

Standards body must be robust

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The international reputation of Australia for high-quality tertiary education of world standard is vital to our nation, not just because education is our fourth largest export, but because the soundness of the country's education system underpins our economy, society and cultural life.

The considerable increase in the number of new higher education and vocational education providers in recent years needs to be managed so that the overall strength of Australia's higher education and vocational education is not inadvertently compromised. This requires stronger oversight by a national body since it is national reputation that is at stake.

For this reason – among others – the Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) is squarely behind the Australian government's move to establish the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, TEQSA.

This should be a significant enhancement of the existing strong national focus on ensuring excellence in higher education.

But there has been little formal consultation with universities, or other key stakeholders, including employers and professional bodies, about these important matters.

Notwithstanding this, an inter-governmental agreement, outlining the powers and objectives of TEQSA, is expected early in 2010.

TEQSA will have a broad remit, covering quality assurance and regulation; accreditation of institutions; and oversight of academic standards.

Initially, it will deal with higher education and international education, but will expand to cover the entire formal training sector as well.

For TEQSA to succeed, however, it will need the confidence of the government, the community and the sector. To achieve this there must be at least six principles to its operation.

First, it must establish clear national measures for considering new entrants who are seeking to offer higher education in Australia and it must have clear metrics established by which its performance can be judged.

Second, TEQSA should be responsible for regulating all tertiary education. Making artificial distinctions between vocational and higher education, public and private institutions, and state and national institutions risks regulation falling through the jurisdictional cracks. While transitional arrangements may be needed to harmonise the very different existing quality assurance and regulatory processes for vocational and higher education, these should be clearly temporary and should have a defined sunset provision.

Third, regulation and reporting should be related to risk. Institutions that have a higher risk of failure should be monitored more closely than others, and within institutions, most attention should be given to activities that have the highest risk and most serious consequences of failure.

Fourth, TEQSA must recognise innovation, the changing nature of education, and individual missions, and focus on outcomes and achievements, and not be drawn into the standard bureaucratic approach of obsession with inputs.

Fifth, TEQSA must be impartial and transparent. Institutions should also have access to administrative appeals mechanisms.

Sixth, TEQSA must equip itself with knowledge of the sector and high technical capacity to interpret data and its statistical validity.

Australia's strong international education and reputation requires a national accreditation body to complement the national qualifications framework and to underpin a national tertiary education system.

The Australian government should open the discussion to these issues with the public, students and the institutions involved.

There must be public debate. The future of our nation rests on the strength and capacity of its education system.

This requires a quality and standards body for tertiary education that is robust, transparent and firmly based on consensus.