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Mid-level qualifications in the divided tertiary education systems in Australia and England

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ABSTRACT

The Universities Accord 2024 in Australia and the Augar Review 2019 in England both argue for a more cohesive tertiary education system and consider promoting mid-level qualifications. This paper compares the roles of mid-level qualifications in the two countries' current systems. We review government reports and analyse national statistics, and find that despite England's population being three times larger, Australia's mid-level qualification enrolments were three times higher, mainly driven by Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas. Both countries have intricate networks of mid-level qualification providers and funding systems that prioritise Bachelor's Degrees over mid-level qualifications. However, England has recently announced a new funding policy, the life-long learning entitlement, which was motivated partly to promote participation in mid-level qualifications. In contrast, a significant barrier for Australia is its complex funding system involving both state and federal governments. These findings suggest a need to consider reforms to possibly expand the role of mid-level qualifications.

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KEYWORDS

Mid-level qualification; associate degree; foundation degree; tertiary education; joined up tertiary education system

Introduction

Background

There has been a strong growth in higher education qualifications relative to vocational education qualifications in Australia and England (ABS, 2023; Field, 2018). There have also been increasing concerns about the lack of connectedness between the higher education sector and the Vocational Education and Training (VET) Sector in Australia (Department of Education, 2024), and between the higher education sector and the further education sector in England (Wolf et al., 2016). This has been a concern in both countries for decades, which was reiterated in the English Augar Review (Augar et al., 2019), and the Australian Universities Accord, which is the outcome of the major review of the Australian Higher Education with the final report published in February 2024, chaired by Mary O'Kane (Department of Education, 2024).

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The Australian Universities Accord (Department of Education, 2024, pp. 234–239) argues for ‘drawing together higher education and vocational education sectors’ into a ‘more cohesive’ tertiary education system. It acknowledged that ‘pathways between vocational education and training and higher education are currently fragmented and misaligned, making navigation across sectors very difficult’ (p. 91). Further, it proposes the establishment of a Tertiary Education Commission to drive this change (p. 244), starting with reform in higher education, alongside reform of the Australian Qualifications Framework, which applies to both vocational and higher education. It calls for flexibility in the tertiary system that facilitates both articulation pathways and early exit pathways that allow students doing Diploma, Advanced Diploma or Associate Degrees to earn credits to transition to a Bachelor’s Degree. Meanwhile, early exit pathways ‘recognise the achievements of students who decide to withdraw before completing the entire degree’ by awarding them with recognisable qualifications accordingly’ (p. 97).

Five years earlier, the Augar review (Augar et al., 2019) of post-18 Education and Funding in England reached some very similar conclusions. The review argued for ‘a joined-up system that is accessible to all, supported by a funding system that provides value for money and works for students and taxpayers, incentivises choice and competition across the sector and encourages the development of the skills that we need as a country’ (p. 9). The Review also placed a particular focus on ‘the missing middle’ which has recently been described as ‘part of a broader and inequitable polarisation between those who go to university and the rest of the population who select from a set of often low-level technical alternatives to university’ (Field & Tahir, 2022 section 3, para 1). These mid-level qualifications, as they argued, could offer a way of reducing the earnings gap between university graduates and others.

Research aims

This paper investigates what role mid-level qualifications plays in the tertiary education systems in Australia and England. Mid-level qualifications refer to the group of qualifications at level 5 and 6 in the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF), specifically Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Associate Degree and at level 4 and 5 in the English Regulated Qualification Framework (RQF), including Foundation Degree, Higher National Diploma, Higher National Certificate, Certificate of Higher Education, and Diploma of Higher Education (see Table 1). The AQF comprises 10 levels, starting from Certificate I (entry-level) to Doctoral Degree (level 10 – highest level) (AQF, 2021), while

Table 1. Mid-level qualifications in Australia and England.

Australia			England		
AQF level	Vocational	Academic	Vocational	Academic	RQF level
Level 6	VET Advanced Diploma	HE Advanced Diploma Associate Degree	Higher National Diploma	Diploma of HE Foundation Degree	Level 5
Level 5	VET Diploma	HE Diploma	Higher National Certificate	Certificate of HE	Level 4

the RQF comprises nine levels, ranging from Entry Level to Level 8 (Pearson Education Ltd, 2024).

Sitting in the middle, these qualifications can, in principle, serve as a conduit for joining up the two sectors into a more cohesive system that works effectively for all stakeholders. However, there is a limited understanding of the role that mid-level qualifications play in the tertiary education systems. Investigation into this would bring insight into systematic factors that promote or hinder mid-level qualification participation. This knowledge is expected to inform future policy-making and guide the development of strategies aimed at creating a more integrated system.

Research methods

To understand the characteristics of the qualifications, we review government reports. To examine the scale of provision of these qualifications, we draw on national statistics on student enrolments. For Australia, we use data from the National Central for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), and Higher Education Statistics from the Australian Department of Education. For England, we obtain data from the Department of Education (the Further Education and Skills statistics), and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

Additionally, to understand enablers and barriers for students and providers to participate in these, we review the literature on the provider systems, the credit transfer systems, and the funding systems. Finally, insights from a series of consultation with experts (see their details in our acknowledgement) in tertiary education policies from both countries also contribute to the discussion.

Characteristics of mid-level qualifications

The Australian Associate Degree versus the English Foundation Degree

The Australian Associate Degree

The Associate Degree was introduced officially into the AQF, sitting at level 6 in 2004 (AQF, 2004), although it emerged in the Australian tertiary sector earlier, in the 1990s at a time of structural innovation in both education and industry (Smith, 2013). There is very little documented history of the Associate Degree and a lack of established practice standards to guide Australian tertiary institutions in developing these programmes (Smith, 2013). Moreover, the inclusion of the Associate Degree in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) was not driven by a strong national policy. Unlike the introduction of the Foundation Degree in England, the Australian Associate Degree was quietly added to the AQF in 2004, based on recommendations from a discussion paper by I. Allen and Gientzotis (2003) commissioned by the AQF, without a national inquiry (Smith, 2013).

Despite its decentralised nature in implementation, a broad consensus emerged regarding the key characteristics and functionalities of the Associate Degree (Smith, 2013). According to Tan (2010), the Australian Associate Degree, although similar in name to the US's Associate Degree, is more aligned with the philosophy of the English Foundation Degree. It aims to address mid-level skill shortages in the workforce by

providing a broad-based entry point into employment instead of merely serving as a pathway to higher education as the US's Associate Degree (Tan, 2010). The purpose of the Associate Degree, as stated in the AQF, is to equip individuals with foundational technical and theoretical knowledge applicable across various contexts, enabling them to engage in paraprofessional roles and providing a stepping stone for further educational endeavours (AQF, 2021).

The English Foundation Degree

Equivalent to two-thirds of a Bachelor's Degree, a Foundation Degree is valued at 240 credits within the RQF, situated at level 5. It was introduced in 2000–2001, following government investigations concerned with revamping higher education meet labour market demands (Longhurst, 2010; Smith, 2013). This qualification was designed to serve multiple objectives, including 'skills development and training; enabling progression to bachelor degrees; and increasing flexibility in, and access to, higher education' (Gallacher et al., 2012, p. 384). According to Gallacher et al. (2012), the shift from the single focus on vocational training to inclusion of other objectives has created ambiguity about the role of these programmes, as the different goals they aim to meet are not always compatible. However, according to Longhurst (2010), one advantage of the Foundation Degree is that it can overcome outdated educational models that separate academic education from vocational training, and create hierarchy between higher education and VET.

According to Longhurst (2010), there are five characteristics that define the unique identity of the Foundation Degree. The first characteristic is accessibility to higher education. Foundation Degrees attract a diverse student body, particularly those from ethnic minorities, mature students, and lower socio-economic backgrounds (Greenbank, 2010).

The second characteristic is the pathway progression from VET to HE. According to the QAA Qualification Benchmark Statement, universities were required to provide foundation degree students with the opportunity to advance to one or more honours degree programmes, typically with an additional year of study (Longhurst, 2010; Shreeve, 2009). Research suggests students primarily use Foundation Degrees to progress to honours degrees (Beaney, 2006; Burke et al., 2009; Dodgson & Whitham, 2004; Greenbank, 2010).

The third characteristic is the involvement of employers in designing and developing the curriculum and assessment (Higginbotham, 2023; UCAS, 2024). The Foundation Degree was designed to respond to ongoing employer feedback indicating that many young students and graduates are not sufficiently prepared for the workforce (Kingston, 2009).

The fourth characteristic is flexibility, which encompasses the use of technology to facilitate learning, offering distance education options, and programme delivery tailored to meet the varied requirements of students (Longhurst, 2010).

The fifth characteristic of Foundation Degrees involves partnerships among universities and colleges, and employers, and notably, with students. Foundation Degrees are structured based on specific goals and learning results, which are mutually decided by the provider, the employer, and the student all under a formal learning agreement (Longhurst, 2010).

Other mid-level qualifications

The Australian Diploma and Advanced Diploma

Sitting at level 5 in the AQF, the Diploma is a one-year qualification that is designed to provide graduates with a broad range of specialised knowledge and skills for professional work and further learning (AQF, 2021). The Advanced Diploma, which is positioned at level 6 in the AQF, is a two-year qualification (the standard time can be reduced to 18 months with valid Recognition of Prior Learning) (Karmel & Lu, 2012). According to the AQF (AQF, 2021), the purpose of the Advanced Diploma is to provide individuals with specialised knowledge in various settings to perform advanced skilled or paraprofessional tasks, and to provide a route for further study.

Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas can be either delivered as VET or HE qualifications (Noonan et al., 2019). Distinct from the long-established VET counterparts, the HE Diploma and Advanced Diploma have a relatively recent history, emerging in the AQF in 1995 (Noonan et al., 2019). With regard to programme design, the VET Diploma or Advanced Diploma focuses on practical skills and competencies directly related to specific industries or trades and aim to prepare students for immediate entry into the workforce with job-ready skills (Noonan et al., 2019). In contrast, HE Diploma and Advanced Diploma are designed to provide a more academic and theoretical education and aim to prepare for professional careers requiring a deeper theoretical understanding, or serve as a pathway to further higher education, such as a Bachelor's Degree (Noonan et al., 2019).

The English HNC, HND, CertHE, and DipHE

The Higher National Diploma (HND) and Higher National Certificate (HNC), which are equivalent to the Australian Diploma and Advanced Diploma were introduced in the 1920s as a result of English government's effort to expand education after the First World War (Wonkhe, 2014). In the 1970s and 1980s, HNDs and HNCs played a pivotal role in the offerings of polytechnics (Wolf et al., 2016). However, these qualifications have undergone a significant decline since the disappearance of polytechnic institutes in 1990s (Wolf et al., 2016).

HNCs sit at level 4 while HNDs are at level 5 of the RQF. The curriculum of an HNC/HND usually includes a mix of theoretical study and practical training, with a focus on developing industry-specific skills and knowledge (Crimson, 2023). Upon successful completion of an HNC/HND, students may choose to enter the workforce directly, using their qualification to secure entry-level positions in their chosen field. The primary distinction between an HND and a Foundation Degree, which sits in the same RQF level, lies in their approach to coursework. The former concentrates on creating a portfolio of work-related assignments without requiring essay writing, whereas the latter incorporates a blend of work-related projects and academic assignments (ukstudyonline, 2022).

The Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) and the Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) were introduced in the United Kingdom as part of the broader reforms in higher education during the 1970s (Parry et al., 2017). CertHE is a one-year academic qualification at level, which is equivalent to the vocational HNC qualification (QAA, 2024). CertHE provides foundational knowledge in a particular subject and can be earned as an independent qualification, or serve as a pathway towards completing a Bachelor's

Degree programme. DipHE also sits on the academic strand, one level higher than CertHE. The DipHE requires 2 years of study and offers more advanced learning, with the potential to progress directly into the workforce or continue into the final year of a Bachelor's Degree programme (QAA, 2024). Compared to Australia, the English CertHE is equivalent to the HE Diploma while the DipHE is equivalent to the HE Advance Diploma.

Concluding remarks of mid-level qualifications' characteristics

In summary, despite different characteristics at the micro-level, mid-level qualifications serve similar functions in both countries. They aim to foster a more joined-up approach to tertiary education by focusing on both vocational skills and theoretical knowledge (with variations between specific qualifications). They can be used to obtain employment or pursue higher-level qualifications. They also serve as pathways to transition to Bachelor's Degree programmes.

Student enrolments

This section examines the prevalence of mid-level qualifications in Australia and England from 2018 to 2022. This timeframe was chosen for its relevance to current policy discussions, particularly the Augar Review and the Universities Accord. Additionally, data availability, comparability, and recent changes in data collection methods in both countries (e.g., NCVER's 2015 changes to include total programme enrolments for diplomas and advanced diplomas in Australia and the consistent assessible data from HESA available from 2017/18) limited the scope to the most recent five-year period.

Mid-level qualification versus Bachelor's degree enrolments

Between 2018 and 2022, enrolment trends in Bachelor's Degrees and Mid-Level Qualifications differed between Australia and England (see Table 2). In Australia, Bachelor's Degree enrolments increased slightly but then declined in 2022, while Mid-Level Qualifications enrolments fluctuated within a narrow range. This resulted in a relatively stable ratio of Bachelor's Degree to Mid-Level qualifications enrolments, averaging around 2.5.

Table 2. Bachelor's degree versus mid-level qualification (MLQ) enrolment ratio from 2018 to 2022.

Year	Australia			England		
	Bachelor's degree	Total MLQ	Bachelor's degree/total MLQ	Bachelor's degree	Total MLQ	Bachelor's degree/total MLQ
2018	992,089	394,940	2.51	1,657,020	117,445	14.11
2019	1,005,614	389,510	2.58	1,690,225	112,165	15.07
2020	1,007,034	392,700	2.56	1,735,570	116,740	14.87
2021	1,016,411	415,355	2.45	1,847,635	115,020	16.06
2022	981,833	378,720	2.59	1,883,860	116,210	16.21

Sources: Collated and inquired data from Higher Education Statistics (Department of Education, 2023) and NCVER Research & Statistics (NCVER, 2024) for Australia and from Higher Education Student Statistics (HESA, 2023) for England.

In contrast, England experienced a significant increase in both Bachelor's Degree and Mid-Level Qualifications enrolments. However, the ratio of Bachelor's Degree to Mid-Level Qualifications enrolments in England grew substantially during this period, starting at 14.11 in 2018 and reaching 16.21 in 2022. This suggests that Bachelor's Degrees are the dominant higher education pathway in England, while Mid-Level Qualifications play a more substantial role in Australia. The dominance of Bachelor's Degree in England is attributed to the removal of undergraduate student cap in 2015 and the funding system that biases against lower-level qualifications (Office for Students, 2020; Wolf et al., 2016).

Overall, despite its population being three times smaller, Australia's mid-level qualification enrolments were three times higher than England's.

The Australian associate degree versus the English foundation degree

Table 3 compares the numbers of Associate Degree and Foundation Degree enrolments from 2018 to 2022. During this period, the enrolment trends for Australian Associate Degrees and English Foundation Degrees followed distinct patterns. Australian Associate Degree saw a steady increase in enrolments from 11,564 in 2018 to 12,730 in 2021, before slightly declining to 12,031 in 2022. In contrast, English Foundation Degree enrolments consistently decreased over the same period, dropping from 30,000 in 2018 to 24,685 by 2022.

The percentage of Associate Degree enrolments over total mid-level qualification in Australia was consistently lower than the percentage of Foundation Degree enrolments in England throughout 2018–2022 (Table 3). While Australia's Associate Degree enrolment percentages hovered around 3%, England's Foundation Degree enrolment percentages were higher, starting at 29.84% in 2018 and gradually decreasing to 25.02% in 2022. This indicates that, despite the decline, Foundation Degree enrolments in England were proportionally more significant than Associate Degree enrolments in Australia.

Other mid-level qualifications

Between 2018 and 2022, Australia saw a stable trend in VET Diploma and Advanced Diploma enrolments, with proportions consistently around 84% of total mid-level qualification enrolments (Table 4). In contrast, HE Diploma and Advanced Diploma enrolments in Australia ranged from 11.5% to 14.13%, which is much lower than the data

Table 3. Number of Associate Degree (AD) and Foundation Degree (FD) enrolments, and as a proportion of mid-level qualifications (MLQ), from 2018 to 2022.

Year	Australia			England		
	AD enrolment	Total MLQ	AD/total MLQ	FD enrolment	Total MLQ	FD/total MLQ
2018	11564	394940	2.93%	35045	117445	29.84%
2019	12105	389510	3.11%	33630	112165	29.98%
2020	12086	392700	3.08%	31600	116740	27.07%
2021	12730	415355	3.06%	30880	115020	26.85%
2022	12031	378720	3.18%	29080	116210	25.02%

Sources: Collated and inquired data from Higher Education Statistics (Department of Education, 2023) for Australia and from Higher Education Student Statistics (HESA, 2019, 2022) for England.

Table 4. 2018–2022 enrolment numbers and percentages for Dip and Adv Dip in Australia and HND, HNC, CertHE, Dip HE in the UK.

Year	Australia				England			
	Vocational qualification		Academic qualification		Vocational qualification		Academic qualification	
	VET Dip & VET Adv Dip enrolment	Vocational qualification/total MLQ	HE Dip & HE Adv Dip enrolment	Academic qualification/total MLQ	HND & HNC enrolment	Vocational qualification/total MLQ	CertHE & DipHE enrolment	Academic qualification/total MLQ
2018	335,245	84.89%	53031	13.43%	28,240	24.05%	54,160	46.12%
2019	330,130	84.76%	53770	13.80%	23,615	21.05%	54,920	48.96%
2020	330,810	84.24%	55472	14.13%	20,985	17.98%	64,155	54.96%
2021	352,340	84.83%	47771	11.50%	20,540	17.86%	63,600	55.29%
2022	321,450	84.88%	48433	12.79%	18,065	15.55%	69,065	59.43%

Sources: Collated and inquired data from Higher Education Statistics (Department of Education, 2023) and NCVER Research & Statistics (NCVER, 2024) for Australia and from Higher Education Student Statistics (HESA, 2019, 2022) for England.

Table 5. Students with mid-level qualifications prior to enrolment in a Bachelor's degree programme in England.

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022
HNCs, HNDs, FD, DipHE, CertHE	55,790	58,850	57,495	56,775
Total domestic Bachelor's Degree commencements	423,195	448,465	439,140	445,130
% of students entering Bachelor's Degrees with other undergraduate qualifications	13.2%	13.1%	13.1%	12.8%

Data collated from Higher Education Student Statistics (HESA, 2023).

Table 6. Students with a Bachelor's degree enrolling in diplomas and advanced diplomas in Australia.

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Advanced diploma	9,065	9,795	10,890	11,925	10,610
Diploma	52,820	52,885	54,115	61,755	54,430
Diploma & Advance Diploma	61,885	62,680	65,005	73,680	65,040

Source: VOCSTAT Data builder (NCVER, 2024).

for VET counterparts. This indicates that vocational education at the diploma level is more prominent in Australia compared to higher education diplomas.

In England, the trend was different. Enrolments in vocational qualifications, specifically HND and HNC, showed a steady decline in percentages, from 24.05% in 2018 to 15.55% in 2022. On the other hand, enrolments in academic qualifications, including CertHE and DipHE, saw a slight increase in percentages, from 46.12% in 2018 to 59.43% in 2022. This suggests that HE mid-level qualifications are relatively more significant in England compared to vocational qualifications. Furthermore, VET Diploma and Advanced Diploma enrolments in Australia were significantly higher than HND and HNC enrolments in England throughout the period (over 84% compared to under 24%).

The comparison also highlights that in Australia, vocational qualifications at the diploma level are more prominent, while in England, academic qualifications have a relatively higher enrolment percentage. The most striking finding of all is the importance of the VET Diploma and Advanced Diploma in Australia. Of all the mid-level

qualifications under consideration in this paper, these are far and away the most significant in terms of enrolment growth.

Overall remarks on student enrolment

In summary, Australia's mid-level qualification enrolments were three times greater than England's although its population is three times smaller. Australia has a significantly higher proportion of enrolments in mid-level qualifications compared to England, while England has a higher proportion of Bachelor's Degree enrolments than Australia. Vocational qualifications at the diploma level are significantly more prevalent in Australia, whereas academic qualifications have a higher enrolment rate in England. Additionally, Foundation Degree enrolments in England are proportionally more significant than Associate Degree enrolments in Australia. Overall, compared to Australia, England saw a stronger preference for academic-focused qualifications. More importantly, the most striking finding is the importance of VET Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas in Australia. There are no mid-level qualifications in England that are anywhere near as significant.

Student mobility across sectors

A cohesive tertiary education system facilitates student mobility across sectors, while a divided one blocks it (Curtis, 2009). Therefore, it is important to understand whether the current operation of mid-level qualifications facilitate student mobility, which refers to the transfer from one to another qualification within the tertiary system, which is not time-bound.

Transition from mid-level qualifications to Bachelor's degrees

For decades, both Australia and England have tried to address the challenge of student transfers between vocational and higher education. Over the years, efforts have focused on understanding the transition from vocational to higher education (Moodie, 2010; Moodie et al., 2013; Wheelahan, 2009). However, comprehensive nation-wide data on the numbers of students using vocational pathways are not available. In what follows, we draw on various available data sources to sketch an overview of student mobility.

In England, the proportion of students enrolling in Bachelor's Degrees with prior qualifications as HNCs, HNDs, FDs, DipHEs, and CertHEs has remained relatively stable in recent years (see Table 5). Note that the numbers are not exclusive of those who had mid-qualifications but were admitted on other bases. In 2019, 13.2% of Bachelor's Degree students had such qualifications, and this figure only slightly decreased to 12.8% by 2022.

In Australia, according to Universities Australia (2022), between 2008 and 2020 the proportion of students admitted to bachelor's degree programmes through prior higher education and vocational qualification rose from 33% to 40%, while the percentage of students admitted on secondary education decreased from 50% to 43%. A survey of student completions of top 100 VET courses finds that the percentage of students that commenced higher education after completing a VET course (which includes level 1 to level 6 qualifications) was 6.7% on average in 2019 (Jobs and Skills Australia, & Australia

Government, 2023). Top five qualifications with highest progression to higher education programmes are Diploma of Nursing (35.0%), Diploma of Information Technology (29.5%), Diploma of Business (23.5%), Diploma of Screen and Media (20.9%), and Diploma of Accounting (20.6%). Taking Diploma in Construction and Building in 2020 for instance, 8.3% of completed students enrolled in BA programmes (Master Builders Australia, 2021).

Transition from Bachelor's degrees to mid-level qualifications

In Australia, the numbers of students with a Bachelor's Degree, enrolling in diploma and advanced diploma programmes increased consistently between 2018 and 2022 from 61,885 to 65,040 total, peaking at 73,680 in 2021 (see Table 6). A possible account for the sharp increase in 2021 is the introduction of policy measures in 2020 and 2021, which aimed at promoting adult participation in VET programmes in a response to the economic impact of COVID-19 (NCVER, 2021).

In England, data on the number of students enrolling in mid-level qualifications after completing a Bachelor's Degree is not publicly available. Our discussions with an English expert revealed that the system discourages highly qualified students from pursuing equivalent or lower-level qualifications. Furthermore, due to the small number of students in this cohort, it has not been systematically recorded.

Final remarks on student mobility across sectors

In conclusion, while Australia and England share a common goal of facilitating transitions, their experiences differ. Australia's HE sector has seen a consistent influx of students with prior VET qualifications. However, data limitations in Australia hinder a comprehensive understanding of student mobility, while England's system provides more clarity in transitions from mid-level qualifications to Bachelor's Degree programme although the figure is relatively small.

Australia observed a trend of Bachelor's Degree graduates enrolling in VET programmes, particularly post-COVID. This data, is, unfortunately, not available in the public domain in England, which presents obstacles to fully understanding its scope and impact. Addressing data gaps in both countries is not only helpful for providers to guide their curriculum planning, but also essential for policy-makers to better understand and support student mobility, ensuring that individuals have the flexibility to pursue fulfilling educational and career paths.

Systemic enablers and barriers

The provider systems

There are a number of similarities and differences between the two countries' provider systems of mid-level qualifications. Both countries have four major types of providers: public and private higher education providers, public VET providers (known as TAFE colleges in Australia, and Further Education (FE) colleges in England), and private VET providers (known as private registered training organisations or RTOs in Australia, and

alternative providers in England) (Gale et al., 2013; Hubble & Bolton, 2019; Wolf et al., 2016). The second similarity is that the majority of higher education qualifications are provided by public universities, which have the authority to accredit their own higher education degrees. Third, private providers and public providers of VET can apply for power in accrediting their own higher education qualifications although the numbers of providers going through this path in England are not high. Providers without awarding power of HE qualifications need to collaborate with universities in conferring the qualifications. One difference is that Australia has a higher number of dual-sector institutions who have degree-awarding powers and administrative procedures in place to provide both VET and higher education qualifications (Gale et al., 2013). In 2016, there are 86 institutions registered as dual-sector institution in Australia (Fowler, 2017; Norton & Cakitaki, 2016). Among these 86 institutions are six dual-sector universities, including RMIT University, Victoria University, Federation University, Charles Darwin University, Central Queensland University, and Swinburn University, which account for large proportions of student enrolments (Atkinson, 2020).

In England, colleges and universities that offer both further and higher education are referred to as dual-sector or mixed-economy providers. The majority of these providers have the authority for teaching but not necessarily for awarding higher education qualifications. Degrees are legally owned by the awarding institution rather than the state, and the power to award degrees is regulated by law, and institutions must meet high standards to obtain this authority (J. Allen & Parry, 2022). Until 2016, only one college group had been granted full authority to award taught degrees. Only a few further education colleges combined with higher education institutions to create Australian-style dual-sector universities (Bathmaker et al., 2008).

Another difference is the Australian TAFE colleges and the English FE colleges, key providers of VET, do not share similar roles. While TAFE colleges have the key responsibility in providing vocational education, FE colleges expanded their role to providing a variety of post-16 education programmes, including A-levels, which serve to prepare students for university entrance (Wolf et al., 2016). More importantly, FE colleges face unique barriers in providing mid-level qualifications that TAFE colleges do not experience. FE colleges need to pay fees to a private company, Pearson, which owns the HNC and HND and collaborate with higher education institutions in providing Foundation Degree programmes (Wolf et al., 2016). In contrast, TAFE colleges can offer VET diplomas and VET advanced diplomas, which have the highest enrolment rate of all mid-level qualifications, without going through relying on higher education institutions for accreditation purposes. Additionally, the Universities Accord recommends that TAFEs offering higher education move towards self-accrediting status (Department of Education, 2024).

Nested qualifications and the credit recognition systems implementation

The qualification frameworks in both countries provide guidance for providers in offering nested qualifications (Department of Education, 2024; GOV.UK, 2020). These qualifications offer a pathway for students to progress through a series of interconnected courses, where each level builds upon the previous one. For instance, a student may start with a certificate III, advance to a diploma, and ultimately earn a Bachelor's Degree

within the same field. This flexible structure also allows students to exit with a recognised qualification at various stages and return later to continue their education (Australia Government, 2024a).

Both countries have credit recognition systems in place to support student mobility across qualifications. In Australia, some states and territories have developed their own initiatives, such as the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority's Credit Matrix, which maps VET qualifications with HE courses (Kift et al., 2023; Noonan et al., 2019). Similarly, England uses a system aligned with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) to facilitate the recognition of prior learning and qualifications through a credit-based structure (QAA, 2021). However, both nations lack a unified national policy to guide credit transfer; as a result, institutional agreements play important roles in facilitating credit transfer (Brennan, 2021).

With no unified national guidance, both countries continue to experience barriers in supporting student transfer between VET and higher education sectors. In Australia, challenges arise from differing expectations between VET and university sectors regarding independent study and assessment (Hurley & Pilcher, 2023). Differences in assessment approaches often result in students transitioning from TAFE to universities receiving limited block credit for their Diploma or Advanced Diploma qualifications (Fowler, 2017). Similarly, in England, the number of student transfers between sectors remains low, partly due to curriculum differences and a lack of collaboration among providers (Brennan, 2021).

The funding systems

Australia's and England's funding systems for tertiary education share one significant similarity: income-contingent loans. This loan scheme was first introduced in Australia in 1989 under the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (Hurley & Pilcher, 2023). Income contingent loans are a key component of the Higher Education Loan Program, which assists eligible students in paying tuition fees in higher education courses. Over time, the programme has evolved, and additional loan types have been added, such as VET FEE-HELP for VET students enrolled in high-level vocational qualifications, especially diplomas and above. In 1998, a decade after Australia, England introduced income-contingent loans for students enrolled in university courses (Wolf et al., 2016). Additionally, advanced learner loans were introduced in England in 2013/14 to support adult learners aged 19 and over who are undertaking eligible further education courses, including vocational qualifications, diplomas, and certain A-levels (Wolf et al., 2016).

Compared to England, Australian providers and students need to navigate through a more complex funding system for mid-level qualifications. Complexities not only come from the two levels of government, but also from multiple funding schemes (Hurley & Pilcher, 2023). The Australian government provides substantial funding for tertiary education through the provision of income-contingent loans and the Commonwealth Grants Scheme programme, which pays a portion of the tuition fees. State and territory governments also contribute funding to tertiary education for VET qualifications.

More importantly, the funding complexity also impedes participation from VET providers in delivering mid-level qualifications. VET providers, funded by state/territory governments, are typically excluded from the Commonwealth Supported

Places programme, unless their courses are directly related to current national priorities, or they have research grants tied to national priorities (Gale et al., 2013). Generally, funding for VET and higher education is distinct. Only a few TAFEs receive Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs); for instance, Holmesglen receives direct funding for nursing degrees, but that is an exception. To gain access to Commonwealth Supported Places funding on these grounds, they need to partner with universities (Gale et al., 2013). TAFE institutes' access to funding is limited due to government policy, which generally restricts public funding for undergraduate programmes to public universities, although this policy has become more flexible over the years. The Australian Universities Accord 2024 recommended increasing the amount of CSP to TAFE institutes (Department of Education, 2024).

In contrast, England experiences a different kind of challenge. The current English funding system promotes the expansion of Bachelor's Degree at the expense of mid-level qualifications (Wolf et al., 2016). Public funding for mid-level qualifications has decreased and the restrictions on student loans resulted in a majority of students choosing a degree programme over mid-level qualifications (Wolf et al., 2016). Students are provided with a singular tuition loan associated with a degree programme, offered only once. Therefore, universities lack financial motivation to provide mid-level qualifications, while they gain more income from offering three-year full degree programmes. Additionally, they have no limitations on the number of undergraduate spots they can provide. As a result, most universities and alternative providers have discontinued the offering of level 5 qualifications, which were once appealing as a means of government-supported growth (Wolf et al., 2016). Australian universities encounter similar financial incentivisation; however, student loans in Australia are not as restricted as in England. Australian students can obtain loans up to 7-year equivalent (Australia Government, 2024a) while the English student loan is currently limited to 3 years full-time equivalent (Wolf et al., 2016). Moreover, the equivalent or lower qualification restrictions are more relaxed in Australia. Australian students with a Bachelor's Degree can receive VET student loans to study a diploma programme if they can provide a justification, e.g., due to industry requirements or pursuing professional qualifications in a different field (Australian Government, 2024b).

England has realised the need to reform the funding system so as to promote mid-level qualifications. In 2023, the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) was introduced in England, as a solution to address the problems created by the disparities between VET and HE sectors (Lewis & Bolton, 2023). LLE will supersede the existing systems of publicly funded HE student finance loans and Advanced Learner Loans, which will take effect from 2025.

The LLE is designed to offer flexibility, catering to both full-time and part-time study of modules or full qualifications at levels 4 to 6 within colleges or universities. To enhance flexibility for individuals seeking to retrain, current restrictions on funding for most courses at an equivalent or lower level to a qualification already held by the student will be lifted. The removal of equivalent or lower qualification restriction means that a student who has credit balance can receive funding when they transition from a higher-level to a lower-level qualification. This policy change is expected to have several broad impacts including increased demand for mid-level qualifications (Lewis & Bolton, 2023).

Overall remarks on systemic enablers and barriers

In summary, there are similar barriers for providers and students to participate in mid-level qualification programmes in both countries. VET providers experience challenges in obtaining funding, conferring HE qualifications, and facilitating student mobility. The Australian funding system is more complex due to the involvement of two levels of government. Despite major similarities, the current English funding system has a serious flaw: student loans are tied to one qualification, which incentivises universities to favour Bachelor's Degrees over mid-level qualifications. However, England has recently issued a new funding policy which allows flexibility for students to move cross-qualification levels. With the new funding policy, England is ahead of Australia in its efforts to enhance the cohesiveness of the tertiary education system. Although Australia introduced an income-contingent loan scheme a decade ahead of England, it experiences a greater challenge in reforming the funding system.

Conclusions and policy implications

Summary

The mid-level qualifications in both countries serve multiple missions. First, they are designed to offer both vocational skills and theoretical knowledge, targeting at paraprofessional skills. Second, their delivery requires some form of collaboration between higher education and VET sectors. Finally, they aim to facilitate transition back and forth between mid-level qualification courses and Bachelor's Degree programmes.

In terms of enrolments, both countries have lower enrolment rates in mid-level qualifications than Bachelor's Degree enrolment although Australia has a much higher proportion of enrolments in mid-level qualifications. Vocational qualifications at the diploma level are much more common in Australia.

Although credit recognition systems and the creation of nested qualifications in both countries aim to facilitate mobility between qualifications and institutions, they both do not have a unified national policy, which may hinder student mobility. To understand the role of mid-level qualifications in facilitate student mobility across sectors, we need consistent nation-wide data. However, there is not comprehensive data to conclude how mid-level qualifications have been effectively used as either entry or exit pathways in both countries. Available data suggest that the English system only encourages transition from vocational to higher education while there is an upward trend in the numbers of students with Bachelor's Degrees enrolling in dDiploma or Advanced Diplomas.

Collaboration between higher education and VET institutions to some extent is required in delivering mid-level qualifications in both countries. However, the collaboration is not based on equality. HE institutions can independently deliver these qualifications. By contrast, VET institutions do not enjoy the same independence: they need to partner with universities for funding and accreditation purposes. This unequal relationship indicates hierarchical status of the HE sectors in both countries.

Mid-level qualifications in Australia are affected by the particular challenges associated with navigating the complex funding system, which involves both federal

and state governments. With one level of government, it is easier for England to unify its funding system more easily than Australia as indicated in its proposed new funding policy.

Policy implications

Both the Augar Review and the Universities Accord Review indicate both countries' increasing interest in reforms that would create greater connectedness between higher education and VET. Higher education qualifications tend to be towards the top of the qualifications framework and VET qualifications towards the bottom, with overlaps in the middle. Those overlaps in the middle would seem to be a promising place to look to strengthen the connection between VET and Higher Education.

We noted in the introduction that Field and Tahir (2022) present data that shows that the lack of mid-level qualification is a bigger problem in England than in Australia. Evidence presented in our paper reaches a similar conclusion. This concern about the missing middle in England and the need to have stronger connections between further education and higher education have led to the forthcoming introduction of a Lifelong Learning Entitlement available for use in both systems in England. It will be interesting to see whether that incentivises greater use of mid-level qualifications in further education either as exit qualifications or as pathways to degrees. A cap on the size of the entitlement, for example, might incentivise students to being frugal in the use of their entitlement and opting for less expensive pathway programmes in FE on their way to a degree.

Reforms to put VET and higher education on a more level playing field is a possible avenue for Australia too (see (Chapman, Dawkins, et al., 2023; Chapman, Higgins, et al., 2023)). This would include a more level playing field between VET and higher education in government subsidies and extending income contingent loans to VET qualifications (noting that they are available for some VET Diplomas already).

A major reason why Associate Degrees have not taken off in Australia, would appear to be that since the demand-driven system for higher education was introduced in 2010 (and even since has ended in 2017) (Productivity Commission, 2019), entrance to full bachelor's degrees programs have been easily accessible to those who want to do them, with income contingent loans. This is a difficult environment for Associate Degrees to be competitive as a relatively new product.

If governments in Australia wish to explore the promotion of Associate Degrees as an alternative to bachelor's degrees, there is a need to find ways to incentivise students to enrol in them and providers to offer the courses. The form of any incentive need careful planning in order to minimise the risk that the Associate Degree competes with Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas and therefore compromising a wider policy objective of creating a synchronised and coherent tertiary education system.

Meanwhile, building on the relative success of VET Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas is a way to expand mid-level qualifications either as exit qualification or as pathways to degrees. Good examples are the Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care, the Diploma of Nursing, the Diploma of Information Technology, the Diploma of Business, the Diploma of Screen and Media, and the Diploma of Accounting, which are the five Diplomas with the highest progression rates to degrees.

Notwithstanding the relative success of some of these diplomas as pathways to degrees, they still do present challenges in relation to credit transfer. This suggests the need to develop a national credit transfer system and explore qualification reform that would make it easier to compare the skills and knowledge associated with VET Diplomas and Bachelor's degrees. This could be assisted by reform of the Australian Qualifications Framework (Kift et al., 2023; Noonan et al., 2019) and the development of a National Skills Taxonomy (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024), the latter to provide a common language about skills across the Tertiary System.

Finally, it is to be noted that because of Australia's projected growing skills needs for the future, the final report of the Universities Accord in Australia (Department of Education, 2024, p. 17), recommended a target of 80% of the working age population achieving a tertiary education by 2050, and 55% of 25 to 34 year old to have Bachelor's degree or above by 2050, up from 45% in 2023. This will require a substantial uplift in participation in tertiary education from students who are less well prepared for bachelor's degrees and many from low socioeconomic backgrounds and regional and rural Australia.

It seems unlikely that these objectives will be reached without a major role for mid-level qualifications, both as pathways to bachelor's degrees and as exit qualifications with job ready skills. The evidence of this paper suggests that this will require significant reforms to make it possible to forge stronger connections between VET and higher education and a bigger role for mid-level qualifications.

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