

University of Ballarat

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***The Best of Both Worlds: Successfully Combining TAFE and Higher Education Writing Programs***

**Abstract:**

*In 1996, collaboration between staff of the University of Ballarat and the (then) School of Mines and Industries, Ballarat, successfully established a combined writing program from the TAFE and higher education sectors - the Bachelor of Arts/Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing).*

*This paper explores the design of the program and its development till now. The growth in interest and reputation of the program is reflected in yearly increases in the number of students from Year 12 and elsewhere who seek a place. It also looks at comparisons with other, more traditional, models of cross crediting in writing programs between TAFE institutes and universities. A survey of students also shows clear support and enthusiasm for the combined program.*

*The aim of this paper is not to assert the superiority or otherwise of either system in the delivery of writing programs but to explore the differing roles of TAFE and higher education together in producing the desired outcome: highly skilled and well-regarded graduates in the writing field.*

I would like to begin with a quote that came to me recently from the most unlikely of places, a box of 'Fruitful Lite' breakfast cereal. It says:

LIFE

Life is an opportunity - benefit from it  
Life is beauty - admire it  
Life is bliss - taste it  
Life is a challenge - meet it  
Life is a duty - complete it  
Life is a game - play it  
Life is costly - care for it  
Life is wealth - keep it  
Life is a promise - fulfil it  
Life is sorrow - overcome it  
Life is a song - sing it  
Life is a struggle - accept it  
Life is a tragedy - confront it  
Life is an adventure - dare it

Life is luck - make it  
Life is life - fight for it (Author unknown) (1)

Despite its homespun philosophy, it struck me that this is what writing programs aim to teach students to do; that is, write about life in all its aspects. The delivery of this teaching in Australian universities, however, varies greatly.

In *TEXT* (April 2000) Nigel Krauth reports on his investigation of writing programs in tertiary institutions Australia-wide. Among a plethora of writing programs from non-degree studies to masters and PhD programs (2), information gathered about these programs shows that there are only two which combine an undergraduate degree with an appropriate TAFE diploma delivered to students at the same time. These programs are the Bachelor of Arts/Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing) developed by staff at the (then) School of Mines and Industries, Ballarat (SMB) and the University of Ballarat (3), and the Bachelor of Communication/Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing) program delivered at Monash University and Chisholm Institute of TAFE.

What I will outline is the progress of our combined award from its conceptual beginnings in 1996 to the present, as well as some thoughts about its future. This paper describes the establishment and subsequent development of the Bachelor of Arts/Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing) program. It is a tribute to the commitment and dedication of the people involved in establishing the program and the collaborative way in which it was done between two sectors which are often perceived as being at odds with each other, despite the rhetoric of common aims. As the first intake of combined award students are nearing graduation, it is opportune to include the results of a brief survey of student satisfaction with regard to combining the two awards.

The Bachelor of Arts and the Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing) as separate programs have a natural affinity in content and outcomes. Bachelor degrees in general and arts degrees in particular aim to help students:

- acquire a systematic and coherent body of knowledge, underlying principles and concepts, and associated problem-solving techniques;
- develop the academic skills and attitudes necessary to comprehend and evaluate new information, concepts and evidence from a range of sources; and
- develop the ability to review, consolidate, extend and apply the knowledge and techniques learnt. (4)

Diploma programs on the other hand offer students:

- the self-directed application of knowledge and skills, where judgement is required in planning and selecting appropriate equipment, services and techniques;
- a breadth, depth and complexity covering planning and initiating alternative approaches to skills or knowledge applications across a broad range of technical and/or management requirements, evaluation and coordination; and
- participation in developing strategic initiatives, as well as the responsibility and autonomy in performing complex technical operations or organisation of others. This includes participation in teams concerned with planning and evaluation functions. Group or team coordination is involved. (5)

Graduates of the Bachelor of Arts/Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing) program at the University of Ballarat, I believe, achieve these criteria.

Where did this begin? Following the successful introduction of the Bachelor of Arts/Associate Diploma of Business (Office Administration) in 1996, both organisations, the School of Mines and Industries Ballarat (SMB) and the University of Ballarat, were eager to extend opportunities for students to study in two programs concurrently and have modules/units from each program cross-credited. The Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing) program began the previous year at SMB and this program proved to have much stronger links with the Bachelor of Arts program than the Associate Diploma of Business (Office Administration).

The undergraduate Arts degree offered by the University of Ballarat in 1996 included major studies in literature, children's literature and film and media that were philosophically aligned with the content of the Diploma program. The Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing) program at SMB offered editing, short story writing, design and layout, novel writing and other modules. It seemed logical and marketable to put the programs together and offer students with an interest in the writing field the opportunity to be enrolled in both awards concurrently.

Rationale for the combining of awards from different sectors had been strengthened by the introduction of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) on 1 January 1995. The AQF 'provides a comprehensive, nationally consistent yet flexible framework for all qualifications in post-compulsory education and training'. (6)

The design of the combined award was influenced by the following considerations:

- the conviction that study demands on students should be such that they have time for reflection and personal growth;
- the belief that to develop an appropriate level of competency in the combined award requires three-and-a-half years of full-time study;
- a combined award offers students increased career opportunities;
- such an award offers a positive response to the policy directions of both Federal and State governments to increase the level of cooperation and opportunity between the higher education sector and the TAFE sector;
- the principle that an undergraduate degree and diploma together is only the first step in a life-long learning process, and that it should provide a sound basis for possible further studies, and/or a professional career in a wide variety of industries;
- that this award gives the students a wider range of subject areas to choose from than otherwise would be available in either program as currently offered. (7)

From March to November 1996, the focus of regular meetings between staff at the two institutes was to produce a model for the combined award. The model was developed following consideration of the Bachelor of Arts/Associate Diploma of Business (Office Administration) which had been established the previous year, and the Bachelor of Communication/Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing) model developed by Monash University and Chisholm Institute of TAFE. This meant that in year one, full-time students would enrol in four modules in the Diploma and one Bachelor of Arts (BA) unit each semester. In year two, we would require students to enrol in four modules in the Diploma

and four units in the BA, and the final 18 months of the combined award would comprise BA units only.

Key features of the combined award included:

- students graduate with both awards in three and a half years of full time study, thus saving their investment of both time and money;
- in their Diploma studies, students exchange one elective unit each semester for an Arts unit from a nominated range of literature and film and media units;
- in their Bachelor of Arts studies, students receive recognition for all Diploma modules;
- students still fulfil the basic requirements of the Arts degree;
- students benefit from the combined resources and facilities of both institutions.

The final stage of the process required approval from appropriate internal and external bodies to conduct this combined award. Support from both the University of Ballarat and SMB curriculum committees was sought and received. As the Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing) program is a Victorian state TAFE curriculum and the addition of the Bachelor of Arts constituted a major alteration to the program, permission to deliver the combined award was also needed from the Victorian Cultural and Recreation Industry Training Board. This was granted on 28 November 1996, just in time for the new program's official launch.

Since its inception there have been no alterations to the basic delivery model of the combined award. However there have been modifications to units and modules available to students in both the BA and the Diploma. During this time we have been able to provide students in the Diploma with additional electives and some modules can now be credited at either first or second year level. Two years ago, the Bachelor of Arts program had foundation units added to its profile. Of the three foundation units, 'Australia: People, Institutions and Culture', 'Critical Literacy' and 'The Western Tradition and the Contemporary World', combined award students only needed to do one. A closer look at the content of these units found that 'Critical Literacy' was covered by modules in the Diploma, and that 'Western Tradition and the Contemporary World' had less relevance to the spirit of the combined award, although one can argue that in gathering knowledge for writing everything is valid. 'Australia: People, Institutions and Culture' fitted most comfortably with the content of the Diploma.

Behavioural and Social Sciences and Humanities, the higher education school which delivers the Bachelor of Arts, has recently proposed additional course changes which may, in the forthcoming review, require adjustments to the original model. As well as a name change to the Bachelor of Arts (Humanities and Social Sciences), twelve disciplinary majors have been replaced by four new multidisciplinary major sequences of study. These are: Social Inquiry; Communication, Information Technology and Ways of Knowing; Cross Cultural Studies; and Myth, Meaning and Memory. Students are now able to select sequences within these multidisciplinary majors, but again we need to look in more detail at what is consistent with their diploma studies while remaining within the regulations governing the degree.

In each year of the combined award to date, there have been 30 combined award places available. In 1997, the first year of entry in the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) guide, 170 Year 12 students placed this program among their eight selections for study in 1998. In 1998, these numbers grew to 206. Of these 206 applications, 74 applicants

had the program listed in their first three preferences. In 1999, 180 VTAC applications were received, along with approximately 20 applications directly to the institution. It is the first time that this method of application has been available alongside VTAC applications and it proved effective in attracting mature age applicants.

Competition for places in the combined award has increased steadily. We have had no difficulty in filling the places as the program attracts students with a high Tertiary Entrance Ranking (TER). Applicants are also required to submit a supplementary application form outlining their previous experience in the writing field (if any) along with a folio of written pieces, indicating their interest in the field and their ability to cope with the rigours of the two programs. While higher education staff look at TER scores to predict success in a course of study, the TAFE sector prefers examples of ability. The two systems together reinforce the quality of students attracted to the combined award program. This is also reflected in the low drop-out rate of combined award students.

In 2000, it is time to ask students about their experiences of the combined program. Forty past and present students of the Bachelor of Arts/Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing) program were asked to complete a short questionnaire. Fourteen students responded. Eight students were from the first year, five from the second year and one had completed the Diploma part of the program.

The majority of respondents had gained information about this combined award through the VTAC Guide. Other sources of this information were secondary school careers advisers, a visit to the University on open day and newspaper advertising. Eight of these students came to the program straight from secondary school and six were mature age students.

When asked what attracted them to this particular program, responses included:

'[It was] the prospect of gaining a Diploma and Bachelor of Arts in the field of writing.'

'It was a mixture of [studying at] TAFE and University.'

'[It was] the reduced time and [being able to study] both awards.'

'The opportunity of the award program obtaining both degree and diploma, [offering] widened opportunities and skills.'

'[It was] definitely the opportunity to continue my Arts course but give it a vocational focus simultaneously, PLUS the opportunity to learn editing skills from those in the industry.'

'The combined award offers a more specific accreditation than a straight Bachelor of Arts.'

'It is a Bachelor of Arts with practical applications.'

When asked about advantages of combining these programs, comments highlighted:

- the practical nature of the Diploma and the theoretical focus of the Arts degree. Students saw these as complementary and a definite advantage for career prospects;

- the time factor in completing the combined award was also seen as an advantage;

- the experience of study at tertiary level was a positive one;

- more opportunity to study a range of modules and units in both sectors.

Comments included:

'[The experience of] attending two campuses which are both very different from each other.'

'Each [program] helps the other. I think we will get more out of each of the programs as there are more career opportunities.'

'You experience each world and end up with a diploma and a bachelor in the time it usually takes to finish one university course.'

'The two programs complement each other to a level that benefits...students' capabilities in their work. Confidence is generally high among these students.'

'[The program] gives more opportunities from different classes. [The degree] enhances the diploma award and adds more chances of employment due to [an] extended qualification.'

'Heaps! I love that I had the chance to study at university and TAFE at the same time. After one year in a pure university Arts course, the combination of the TAFE environment with university was extremely refreshing.'

How does the structure of the combined award suit their needs?

'It's good because even though there are a lot of hours, there is still plenty of time to complete homework and have a casual job.'

'You can concentrate on TAFE for the first year, ease your way into the second with both TAFE and university, then concentrate on university for the third.'

'The cost is spread out.'

'It suits my needs on three levels:

- Learning the basics of writing
- Expanding my writing talents
- Providing me with challenges.'

'I'm working to become an editor and this program enables me to graduate with vocationally focussed skills as well as a university degree.'

One of the things that has made this program a positive learning experience for students is the expertise of staff who teach in the program on both campuses. The strength of the program has enabled us to attract people who not only have knowledge and skills in business, but also have extensive backgrounds in teaching. We have on staff published (and award-winning) writers, editors and publishers.

Three-and-a-half years on, however, we still need to address a number of customer service issues. Students have highlighted the need for better communication between staff in the two sectors. There are occasional problems with timetables, the coordination of examination periods and issues with holidays. The amalgamation of three independent institutions creates the impression of a single organisation in theory, but not necessarily in reality. Such

issues as separate enrolments (forms and numbers) due to different funding models and the non-integration of computer systems are examples of administrative issues which are yet to be resolved. These can affect our combined award students more directly than other students who study at this university.

And what of the future? During 2000, reviews of the combined award at the university level and the Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing) at Victorian state level are occurring simultaneously. The outcome of these reviews may alter the way the current combined award looks, and a more complete pathways program could ultimately mean that a combined award is not needed because of full integration of programs between the two sectors.

If this seems to you like an advertisement for our program then you are right. I am unashamedly proud of what we have achieved in a little over three years, and the skills and abilities our staff and students have shown. But I am also realistic enough to know that we do not have a perfect product, if there is such a thing. We are continually looking for better ways to provide for our students and to enhance our reputation as a producer of good writers, editors and publishers.

As a small regional university competing for students in an open market, the University of Ballarat has something different to offer from the city-based, more established universities. We promote our courses by emphasising small class sizes that result in more individual attention, and the advantages of living and studying in a rural community within easy reach of Melbourne. The city of Ballarat itself is widely promoted as a 'learning city'. The Bachelor of Arts/Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing) program at the University of Ballarat is developing a reputation for its innovative approach by delivering to students 'the best of both worlds', a positive, integrated experience of tertiary study which thoroughly prepares them for the world of work.

## Notes

1. *Clipboard*, Hubbards Foods Limited, Auckland, New Zealand. No 6. return to article
2. *The AAWP Guide to Australian University Writing Programs*, TEXT, Vol 4 No 1, 2000. return to article
3. The School of Mines and Industries Ballarat (SMB), the University of Ballarat and the Wimmera Institute of TAFE were devolved into the multisectorial University of Ballarat on 1 January 1998. return to article
4. These points are adapted from the *Australian Qualifications Framework Implementation Handbook* (2nd edn) 1998, p 49. return to article
5. These points are adapted from the *Australian Qualifications Framework Implementation Handbook* (2nd edn) 1998, p 38. return to article
6. *Australian Qualifications Framework Implementation Handbook* (2nd edn) 1998, p1. return to article
7. This list is adapted from the Bachelor of Arts/Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing) Course Proposal, November 1996. return to article

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