

## Concentrating on research

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The recommendations in the Bradley Report on the development of a new quality assurance and accreditation regime are to be welcomed.

The proposals address two significant issues that have been unresolved since the Australian system of quality assurance audit began. It proposes that the system focus on standards and outcomes that are internationally comparable; and it proposes that all institutions be re-accredited under a consistent set of rules. The adoption of these proposals would create a new Agency with responsibility for tertiary education rather than just universities and degree granting bodies.

In developing its recommendations, however, the Report adds some processes and measures that are not necessary to achieve its aims and could lead to uniformity and a lack of flexibility in the system. It seems to succumb to taking ideological positions rather than carefully argued and logical ones.

Let us take the positive elements first.

The Report correctly acknowledges that the quality assurance system has not produced the intended results, having been too focused on inputs and processes. While AUQA had a remit to assess standards and outcomes, partly in response to the government's own light touch injunction, it chose in the first audit cycle to concentrate on measuring the adequacy of processes to deliver the objectives and missions that institutions had determined as part of their self-assessment. While AUQA is focusing on standards and outcomes as part of its second cycle, following an instruction from the Minister, its reluctance to address these issues during the first cycle has meant that the new system has been introduced while the measures are still being developed. Nevertheless, the measures are being developed and it is likely that a new body with a quite explicit mandate to concentrate fully on these issues will be able to develop suitable and acceptable measures.

While I have argued for some time that we must measure standards and outcomes, I have also acknowledged that the development of measures that will meet the objectives will be a difficult process. However, our position as teaching institutions would be undermined if we were to maintain that we do not have a measure of standards and that we cannot assure the public that in a diverse system a degree is of the same minimum quality irrespective of the institution in which it is offered.

Fortunately, the Bradley Report's position brings Australia into line with similar movements occurring internationally. OECD Ministers, for example, also agreed at the end of 2006 that quality assurance needed to move to measuring standards and outcomes. As a result the OECD has developed a project on Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) whose intention is to develop measures of educational outcomes so that standards can be measured on an international basis. Australia therefore has the opportunity to lead in the development of appropriate measures, while also being able to learn from any relevant work being conducted in other countries.

The second part of the recommendations under this rubric has to do with accreditation. While this will remove the previous imbalance between new and old institutions, which caused new institutions to meet criteria that were not applied to existing institutions, the addition to the processes of a requirement that all new and existing universities be required to demonstrate research activity will serve to complicate the process and is likely to be unsuccessful in achieving what the Report ostensibly argues as the basis for this idea.

The argument is that Australian universities are different from others in the world because they have always had a research focus and should retain it and because, despite the Report's own admission that the evidence is lacking, there is a strong nexus between research and teaching. This is patently incorrect because half our universities had no research obligation before they became universities and acquired the title without having to demonstrate that they had changed that status. It is also untrue because the research activity is not evenly spread and our two successful private universities would argue that they prefer to be excellent teaching institutions.

In the meantime much time, effort and money has been wasted attempting to make universities research-active while the outcomes would appear not to have justified the effort. The pre Dawkins universities still undertake the majority of research and if one adds the former Central Institutes of Technology (the current ATN group) the proportion is close to 95%. There are pockets of research in the other universities but these are small and not likely to grow.

So when the new agency attempts to define what an adequate research profile should be to retain university status, it will either need to set the bar very low – presumably at the lowest level of research being undertaken by the least research active existing university – or it will have to deem some universities as no longer worthy of the title. The chances that a university in a marginal seat will have its title removed are zero. So the new power will either never be used or there will be a move from measuring the quantity of research-like activity rather than the quantity of quality research. Australia's performance in international rankings will not be improved by this strategy and its credibility in regulating universities will be reduced.

Research concentration is a different issue and one that should be assessed on whether Australia has sufficient resources to fund the full costs of research wherever it occurs. It has been obvious from several international examples, and it makes logical sense, that research is more likely to flourish in large, properly funded concentrations. While we do need to ensure that we don't thereby miss small gems, this can still be achieved by asking institutions to decide whether they want to be research active and how they want to concentrate their research. If they can prove that they are able to support the research they should be funded to do so, but that is a long way short of demanding that all institutions do so in the hope of finding some small successes.

The government would be well advised to adopt these proposals in a form that will enable their credible implementation. An institution should be measured on its capacity to deliver degree programmes that meet the stringent new standards that will be developed. Each should be allowed to determine whether it wishes to undertake research and how much effort it wishes to devote to it. This is not to suggest that non-

research active institutions will have teachers who are not up to date with research in their field - they would fail the standards test if they were not - but it is not necessary to be at the discovery end of the research cycle to teach about the impact of the latest research on the subject matter being taught.

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