branch at the end of April ([CR, 04.05.09](#)). Teaching-focused roles were also limited to renewable one-year contracts. "It was about ways of controlling against the danger that a large army of teaching-only oppressed staff might emerge," Spence says.

"That danger is incredibly remote. It's inconceivable that a place like Sydney would want to damage its reputation in that way."

But Argall says that army of staff already exists across the system, in the form of casuals. The NTEU is campaigning to reduce the number of casual staff and improve pay and conditions for those who

remain, but union figures privately concede something also needs to be done to enhance the professional dignity of the teaching-only casuals who'll inevitably remain in the system.

They speculate that there could be a role for teaching-only positions in certain disciplines, for example. But they worry that the universities would use any such concession as a wedge during the next bargaining round to expand teaching-only roles to different staff, faculties or universities. It's about the thin edge of the wedge. No union branch wants to be the one that took its finger out of the hole in the dyke.

But if the thin edge of the wedge is the unspoken reason behind union resistance to teaching-only roles, what about the public reason? How vital is the research-teaching nexus, anyway? Barrie points out that a much-cited 1996 study by Hattie and Marsh found no correlation between the two. "There are some people who are great teachers and great researchers, some people who are appalling teachers and appalling researchers, and some who are good at one and not so good at the other," he says.

Barrie says the debate tends to get "derailed" into a discussion about what an academic should be, partly because of the performance measures around teaching. "Perhaps a solution to this debate lies with understanding the needs of our students and our society," he says.

"Employers and society don't need a bunch of graduates who can recite the contents of a text book. They need graduates who know how to question orthodoxy – people who can cope with and thrive on the sort of uncertainty that's around at present. Employers want graduates who can create new opportunities and solutions to replace the ones that are increasingly ephemeral and vanishing.

"If you think that's what students need, learning about enquiry is at the heart of what they have to learn. So you want the people who are teaching them to be enquiring. It's not about a simple service transmission. It means we have to start thinking about teaching as an intellectually challenging and scholarly activity, not a service we provide consumers."

Barrie says that means teachers need the "ethos" of research, rather than necessarily being research-active. But Spence says it isn't enough to be imbued with the research culture or well abreast of the latest research in a particular discipline – not at his university, at any rate. "There are institutions where there are many staff effectively working on that basis. We don't think that's the space an institution such as Sydney should occupy."

McAlpine agrees. "I might be teaching second year biology, and the field I'm researching might be a tiny sliver of that. It's not like I'm walking into my lecture and telling people the results of my research. Nevertheless, I am generally expected to be supervising honours and PhD students. If I'm not active as a researcher, I can't do that."

But there are arguments that the nexus isn't as critical in some disciplines as others. Students of Spanish, for example, could be more interested in being taught by someone who knows how to speak the language with current authenticity than someone researching the 15th century evolution of the subjunctive.

But Barrie says the inquiring ethos is essential in all disciplines. "For example economics – everyone assumes it's a set of dogmas and dry fact," he says.

"If students were learning those, it's not hard to imagine how you end up in a global economic crisis. There's no one critically questioning the established practice."

Wriggle room: where Cutler and Bradley intersect

[16 Feb 09](#) by John Ross | [Print this story](#) | [Send this story to a friend](#)

The Cutler and Bradley reports have been designed to answer different questions. But they raise some questions about each other, writes John Ross.

The Bradley and Cutler reviews were the two big ticket items in higher education last year, attracting well over 1000 submissions between them. But despite their scope, they occupied different spheres. Cutler's report largely avoided universities, while Bradley's touched only briefly on research.

But where they overlap – university research – they seem to be in furious agreement. And with education minister Julia Gillard and innovation minister Kim Carr understood to be preparing a joint submission to cabinet, to fund whatever they can agree on in the areas where the two reports are interconnected, university research leaders are licking their lips.

The world's financial storm clouds are threatening to rain on the reports' more aspirational recommendations: Bradley's ambitious higher education participation targets and Cutler's push for a world-leading slice of GDP to be invested in innovation. Boosting university research funding seems a relatively modest proposal.

Even before the storm clouds started gathering, Carr was pouring water on any expectation that the government would quickly restore innovation investment to early 1990s levels. "That may cost as much as \$2 billion a year extra," he told the press conference at the launch of Cutler's report. "That's an expenditure claim on any one budget that can't be met – and won't be met." But he attached no such qualification to Cutler's university research funding recommendation.

So, much of the speculation has been about how the finding pie should be carved up – not how big it's going to be. The arguments are around whether the elite universities should retain the lion's share of the funds or get even more, whether funds should be divvied up more evenly, and whether new collaborative distribution channels should be introduced.

But some commentators aren't so sure the pie will be that much bigger – in the short term anyway. Both reports have given the government too much wriggle room, they say.

Bradley takes the nuts and bolts approach of raising the Research Infrastructure Block Grants program from 20 cents to 50 cents for every dollar provided through competitive grants. Cutler takes an in-principle approach – fully funding the costs of university research. Both recommendations apparently carry the same price tag – around \$300 million – even though Bradley's only talking about raising block grants, while Cutler's talking about competitive grants too.

Cutler's approach should cost more, this suggests. But Carr told the press conference it could be less. "It may well be as much as \$300 million a year extra. It may be done at a much lower rate. The costings of these matters are subject to the assumptions that underpin them. It will depend how it's done."

This vagueness is a reflection of the term. Even in the UK – the international flag-waver for full economic costing – research council grants translate to around 80 per cent of the actual costs.

And even in the UK, full economic costing can be more an accounting than a billing exercise – a measure of what universities ****should**** get, not what they ****do**** get. Ian Creagh, head of administration at King's College London, says it can be very hard to persuade industry to kick in for university overheads related to a research project – particularly when the firm already has a business or philanthropic relationship with the university.

And the very concept of full-cost funding could hit a roadblock in the Canberra bureaucracy, where some bean counters don't swallow the argument. Cross-subsidising is a fact of life, they say. All businesses underwrite their less profitable activities by channelling dollars from their more profitable ones. Why should university research be any different?

All this suggests Bradley's nuts-and-bolts approach – meeting indirect costs by raising RIBG – could be more fruitful. But this leaves wriggle room too, commentators say. Bradley's suggesting a big jump,

from 20 to 50 cents in the dollar, and the government might decide to take it in small steps. Maybe 30 cents this year, 35 next year, and so on.

Activity-based costing is another question mark. Some say it's too costly and cumbersome. Others say it's needed to add transparency to university's real costs, in teaching as well as research. Some speculate that activity-based costing may be introduced as a quid pro quo for increased RIBG levels. Or as an incentive for institutions wanting to negotiate even higher levels of RIBG funding. Either way, it would add to universities' administrative costs.

Innovative Research Universities Australia supports Bradley's recommendation, but points out that increased RIBG levels won't improve funding levels for a large chunk of university research. While RIBG is tied to competitive grants, IRUA director Lenore Cooper says, more than half of university research is funded through other sources like industry, councils and state governments.

"The government is quite rightly encouraging universities to work collaboratively with end-users of research. There is a case for government to provide infrastructure funding to support collaborative research of this nature, in addition to research funded through competitive grants," Cooper says.

And while the Gillard-Carr submission will concentrate on areas of Cutler-Bradley overlap, some commentators think the government should also be keeping an eye on downstream effects – when the bow wave from Bradley rocks Cutler's ship. One argument is that Bradley's wholesale increase in university participation will require lots more academics, who will conduct lots more research – and require lots more grants. Will the post-Cutler innovation system be able to afford it?

Another argument is that funding for university teaching has always included an implicit research component, to cover the time academics spend on their research. But under Bradley's voucher funding model, universities and non-university providers will get the same funding for teaching. And under her accreditation model, non-universities may not conduct research. So who's going to pay for academics' research time? Where will the money come from?

The sector may get answers to a few of these questions next month, when Gillard releases her Bradley response. And a few more around budget time. But for most of these questions, it's going to take years.