

**A response to the *Review of Australian Higher Education*
*Discussion Paper June 2008***

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Dear Professor Bradley

I welcome the opportunity to respond to your timely discussion paper as part of the review and congratulate the Government for commissioning it. I taught Medical and Science students for thirty-five years at the University of New South Wales, was Head of the School of Microbiology and Immunology for nine years and Pro Vice Chancellor (Education and Quality Improvement) for six years. Outside my university, I was a member of the Australian University Teaching Committee (AUTC) and an AUQA auditor, chairing the audits of the University of Queensland, Deakin University, Monash University in cycle 1 and was a member of the audit of ANU. More recently, I chaired the AUQA Cycle 2 audit of Swinburne University. This is the experience that makes me feel qualified to make a brief number of points which I am convinced are critical for the Government to consider as they seek to reform the sector.

These comments are relevant the following questions in the discussion paper:

Section 3.3 The student experience of higher education

12. How can the quality of the student experience within Australia's higher education institutions be monitored nationally? Is there evidence that declining student:staff ratios have impacted on the quality of the student experience?
13. How can the quality of learning outcomes in Australian higher education be measured more effectively?
14. How do institutions measure the quality of their learning outcomes and how do they know they are nationally and internationally competitive?

There have been three initiatives, albeit introduced by the previous government, that need to be commended and should be a part of the revamped Australian Higher Education sector following strengthening and strategic improvement. These are The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) /formerly the Carrick Institute, The Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF) and The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA).

All of these initiatives are and will in the future contribute to both improved measurement of the quality of learning outcomes and the actual quality of the Australian student learning experience. As mentioned in the discussion paper, there are difficulties in satisfactorily demonstrating that one institution has better outcomes than another and thus "standards" are higher. Likewise the reassurance that the "standards" of Australian Universities are not declining and are as good or better than those of benchmark

institutions identified by politicians and the general public is remarkably difficult to provide evidence for. Many institutions are encountering these difficulties as they prepare for their Cycle 2 AUQA audits where standards are a specified focus. Institutions need to better define the outcomes they need to measure and decide on appropriate indicators for achievement of these outcomes rather than rely on the limited current range of questionable indicators. In particular, those outcomes they think are especially relevant to their own students and their institutional mission. ALTC can play a major role here. A classic example is the extremely important ALTC project initiated by Denise Chalmers, *The teaching Quality Indicators Project: Rewarding and recognising quality teaching in higher education through systematic implementation of indicators and metrics on teaching and teacher effectiveness*. ALTC is well placed to contribute to answers to the discussion questions listed above.

AUQA can also play a role here as it encourages institutions to add to the existing outcome measures and not only better define the outcomes they are measuring but also to find relevant institutions that they are able to usefully compare themselves with.

Thus the first of my major contributions to the discussion is that:

It is essential that the ALTC continues in the future and is sufficiently well funded to continue to make the positive contributions it is currently making.

Note: this is only one example of ALTC's positive contributions and potential. However, I do believe there are areas of ALTC that could be improved. For example, I do not believe enough opportunity is available for the growing communities of successful Australian educators e.g. ALTC Fellows, Associate Fellows, Award winners and Citation holders to share and contribute to improvement across the sector rather than solely in their own institutions. This wonderful human resource is not being tapped into enough.

My next issue relates to concentration on processes as measures of quality in education. Some detractors of AUQA have vigorously attacked the demonstration that appropriate processes are in place as a surrogate for quality as a major part of university audit. Given the difficulty in demonstrating learning outcomes referred to above this is naïve. There remains a strong argument for all bodies involved in judging Universities performance to continue to demand evidence of appropriate processes being implemented that are proven to be likely to result in enhanced student learning eg. Promotion processes that reward teaching excellence, effective staff development, evidence that students are being informed on the basis on which they are being assessed etc.

An area I have been heavily involved in over recent years is to encourage institutions to adopt guidelines on learning i.e. to encourage staff to base

their teaching on what we know about student learning. If it can be demonstrated that staff are informing their teaching activities on what the literature tells us about increasing student learning, then there is a strong chance that deeper learning will be achieved than from teaching based solely on passive lectures and content laden assessment.

<http://www.guidelinesonlearning.unsw.edu.au/>

http://tls.vu.edu.au/learning_and_teaching/guidelines/guidelines_about_guidelines.html

http://web.mit.edu/tll/learning_guidelines_2007.pdf

While there has been much criticism of the performance measures used in the LTPF, in my experience the fund has been an outstanding success. To have real money tied to performance in learning and teaching gave me great opportunities while PVC to try to improve the student experience at UNSW and convince research-focussed academics, Deans and Heads of School that teaching was taken seriously by the institution. However, what is often not referred to is the enormous impact of stage 1 of the first LTPF allocation in which institutions had to demonstrate they had in place processes known to be important e.g. regular evaluation of both staff and units. I submit that many Australian students have benefited greatly from many processes introduced in response to LTPF stage 1 as institutions strove to qualify for entry into the fund distribution. Thus my second contribution is that:

In some modified form, it is essential the LTPF continues as a stimulus to improvement in Australian higher education. There should be a balance of both improved outcome measures and input requirements as part of the funding allocation.

The process vs outcomes debate will continue as one reflects on the performance and contribution of AUQA to the quality of Higher Education. While the increased emphasis on outcomes in Cycle 2 is important, having just completed chairing a cycle 2 audit, I consider monitoring the quality of selected processes and seeking evidence of their implementation remains essential. Demonstrating your position on the THES and Shanghai Jiao Tong rankings is unlikely to contribute to identification of areas for improvement in student learning. I am sure many other respondents have also supported continuation of AUQA in the future. Here, major changes are not needed as I have proposed for ALTC & LTPF. So I suggest that:

It is essential that AUQA remains adequately funded and supported by Government and continues to function as it is at present until completion of the cycle 2 audits when it would be appropriate for a rethink of how AUQA can best contribute to continual improvement in Australian Higher Education

My final comment, I am sure has also been made by others. As one looks for and makes judgement on the achievement of learning outcomes, it is critical that the importance of "value adding" be taken into account. I have taught medical students for 30 years. Many of these students come in with outstanding attributes due to their privileged position and outstanding

secondary schooling and would have succeeded whatever we did to them. The "value add" we gave them, no matter how brilliantly we taught, would be far less than that given to students at institutions that would be considered by some lesser universities yet who produce the first university graduates in families and many remarkably successful graduates who were far less privileged and faced major challenges not only to get into Higher Education but to stay there.

When considering the performance and success of Institutions in Australia due recognition and reward must be given to those universities that provide evidence of major "value adding" to their students.

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