The quality of Australia’s higher education system: How it might be defined, improved and assured

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Discussion Paper 4

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This paper is the last in a series of interrelated discussion papers that has been prepared for the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) by Belinda Probert. The first discussion paper, *Teaching Focused Academic Appointments in Australian Universities (2013)*, raised the question of how we should understand the requirement for all higher education teachers to demonstrate scholarship, whether in a technical and further education (TAFE) institute, private college or university.

The second discussion paper, *Why scholarship matters in higher education (2014)*, provided a critique of the way in which ‘scholarship’ has come to be interpreted in Australian higher education, arguing for a return to Boyer’s conception as a starting point. The third discussion paper, *Becoming a university teacher: the role of the PhD (2014)*, focused on the character of the Australian PhD and its role in preparing graduates for teaching roles in higher education.

This discussion paper, *The quality of Australia’s higher education system: How it might be defined, improved and assured*, sets out to encourage an informed and critical debate concerning why educational quality needs to be demonstrated and what has been learned from the last two decades of policy and practice.
Executive summary

Ever since the rapid expansion of higher education provision in Australia triggered by the Dawkins reforms of the late 1980s, there has been ongoing debate and policy development about how best to assure the quality of this increasingly important sector. This has included arguments about what the best measures of quality might be, what kinds of policy incentives work best to promote quality improvement, and how processes of quality assurance can respond to the interests of different ‘stakeholders’, from students to employers, and from academics to taxpayers.

Today there is a danger that global rankings and their particular performance indicators (which are based primarily on research performance) will become the international norm for what constitutes quality. In this context there is a growing need for transparent and credible measures of educational quality that can underpin claims to alternative kinds of excellence.

This discussion paper sets out to engage the widest possible audience in an informed and critical debate about why educational quality needs to be demonstrated, and what we have learned from the past two decades of policy and practice. It begins by noting (in Part 2) how the purposes of higher education have inevitably changed as we have moved from an elite system towards universal participation, requiring us to redefine our definitions of quality.

The supposed tension between education for the life of the mind and education for professional or vocational employment is increasingly irrelevant in a mass higher education system, and in Australia there is now widespread agreement about the importance of ambitious graduate capabilities that go beyond technical or disciplinary expertise. We cannot discuss quality in a fruitful way without agreeing on the purposes of higher education today.

In Part 3 the key ideas about quality in higher education that have shaped both government policy and institutional practice are reviewed. The paper moves in Part 4 to an historical analysis of the different approaches to quality assurance that have been adopted since the early 1990s. These illustrate a move from evaluating quality processes within the sector (such as through the Australian Universities Quality Agency audits) to the development and use of performance metrics and standards (such as the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund). However, the search for valid measures of student learning outcomes seemed to lead inexorably back to the more familiar processes of peer review rather than to any widely agreed comparative indicators. Most recently, the focus has moved to what is intended to be a less intrusive and more risk-based national regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. Each of these approaches can be seen to have had intended and unintended consequences, from which much can be learned.
In Part 5 the focus shifts to how universities themselves have responded to these government initiatives in quality assurance, and the means they have adopted to promote quality improvement in teaching and learning. There is strong evidence that many institutions now gather and use a range of (often imperfect) data as a starting point for questioning and analysing their own teaching performance, and for thinking about strategies for improvement at the program or discipline level.

This section also critically reviews the institutional use of incentives such as individual prizes and awards, as well as the development of new approaches to staff performance management, including the use of codified teaching standards and accreditation. It argues that these approaches have largely failed to change the dominant academic culture in which research performance is seen as the most important measure of institutional and individual status. There is a danger that individual (and private) performance management is being given higher priority than investment in planned, coherent, institution-wide staff development that includes a central focus on keeping up with current disciplinary or professional scholarship.

Across the sector there is now deeper knowledge about what leads to better learning, and a far more scholarly culture around teaching. Most universities have revised their promotion criteria to reward excellent teaching, and in so doing have had to make explicit what would constitute evidence of it. This has raised consciousness and created incentives for some academics, at least, to invest seriously in becoming leaders in teaching and learning.

What is less obvious is the extent to which the teaching practice of all academic staff has become more professional and scholarly. Evidence suggests that research performance continues to be seen as the primary source of job satisfaction, status and reward in Australian universities.

In the final part of the discussion paper the possible elements of a quality regime for the future of Australian higher education are outlined and critically evaluated, building on what we can learn from our own experience and the higher education systems of the US and the UK. The challenges presented by an increasingly global and competitive environment, as well as growing constraints on the level of public funding for higher education, are outlined. The new contest of ideas around the role of markets and private providers in promoting quality in education is reviewed, along with arguments for and against different levels of regulation.

There is little empirical or historical evidence to support the argument that greater competition and less regulation will improve educational quality (even if it might improve research performance), and theoretical contributions suggest that markets in education are quite unlike markets for most goods and services.
The paper concludes by arguing that the higher education sector itself needs to take responsibility for demonstrating the quality of its teaching and learning, and to assure the public – and students, in particular – about the value of their growing investment in higher education.

The effectiveness of any quality regime will depend on the relationship between its parts and, in particular on the effect that regulatory or audit-type processes have on institutional cultures and institutional commitment to evaluating how well their students are learning, and to investing in better teaching.
Part 1: Introduction

The Australian higher education sector has been expanding rapidly since the 1990s, as a result of successive waves of policy changes. There is today widespread agreement that participation rates should continue to grow, and that everyone who is capable of benefiting from higher education should have the opportunity to study at this level. This commitment to increased participation and to more equitable access has led to the appearance of new non-university higher education providers, new pathways into higher education, and new, more modular degree structures and credit-transfer arrangements. Over the same period, technological innovations have made it possible for students to learn in ways that bear little resemblance to the traditional on-campus experience offered by most Australian universities until quite recently.

There are several grounds for believing that the expansion of Australian higher education has been achieved without sacrificing the quality of teaching and learning. Commentators have pointed to a range of indicators to support this view, including high enrolments of international students, steady improvements in student satisfaction (as measured by the Course Experience Questionnaire), stable retention rates and continued improvements in the global rankings of research-intensive universities.

However, this view is being challenged both by those who remain unconvinced by the kinds of indicators used to assure us of the ongoing quality of the sector, and by those who see serious risks emerging. Many commentators have expressed concern about the fact that more than half of all undergraduate teaching in Australia is now provided by casually employed academic staff, while the staff–student ratio has declined to such an extent that tutorials, as such, are no longer feasible. Data gathered by the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement has consistently shown that Australian students do not score well on measures of ‘active learning’, interactions with academic staff or ‘enriching educational experiences’.1 More recently, the New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) has drawn attention to the sector’s financial reliance on international fee-paying students, and to its associated potential vulnerability to corruption in some admissions processes and to ‘soft-marking’.2 Experts continue to express concern about the English language proficiency of many international students who graduate from Australian higher education institutions.3

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1. See, for example, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010.
3. See for example Craven, 2012; Barthel, 2015.
Australian higher education shares many characteristics with other national systems of higher education. Indeed, higher education is becoming an increasingly global system, with high levels of mobility among students and academics as well as international networks of research collaboration. The standards by which quality is judged have become international, with global rankings of universities becoming remarkably prominent over the past decade.

The function and value of these new global ranking systems in a sector that is approaching universal participation has been the subject of much critical debate. The weight assigned to research metrics in these ranking systems does not reflect the fact that the primary purpose of most higher education institutions is to educate students. Yet, as Ellen Hazelkorn argues, rankings ‘have charmed audiences around the world by their crude simplicity. By equating inputs with outputs, rankings privilege age, size and wealth.’ However, the vast majority of students now attend higher education institutions that are publicly funded, teaching-focused and not elite.

While these rankings focus primarily on measures of research quality, the expansion of publicly funded higher education over the past two decades has been accompanied by growing government interest in the quality of the student experience. In Australia this has been reflected in successive rounds of institutional audits since the 1990s, and in an ongoing search for appropriate performance indicators for teaching and learning. There have been both intended and unintended consequences of these quality assurance policies, as well as growing recognition that educational quality is a complex issue that cannot be reduced to any ‘crude simplicities’. Indeed, in the UK, such have been the disagreements about the relative merits of institutional audits versus universal assessment that Sir David Watson has described them as ‘quality wars’.

As governments have stepped up their role in assuring the quality of educational programs, many academics have become increasingly disenchanted with the topic. Historically, universities – as self-accrediting educational institutions – have been responsible for the quality of their own programs, together with a range of professional accreditation bodies. Respect for disciplinary expertise and processes of peer review, both internal and external, are part of the academic DNA, but the wider quality movement that evolved from Japanese car production methods is widely seen by those within the sector as irrelevant to higher education. Academic culture has proved hostile both to the discourse of quality management and to

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4 In this paper, the terms ‘elite’, ‘mass’ and ‘universal’ are used in the sense established in Trow, 2007. A universal system is one in which almost everyone has access to some form of post-secondary education.
5 Hazelkorn, 2015.
6 Watson, 2006.
contemporary ‘managerialism’ more generally. Academics’ eyes glaze over at the constant references to ‘excellence’, ‘continuous improvement’ and claims to be ‘world class’.

At the same time, university managers are devoting increasing energy to the challenge of developing internal performance measures for good teaching, and embedding these in performance management systems and promotion criteria for academic staff. Here, too, there is a divide between those who embrace these developments as valuable tools for recognising and rewarding good teaching and raising its status, and those who see them as a ‘corrosive way of assuring quality’ that undermines professional autonomy and spreads distrust.

These developments have seen the policy debate about educational quality become detached from those who are responsible for the quality of teaching in our universities. As Ellen Hazelkorn puts it, ‘a Rubicon has been crossed’:

While higher education has traditionally been the primary guardian of quality, its role has effectively been usurped. If it wishes to regain some degree of control, then it needs to ensure that it is involved in a more meaningful way than it was previously. Urgent action is required to agree on how quality can be demonstrated to the satisfaction of all stakeholders.

This discussion paper sets out to engage the widest possible audience in an informed and critical debate about why the quality of higher education needs to be demonstrated, and what we have learned from the past two decades of policy and practice. With the uncapping of student places in 2012, there has been a new focus on students as informed ‘consumers’ who have a major financial interest in the quality of their education, and in the relationship between competition and quality more generally. As Peter Ewell has argued in the US context, ‘because the stakes associated with higher education are so much higher for policy makers today, aggressive action on the accountability agenda is more likely and a proactive response on the part of the academy is more urgent.’ This discussion paper is intended to encourage and stimulate such a response in the Australian context.

Within the scholarly literature about educational quality assessment there are radically opposed theoretical frameworks that have been deployed persuasively, ranging from sophisticated evaluations of the merits of different kinds of auditing to equally sophisticated critiques of the emerging audit culture, which is seen as

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7 There are nonetheless several key publications that provide persuasive arguments about the value of quality frameworks in knowledge-intensive, people-focused industries such as education. See, for example, Crosby, 1979; and Massy, 2003.
8 Morley, 2003, p. 171.
9 Hazelkorn, op. cit.
displacing professional autonomy and ethics. This paper begins by defining the current context within which concerns about quality are being expressed, before reviewing the major ideas that have shaped approaches to quality assurance (and quality improvement) in Australian higher education over the past two decades. This necessarily involves consideration of policies designed for the sector as a whole, for individual institutional application, and for the assessment and/or management of the performance of individual academics.

In writing this paper I have found the scholarly contributions of a small number of writers particularly valuable in shaping my discussion of quality in the higher education systems of Australia, the US and the UK as they approach universal levels of participation.

US academic Martin Trow was a pre-eminent figure in the comparative study of higher education systems for more than three decades. In 2007, the year of his death, his overview of the challenges posed by the transition from elite to mass to universal access in the US, the UK and Europe was published. In it, he concluded that:

American higher education as a system is simply better adapted, normatively and structurally, to the requirements of a ‘post-industrial’ age, which puts a great premium on the creation and wide distribution of knowledge and skill ...

Across the Atlantic, Sir David Watson led a new British university that typified the promise of mass participation before writing several highly influential books about higher education. In some of his last writing before his untimely death earlier this year, he provided a compelling case for the historic strengths of the UK system as a whole, as well as the very real contemporary threats to its quality. His work provides a constant reminder of the complex and contradictory demands placed on the modern university.

Among those who have written closely about the characteristics of different quality regimes, the works of William F Massy in the US and Vin Massaro in Australia are particularly valuable in assessing the merits of different forms of institutional auditing. At a more granular level, Professor Graham Gibbs has written a number of important reports for the UK’s Higher Education Academy (HEA) that deconstruct the ‘dimensions of quality’ that are so widely used in the development of new metrics for evaluating student learning.

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11 For an excellent example of the former, see Massy, op. cit. For an excellent example of the latter, see Morley, op. cit. Interestingly, they both agree that there has been a fundamental loss of trust in universities, though their explanations for this are somewhat different.

12 Trow, op. cit., p. 269.
Context

Much of the current debate about quality in Australian higher education stems from the move towards universal participation and, in particular, from the method chosen to stimulate growth in the sector: the creation of an uncapped market in student places – or ‘demand-driven’ funding. Allowing universities to select and enrol as many students as they see fit has undoubtedly created growth and greater competition in the system, but it has also raised questions about the quality of the education that is being provided. Similarly, the increasing presence of non-university and private higher education providers is raising questions about comparative and absolute standards across the sector.

Had funding levels remained stable, much of this concern would have been muted. However, federal budget pressures have reduced the level of public funding per student, just when universities are enrolling students with more varied levels of academic preparation requiring a greater range of learning support. Universities have continued to respond to funding pressures by replacing full-time academic staff with sessional (casual) employees. The casualisation of university teaching has attracted a great deal of attention, but primarily as an industrial matter to be analysed in terms of the development of a segmented and exploitative labour market. Relatively little attention has been paid to its implications for the quality of teaching and learning. Nonetheless, *Universities Australia* has argued that, without either an increase in public investment or fee deregulation, the ‘quality, performance, competitiveness and reputation of Australia’s higher education sector will be condemned to a path of inevitable decline’.\(^\text{13}\)

Discussion about defining and measuring good teaching and learning, and about the conditions necessary to develop and sustain high standards, is not new. The first Australian quality assurance system emerged in response to an earlier period of major expansion associated with the Dawkins reforms of the late 1980s, during which the Higher Education Council suggested that quality had suffered ‘as a result of trying to spread too little money too thinly’.\(^\text{14}\) It is hardly surprising that periods of rapid expansion and/or reductions in funding have triggered questions about declining quality from both a federal government concerned about holding universities accountable for large increases in overall expenditure and vice-chancellors concerned about reductions in funding per student. As Martin Trow has argued, no country can afford the public funding required for mass participation if its system is based on maintaining an earlier, elite model of higher education, and that such an approach will inevitably lead to lower standards.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{13}\) Universities Australia, 2014.

\(^{14}\) Massaro, 2013.

\(^{15}\) Trow, op. cit.
It is important to acknowledge, however, that the amount of attention being paid to defining and assuring the quality of teaching and learning in Australian universities should not be taken as evidence, in itself, of any decline in quality. Indeed, some would say that there is no problem.  

Australian commentator Gavin Moodie has argued that there is no evidence that the radical expansion of higher education sparked by the Dawkins reforms more than 25 years ago has reduced its quality. Acknowledging the difficulty of directly observing quality in this context, Moodie argues that we inevitably rely to some extent on trust in the ‘application of accepted norms’:

> When those norms are disrupted, trust is undermined until new norms are accepted. If there was a gap in the Dawkins revolution in assuring the quality of higher education, it wasn’t in the changes themselves but in measures to build general confidence in the new arrangements and norms being developed.  

The current approaches to ensuring further growth in Australian higher education are undoubtedly challenging accepted norms. But fears about their effects on quality can be analysed in radically different ways. UK professor of education Louise Morley, for example, describes the concern about standards and about the potential ‘dumbing down’ of higher education in the UK as being a reaction to the policy focus on increasing equity and access. ‘There are contamination fears expressed in the idea that massification and the entry of “non-traditional” learners presents a threat to academic standards,’ she writes. Such fears are not difficult to find among some Australian academics.

There is, at least, little evidence of complacency in contemporary Australian universities’ attitudes to educational quality. There is now growing interest within the sector in structures for ‘professionalising’ university teaching, as well as more formal recognition of university academics as teachers, including a system of accreditation. This reflects an international trend, with a 2013 European Commission report on improving the quality of teaching and learning arguing that the ‘essential challenge for the higher education sector, generally speaking, is to comprehensively professionalize its teaching cohort as teachers.’

While there may be little evidence of complacency in the debate about the quality of Australian higher education, there are a number of unchallenged assumptions about how it might best be assured and improved. There are many questions that need to be asked about the kinds of policies being adopted to promote good teaching and to

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16 For example, Coaldrake & Steadman, 2013b.
17 Moodie, 2013, p. 246.
18 Morley, op. cit., p. 130.
19 The teaching and learning sections of the two rounds of Compact agreements between the Commonwealth and individual universities provide an excellent overview of all the work being done to improve quality. See http://docs.education.gov.au/search/site/compact.
evaluate it – at the individual, institutional and system levels. It is widely acknowledged that universal participation in higher education will bring with it many new challenges. We need the widest possible discussion about the most effective ways to improve the quality of education on offer, and to assure the public – and students, in particular – of the value of their investment in higher education.
Part 2: The purposes of higher education

At the end of the day everyone makes sense of his or her own higher education, not necessarily immediately, and in some cases not for a considerable time. You don’t have to buy the full proposition if you don’t want to – there is a definite escape clause (away from doctrinal study) that says no one can make you take away what you don’t want to take away from the experience.

You are, however, compelled by an authentic higher education experience to practise answering difficult questions. You are given a safe place in which to do so. Depending on your subject or discipline (or combination of these), you will gain a powerful evaluative toolkit. You will be required to communicate what you have learned. This is hard work but for centuries students have found it to be immensely satisfying and it has, generally, helped to make the world a better place.21

In current debates about the quality of higher education teaching and learning, a great deal of attention is being devoted to defining in ever more detail how university teachers should teach.22 What is missing from much of this work, however, is clarity about the purposes of Australian higher education in an era of universal participation. Quality cannot be defined or measured without reference to purpose. Without clarity about the purposes of higher education, the focus on developing teaching standards is in danger of becoming separated from the question of course (or program) standards and of what students should be capable of at the point of graduation.23 In his reflections on the implications of universal access to higher education, Martin Trow concludes that this ‘shift in meaning and significance of attendance in the tertiary sector has enormous consequences for student motivation, and thus also for the curriculum and for the intellectual climate of these institutions.’24

Given the rapid expansion now occurring in Australian higher education, it is not surprising to find a range of views about its purposes, and these play out in judgments about its quality. There is no simple answer to the question of purpose, but merely asking it helps us to focus attention on what students should learn (including the depth of that learning), and on the development of lifelong attitudes to learning.

The tension between different views was nicely captured in a 2012 exchange between Australian academic and writer Raimond Gaita and University of

21 Watson, 2013.
22 See, for example, Chalmers et al., 2014.
23 The question of ‘course standards’ is becoming more important with the growth of ‘alternative, disaggregated and distributed delivery methods’. The Higher Education Standards panel established a project to investigate how teaching and learning standards can be applied to these new forms of teaching. See www.hestandards.gov.au/higher-education-standards-panel-research-fellowship.
Melbourne Vice-Chancellor Glyn Davis over the role of the contemporary Australian university. Gaita provoked a response from Davis with his eloquent and heartfelt critique of the managerialism and utilitarianism that he believes is destroying what he considers the essential value of university education – something to be acquired ‘by living in a community that must continuously rise to the obligation to reflect on what it means to be a student or a teacher, responsive to the ideals that define the deepest and most rigorous standards of their disciplines’. Gaita argued that, for a long time, ‘we have been bereft of such a common understanding, one that would enable us to give authoritative voice to a conception, positive and deep, of the value of academic forms of the life of the mind’.

Responding to this expression of profound regret about what has been lost with the expansion of higher education, Davis in turn reminded us of the particular history of the Australian university, which for most students and academics has ‘always been primarily concerned with preparation for the professions’. In this, the origins of Australian universities are radically different from those of the colleges of North America, which were set up with the explicit ambition of ‘shaping the self, civic, cultural and religious habits of mind and character’. A 2007 report on college learning for the 21st century published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities began with a reminder that ‘Liberal education has always been this nation’s signature educational tradition’. In the US there has long been a shared understanding that college is a place ‘for the development of character’, for ‘fostering ethical as well as analytical intelligence’, where students can be ‘touched and inspired as well as trained and informed’.

The contrast with Australia’s more utilitarian foundations could not be clearer. As Davis pointed out in his rejoinder to Gaita:

- Students enrolled in the liberal arts, and academics engaged in public debate, have always been important voices on campus, but the dominant tradition is pragmatic and vocational. It was a path chosen early, and reinforced by national policy, student choice and academic values.

Despite past efforts to increase diversity in Australian higher education, our universities have remained remarkably homogenous. Davis described them as being ‘autonomous, professional, comprehensive, secular, public and commuter’. Student preferences have also remained consistent, with seventy per cent of

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26 ibid.
27 Davis, 2013. For more on the history of the Australian university, see Forsyth, 2014.
28 Sullivan & Rosin, p. 22.
31 Davis, op. cit.
32 ibid.
students choosing to enrol in programs of professional preparation. For many, ‘university remains a means to a vocation’.33

The point of drawing attention to this exchange of views between Gaita and Davis is to illustrate how work on defining good teaching needs to be contextualised and linked to an explicit account of the purposes of Australian higher education. For example, Gaita worries about the negative impact on teaching of utilitarianism and vocationalism, suggesting that:

> Academics now tend to cut their subjects down to a size that is tractable enough to meet the demands of accountability. Impressive technicality, a kind of high-flying thoughtlessness, can shine in such conditions.34

In thinking about the purpose of higher education in an era of near-universal participation, we need to understand the forces that have shaped its expansion, the kinds of intellectual capabilities that have come to dominate the curriculum, and the reasons for the valuing of particular capabilities over others. Australian academic and writer Hannah Forsyth argues that as far back as 1979, when the Williams Report was published,35 government attitudes to the purpose of higher education were changing in fundamental ways:

> Politicians began to argue that higher education had two primary purposes: workforce planning and economic growth. The older idea, held by Menzies, Beazley (senior) and Ian Clunies Ross, that universities were intended to uphold culture and civilisation, was being discarded.36

As higher education has become the prerequisite for many more occupations, professional associations have sought to pressure universities in ways that might conflict with what have traditionally been seen as independent academic decisions. These have included pressuring them to include specific units of study, to employ academics at particular levels of seniority and to exclude students with particular Australian Tertiary Admission Rank scores (even when academic staff might believe these students are capable of successfully completing the course).

The contrasting of higher education’s purposes in terms of binary oppositions (vocational/professional versus life of the mind) is, however, both unhelpful and unrealistic. Sir David Watson has described higher education as ‘essentially geological. Strata are laid down at different times, in different ways, and for different purposes, but once there they are irremovable.’37 As a result the pressures on

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33 ibid., p. 45. Davis describes the way Griffith University was brought into line despite its innovative curriculum. I taught at Murdoch University in its first four years, and witnessed a similar process of ‘normalisation’, with the abandonment of compulsory liberal education elements such as ‘Great Ideas’.

34 Gaita, op. cit., p. 6.

35 Williams, 1979.

36 Forsyth, 2014, p. 98.

37 Watson, 2014.
modern universities are now, not surprisingly, often contradictory. They are expected to be, among many other things, ‘conservative and radical’, ‘competitive and collegial’, ‘excellent and equal’, ‘traditional and innovative’. The contemporary focus on employment skills does not, in any case, lead inevitably to a narrow technical education. A major 2007 review of the US college system, which surveyed more than 100 institutions ranging from two-year community colleges to research universities, began by asserting that ‘across all the discussion of access, affordability, and even accountability, there has been a near-total public and policy silence about what contemporary college graduates need to know and to be able to do.’ It concluded that:

> [E]very student – not just the fortunate few – will need wide-ranging and cross-disciplinary knowledge, higher-level skills, an active sense of personal and social responsibility, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge to complex problems. The learning students need is best described as a liberal – and liberating – education.

It is this clarity about the purpose of US college education that shapes recommendations about the curriculum, and about the need to stop the growth of ‘differential tracks’ in post-secondary education. In particular, the reviewers expressed concern about the growth of commercial or ‘career’ colleges whose mission is to prepare students only for one specific occupation. As the costs of college education in the US rise, this review warns that while students and parents might believe that a narrow, occupationally focused program represents good value, in fact it is unlikely to be rewarded in the labour market. In Australia, despite its very different tertiary education system, it is already clear that employers prefer degree holders to diploma holders, and this fact deprives diploma students of one of the historic benefits of occupationally focused education programs.

It is important to recognise how these different understandings of the purpose of higher education feed into what we think about quality. An example of this is provided by Sullivan and Rosin, who argue that the privileging of certain kinds of knowledge is leading to profoundly lopsided curricula and to distorted development of graduate capabilities. They and others are concerned about the reification of critical thinking as the highest goal of education in the modern university, arguing that much of higher education is ‘about induction into this culture of criticism and evidence, which is universal in its claims and understands itself as the cutting edge of

40 ibid., p. 11.
41 ibid., p. 9.
42 ibid.
43 Wheelahan, Moodie & Buchanan, 2012.
humanity’s forward progress’. They describe the triumph of abstract theory and criticism over what they call ‘formation and action’. For them, ‘analytical thinking is essential but it is insufficient guide in the face of complex and uncertain situations that often involve competing human goods.’

They argue that students need to become more than critical thinkers:

> [T]he academy is not only called upon to break apart the world into its constitutive relations and causes through critical thinking ... We mistake analyses and critical thinking, which are disintegrating ends, for judgment and responsibility, which are integrating and consummating ends.

> Our students will be called upon to take up concrete places and stances in the lives of others. They must learn to discern the practical salience of academic insight through integrative acts of responsible judgment in the world. What critical thinking pulls apart responsible judgment must reconnect.

While American writers are happy to debate the idea that undergraduate education should include the development of civic responsibility and moral character, Australians are more comfortable discussing the same kinds of qualities using the more prosaic language of ‘graduate attributes’.

Graduate attributes are the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time with the institution. These attributes include but go beyond the disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses. They are qualities that also prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future.

A major project funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) created a ‘map’ of university statements about graduate attributes. While these nearly always included practical, discipline- or work-related skills, such as communication and teamwork, most universities have also recently adopted what the project’s authors called ‘enabling’ attributes, which can be thought of as broader dispositions. For example, the project identified ‘global citizenship’ as a widely shared attribute that included the development of both ‘global perspectives’ and a sense of local/domestic social responsibility. Twenty-two universities included a statement about social or civic responsibility (though most of these statements referred to attitudes of mind rather than requirements to act).

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45 ibid., p. 20.
46 ibid., p. 143. In Australia, these ideas have been taken up and developed by Geoff Scott, building on empirical research into the capabilities of successful early career graduates in a number of professions. See Scott & Yates, 2002.
47 See, for example, Nussbaum, 2012.
48 Bowden et al., 2000.
Despite the apparent institutional enthusiasm for developing these graduate attributes in all students, universities have generally found it to be very hard work. Giving up discipline content in order to create space in the curriculum for the development of skills relating to employability is widely resisted. Even where the attribute is deemed worthy, as in the case of ethical or civic responsibility, the question of how it should be taught or learned is far from simple. Research shows that generic capabilities are most effectively taught within discipline- or profession-specific contexts.\(^{51}\) However, most academics resist the suggestion that they bear any responsibility for teaching academic literacy or communication skills, believing these skills to have nothing to do with the content knowledge of their discipline. This stance also probably reflects the fact that these staff feel underqualified to teach basic literacies.

The development of ambitious graduate capabilities requires sustained collaborative work to redesign undergraduate education, with academics working together over time and across disciplinary and professional boundaries.\(^{52}\) This cannot, however, be done without breaking down the specialised silos of the modern university and resisting the powerful research pressures that encourage narrow identification within disciplines. Current academic career incentives in Australia, as in the US and the UK, strongly emphasise individual scholarship and teaching, and a disciplinary publication profile.

Promoting the collaborative nature of good teaching is unlikely to be effective unless it is realised that powerful pressures have created university cultures that are ‘hyperrational, individualistic and dominated by research’.\(^{53}\) This is an important reminder that universities are complex institutions characterised by contradictory external pressures as well as by contradictory internal interests.

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51 Jones, 2009.
52 The review of US college education identified five ‘essential learning outcomes’ for all college graduates, ranging from disciplinary knowledge in the humanities and science to generic analytical skills, civic responsibility and the capacity to apply all this to new settings and complex problems. National Leadership Council, op. cit., p. 12.
53 Fallon & Scott, 2009, p. 25, include in this list ‘prone to talk’. Sullivan & Rosin also view with concern the increasing narrowness of graduate research, and the absence of any focus on the development of students as teachers in doctoral programs. For a fuller discussion of this, see Probert, 2014b. The tensions between research pressures and educational quality will be discussed more fully later in this paper, in relation to the role of university rankings in a marketised system of universities.
Part 3: Key ideas about quality in higher education

Processes, performance and standards

There are many ways in which the quality of Australian higher education has been both assured and improved over the past two decades. These include the effective longstanding institutional quality review processes that reflect the self-regulating character of Australian universities; external accreditation of programs undertaken by professional bodies; legal obligations overseen by such bodies as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and by state/territory ombudsmen; various forms of external quality auditing (such as those undertaken by the Australian Universities Quality Agency); and Commonwealth oversight of a wide range of performance data linked to funding agreements and now underpinned by the power of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) to register and de-register providers.

As Lee Dow and Braithwaite suggest, it is useful to divide these arrangements into two types of activities, ‘the first being forward looking assurances of strategic planning; and the second being backward looking accountabilities for delivery and outcomes.’ In the current regulatory architecture, ‘the Commonwealth and its funding, especially through HESA [the Higher Education Support Act 2003 (Cth)], is what drives the majority of the strategic forward looking assurance activities and conversations such as the Compacts and the data collection which forms the accountability for delivering outcomes.’

Within these arrangements, judgments about the quality of teaching and learning in higher education have deployed a limited number of key concepts. Many of these concepts are highly contested or extremely difficult to operationalise, with the result that it has been difficult to develop a framework for evaluation that is widely accepted as well as feasible. Australian higher education institutions have been reviewed over the past two decades in terms of:

- their processes for evaluating progress against institutional objectives, with participation on a voluntary basis, ranking in bands and financial rewards for top bands (Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education)
- their processes for monitoring and improving quality, judged in terms of fitness for purpose against their individual missions, with compulsory participation but no funding (Australian Universities Quality Agency audits)
- their comparative performance against selected metrics, leading to national institutional rankings and funding by performance bands (Learning and Teaching Performance Fund)

54 Lee Dow & Braithwaite, 2013, p. 8.
• their individual performance over time against selected metrics, to reward improvement (first Compact negotiation process)
• their ability to meet defined standards in teaching and learning for the purposes of registration (TEQSA and the Higher Education Standards; Higher Education Academy professional accreditation).

Even within approaches that rely on comparative performance metrics, there has been extensive debate about the relative value of ‘input measures’ (such as the qualifications of teachers) versus ‘output measures’ (student outcomes), and concern about the sector’s perceived over-reliance on measures that are only proxies for measures of real learning (such as student satisfaction).

In the following parts of this paper, different elements of the Australian quality regime are outlined and critically reviewed. However, Lee Dow and Braithwaite are right to suggest that quality assurance must rest primarily within the institutions themselves:

What is persuasive in that argument is the recognition that it is within institutions, and indeed within their component faculties, schools and departments that the commitment to enhance quality must take root and be sustained. It might be desirable for the government and its regulator to encourage and perhaps monitor that, but ultimate success will depend on individual staff and the culture of their disciplines, fields and professions and their institutions more than on a national regulator.56

Universities have their own ‘norms, values and processes that together create a “scholarly culture” with as much regulatory punch as any demands imposed from outside’.57 Those being regulated within this context can respond either positively or negatively and, in so doing, either strengthen or undermine ‘the legitimacy and effectiveness of the regulator’.58 Indeed, the ‘regulatees’ can organise themselves in ways that are able to marginalise a regulatory agency, and render it unable to act effectively.

**Institutional quality assurance/self-regulation**

Australian universities have a long history of regulating and reviewing the quality of the educational programs they offer, through processes in which peer review is paramount. Programs are approved through faculty and academic boards and committees that are ultimately responsible for academic policies and quality assurance, and in which academic expertise and standing carry authority.59 Similarly,

56 ibid., p. 41.
57 ibid., p 18.
58 ibid.
59 In some older universities every full professor is automatically a member of the Academic Board; however, most have adopted models with a more ‘managerial’ complexion and fewer members.
most universities mandate regular external reviews of their educational programs and disciplines, undertaken by discipline experts in the relevant field. Judgments are underpinned by ‘a shared scholarly culture of norms and practices that transcend national boundaries and are institutionalised through disciplines and scholarly societies.’

Alongside these general aspects of quality assurance, professional courses are generally subject to rigorous external accreditation and periodic re-accreditation. The focus here is on whether the program of study does in fact prepare graduates to become competent practitioners of the particular profession.

Because expert panels, with a stake in ensuring that professional standards are maintained, conduct the reviews, they are accepted for their insights with no hint of interference in institutional autonomy.

As Vin Massaro notes, a rigorous quality assurance process that is focused on standards and outcomes must be conducted at discipline or program level, and must be based on international peer review (among other things).

Peer review also plays a major role in the appointment and promotion of academic staff, both directly through the constitution of selection and promotion committees, and indirectly through the processes of doctoral examination, national and international competitive grant allocation and scholarly publication.

The importance of sustaining this professional commitment to quality at the level of departmental and disciplinary cultures is clearly revealed in the issue of ‘soft-marking’. Public concern over this issue first emerged in the 1990s within the context of Australian universities’ growing dependence on the fees paid by international students, and isolated cases where it was claimed managerial pressure was being exerted to pass international students who did not meet the required standards. Enrollments of international students increased thirteen-fold between 1998 and 2014, and the recent ICAC review of New South Wales universities concluded that they ‘have come to depend financially on a cohort of students, many of whom are struggling to pass, but who the university cannot afford to fail.’ Similar concerns have been expressed about the integrity of standards in some non-university higher education providers.

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60 Lee Dow & Braithwaite, 2013, p. 20.
61 Massaro, 2013, p. 57.
62 ibid., p. 52.
63 ICAC, p. 9.
64 In March 2015 the Victorian Government promised a thorough investigation into claims that one of Melbourne’s biggest TAFE colleges had passed international students who should have failed with exam papers being remarked, increasing the scores of some students to a pass. The allegations against the Box Hill Institute were made by former students and teachers, and have also been referred to Victoria’s Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission.
The strongest defence against such concerns is the confidence of higher education teachers in their colleagues’ commitment to academic values. As the ICAC review points out:

Compliance with academic standards, for example, is a powerful way of minimising plagiarism, exam cheating and ghost writing. The implementation of academic policies, course design requirements, marking policies and exam and assessment standards are all part of the academic controls system.\(^{65}\)

For academic standards to be protected, the relevant committee structures need to be independent of individuals with responsibility for maintaining funding from international students. Yet, as budgets have increasingly been devolved to faculties and schools, ‘the intertwining of compliance and business development continues’.\(^{66}\)

A number of experienced commentators have noted that external confidence has been eroded in recent years. Ellen Hazelkorn points the finger at the lack of external transparency in university processes, which rely too heavily on reports that are ‘usually written in opaque academic language, making it difficult to understand or compare performance between institutions, especially internationally’. This, she argues, ‘has contributed to a breakdown in trust between institutions and students, policy makers and others.’\(^{67}\)

While peer review and professional, discipline-based judgments are necessary elements of any quality assurance system in higher education, they are not without problems when it comes to the quality of teaching and learning. As William F Massy asks: ‘Professors are the guardians of educational quality, but what does this responsibility mean to them?’\(^{68}\) Interviews reveal that they generally see quality as being synonymous with course content. ‘[T]he stronger the content, the better the educational quality. Furthermore, professors tend to equate good course content with a strong research program.’\(^{69}\) This thinking has for several decades been reflected in the selection and promotion criteria for Australian academic staff, which, until recently, have been overwhelmingly focused on evidence of research performance. A concerted campaign to raise the status of teaching has led to widespread changes in promotion policies, but parity of esteem remains an elusive goal.\(^{70}\) Research expertise remains dominant in academic conceptions of excellence, including educational excellence.\(^{71}\)

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\(^{65}\) ICAC, p. 28.

\(^{66}\) ibid.

\(^{67}\) Hazelkorn, op. cit.

\(^{68}\) Massy, op. cit., pp. 152–154. ‘Professors’ in the US context essentially means all academic staff, rather than just the most senior academic staff, as it does in Australia.

\(^{69}\) ibid.

\(^{70}\) See Probert, 2013.

\(^{71}\) See Probert, 2014a.
Despite the lack of any evidence to support this supposed connection between research excellence and teaching excellence, the concept continues to act as an obstacle to some aspects of quality improvement in teaching. It is reflected in such things as cynicism about reliable measures of teaching quality, lack of interest in professional development as teachers, and unequal allocation of time and energy between research and teaching. Attitudes are changing in most universities as a result of central policy changes designed to improve teaching, and a small number of institutions are beginning to take seriously the role of peer review in teaching.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{72} For example, the University of Wollongong and Monash University.
Part 4: Quality assurance in practice: process versus metrics

From the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education to the Australian Universities Quality Agency

Gavin Moodie has provided a useful overview of how quality has been defined and assessed in Australia’s post-Dawkins university system. He notes that during the 1990s and early 2000s, the Australian government ‘took the view that quality is assured by processes to monitor and improve quality’. This was seen as particularly appropriate given the desire to encourage diversity of mission within the new expanded sector. As Vin Massaro commented at the time, ‘the quality assessment process was given the specific encouragement to reward diversity by ensuring that quality was not measured against some abstract notion, but against the university’s mission statement and a self-assessment of the effectiveness of its quality assurance.’

The three rounds of audits conducted between 1993 and 1995 by the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) adopted this approach, asking each institution to define quality in its own way. These audits were designed to determine whether institutions had put in place appropriate methods to evaluate their progress against their own objectives. Despite their process focus, the audits were in fact used to create three bands of ‘performance’ rankings, in which the newest universities came off worst. Massaro concluded that this had the unintended consequence of further encouraging conformity to the traditional sandstone university model. The impact on the quality of teaching was probably very modest, and only a small layer of staff in each institution became acquainted with ‘QA’ (quality assurance) thinking. Nonetheless, this experiment brought quality and quality management into the centre of Australia’s higher education system.

In 2001, following further debate about the best approach to quality assurance in higher education, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was established. For 10 years AUQA undertook audits of all Australian universities (on a five-yearly cycle), based on detailed self-assessment and evidence of relevant ‘quality processes’. The audits were initially carried out on a whole-of-institution basis but subsequently focused on particular themes (such as research and research training, internationalisation and quality of teaching).

AUQA’s work embodied the same focus on ‘quality processes’ that characterised the wider quality movement that had taken hold from the 1980s within the

73 Moodie, op. cit.
74 Massaro, 1997, p. 54.
75 ibid.
76 Aitkin, 1997, p. 46.
77 See, for example, Anderson, Johnson & Milligan, 2000.
manufacturing and business sectors more generally. It can be summed up as defining quality in terms of user needs (as opposed to producer interests), and embedding systems that ensure that everyone involved participates in constant and continuous quality improvement. This in turn means that data is critical, for without it no assessment can be made and no improvement measured.

It is perhaps not surprising that academics failed to embrace these ideas during the AUQA years. Most strongly resisted the importation of business practices into education, and rejected the notion that students were equivalent to ‘users’. Massy reported from an extensive survey of US academics that:

> They say the true worth of a course or degree can’t be measured, that faculty expertise is the only important quality variable, and that universities exist to create, preserve, and extend knowledge rather than to ‘serve customers’.78

In Australia, even more critical views about this kind of quality assurance were common, with ‘evidence suggesting that academics view it as a meaningless set of policies driving managerial behaviour’.79 The failure to convince the academic community that they should indeed attune their ‘teaching and learning processes to satisfy the wants and needs of their students’, or to ‘develop the assessment measures needed to ascertain their success in so doing’ reflected a lack of leadership within the sector perhaps only a decade ago.80 It also reveals how much has changed more recently.

In the AUQA process, the first step of conducting a self-review and preparing a portfolio was intended to be as important as the review itself, giving universities a chance to look closely at the clarity of their educational objectives, the data they were using to define progress, and their processes for monitoring and responding to progress. Those with managerial responsibilities came to see the real value of being required to systematically collect, interpret and act on their own data (even if they usually argued that the final report told them nothing that they had not already known.)

Despite this, widespread dislike of AUQA’s approach led to various forms of institutional resistance and avoidance. The Australian National University (ANU), for example, decided to run its own quality review prior to AUQA’s, in order to show how it should be done.81 Professor Ian Chubb, then vice-chancellor of ANU, spoke for ‘the better universities’ when he said:

> We took a pretty laid-back view of these audits because we don’t believe AUQA’s emphasis on process tells you what you need to know. A focus on process doesn’t

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78 Massy, op. cit., p. 157.
79 Thompson-Whiteside, 2013, p. 41.
80 Massy, op. cit., p. 157.
81 In 2004, ANU undertook a full pre-emptive review using discipline-level international peer reviewers (ANU, *Capabilities and Performance Statement*, 2004).
help the better universities, as they are internally focused on the quality of their outcomes. They want to know how good they really are; they already know about their processes. The AUQA audits could lead us to infer more than is reasonable about the quality of our teaching and research.  

At other universities, vice-chancellors handed the onerous job of preparing the self-assessment portfolio to a specialist ‘quality’ person, who was often also required to coach other staff in what to say and what not to say during the audit visit. Less well resourced, newer universities often struggled.

While the oldest universities tended to be the most dismissive, newer and more technical institutions were keener. At least one Australian Technology Network (ATN) university became so enthusiastic about quality systems that it began the process of seeking International Organization for Standardization (ISO) accreditation – a process that left most academics cold.

The only parts of the final audit report that could cause anxiety were the criticisms, euphemistically called ‘Recommendations’ (as opposed to Commendations). There is no doubt that universities worked hard to avoid receiving any recommendations about their international operations, since here a negative finding would directly endanger revenue and reputation. One enterprising new university launched a controversial marketing campaign on the basis that it had received a higher ratio of commendations to recommendations than had its higher-status, older competitors. However, the stakes were otherwise low.

Whatever the flaws of the AUQA approach, the belief that ‘faculty expertise is the only important quality variable’ in higher educational reflects a set of assumptions that needed to be challenged. In Australia we have undertaken remarkably little research into what academics think about educational quality, but it is likely that their views are not dissimilar to those of their US counterparts. Interviews conducted by the National Center for Postsecondary Education with academics from a number of US universities revealed that quality was seen as being synonymous with course content, which in turn was seen as being dependent on research strength.

There is no doubting the importance of content, though the earlier discussion of the purposes of higher education suggests that this is not as obvious a concept as it might seem. Nonetheless, the argument that excellent content (that is, research credentials of teachers) is the best guarantee of educational quality is unsustainable.

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82 Quoted in Matchett, 2011.
83 I was a member of the executive in three different universities as they underwent an AUQA audit, representing the ATN, Go8 and IRU.
84 Shah, Roth & Nair, 2010. Macquarie University suffered adverse publicity in 2003 following highly critical comments about its international operations, the quality of its submission and its defensive attitude in general.
85 Massy, op. cit.
86 ibid.
Indeed, it has been persuasively argued that it is precisely this kind of thinking that causes research to be consistently prioritised over teaching at both individual and departmental levels – what Massy and Zemsky have described as the ‘academic ratchet effect’. 87

This is not to suggest that universities are blind to problems with teaching quality, but that they tend to see poor teaching as a matter of individual ‘failure’. As Massy put it: ‘Faculty and staff responsible for quality view shortfalls as people issues, and then become frustrated when academic autonomy and tenure limit their ability to effect improvement’. 88 This kind of thinking does not encourage a focus on cultural or systemic aspects of quality.

For a variety of reasons the focus of government quality assessment has now moved definitively away from the AUQA approach, yet there are good reasons to suggest that as a process for quality improvement – as opposed to quality assurance – it had a great deal to recommend it in an increasingly diversified sector. Applied to the educational mission of a university, this kind of educational quality auditing requires the institution to be clear about its desired learning outcomes, to have designed high-quality curricula and teaching and learning processes, to be clear about how learning will be assessed, and to have developed processes that focus on implementation – on making sure that what is planned actually happens. What Massy called ‘educational quality processes’ are designed to improve performance across an institution in systematic ways that ensure that everyone involved in teaching is engaged in the improvement. 89

If such an approach were advocated strongly by vice-chancellors in Australia, these processes would become embedded in normal academic life – especially at program or departmental level – rather than being seen as irritating, externally imposed demands for accountability. This might in turn give legitimacy to academic staff who allocate more time to thinking about improving teaching in the face of ever more intense research pressures.

The AUQA process was resource-intensive and time-consuming. However, there are a variety of different approaches to the application of this model, including the very ‘light-touch’ approach used in the institutional audits run by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, which focused on quality enhancement processes. As Hazelkorn notes, ‘In this approach universities are assessed against their own criteria with the aim of helping them to improve their own efforts to bolster quality.’ 90

88 Massy op. cit., p. 159.
89 ibid., pp. 159–165.
90 Hazelkorn, op. cit.
**Performance metrics and standards**

Ian Chubb was not alone in being critical of quality assurance frameworks that focus on processes rather than outcomes or standards. His response was to turn to academic peer review at discipline level, but this provided little by way of data about student learning, and most academics remained sceptical that improvements in teaching could in fact be measured. Nonetheless, a great deal of work had been done to develop metrics of teaching and learning quality.

At the same time as the Australian government was pursuing versions of ‘fit for purpose’ quality auditing, policy work was also being undertaken to develop comparative performance indicators for the measurement of quality and efficiency in Australian higher education, reflecting a rather different but still generic business ‘production measurement’ view of quality. From this work came the development by Paul Ramsden of the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), introduced in 1993 and administered annually since then by all Australian universities.

The original version of the CEQ asked students who had just completed an undergraduate degree program whether they agreed or disagreed with each of 25 statements relating to the quality of the program. It sought to measure their perceptions of good teaching, their perceived acquisition of generic skills for the workforce, and their overall satisfaction with the quality of the program. The primary function of the CEQ was to allow comparisons of the best and worst courses in a particular field of study, and to provide useful data on what academics needed to be doing to promote good learning outcomes. The CEQ provided the first comparable data on teaching quality across the higher education sector. Together with the Graduate Destinations Survey (GDS) – which collects information about graduates’ employment and salary outcomes and continuing study/labour market status – it constituted the national annual census of higher education graduates for more than two decades.

In 2003, armed with a now well established (if often criticised) comparative data set, a new government review of higher education titled Backing Australia’s Future recommended the introduction of performance-based funding for teaching. The Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF), totalling $220 million over three years, was awarded in three rounds between 2006 and 2008, based on a range of measures including student retention and progression, and CEQ and GDS scores. The stated purpose of the LTPF was ‘enabling excellence in learning and teaching to achieve equal status with research excellence in terms of contribution to Australia’s

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91 Moodie, op. cit., p. 235.
92 The term ‘generic skills’ has probably passed its use-by date and should be replaced with notions of ‘transferable skills’ to eliminate the idea of generic skills isolated from the context/content. I am indebted to Liz Johnson for many wise comments on my discussion of graduate capabilities and generic skills.
knowledge systems. It rewarded institutions that could demonstrate excellence in teaching, and aimed to encourage institutional diversity by providing an alternative source of status to that created by research measures. In this latter effort it was particularly unsuccessful: while the number of universities that received a share of funding varied each year according to fairly arbitrary criteria, the lion’s share was consistently awarded to the Group of Eight universities, even in years when the number of universities receiving some amount of funding increased.

While the significant sums at stake ensured widespread university engagement with the LTPF, it was not accepted by most of the sector as a credible or legitimate method of distributing such large sums of government money, even if individual universities muted their criticism when they found themselves winners. In the absence of any agreed method of measuring learning outcomes, the allocation of funds had to rely on a set of proxies for learning (such as student satisfaction), which became the source of endless dispute and resistance. Not only did the sector argue against the legitimacy of the indicators, there was almost universal criticism of the rankings they were used to create.

These criticisms of the LTPF were well founded, but they also helped to shore up some of the less credible views that dominated many academics’ thinking – namely, that there is no way of measuring the quality of higher education teaching, and everyone should therefore stop trying to do this. A decade after the introduction of the CEQ, those interested in collecting data that could be used to improve teaching quality began to take notice of the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and to trial a modified version of it in Australian universities. A key assumption of the NSSE is that learning is influenced by how a student participates in educationally purposeful activities, and the degree of challenge posed by these activities. Many educators argued that the NSSE provided the most reliable proxy measures of learning outcomes, as well as good diagnostic measures for improvement at program level. By 2007 the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) was offering an Australasian version (the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, or AUSSE), and had 25 higher education providers willing to pay to participate. As US academic George Kuh argued:

The voluminous research on college student development indicates that what students do when they get to college is more important to their learning (and, arguably, the educational effectiveness of an institution) than who they are or what

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94 In 2006, five universities were awarded a total of $30m, with a second band of nine universities receiving $14m between them. In 2007, 30 universities received funding, and 12 universities in 2008.
95 Wheelahan, 2007.
96 The University of New South Wales and the University of Western Australia were the first to do this.
they bring with them to post-secondary education ... Educationally effective colleges and universities employ pedagogical practices and organize the curriculum and other learning opportunities in ways that induce students to devote more effort to educationally purposeful activities than they might otherwise.97

The concept of ‘student engagement’ had entered the mainstream as a valuable means of evaluating the quality of teaching and learning. It was, however, entirely unsuited to ranking the performance of institutions, since field-of-study variations within institutions were much greater than the variations between institutions.98

With the change of Australian government in 2007, the LTPF was abandoned. However, the government’s insistence on the importance of measuring quality became louder as a result of the Bradley Review of higher education in 2008.99 The decision to encourage a rapid expansion in participation, and to introduce as the preferred mechanism an uncapped market in student places, meant that the government looked for higher levels of quality assurance. If providers could enrol as many students as they wanted rather than being dependent on government-determined quotas, how was the quality of the educational experience for those students to be assured? The Bradley Review insisted that ‘Australia must enhance its capacity to demonstrate outcomes and appropriate standards in higher education if it is to remain internationally competitive and implement a demand driven funding model.’100

Given that current international university rankings are overwhelmingly determined by research performance rather than teaching quality, it is questionable whether the demonstration of learning outcomes and standards is critical to international competitiveness.101 Nor is there any evidence that learning outcomes or standards play a significant role in shaping local student demand as yet. Student preferences are primarily shaped firstly by their choice of course, and secondly by the status of the institutions that offer that course. However, there are good reasons to insist that outcomes and standards must be demonstrated if there is to be an uncapped market in taxpayer-supported student places.102 As the Bradley Review argued, the existing quality assurance framework was ‘too focused on inputs and processes and does not give sufficient weight to assuring and demonstrating outcomes and standards.’103

97 Kuh, 2005, p. 151.
98 ibid., p. 163.
99 Bradley et al., 2008.
100 ibid.
101 The Chinese government, for example, sees the existence of strong regulation in Australian higher education as the key to quality, which creates a dilemma for the proponents of deregulation.
102 The importance of this question can be seen in the current debate about the ATARs of student being admitted to teacher education programs. See Ferrari, 2014.
103 Bradley, 2008, p 115.
Central to the new quality regime was the establishment of a national regulatory body for all higher education providers – the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) – with the power to register and re-register providers according to explicit standards developed by the Higher Education Standards Panel. Greater freedom required greater oversight.

The Bradley Review admitted that creating a quality framework based on the achievement of standards (as opposed to fitness for purpose) ‘will not be simple either conceptually or practically’. It recommended that work be commissioned to develop ‘a set of indicators and instruments to directly assess and compare learning outcomes and a set of formal academic standards by discipline along with processes for applying those standards,’ In the meantime the federal government’s implementation of the Bradley recommendations included proposing new ‘at risk’ performance-based funding for higher education institutions from 2012, to be based on yet-to-be developed ‘robust’ indicators relating to the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. The problem of finding such valid and acceptable indicators was now acute.

One of the most welcomed aspects of this proposed approach was that the indicators were not to be used to rank or compare institutions, but to identify institutional improvement targets that would form the basis of performance funding. In other words, in theory, every institution could be successful in receiving funding if it could meet the agreed improvement targets. This addressed one major criticism of the LTPF and resolved many of the sector’s legitimate concerns about how indicators might inappropriately be used to rank or compare institutions. Such an approach also retained a strong focus on quality improvement.

Between 2010 and 2012, a number of proposals relating to performance measures – some more radical than others – were developed and discussed. One suggested that the CEQ’s generic skills measure be replaced with a direct measure of student learning to be modelled on the US Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) tool. The sector was again divided, and within a year the idea of a CLA pilot study in Australia had been abandoned as being ‘not fit for purposes currently proposed for its use in Australia’. Eventually, the search for agreed measures that could be used to allocate funds proved too difficult, and in the face of a 2011–12 mid-year budget

104 ibid., p. 134.
105 ibid., p. 137.
106 The 2009–2010 Budget’s Transforming Australia’s higher education system introduced mission-based compacts: three-year agreements in which each institution would identify how it would contribute to the government’s goals for higher education, including new performance-based funding targets.
107 DEEWR, 2011.
review that demanded expenditure cuts, the government abandoned the idea of performance-based funding for teaching quality.

Meanwhile, work continued on the parallel challenge of developing statements of academic standards by discipline, together with processes for applying those standards. The ALTC invested heavily in the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards (LTAS) project, helping discipline groups to develop discipline-specific ‘threshold standards, expressed as the minimum learning outcomes that a graduate of any given discipline must have achieved’. Those involved in the LTAS discipline groups learned a great deal from the process of having to discuss explicit learning outcomes (discussed further in Part 5), but the wider project did not find favour with influential vice-chancellors, who were opposed to the kinds of powers TEQSA seemed to be inheriting. (They would later have been relieved to hear a future minister for education announce that, at least for the Group of Eight universities, ‘to be expected to be subject to faceless Canberra bureaucrats for your standards and qualifications is, quite frankly, offensive’.)

The search for ways of comparing learning outcomes across institutions is a global one that has attracted large amounts of funding in the hope of developing a standard tool for quality assessment and regulation. At this stage, however, the Tuning process in Europe and Latin America, and the OECD’s Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project have as yet had little impact, and experts agree that ‘the field is at an uncertain stage and in need of major progress to yield its reform potential’. For more than 10 years Britain has been using subject benchmark statements (alongside its longstanding system of using external examiners), but their effectiveness in a system of quality assurance is regularly questioned. In Australia, Royce Sadler has demonstrated how this approach ‘cannot safeguard academic achievement standards or lead to high levels of comparability in judgments of student performance’.

The search for valid measures of student learning outcomes seemed to lead inexorably back to the more familiar processes of peer review rather than to any comparative indicators. As Vin Massaro concludes:

If TEQSA’s role is primarily to protect quality and standards, measuring performance against the teaching and learning standards should be the central focus of its work. Because these are unlikely to be amenable to quantification without the mediation of peer reviewers with the expertise to determine the comparability of standards, the

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109 Thompson-Whiteside, p. 43.
110 Christopher Pyne, quoted in Ferrari & Trounson, 2010.
111 For a description of the Tuning and AHELO academic standards projects, see Harris, 2009.
113 ibid. Many argue that they are inevitably either too vague or too prescriptive. See Morley, op. cit., pp. 42–46.
Agency will need to rely on expert advice. It will need to accept that this involves a complex task of peer assessment and expert judgment, neither of which lends itself to formulaic solutions.¹¹⁵

Even where such processes of expert judgment are used, the attempt to score or rank the results has proved highly problematic. The UK adopted an enormously resource-intensive cycle of subject reviews between 1995 and 2001, awarding a score out of four to different aspects of teaching and student support, but it too was subject to widespread criticism.¹¹⁶

**Indicators to inform student choice**

Perhaps not surprisingly, the idea of developing indicators to be used to allocate funding or directly manage performance was dropped, despite other work undertaken in this area, including a major ALTC-funded project on ‘teaching quality indicators’. In its place, interest turned to ways in which performance indicators could be used to inform student choice in the new demand-driven system. (The idea that students should have access to relevant information about the quality of teaching and learning offered by different providers is certainly not new. *The Good Universities Guide* has been offering something similar for two decades, although without having any discernible impact on student destinations.)¹¹⁷

A similar policy turnaround occurred in UK higher education a decade earlier, when official statements shifted their emphasis from ‘quality enhancement’ to ‘meeting public information needs’ as ‘the “first principle” of the new arrangements’.¹¹⁸ In 2001 the UK’s approach to assessing teaching and subject quality was already moving from peer review towards providing comparable performance indicators to the public. The list of indicators developed by an expert committee became the basis of Unistats, leading in turn to the development of the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2005.

In 2009 a new UK White Paper gave information an even more central role in quality assurance, and led to two surveys being conducted to examine the information needs of students. The first found that there was no appetite for a new large-scale information system, that only half of all students looked for such information, and that even then they were only interested in very limited kinds of material. The report on this survey made recommendations about how the NSS could be improved, but

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¹¹⁵ Massaro, op. cit., p. 55.
¹¹⁶ The assessment of teaching and learning moved from teaching quality assessment (TQA) subject reviews to a new system of institutional audit in 2003. See Morley, op. cit., ‘Chapter 2: How quality is assessed’.
¹¹⁷ Much of what was available on the relatively short-lived MyUniversity website is also available on www.hobsonscoursefinder.com.au, the current owner of the Good Universities Guide.
¹¹⁸ Brown & Carasso, 2013, p. 110. Brown argues that this ‘was in effect a quid pro quo for the scaling back of assessment/subject review’.
concluded that it could not be used to compare different subject areas, nor to compare scores on different aspects of teaching, nor to compare whole institutions. It did conclude, however, that the NSS was a useful quality enhancement tool. This confirms Australian evidence that the University Experience Survey (UES; and, before that, the AUSSE) can and is being used for institutional self-improvement (see Part 5). In neither country is there any evidence to suggest that they are being used for the ‘consumer information’ purposes central to the proposed link between competition and quality.

In the UK, additional course/program–level information has been added, including learning, teaching and assessment methods and professional accreditation (where relevant), together with employability statements and so on. This is all available as part of a ‘key information set’ for each course, which includes 17 items of information (described by Sir David Watson as having ‘supermarket-style superficiality’). As yet there is no evidence of their impact on student preferences or competition.

The final report of the Australian Advancing Quality in Higher Education Reference Group, in 2012, proposed that the key centrally administered performance measurement instruments to be developed should be the UES, which comprises a combination of CEQ and AUSSE–type questions to be administered to a sample of first- and final-year students, a survey of employer satisfaction with graduates, and a Graduate Outcomes Survey (replacing the GDS). This suite of government-endorsed surveys of higher education will form the basis of Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT), to be launched in 2015 as the pared-back replacement for the federal government’s MyUniversity website.

In 2010 the Higher Education Academy in the UK published a major review of research evidence relating to quality in undergraduate education, which it defined as ‘educational gain’. Two key messages emerged from this review of what is a very complex topic. The first was that many intuitively useful measures – such as employment outcomes and retention – are not linked to educational gain. The second was that the best predictors of educational gain are measures of ‘educational process: what institutions do with their resources to make the most of whatever students they have’. For example, ‘Class size, the level of student effort and engagement, who undertakes the teaching, and the quantity and quality of feedback to students on their work are all valid process indicators.’

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119 These reports and reviews are discussed fully in Brown op. cit., ‘Chapter 6: Quality assurance’.
120 Watson, 2014, p. 16.
121 Attempting to use the KIS website to choose a course and institution is a salutary experience. See https://unistats.direct.gov.uk/find-out-more/key-information-set.
122 DEEWR, op. cit. p. 2.
124 ibid., p. 5.
The UES does include some reliable indicators in this respect (particularly those derived from the AUSSE). All in all, however, both the government and the sector are some way from having indicators that could plausibly be used to help students make informed decisions about the educational quality of different institutions. There is also no evidence, as yet, to suggest that the data to be provided would be central to students’ course choices.125 Whether student use of such information will act as a major source of quality control therefore remains to be seen.

**The role of the regulator**

Only one year after TEQSA had commenced its work as the new national regulator of higher education it was subjected to a major review, following widespread complaints from the sector.126 These criticisms were, according to the reviewers, ‘part of a wider climate of unease in the higher education workforce that sees collegial bottom-up quality assurance displaced by top-down managerialism and metrics of dubious validity.’127 The review concluded that there was widespread support for TEQSA’s core regulatory activities of registering and accrediting providers, particularly given the encouragement being shown to non-university and private providers in the market. It recommended that TEQSA should ensure that ‘new entrants to the sector understand and meet the requirements to be an Australian higher education provider based on clear standards.’128 However, it also recommended that ‘the future is one in which providers are primarily self-regulating’,129 meaning that TEQSA’s role should be redefined more narrowly, to exclude responsibility for quality assurance (‘best practice and continuous improvement’).130

The teaching and learning standards against which providers will be judged in the process of registration or accreditation emphasise the importance of benchmarking and external referencing rather than the independent measurement of learning outcomes envisaged by various standards projects.

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125 James, Baldwin & McInnis, 1999; Ressler & Abratt, 2009, pp. 35–45.
126 Lee Dow & Braithwaite, op. cit.
127 ibid., p. 42.
128 ibid., p. 55.
129 ibid.
130 ibid., p. 56.
Part 5: Institutional policy and practice

The development of different government approaches to assuring the quality of Australian higher education has had a major impact on the policies and practices of individual institutions, often in quite unintended ways. At the same time, global changes in approaches to management and accountability (often described as the rise of ‘managerialism’ and the spread of an ‘audit culture’) have worked their way into many universities. Many expert commentators identify departments and disciplines as the key actors in maintaining and improving the quality of educational experience (as well as in subverting external quality processes). Institutional policies, practices and cultures remain central to any review of the changing quality regime.

The system of quality audits that evolved with the unified national system of universities from the early 1990s was designed to encourage institutions to develop their own internal quality improvement processes. Ultimately the quality of university teaching and learning depends on what thousands of academic staff are doing – as individual teachers, in program teams, and as members of powerful disciplinary groups organised in departments or schools, but also at national and international levels. However, only a very small number of teaching academics would have had direct experience of any of the quality audits conducted by the CQAHE or AUQA. Many probably remained oblivious to these events, and hostile to the language and practices of quality management. As Lee Dow and Braithwaite point out, there are tensions within the internal regulatory structure of universities:

As academics become global citizens in their capacity as teachers and researchers, their affiliation to their academic community strengthens compared to their affiliation to their home institution. For many academic staff, vertical institutional regulatory ties within the university are at odds with the horizontal scholarly regulatory ties that define their identity and career success.

Important aspects of quality thinking have, nonetheless, been slowly embedded in universities, and now play a significant role in supporting a culture of ‘improvement’. Perhaps the biggest incentive to focus on educational quality at institutional level was the short-lived LTPF. Despite the criticism of the validity of the proposed performance indicators, the sheer size of the fund meant that no university chose to stay out of the competition. Yet to be in the competition a university needed to meet ‘participation requirements’ that gave leaders of teaching and learning internal leverage if they needed it. To be eligible for funding,

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131 The most influential analysis of ‘the audit explosion’ is Power, 1997.
133 Lee Dow and Braithwaite, op. cit., p. 20.
134 Louise Morley provides an excellent Foucauldian critique of the concept of ‘continuous improvement’ and its potentially negative impacts on academic life, creating a sense of anxiety and inadequacy in a world of perpetual motion; op. cit., pp. 13–14.
universities were required to have a learning and teaching plan or strategy; to provide evidence of systematic support for professional development in learning and teaching, not just for full-time academic staff but for sessional teachers as well; and to have probation and promotion policies whose criteria included effectiveness as a teacher. Together, these requirements represented a major challenge to many universities that had primarily been focused on research status, at both institutional and individual levels. They also represented a major challenge to those new institutions that had yet to take the idea of professional development in teaching seriously and systematically.

The requirements encouraged university leaders to make deans and, in turn, heads of school and department accountable for teaching and learning performance. Many deans responded by insisting that the indicators used for the LTPF were things over which they had no control, and that they could not be held responsible for the unpopularity of major compulsory subjects in disciplines such as engineering. Others continued to blame their students for high failure rates. Among teachers themselves, many argued that the system would lead to declining standards as academics made their subjects easier in order to elicit positive student evaluations in CEQs. Such resistance, reflective of the dominant academic culture in most universities, was palpable less than a decade ago. It did not mean that teaching was undertaken without passion and commitment, but it was unusual for anyone to be held accountable for poor student learning apart from the students themselves. Nor was there widespread belief that the scholarship of teaching or pedagogical knowledge had much to contribute to the quality of teaching and learning at universities. Very few academics had undertaken any of the professional development that might have persuaded them otherwise. Nor had they had very varied educational experiences themselves that might have helped them envisage alternative ways of learning and knowing that might be relevant for a rapidly diversifying student cohort.

Since then there has been a major cultural change at institutional level, and some of the LTPF participation requirements have now become standard practice despite the disappearance of the funding. Every university now has a teaching and learning plan, employs some form of gathering regular student feedback on teaching, and gives teaching greater weight in promotion criteria. They all offer a range of professional development programs promoting effective teaching in higher education, and many now require new staff to participate in these. 135

This is an important example of how change occurs in complex systems. The explicit intention of the LTPF was undermined by the absence of legitimate performance indicators, and by somewhat arbitrary decisions about rankings and cut-off points.

135 The area where little progress has been made is in the provision of training for casually employed teaching staff. See Harvey, 2014.
The quality of Australia’s higher education system for funding. Yet its long-term impact on the quality of teaching and learning across the sector has, it could be argued, been substantial.

**Performance indicators and their institutional use**

The CEQ, AUSSE and, most recently, the UES only began to have an impact on teaching when individual universities started to use the data to press internally for improvement. At RMIT University, for example, in 2001–02 the then vice-chancellor insisted that CEQ data should be used to review and subsequently close programs that scored significantly below the national average in that field. The policy threatened some of the university’s key programs, including nursing. There was initially widespread resistance to this use of performance data, with many academics deploying their formidable analytic skills to argue that the CEQ was an invalid instrument – especially for their particular discipline. Yet today, most universities use CEQ data, or AUSSE and now the UES, to drive institutional behaviour to an unprecedented extent, through annual cycles of program performance reviews. In the second round of Compact negotiations providers were required to outline their strategies to support the quality of teaching and learning. The resulting agreements (2014–16) show that almost every institution has now adopted a regular process of program review in which a wide range of data is used, and many also engage in serious benchmarking using these data sources.136

Following the 2012 recommendations of the Advancing Quality in Higher Education Reference Group, in 2014 the UES was adopted as one of the government’s three Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching. The Department of Education was ‘swamped by universities requesting the national data file that allows them to benchmark courses’, suggesting that the sector was increasingly aware of the potential such data presents for quality improvement.137 The authors of a report on the UES would approve, pointing out that:

> it is imperative that quality enhancement work be positioned at the front-end rather than lagging tail of data collection and reporting activity. Using survey data for improvement is the most important and perpetually most neglected aspect of initiatives such as the UES, yet without improvement the value of the work is questionable.138

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136 Bond University provides a particularly good example of such processes in its 2014–2016 Final Compact. The Bond University Curriculum Review includes consideration of the extent to which original research has played a part in the development of the subjects taught, an unusually transparent approach to the teaching–research nexus. See http://docs.education.gov.au/documents/2014-16-mission-based-compact-bond-university.

137 Correspondence from Department of Education, March 2014. The value of the UES data for quality improvement hinged on its being made available at course level.

138 Radloff et al., 2012, p vi.
In the UK, the NSS has been the subject of familiar criticisms about its validity as a measure of quality, its use in the construction of league tables, and its promotion of students as consumers. However, a major review of how UK universities are now using NSS scores illustrates its potential for positive impact, bringing ‘an increased focus on learning and teaching, that for some institutions can be both novel and welcome.’\(^{139}\) While it is widely acknowledged that data from the NSSE gives greater insight into student engagement, the NSS ‘has been very effective at making teaching and learning enhancement an institutional priority sector-wide – perhaps more strongly so than any other efforts before.’\(^{140}\)

The lesson from these developments is that what is most important for quality improvement is that an institution takes data as a starting point for questioning and analysing its own performance and engaging teachers in the process, even if that data is flawed.

A wider interest in the potential role of data in improving teaching and learning is also being fanned by highly publicised examples from the growing field of learning analytics. Many academics with no previous interest in the topic have watched Daphne Koller promote Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) in her 2012 TED talk, during which she shows how educational technology company Coursera is able to revise and improve curricula by noting where very large numbers of students are having difficulty mastering the content.\(^{141}\) The ubiquitous use of information and communication technologies in higher education today has created extraordinary opportunities for teachers to understand more about successful learning, and lies behind the growing interest in learning analytics (even if, ‘compared with other sectors, education has a low level of analytics maturity’).\(^{142}\)

The Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) supported the publication of a 2013 discussion paper by the Society for Learning Analytics Research that included seven Australian university case studies in the use of learning analytics.\(^{143}\) The University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), for example, has invested in analytics to:

- identify why students continue to fail subjects or why there are low pass rates in particular subjects. These findings have led to interventions around the order in which subjects were taken in particular courses. The early identification of students at risk of failure or attrition led to a prioritisation of contact made with students in their first year of study to offer support tools and mechanisms.\(^{144}\)

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\(^{139}\) Buckley, 2012, p. 7.

\(^{140}\) ibid.

\(^{141}\) www.ted.com/talks/daphne_koller_what_we_re_learning_from_online_education?language=en.


\(^{143}\) ibid.

\(^{144}\) ibid., p. 18.
In the last round of Compact agreements, 16 universities explicitly noted projects and processes that they had in place to improve retention in their quality strategies, and many were using learning analytics. The financial threat posed by poor retention rates in an uncapped student market appears to have been a more powerful incentive to manage quality than any amount of scholarly argument about the potential for better teaching.

**Teaching and learning standards**

The new quality regime introduced in the wake of the Bradley reforms to higher education was always intended to rest on the regulation of providers by TEQSA against a set of explicit standards, including teaching and learning standards. Within the sector there was serious concern initially about how these teaching and learning standards would be defined, and possibly ‘imposed’ on the sector. The perceived danger was enough to provoke the sector to develop a range of interesting projects designed to show how standards could be assured. The Group of Eight designed a Quality Verification System in 2013, which involved an external, discipline-based, academic peer review process that focused on examples of final-year undergraduate work. Given the similar educational missions of the group, this system of benchmarking makes good sense as a form of quality assurance. While the process does not lead to any moderation of grades, it has the potential to lead to quality improvement.145 The approach is more robust than accreditation processes that focus on inputs rather than student learning outcomes.

A more ambitious project was funded by the OLT, expressly to respond to what was seen as TEQSA’s ‘imperative’ to demonstrate ‘sector-level, self-regulated, robust approaches for assuring quality and standards’.146 This project was designed to address the acknowledged need for a ‘relevant and feasible way to assure the validity, reliability and comparability of assessment outcomes and learning standards in equivalent university programs across the nation’.147 The collaborative project, which involved eight universities from different groupings, developed a rigorous ‘blind’ peer-review methodology, and created publicly available moderation guides and user guidelines. Its methodology also involved training a layer of university teachers to be reviewers, without resorting to standardisation.148

At discipline level there has continued to be some serious work done following the national LTAS project. Some of the most effective investment has been in the discipline of accounting, which has had a broader impact on business programs more

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145 Go8, 2013.
146 Krause et al., 2014, p. 5.
147 ibid., p. 6.
148 Potential conflict of interest alert: I was involved in this project.
Disciplines or fields of study requiring professional accreditation are fertile ground for the spread of work on standards. History, by contrast, provides an interesting case study of how the fear of externally imposed standards has provoked a discipline with no accreditation requirements to invest in capacity building among historians from the grassroots level, to develop a disciplinary consensus about appropriate standards. \(^{150}\)

The impetus for much of the work undertaken by individual institutions and disciplines was a desire to head off centrally imposed and academically unacceptable approaches to standards verification. As that threat recedes, it remains to be seen whether there will be sufficient internal commitment to this kind of work on an ongoing basis. In February 2015, following a rather bumpy early life, TEQSA issued a clearly worded summary of its revised approach to assuring that quality standards are being met by all registered higher education providers (including hypothetical case studies to illustrate application of the framework). \(^{151}\) Much of the document was devoted to reassuring universities that they represent very low risks, meaning that TEQSA can focus on ‘promoting and facilitating a culture of effective self-assurance by providers’. \(^{152}\)

The new standards for course design recommended by the Higher Education Standards Panel (which are expected to be implemented in 2016 as part of the revised higher education standards) wisely avoid reference to anything more specific than the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and professional accreditation requirements, instead focusing largely on quality processes. \(^{153}\) For example, how will the expectation about benchmarking be interpreted by providers, or the requirement that student learning outcomes be regularly referenced against comparable courses of study? Some universities are already signalling a much more modest approach to meeting the benchmarking requirement, relying on data obtained from student evaluations. \(^{154}\) The response from different providers will depend, in part, on institutional leadership, and the extent to which academics are rewarded for spending time thinking about standards and working with their colleagues to raise them. \(^{155}\)

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149 See the OLT-funded project Achievement Matters, led by Mark Freeman and Phil Hancock, http://achievementmatters.com.au.
150 A fascinating and revealing account of this work can be found in Brawley et al., 2011.
152 ibid., p. 2.
154 See, for example Deakin University’s plan at www.deakin.edu.au/learning/evaluating-teaching-and-learning.
155 The OLT-funded National Peer Review of Assessment Network is doing important work in encouraging higher education providers to work on good practice in external assessment. For a summary, see www.utas.edu.au/student-evaluation-review-and-reporting-unit/nprn.
From prizes to performance management: professionalisation and de-professionalisation in higher education teaching

Over the past two decades individual universities have worked on a variety of measures to recognise good teaching, and to develop ways of rewarding academics for being good teachers as well as researchers. The approaches adopted have moved from prizes and celebrations to performance management and accreditation, with a focus on both quality improvement and quality assurance. In this area the weight of attention in measuring quality has shifted even further from ‘outputs’ – measures of student learning – and toward ‘inputs’ – teacher preparation and attitudes.

As noted in Part 1, the growth of enrolments in higher education and the increasing diversity of the student body have created new challenges for teachers and led to debate about the desirability of ‘professionalising’ university teaching. In 2010–11, for example, the ALTC funded a Macquarie University–led project to develop a Teaching Standards Framework, which resulted in six standards being developed to support institutional benchmarking of the quality of teaching, the learning environment and the curriculum. In 2012 the OLT sought to commission strategic projects on ‘the professionalisation of the academic workforce’ (giving rise to some sensitivity about the implicit suggestion that there might be anything amateurish about Australian university teaching).

The recently developed Teaching Standards for TEQSA’s regulation of the sector require higher education teaching staff to have knowledge of contemporary developments in their discipline or field, ‘informed by continuing scholarship or research or advances in practice’, as well as ‘skills in contemporary teaching, learning and assessment principles’. It remains to be seen how providers will seek to provide evidence of the latter, but there are now a wide range of ways in which good teaching is being assessed, rewarded and improved. Despite this, Lee Shulman’s definition of academic professionalism would surprise many Australian academics:

> Each of us in higher education is a member of at least two professions: that of our discipline, interdiscipline or professional field ... as well as our profession as an educator. In both of these intersecting domains we bear the responsibilities of scholars – to discover, to connect, to apply and to teach.

As the language of ‘standards’ and ‘accountability’ reaches into the higher education teaching workplace, are we likely to see systematic quality improvement and quality assurance of teaching?

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157 Shulman, 2000, p. 49; emphasis added. For a longer discussion of this topic, see Probert, 2014a.
Awards and prizes for teaching

In 1992 the first competitive grants program and teaching fellowship schemes were established by the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT). While the body responsible for implementing the schemes has changed many times, they are still a central part of the OLT’s mandate today. In 2000 the Australian Awards for University Teaching were introduced; these have been called ‘one of the most prestigious award programmes in the world for teachers in universities’. The overall objectives of the current set of awards are ‘to raise the profile and encourage recognition of the fundamental importance of teaching in higher education institutions and in the general community, and foster and acknowledge excellent teaching in education.’ Most universities have now developed their own internal award systems and aligned them with the national awards. A great deal of effort goes into ‘training’ for the nationals, with teaching and learning experts working with academics to develop and substantiate their case. At one well resourced university, potential applicants are offered a two-day retreat to work on writing their applications.

We do not really know how effective awards have been in raising the status of teaching generally, although they have certainly succeeded in providing individuals with recognition, adding weight to applications for academic promotion. Promotion committees, which are generally dominated by professors who feel confident about making research performance judgments, are relieved to see this kind of independent validation of teaching quality. The 2002 Review of Awards found a positive impact on recipients’ opportunities to contribute to the development of teaching and learning in their own universities and, in some cases, more widely. And they liked getting them.

No evaluation of teaching awards has tackled their cultural reception at the departmental or discipline level, where academics identities are formed, nor the response of the academic workforce as a whole. The 2008 review of the ALTC...
concluded that teaching awards ‘have been enormously important in raising the profile of recognizing teaching excellence across the sector’, but based this on ‘the responses of interested people to this review’ (emphasis added). We know nothing about the scale of ‘disinterest’. The introduction of the much larger category of ‘citation’ winners in 2006 may be helping to develop an influential pool of informed and enthusiastic teachers capable of changing departmental cultures, or it may be diluting the status of an award. We have no way of knowing at present.

One aspect of the whole award system that has been curiously absent from any evaluation is the fact that it is competitive. Indeed, the grand ceremonies that accompanied the establishment of the Carrick Institute by the Howard government had the aura of higher education Oscars, with the winner of the Prime Minister’s Award being announced ‘on the night’ as the runners-up smiled grittily. But does the competitive structure of the awards militate against their having a wider impact on the teaching workforce?

Academics are used to competition, and understand the ranking that occurs with respect to applications for research funding. However, few would understand how teaching award applications are ranked, and many appear to reject the idea altogether. The ALTC review acknowledged the problem:

A serious issue is whether the awards are rewarding conspicuous ‘performance’ and self-promotion rather than acknowledging teachers whose influence may be more profound through a less direct effect on the student experience and student achievement.

The fact that some academics are both sceptical and hostile (which probably tells us more about the dominant academic culture than about the merits of any case) is starkly revealed in the reflections of one Prime Minister’s Award winner. Mark Israel discovered that ‘many awardees had to contend with parts of their institutions that were markedly unimpressed by the national awards’. He advises award winners to be prepared for disappointment:

Other academics may not know about your award, may not care or may be envious. Remarkably, some may think less of you as a result of the award ... Whatever the reasons, their silence or, even worse, their barbed comments can be hurtful. Steel

they are not dissimilar to claims made about the gendered nature of women’s experiences when men have not been included in the study.

164 Lee Dow, op. cit., p. 28.
165 It is not surprising that the introduction of a larger number of citation awards was greeted with enthusiasm, since an individual’s chances of winning a national award were inevitably very small indeed. The Lee Dow review of the ALTC comes to an admittedly anecdotal and subjective conclusion that the ‘numbers of awards, and the value of each award, seem to this reviewer to be “about right” in the Australian context’ (p. 43). By 2011, Johns was suggesting that there were rather too many (pp. 11–12).
166 ibid., p 29.
yourself for these possibilities, rise above any pettiness, and don’t let the negativity of
others undermine your achievements.\textsuperscript{168}

Some universities now take out advertisements to publicise the fact that they have
teaching award winners on their staff, and others provide genuine recognition
internally. Overall, however, we know rather little about the effectiveness of the
Australian awards scheme in bringing about systemic change.

The UK’s HEA commissioned two substantial reports on the reward and recognition
of teaching in UK higher education.\textsuperscript{169} The final recommendations on strategies for
rewarding and recognising good teaching did not include awards of any kind, and the
authors noted that in the UK national teaching awards were seen as valuable by a
very small minority.\textsuperscript{170} The research concluded that the most important reward for
teaching must be one that all academics understand and value, and first among
these is promotion and confirmation of appointment.\textsuperscript{171}

A separate scholarly review of the thinking behind teaching excellence award
schemes conducted for the HEA concluded that ‘with few exceptions the teaching
award schemes studied gave the impression of having their heart in the right place
but not having been thought through very carefully.’\textsuperscript{172} It is even possible that the
objective of recognising individual excellence is, to some extent at least, in conflict
with the other common objective of improving teaching effectiveness within an
institution. If, for example, the objective is to encourage approaches that maximise
student retention and academic success, they are probably aimed at the wrong
actor.

Many such educational goals require intervention at the level of the overall design
and implementation of programmes and by all the teachers who contribute to them,
rather than focusing on isolated individuals ploughing their own furrow, however
imaginatively, in however scholarly a way, and even however highly they are rated by
their students or applauded by their peers.\textsuperscript{173}

The individual focus can have unintended negative effects, and ‘reduce coherence
and make programmes work less well, even when individual teachers and individual
modules are quite good.’\textsuperscript{174}

Looking back recently on 40 years’ experience in the development of university
teaching, Graham Gibbs observed:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{168} ibid., p. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{169} HEA and GENIE CETL, 2009.
\item \textsuperscript{170} ibid., p. 28.
\item \textsuperscript{171} There have also been reviews of awards for teaching excellence in other education sectors that
have produced ambivalent findings about their effectiveness. See Dinham & Scott, 2002;
Mackenzie, 2007 pp. 190–204.
\item \textsuperscript{172} Gibbs, 2008, p. 22.
\item \textsuperscript{173} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{174} Gibbs\textsuperscript{2012}, p. 21.
\end{itemize}
an increasing recognition of the limits on the extent to which individual teachers can change or improve in effective ways if their colleagues and other courses do not, and on the difficulty of innovation and permanent change where the local culture and values are hostile to change, or even hostile to taking teaching seriously.  

In the UK the emphasis on rewarding individual teachers and individual units, and on funding local innovation in teaching, has not been matched by any institutional focus on ‘the effective operation of programme teams ... and on curriculum design and assessment at programme level’:  

A change of focus of national and institutional enhancement efforts is overdue. Institutional career structures still need to be developed that reward leadership of teaching, rather than only individual research and individual teaching.  

Australian awards have sought to recognise the contribution of teams under the category of Awards for Programs that Enhance Learning, while the Awards for Teaching Excellence remain overwhelmingly focused on individuals. Gibbs and others have suggested in the UK context that the moment for individual awards has probably passed, and should be replaced with a focus on rewarding program teams. This in turn is likely to lead to an increase in one of the unquantifiable but recognised indicators of good teaching practice – namely, departmental- or team-level discussion about teaching.  

Australian commentator John Biggs, in his analysis of quality assurance in teaching and learning, comes to similar conclusions, arguing that distinguished teacher awards can imply that distinguished teachers are ‘born, not made: they are a rare species, against whom ordinary teachers cannot be expected to compete.’ Biggs has no objection to rewarding individual teachers, ‘but if we want quality teaching at the institutional level, the focus should not be on the teacher, but on teaching.’  

**Academic promotion**

It has been clearly demonstrated in Australia and the UK that academic staff see promotion as the most important way of recognising and rewarding excellent teaching. Government pressure to change promotion criteria to include teaching effectiveness was exerted through the participation requirements of the LTPF. In the second-round Compact negotiations it was also suggested that universities indicate how ‘teaching performance’ featured in their promotion criteria. Many universities

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176 ibid.  
177 ibid.  
178 At UWA, an award for teaching excellence at school level provided an innovative incentive to take a collective interest in the quality of teaching, to be rewarded by the allocation of funds to support highly valued extra staff resources.  
179 Biggs, 2001, p. 231.
have had to rewrite their policies on academic promotion to recognise teaching, and some have opened up clearly defined career pathways in which teaching and leadership of teaching are the major focus. Others have defined the teaching career path in explicitly truncated ways, ending before the level of full professor.

The need to review promotion criteria stimulated widespread discussion across the sector about what kind of evidence might be used to support claims of teaching excellence. The more recent creation of teaching-focused positions with the promise of career development has pushed the discussion even further. In many universities, senior academics continue to express scepticism about the kinds of evidence that could be used, and reservations about the possibility of setting standards that are as demanding for teaching as for research, at least at the highest levels. However, the need to define what evidence should be provided to support promotion applications based on teaching has generated thoughtful and informed discussion that has moved far beyond simple reliance on various forms of student feedback. Given the wide variations in teaching and learning missions across the sector, there can be no ‘one size fits all’ approach to evidence. In the UK, for example, both the University of Oxford and the Open University receive the highest rankings in the NSS ratings, but they achieve this by doing very different things. 180

Most universities now allow applicants to weight their applications in favour of either teaching or research, but this allows the majority to continue to focus on their research performance in promotion claims, even if they spend a great deal of their time teaching. This can contribute to the appearance of a small stream of teaching ‘experts’, leaving the majority of applicants free to avoid having to provide serious evidence of their development as teachers. 181 In the latest round of Compact documents a small number of universities noted that they had tackled this by requiring all applicants, except those in research-only positions, to provide evidence about their teaching performance, and to do so by providing more than just student feedback scores.

When promotion criteria are changed, many academics remain unconvinced that applications based on teaching performance will be treated fairly. No matter how often evidence is produced to show that such applications are just as successful as those based on research performance, academics continue to doubt that ‘real’ change has occurred. 182 It is reasonable to suggest that this reflects the

181 Most applications processes now require academics to provide student feedback data on their recent teaching as a matter of course, but this is not the same thing.
182 Sandra Wills has done much to persuade Australian academics that ‘teachers do get promoted’, and to show what kinds of rigorous evidence can be brought together to support such applications. See www.uow.edu.au/content/groups/public/@web/@cedir/@fot/documents/mm/uow149242.pdf

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departmental or discipline culture within which they work every day, which is a great deal harder to change than the promotions policy. Looking at revised promotion criteria, it is easy to overstate how much impact they have had on the dominant academic culture and on the process of induction into academia that shapes academic identities and priorities.

**Performance management**

The work that has been done to define what should count as evidence of good teaching for the purposes of promotion (and appointment to teaching focused roles) is now being co-opted into performance management more generally. While the practice of academic performance management varies across the sector, all academic managers now insist on its importance. In an environment of increasing competition, global rankings and declining resources, university managers have turned their attention to managing the workloads and performance of their academic staff in radically more invasive ways. Academic staff are both the core asset and the major cost and, as such, the quality and quantity of their work has become the focus of serious attention over the past decade.

Performance metrics were initially defined for research, reflecting the national need to allocate research funding more selectively and the competitive pressure on individual institutions from global university rankings. At one extreme, the use of research performance metrics had negative effects on teaching, as is illustrated in one university’s Academic Workload Guidelines (2011):

> Staff who are not ‘research active’ as defined by the Division/School/Institute workload allocation model and following a reasonable opportunity to undertake research may be allocated additional teaching or other academic duties.

> Heads of School and other supervisors will use the performance management process to seek ways of supporting staff to become research active where a staff member wishes to commit to this goal.

In other words, teaching is being defined here as a sort of punishment for failure to meet personal research performance targets. (If there were any parallel process for allocating more research duties to underperforming teachers, this might be interpreted as a non-judgmental method of allocating staff time to their relative strengths.)

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184 See Brownell & Tanner, 2012.
185 University of South Australia Academic Workload Guidelines, 2011.
In contrast to this approach, the University of New South Wales (UNSW) has trialled the concept of academics being ‘teaching active’ as part of its ambition to recruit and retain staff who are both leading researchers and ‘passionate, capable teachers.’\(^{186}\) The concept ‘aimed at elevating the status and visibility of teaching, and at contributing to better recognition and reward of quality teaching in all its forms.’\(^{187}\) It was intended that the term be used in a ‘manner that is loosely analogous with research-active, although the indicators and measures would be varied and context specific.’\(^{188}\)

The evidence that is needed to support claims of being teaching active are appropriately varied and rich, and the status is not ‘held in perpetuity but conferred for one year at a time’.\(^{189}\) Perhaps more radically still, the UNSW framework proposed that being teaching active should be a necessary condition for academic promotion in both the teaching and the combined teaching–research combined tracks. The concept is intended to encourage a move beyond focusing on rewarding individual teachers to raising expectations for all academics who teach. Central to the approach is the explicitly shared accountability for academic development between the senior research and learning and teaching portfolios.\(^{190}\)

The shift from rewarding individual teachers with prizes or promotions to raising expectations about the professional development of all staff with teaching responsibilities is a significant one. However, the shift can be conceptualised in different ways, with potentially different effects. One dimension of difference is the degree to which the focus is on ‘managing’ the individual against explicit performance expectations as against transforming the culture within which all staff define success.\(^{191}\)

If UNSW’s framework lies at the professional learning end of the spectrum, the University of Tasmania’s (UTAS) perhaps lies closer to the performance management end. As at UNSW, UTAS wishes to signal clearly what is expected of the UTAS academic. Alongside very specific research performance indicators for each level, a set of ‘Teaching Performance Expectations’ (TPEs) have been developed that fall into

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186 Report on Teaching Active Trial, November 2010. My thanks to Stephen Marshall, Director Learning and Teaching@UNSW, for talking to me about the UNSW approach.
187 ibid.
188 ibid. Most importantly, the concept recognises the ‘centrality of ‘facilitating student learning’ as well as the way this is enabled by ‘active engagement in the ongoing development of the curriculum ... ; oneself as a scholar-teacher; and the physical, virtual and organizational environments in which learning and teaching takes place’.
189 ibid.
190 Sitting behind the framework is the scholarly thinking captured in Marshall, 2008.
191 It is interesting to note that in the parallel world of school teacher professional development, the word ‘development’ has been replaced with the word ‘learning’. The term ‘professional development’, with its connotation of something that is done to teachers, is now called ‘professional learning’, with its connotation of something that teachers have to do for themselves.
three ‘domains’, with a total of 36 ‘activities’ that can provide evidence of performance.\textsuperscript{192} One objective of the TPEs is to clarify expectations, but another is to ‘ensure individual accountability for managing one’s performance, individual development, promotion and career opportunities in learning and teaching’.\textsuperscript{193} This is perhaps meant to draw attention to the value of the framework in helping individuals to see how they might plan a teaching-focused career, but it could also be seen as illustrating a key aspect of what Louise Morley has called the ‘psychic economy of quality’:

\begin{quote}
Academics have to be simultaneously self-managing and manageable workers who are able to make themselves auditable within prescribed taxonomies of effectiveness.\textsuperscript{194}
\end{quote}

A very similar approach to defining teaching performance expectations has been developed by a group of institutions through an OLT-funded Strategic Priority project on the professionalisation of the academic workforce.\textsuperscript{195} The Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards Project has produced an even more elaborate set of expectations, organised under seven ‘teaching criteria’ (similar to the three TPE domains), ranging from the ‘design and planning of learning activities’ to ‘professional and personal effectiveness’. Under each of the seven criteria there are up to a dozen practices or activities that could be used as evidence of performance or achievement, differentiated by level of appointment. At Level B, for example, they range from ‘timely feedback is provided to students’ to ‘demonstrating respect’ and requiring ‘students to demonstrate respect for others’; from ‘evidence of teaching and learning scholarship’ to ‘demonstrating commitment and interest in students and their learning’. Despite its detail and complexity the framework is generic, and its authors recognise that it requires translation into different disciplinary and institutional contexts. The focus is necessarily on the ‘how’ of good teaching rather than the ‘what’, with the latter relegated below the scholarship of teaching and defined as ‘use of disciplinary and current research’.\textsuperscript{196}

In explaining the perceived need for the development of an Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards (AUTCS) framework, the authors note the new challenges posed by a more diverse student body with unequal amounts of ‘cultural, social or economic capital’, regulatory pressures and the need to ‘demonstrate

\textsuperscript{193} ibid.
\textsuperscript{194} Morley op. cit., p. 67.
\textsuperscript{195} Chalmers et al., 2014.
\textsuperscript{196} There is also silence on the value, if any, of the matrix for sessional teachers who now make up more than 26 per cent of the academic workforce on an equivalent full-time basis (excluding research-only staff), and who are responsible for more than half of all undergraduate teaching.
quality in teaching in the international marketplace’. The first of these does indeed constitute a recognisable professional need, but it has been addressed directly by many OLT-funded projects on how to ensure the academic success of a much more varied cohort of students. The AUTCS project codifies much of this, but does not add to it. The second of these challenges is also significant, but this approach may contribute to what the early TEQSA review called the ‘climate of unease in the higher education workforce that sees collegial, bottom-up quality assurance displaced by top-down managerialism and metrics of dubious validity.’ And on the third point, there is little evidence that international students are looking to data on teaching quality to determine their choice of institution or country of study. Nor, as noted earlier, has there been any demand from students for teaching performance indicators.

It is not entirely clear what problem this work on teaching criteria and standards is designed to solve. The strategic goals of the project are described as promoting:

- a shift in university culture through the development of a tool to support quality teaching practices, and to lift the profile of teaching and learning through implementation of the project deliverables in collaboration with academic networks in Australia and overseas.

However, as with many such projects, there is a danger that it is the product of an increasingly specialised group of professional academic developers and senior managers rather than something that has any organic connection to the vast majority of academic teachers. It is an approach that seems to suggest remarkably low levels of professional self-confidence, perhaps reflecting the more widely theorised contemporary loss of trust in the professions.

It no longer really matters how well an academic teaches and whether or not he or she sometimes inspires their pupils; it is far more important that they have produced plans for their courses, bibliographies, outlines of this, that and the other, in short all the paraphernalia of futile bureaucratization required for assessors who come from on high like emissaries from Kafka’s castle.

This is in no way intended to suggest that the inventory of behaviours included in the matrix is not relevant to good teaching. On the contrary, these behaviours point to things that might be part of a ‘foundations of university teaching’ course or even of more advanced professional development. At one point the framework is indeed described as ‘a theoretically sound, practical tool for collaborative implementation

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197 Chalmers et al., p. 8.
198 Lee Dow & Braithwaite, p. 42.
199 Chalmers et al., p. 4.
200 There is a large body of literature on this; see, for example, Brown, op. cit., pp. 120–121; and Morley, op. cit., pp. 53–57;
201 Johnson, 1994, p. 379.
of a functional and fully trialled quality teaching framework'. Yet it is explicitly a framework that is intended for individual performance evaluation, as part of either the promotion or annual performance review process with a primary focus on teaching performance. Academic staff should indeed be held individually responsible for their teaching and research, but what are needed for this purpose are thoughtful criteria linked to student achievement.

One way of understanding these developments is as illustrative of the kinds of changes occurring globally in mass and universal higher education systems and, in particular, in what is often described as rising managerialism. Becher and Trowler, in their seminal account of academic cultures, describe this as a ‘fundamental shift in power relations in terms of what counts as useful knowledge and whose discourses achieve dominance’. They go on:

The activities of the evaluative state, the slide to performativity and the need to ‘chase the dollar’ are just three examples of factors that have meant important changes in academic practices and attitudes worldwide. The decline in donnish dominion ... has meant a parallel decline in the significance of disciplinary knowledge as a force.

As Rhoades argued in 1997, academics are ‘increasingly “managed professionals”’. In most universities the academic board is responsible for the development of promotions policies and criteria, and peer review remains central to the procedures used in making judgments. Performance management frameworks, on the other hand, are generally developed outside the academic governance structures, and are rarely the subject of collegial or professional discussion (though they may well lead to industrial argument). Documents about teaching performance are generally made available for ‘consultation’ but often ignored, unwisely, by the majority of academic teachers. The standards and their indicators that are being developed are not in any way ‘owned’ by the profession itself. Rather than the professionalisation of university teaching, some have argued that we are seeing a de-professionalisation of academic life, ‘while traditional ideas about the special status and knowledge claims of academics have rapidly become outdated.’ This is probably an unhelpful

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203 Teacher inputs rather than student learning dominate the measures, and the ‘form of teaching has assumed dominance over the content’ (Shore & Selwyn, 1998, p. 161).
204 I am indebted to Liz Johnson for making me remember all sides of this story.
205 Becher & Trowler, p. 5.
206 ibid, p. xiii.
207 Rhoades, 1997.
208 Becher & Trowler, p 13.
dichotomy, and perhaps what is missing is a shared conception of what an academic should be in a system of higher education with universal participation.\(^{209}\)

The increasing role of the market in higher education has become a focus of attention in the UK following the abolition of public funding for university teaching in most disciplines.\(^{210}\) However, scholarly analysis of the impact of neoliberal ideology on higher education goes back two decades.\(^{211}\) In Australian universities the language of accountability, quality assurance, performance management, customers and stakeholders is pervasive, but it has often been pushed back by strong disciplinary academic cultures at departmental level, or where disciplinary leaders are most strongly represented, such as on academic boards. These sites of professional autonomy and power are, however, being weakened by successive waves of restructuring into more cost-effective organisational structures that partition academic decisions more clearly from administrative and managerial decisions.\(^{212}\) Professors as a group are far less influential in most universities than they used to be, with power moving to a range of other kinds of academic leadership positions.\(^{213}\) Yet, as Raewyn Connell concluded, in the context of school teaching, ‘how teacher professionalism is defined, and by whom, is important. If teachers’ occupational identity is defined from outside … it is likely to be limited in important ways.’\(^{214}\)

**Standards and accreditation**

One distinctive element of the AUTCS framework is that it moves from what might be described as suggested indicators of performance to prescriptive standard setting (to be tailored for individual institutions), in what is distinctly managerial rather than collegial language. For example:

> The descriptors in bold in the matrix for Lecture (B) level should be interpreted as the **minimum standard** for each and every criterion, and it is expected that every staff member at or beyond this level will consistently demonstrate that they meet the minimum standard as a baseline.\(^{215}\)

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\(^{209}\) An excellent overview of the changing nature of academic work and the conditions and environment in which it takes place is provided in The Changing Academic Profession in the UK: Setting the Scene, Universities UK, 2007.

\(^{210}\) See, for example, Collini, 2013.

\(^{211}\) For example, Delanty, 2001; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; and Marginson & Considine, 2000.

\(^{212}\) For a provocative analysis of these issues, see Bowen & Tobin, 2015.

\(^{213}\) Becher & Trowler; Forsyth, ‘Chapter 7: The DVC epidemic’. Professors may have brought this on themselves to the extent that they have seen their status as reflecting the now archaic ‘personal chair’ rather than an obligation to be the keeper of their discipline. Many universities have recently moved to insert the word ‘leadership’ into the criteria for promotion to full professor to challenge this conception.

\(^{214}\) Connell, 2013, p. 222.

\(^{215}\) Chalmers et al., op. cit., Appendix A, p. 42.
Across the sector there has been increasing interest in the adoption of ‘standards’, particularly following the development in 2011 of the UK Professional Standards Framework ‘for teaching and supporting learning in higher education’, and the link between that framework and the accreditation scheme offered by the UK’s HEA. Several Australian universities are now aligning their definition of performance expectations in teaching to the UK professional, standards and encouraging their staff to seek accreditation by applying for one of the four levels of fellowship offered by the HEA.

These developments form part of a wider discourse of professionalisation. The suggestion that university teaching should be professionalised is not surprising, given that until recently academics received no formal preparation for teaching.\textsuperscript{216} In New Zealand, the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence (AKO Aotearoa) has produced a discussion paper proposing an accreditation scheme that, among other things, would ‘provide evidence of competence in a valid and acceptable form’. In a remarkable display of business discourse, the ‘value proposition’, which the proponents say should include ‘cost advantages’, is as follows.

\begin{quote}
A portable, consistent and commonly understood quality marker clearly demonstrating a tertiary teacher’s expertise, which has been validated externally and independently, will greatly enhance the confidence and career paths of teachers. It will also provide stakeholders with an assurance of quality outcomes.\textsuperscript{217}
\end{quote}

The need for such a scheme is premised squarely on the argument that:

because teachers in the tertiary sector are not required to have any professional teaching qualifications or recognition of their teaching skills before taking up their teaching roles, this impacts on the outcomes for learners. In particular, learners’ experiences may be highly variable and their opportunities to succeed are placed at risk.\textsuperscript{218}

The authors acknowledge that ‘quality cannot be assured across the [existing] qualifications’, but suggest that independent accreditation is the answer.\textsuperscript{219}

While the scheme being proposed is discussed with care, this premise is questionable given what we know about the impact of similar requirements for teaching qualifications on the practice and effectiveness of school teachers. In that sector, teaching practice remains very varied in quality.

What is missing from many of these frameworks proposed by many teaching and learning professionals is any real understanding of the long apprenticeship most early-career academics have undertaken as postgraduate students, involving both teaching and research. Those who are not credentialled in teaching have,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{216}] See, for example, Baume, 2006.
\item[\textsuperscript{217}] Suddaby & Holmes, 2012, p. 13.
\item[\textsuperscript{218}] ibid., p. 3.
\item[\textsuperscript{219}] ibid., p. 8.
\end{footnotes}
nonetheless, a wealth of disciplinary teaching experience which can contribute to defining what sort of professional development is most relevant and most needed.220

In the Australian policy debate about teaching and learning performance indicators, the inclusion of a tertiary teaching qualification has been much debated, and – at least for now – rejected. As Lee Dow and Braithwaite note, having a teaching qualification might satisfy a minimum requirement of compliance, ‘but a teaching qualification does not translate into high quality teaching.’ They argue that peer review is again critical to quality assurance since, realistically, ‘high quality teaching can only be assessed in the classroom by those familiar with the teaching context.’221

Proposals to establish a system of accreditation for graduate certificates in higher education are unlikely to gain widespread support at present, because there is insufficient confidence in their quality and some concern about the unintended consequences of their proliferation. Nonetheless, most universities do now require teaching academics to complete an introductory course in effective teaching, and many encourage and subsidise the completion of higher qualifications, which is an indication of widespread cultural change and a genuine interest in quality improvement. Graham Gibbs argues that data on ‘who does the teaching’ is a meaningful indicator of quality and should be made public to inform the new student ‘market’. It could include the proportion of teaching done by casual teachers, and the proportion of all teachers in a particular program who are HEA-accredited and/or who have a postgraduate qualification in teaching in higher education.222

The emerging focus on academic performance management is linked to an interest in teaching standards that could be used at institutional level, and also validated at national or international level by means of some kind of accreditation process. It is a topic that has close parallels with the work on school teacher accountability, certification and registration that has been going on for the past decade in Australia and across the OECD.

Reviewing the work that has been done to define teacher standards in the school sector, Raewyn Connell argues that what is being produced is a new model of the ‘competent teacher’ that is centred on ‘an assemblage of competencies attributed to good teachers’.223 The list of competencies for teachers these institutions produce are also lists of auditable performances.224 This model is displacing the ‘reflective

220 An excellent example of this kind of approach to building on shared teaching experiences in a disciplinary and developmental context is to be found in QUT’s ‘Teaching Advantage’ program for PhD students.
221 Lee Dow & Braithwaite, p. 24–25.
222. Gibbs, 2012, p. 16
224 ibid., p. 218.
practitioner’ model that became powerful in the more radical 1970s. Large-scale standardised student performance data means that these competencies are increasingly derived from multivariate quantitative research on school and teacher ‘effectiveness’, with its related goal of defining ‘best practice’.\textsuperscript{225}

Attempts to define appropriate standards for teaching inevitably generate very long lists of approved behaviours and attitudes, defined at a highly generic level, in ways that inevitably fragment the work of teaching. There is, for example, a nine-page template provided by the HEA that tells applicants for Fellow status how to write their ‘Account of Professional Practice as a teacher and/or a supporter of learning’. This documentation leaves itself wide open to inclusion in Don Watson’s compendium of modern management speak, \textit{Bendable Learnings},\textsuperscript{226} with suggestions that, for the purpose of ‘Evidencing A4’, you should address ‘the ways you have contributed to supporting and guiding your learners’.\textsuperscript{227} Missing is the vivid sense of partnership between teacher and student in university learning.\textsuperscript{228}

As far back as 1989, US commentator Clark Kerr warned about the experience of school teachers and the school system in the US and the UK. There is something familiar today about his description of the deskilling of teachers ‘through the process of separating the conceptualization from the execution of lessons, increasing bureaucratization and managerialism, central control of the curriculum and extensive audit and control of their work’.\textsuperscript{229}

The production of lists is, nonetheless, a serious attempt to make transparent the fact that good teaching is not easy, and that it is made up of a wide range of different things, including emotional effort. However, contemporary research on the best school educational systems suggests that success comes with requiring higher levels of qualification for teachers (master’s versus bachelor or diploma level) and ongoing professional development, which then allows higher levels of autonomy and freedom – or trust.\textsuperscript{230} As Joseph Bourke notes, ‘the widening gap between stakeholders and academics undermines the one characteristic that all the writers see as essential to the balance between accountability and autonomy – trust’.\textsuperscript{231}

On the question of what good teachers actually, do there is a remarkable degree of consensus between Alfred North Whitehead, writing about the function of universities from Harvard in 1929, and Raewyn Connell, reflecting on the work of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[225] For a critique of the concept of best practice in education, see Morley, op. cit., pp. 112–113.
\item[226] Watson, 2009.
\item[228] Ramsden (2010) describes the struggle over language within the HEA: ‘In vain I tried to dump unhelpful terminology such as “practitioners” (instead of “lecturers”) from its lexicon.’
\item[229] Summarised by Becher & Trowler, p. 14.
\item[230] Jensen, 2015.
\item[231] Bourke, p. 18.
\end{footnotes}
school teachers in 2013 (see above). For Whitehead the key to a university was the
way it unites the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning,
through intellectual curiosity.

Imagination is a contagious disease. It cannot be measured by the yard, or weighed by
the pound and then delivered to the students by members of the faculty. It can only
be communicated by a faculty whose members wear their learning with
imagination.\(^2\)\(^3\)\(^2\)

Teachers will keep their imaginations alive by doing research, while researchers will
keep their imaginations alive by being asked to explain themselves to the ‘active
minds’ of students. In Whitehead’s unforgettable words:

Knowledge does not keep any better than fish. You may be dealing with knowledge of
the old species, with some old truth; but somehow or other it must come to the
students, as it were, just drawn out of the sea and with the freshness of immediate
importance.\(^2\)\(^3\)\(^3\)

Whitehead was deeply interested in the conditions that produce this kind of
imaginative community of teachers and learners, and sceptical of the role of
business management approaches. He warned that ‘the danger is that it is quite easy
to produce a faculty entirely unfit – a faculty of very efficient pedants and dullards’.
The only quality safeguard, in his view, was ‘the public opinion of the faculty, and a
common zeal for the high level of university work’.\(^2\)\(^3\)\(^4\)

Aligning himself explicitly with Whitehead, Paul Ramsden insists that scholarship
leads to the ‘enlivening of the imagination’. He argues that ‘[k]nowledge generation
and knowledge exchange through teaching are indivisible. Subject matter is
important, not just how you teach it.’ Like Connell and Whitehead, Ramsden believes
there is no ‘technical fix’ for the problem of improving the quality of university
teaching.

We can only stimulate, incentivize and inspire it. Books and websites of the ‘3,000 tips
on feedback type’ profess to offer easy solutions for teaching in universities. They face
a fruitless task because they focus on the methods and signs of teaching rather than
what they are meant to address. They are part of the attitude that puts efficient
delivery and compliance with rules above questioning what it is we are providing.\(^2\)\(^3\)\(^5\)

In the same article, Ramsden warns of the possible unintended consequences of the
competency list approach and the kind of lecturers it may produce.

[They have often developed the skills needed to make students active and test the
knowledge they have acquired. They have schooled them to succeed, but not afforded
them a higher education. If this sounds harsh, we should remember that, like their

\(^2\)\(^3\)\(^\text{Whitehead, 1967, p. 97.}\)
\(^2\)\(^3\)\(^\text{ibid., p. 98.}\)
\(^2\)\(^3\)\(^\text{ibid., p. 99.}\)
\(^2\)\(^3\)\(^\text{Ramsden, op. cit.}\)
students, staff are habitually casualties of a system that rewards universities for form-filling and hoop-jumping at the expense of eagerness and meaning. Collaborating with students goes out the window; meeting targets takes priority.

There is much potential good in insisting that all university teachers should become familiar with the ways in which teaching quality can be ‘measured’, and should see this as central to their overall performance as academics – particularly when implemented in a developmental framework. Care needs to be taken, however, to prevent individual and private performance management taking priority over investment in coherent, institution-wide, planned staff development that includes a central focus on keeping up with current disciplinary or professional scholarship. Furthermore, good performance management relies on the supervisor being genuinely wiser than the supervisee, which is not always the case in higher education teaching and learning. (It is perhaps this lack of confidence that is partly responsible for the reliance on detailed, externally generated performance indicators.)

If the focus of these policies was on the improvement of student learning, as opposed to on what teachers do, the approach might be rather different, with an emphasis on the collegial and collaborative nature of the work involved in shaping a three- or four-year curriculum. Such a focus would not only recognise the reality of teacher interdependence for the best learning but, in holding the collective accountable, would encourage and promote collaboration and a shared focus on teaching. This in turn would support what Connell calls ‘a lively occupational culture’ – something that is as relevant to good university teaching as any other kind of teaching.

The current interest in adopting indicators of teaching performance as part of both internal performance management systems and external accreditation processes stems from a genuine concern not just with meeting external demands for accountability but also with encouraging more academics to invest in improvement. The mobilisation of a discourse around professionalising university teaching can be seen as a strategy for challenging the dominance of research in the culture of the university, and creating resources and rewards for those seeking to improve university teaching. To raise a number of critical issues about this approach is not to suggest that ‘professional standards’ are unimportant, or that nothing can or should be done to develop the occupational culture of university teaching. On the contrary, given the evidence of relentless research performance pressures on a global scale, there is a serious need for ‘countervailing measures’ in favour of teaching. At the same time, for many academics, teaching undergraduates has never been more

236 For a discussion of alternative approaches to developing discipline- and department-based evaluations of teaching, see Probert, 2014a, pp. 13–17.
237 Connell, op. cit., p. 223.
demanding, and the challenges seem likely to increase as rates of participation climb, resources fall, competition grows, auditable outcomes are privileged, and technology transforms the landscape.

Alongside the work on more explicit expectations about good teaching for the purposes of measuring and managing performance, there needs to be serious investment in and support for academics as teachers. Across the sector there is now a deeper knowledge about what leads to better learning, and a far more scholarly culture around teaching, stimulated and supported by the work of the OLT and its predecessor bodies. Discussions about revisions to academic promotion criteria have required institutions to articulate what constitutes excellence in teaching (involving much consciousness-raising); this has created some counterweight to the tendency for academics to ‘satisfice’ in their teaching, and created incentives for some academics to invest heavily in becoming leaders in teaching and learning.

Part 6: Elements of a quality regime for the future of Australian higher education

Future context and challenges

There is widespread agreement in Australia that participation levels in higher education should continue to grow, and that anyone able to benefit from higher education should be able to study at this level. There is also widespread agreement that a system of universal participation will require a greater diversity of providers, with more varied missions, fully exploiting the potential role of new technologies. Australians value highly both the relative affordability of higher education, and the egalitarian nature of the existing funding regime that has helped create a national system of higher education that is internationally respected.

Australia is not alone in facing policy challenges in supporting the next phase of higher education’s evolution. The US and the UK, despite their radically different higher education systems, are both wrestling with questions about how to protect affordability and quality when budgets are increasingly tight. Martin Trow has analysed the dilemmas generated by a dual commitment ‘to continued growth and also to high quality in all parts of the system’. For him the key question is ‘whether new forms of higher education can fulfil their functions at a standard that earns high status and satisfies egalitarians, while reducing per capita costs in ways that will allow genuine expansion toward mass higher education’. In Australia the most common institutional approach to reducing per capita costs has been the casualisation of the academic workforce, a strategy that manifestly fails to encourage institutional or disciplinary innovation. This is a topic that needs to be taken up by the academic community as a whole, as part of the necessary reconsideration of what it means to be an academic.

At the same time, higher education is an increasingly globalised and competitive sector in which rankings, despite their ‘crude simplicity and a focus on measures that favour the rich’, have ‘fired a shot across the bow of higher education and their host governments’. The global rankings and their choice of indicators have become the ‘international norm for what constitutes quality’. In this context there is a growing need for transparent and credible measures of educational quality that can underpin claims to an alternative kind of excellence. Much can be learned from the past two decades of quality assurance and improvement policies and practices, but there are

240 ibid., p. 267.
242 ibid.
also new elements for a less regulated quality regime that are being promoted that require critical evaluation.

The role of markets in higher education

The most recent turn in Australian thinking about effective quality regimes for a mass higher education system has focused on giving competition a much larger role, and reducing the emphasis on regulation. Central to the proposed model is the uncapping of student fees – the amount that students can be charged for their education. This is seen by many as the inevitable and logical counterpart to the creation of an uncapped market in student places following the Bradley reforms. The second central element, designed to ensure genuine price competition, is the proposal to give non-university providers the same access to Commonwealth funding for students. This, it is argued, will not only prevent established universities from raising fees with impunity but will also more generally increase competitive pressures on performance.

In such a market-driven framework there will be less need for regulatory approaches to quality assurance since competition will, it is believed, be a far more powerful impetus to quality improvement. It is assumed that an institution with poor retention rates and low levels of student satisfaction will lose students to one with better performance, and be obliged to lift its game. As the current Minister for Education has put it:

> Under our reforms, universities and other higher education institutions will compete to attract students. This will drive quality in higher education – when institutions compete for students, students win.

> Students will have more choice and universities and colleges will need to put more effort into meeting the needs of students. They will need to become more innovative and continuously improve the teaching and learning they offer in order to attract students. 243

However, as many critics have pointed out, the higher education market is, in some key aspects, quite unlike the market for most goods and services, rendering some of these assumptions invalid.

The role of students in quality assurance

The uncapping of student places in 2012 was accompanied by the provision of publicly available comparable data on performance to assist students to make

243 Christopher Pyne, address to Innovative Research Universities, 2014.
The quality of Australia’s higher education system

informed choices.⁴⁴ In an environment where fees are also uncapped and a wider range of providers is encouraged, the role of information becomes, in theory, even more important as students need to be able to discriminate on the basis of cost as well as quality. Even assuming that students will behave like theoretical consumers, deciding what is value for money is far from simple. The new Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching will provide information for students to compare fields of study on a number of key dimensions that should, in theory, allow them to make wise decisions based on their own particular interests and goals.

There is, however, a substantial body of research that suggests the market for higher education does not work like the market for most consumer products. Robert Zemsky provides a scholarly summary of what is known about the impact of competition on US colleges and universities.⁴⁵ He begins by identifying the ways in which the market in higher education is profoundly unlike the market for consumer goods such as cars. These include the fact that, for most people, purchasing a college education is a ‘singular event’, meaning that there is little opportunity for learning more about the product over time and changing one’s preferences. The majority of students are also going to be strongly influenced by their parents’ preferences, since they will be helping to pay for the purchase. Meanwhile, the college or university may not choose to sell its product to the interested student/consumer – ‘and in the most sought after institutions, the decision not to sell is made much more often than the decision to sell.’ Such providers prefer to add to their prestige with these levels of refusal rather than to add to their revenue.⁴⁶

Much has been written about the peculiarities of the US higher education market, which Massy argues remains in ‘a fairly primitive state’.⁴⁷ Indeed, there is no central body providing comparable information for students in the US, with the top-ranking universities declining to participate in the biggest consumer guide, U.S. News. Meanwhile, the two internationally respected indicator sets of educational quality (NSSE and the College Results Instrument) have had little impact on ‘consumer choice’.⁴⁸ Many observers conclude that the market does not work effectively to ensure quality or control prices. In response to these market failures, in 2014 the Obama administration called for the development of a new college rating system in

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244 MyUniversity website. This period of Labor government also saw the introduction of MySchool with a similar objective – namely, to allow parents to see how all schools are performing on certain key measures. Because students are all subject to nationwide testing (NAPLAN), it is possible for the database to produce measures of the value added by particular schools. Without a national curriculum, or any standardised testing, university data cannot be used in this way.

245 Zemsky, 2005.

246 ibid. And ‘to make matters even more convoluted the price an individual consumer is charged in this part of the market reflects his or her ability to pay’, with financial need claims meaning that sometimes the supplier pays for the service it is supplying.

247 Massy op. cit., p. 211.

order to ‘combat rising college costs, make college affordable for American families, and strengthen the value of a college education’.\textsuperscript{249}

In the UK a recent cross-party review of the impact of the 2012 reforms, which cut public funding and allowed providers to increase student fees, concluded that far from introducing more diverse learning models, they ‘have resulted in zero price variation, little expansion of new offers for students and minimal innovation in teaching and learning.’\textsuperscript{250}

In the Australian context, Bruce Chapman has pointed out that higher education is quite an unusual kind of market, particularly in the presence of HECS. ‘Because most people don’t really know how good or bad institutions are, setting prices lower than competitors can signal inferiority and can mean revenue losses.’\textsuperscript{251} Simon Marginson has been writing since the mid-1990s about how education produces ‘positional goods’, ‘places in education that provide students with \textit{relative advantage} in the competition for jobs, income, social standing and prestige.’\textsuperscript{252} Competition in this kind of market is not about the intrinsic content of the education but its symbolic value. Quality education is widely associated with sandstone and ivy rather than with measures of student satisfaction, let alone the quality of teaching. By definition, only a few institutions can be seen as prestigious. As Marginson noted in response to the current reform proposals, ‘[s]tatus is the sole source of educational value, and the strongest source of revenue, and there is only so much status to go around’.\textsuperscript{253}

Almost every Australian university has undertaken expensive market research about how to attract students in recent years, and it consistently supports Marginson’s thesis. Students choose their higher education provider primarily on the basis of whether it offers the course they wish to take, and then on the status of the provider. Status, in turn, is overwhelmingly determined by institutional history and research performance.\textsuperscript{254} The uncapping of student places immediately led to a strong move of students towards the higher-ranked universities.

Australian economist John Quiggin has taken up this analysis of the higher education market in responding to the proposed market reforms. The idea of encouraging

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{249} US Department of Education, 2014.
\item \textsuperscript{250} Higher Education Commission, 2014. The attempt to create price competition, within an overall cap on the fees that could be charged, failed immediately, with every provider moving to the maximum allowable fees. The UK government was obliged to re-regulate the market in places and create a quota that would be offered to providers willing to accept a specified lower fee. Three years later the result, according to the cross-party Higher Education Commission, is a system of loans and fees that is the worst of all worlds, and is unsustainable for the future.
\item \textsuperscript{251} Chapman, 2014.
\item \textsuperscript{252} Marginson, 1997, pp. 7–8.
\item \textsuperscript{253} Marginson, 2014.
\item \textsuperscript{254} In Australia, metropolitan students very rarely leave home to study, so the competition is already severely limited compared to the US or the UK. In three states there is only one Group of Eight university, for example, so if status dominates, they face little serious competition.
\end{itemize}
competition is well understood in thinking about micro-economic reform, with the assumption that those firms that perform well will experience strong and growing demand, leading to financial success, while those that perform badly will lose customers and revenue and, if they fail to respond, will disappear. Quiggin argues, however, that ‘this assumption is almost entirely inapplicable to education, at any level, but particularly for universities. It is extremely rare for universities, regardless of the quality of their management, to close down … More strikingly, even the relative rankings of institutions are almost entirely unrelated to the quality of their management over any period of time that is amenable to policy. Rather, the rankings of universities can be predicted, with a high degree of accuracy, by the date and conditions under which they were founded.’

The only place where these analysts see real competition is at the bottom end of any education market.

Institutions that have difficulty filling their places are contestable, and tend to compete on the basis of efficiency and consumer focus. They spend more on marketing than successful institutions. Nevertheless, they are constantly undermined by the flight of students to more prestigious competitors. Further, real improvements they might make in learning and efficiency will tend to be under-recognised.

A further paradox in the workings of higher education markets is that, while many expert observers are critical of the educational quality on offer, and many politicians are demanding more accountability, there is little evidence that the consumers are unhappy. On the contrary, on many measures the community is happy with the performance of higher education institutions both in the US and in Australia. Despite falling resources per student, measures of student satisfaction with their courses have risen steadily in Australia over the past decade. In the US, where tuition fees have risen far faster than the cost of living, there is a similar lack of community concern.

In its major review of the UK reforms, the Higher Education Commission was surprised at the reaction of students to the high level of debts they would accumulate and their ability to repay them. ‘The extent to which students were more passive recipients than actors in what is sometimes presented as a market was of interest to us and of some concern.’

If students do not behave like consumers in a theoretical market, they are nonetheless central to any educational quality regime. While we gather ever greater amounts of data on their behaviour, we have paid relatively little attention to some of the ways in which they tell us most directly what they value and what they need.

256 Marginson, op. cit., p. 8.
257 Zemsky, 2009, ‘Chapter 4: The way we are’.
258 Thompson, 2014.
For example, one of the most valuable aspects of the CEQ is the invitation to students to write open-ended comments on the best aspects of their university course experience and those most needing improvement. As Australia’s Geoff Scott has shown, CEQuery, the tool for analysing this qualitative data, enables this vast resource to be used to give students a powerful voice.259

**Rankings and ratings**

Massy argues that increasing competition in higher education has made prestige even more important, and that this has become more tightly linked to research performance. The more our higher education providers seek to compete in the upper end of the market, the more they will rely on the strength of their research credentials as evidence of their quality more broadly. International students, who already pay uncapped fees in Australia, are powerfully influenced by these rankings in their choice of institution, despite the fact that they are very likely to be studying commerce or accounting – disciplines that contribute little to institutional research rankings, and in which much of the teaching is done by sessional staff.

Powerful rankings based on research not only have the potential to distort ‘consumer demand’ in a competitive market but can also shape the allocation of resources within universities in ways that reduce educational quality. David Dill has reviewed a range of UK evidence in an attempt to answer the question of whether the emerging market rivalry has influenced universities to take actions that assure and improve academic standards. He concludes that research performance is now so heavily emphasised in all universities that it has altered the traditional roles of academic staff and ‘affected the balance between teaching and research, encouraged more individualistic behavior on the part of academic staff, and contributed to a more fragmented educational experience for students.’260

In the UK, students at a number of Russell Group universities have protested in recent years about the prioritisation of research over teaching, demanding that the universities’ stars should teach them from time to time. The cutting of public funding for teaching in UK universities provoked further demands for improved teaching, with the National Union of Students there threatening to start behaving like consumers. But there is not a great deal of evidence that this consumer pressure has been effective.

The same research priorities also weaken the link between fees charged and the quality of the educational experience, since extra revenue that can be raised from high status is highly likely to go towards improving the institution’s research performance and protecting that status. As Steven Schwarz – someone with

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259 Scott, 2005.
experience as a vice-chancellor in both the UK and Australia – has asked, ‘What additional value can students expect to receive for higher fees? Smaller classes? Extra tutorials? New courses? On this topic, universities have been silent. There will be money for research, salaries and new cadres of administrators’.  

Ross Gittins sees similar forces at work, arguing that ‘such is the strength of the unis’ monopoly over access to the good jobs that most young people would be prepared to pay huge fees and take on very large debts before they resigned themselves to a lifetime of low socio-economic status’. The highest-status universities have all set themselves targets to move up the international higher education rankings, and they can only do this by diverting greater resources into their research activity and rewarding their academics primarily for their research performance.

Institutional rankings are, as discussed earlier, deeply problematic in teaching and learning. The Obama administration is, with good reason, not proposing to create a numerical ranking of institutions but rather a college ratings system, with only three categories: high performing, low performing and those falling in the middle. This proposal has the further merit of directly addressing what are widely seen as weaknesses of the current higher education system – namely, access provided to disadvantaged students, affordability and student outcomes.  

The institutional rankings produced to allocate the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund provoked widespread criticism, and there has been little interest in repeating this exercise since then. The University Experience Survey will allow the more legitimate comparison of similar programs or courses, and it remains to be seen whether any institution will use this data externally to claim ‘bragging rights’.

**New providers and competition based on educational quality**

The other key aspect to improving quality in the proposed market system is the extension of public funding to a wider range of providers. Given the opportunity to compete on price when the cap on student contributions was last raised, not one existing provider chose that path. Despite the best intentions of a wide range of policy initiatives designed to promote diversity, it is still the case that the Australian

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261 Schwarz, 2014. Stephen King, former Group of Eight business school dean and a member of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, has suggested that in an uncapped fee market vice-chancellors need to be held more tightly to account ‘about how the financial gains from deregulation are used’. In particular, he argues that the Group of Eight ‘will be getting a massive great big windfall, and I think the Australian community may not see a lot coming out the other end.’ Quoted by Bernard Lane, ‘MPs should grill uni chiefs on how they spend fee revenue’, *The Australian*, 25 September 2014.


264 I am indebted to Matt Brett for his suggestion that we need to be thinking about ways in which a higher education provider could claim ‘bragging rights’ as an excellent teaching institution.

265 The case for this is well made by Kemp and Norton, 2014.
university system is both homogenous and conservative. As Marginson and Considine have argued, there are powerful forms of isomorphism at work in Australian higher education.\(^{266}\) Competition leads institutions to adopt ‘the same change strategies as their chief competitors’, revealed in part in the relentless mission creep relating to research and prestige.

Massaro analysed the impact of reducing higher education regulation on the development of institutional diversity after the Dawkins reforms. He concluded that, paradoxical as it might seem, the new external quality assurance processes adopted at that time had the unintended consequence of rewarding the traditional notion of universities, and ‘served to further homogenise the system and dilute diversity’.\(^{267}\)

But as participation rates rise and the student body becomes more and more diverse, successive governments have continued to hope for different kinds of providers to meet new kinds of needs, particularly institutions with a strong teaching mission. New technologies have certainly created a great deal of interest in the possibility of new types of providers emerging to compete with the traditional university model. For example, some have suggested that new providers using online learning, and offering micro-credentials (or ‘badges’) for the completion of much more varied types of learning could present a serious competitive threat to the current homogeneous offerings. In the vastly larger US market, the Minerva Project aims to replace the modern liberal-arts college with a remarkable institution that has eliminated lectures and tenure, as well as football games, ivy-covered buildings and research libraries.\(^{268}\)

As yet there is little evidence of such innovation in Australia, but it is important to focus on the ways in which a new, non-university provider might demonstrate persuasively the quality of their educational programs to students, their parents and their potential employer.

The risks to students from opening up public funding to new players are, however, not negligible, and unlikely to be offset by providing them with the kind of information to be found on a website like QILT, or by the discourse of ‘shopping around’ for the best deal. The deregulation of vocational education, and the extension of generous HECS-style loans to vocational education and training (VET) students, has led to widespread exploitation by unscrupulous private providers. The federal government has had to ban colleges from offering inducements such as laptops and iPads to students who sign up with little chance of completing their course, or with no understanding of their obligations to repay their government

\(^{266}\) Marginson & Considine, 2000, pp. 183–185.
\(^{267}\) Massaro, 1996, p. 35.
\(^{268}\) Wood, 2014. See also Carey, 2015, which argues persuasively for the importance of online education that focuses on students learning rather than on buildings and football teams or research.
loans. Aggressive recruitment practices among private colleges have been a major factor behind the five-fold increase in vocational education debt between 2013 and 2015.\textsuperscript{269}

Sir David Watson believed that, in the UK, ‘government concern to ease the path for alternative providers’ was a much more serious quality problem than simple growth. For him, the big question was about ‘the ability – or not – of UK [higher education] to maintain its commitment to a controlled reputational range.’\textsuperscript{270} Rather than accept a growth model based on promoting private providers with minimal regulatory controls, Watson urges the collective higher education sector to take responsibility itself for widening access and systematically supporting lifelong learning – rather than simply leaving all this to the Open University.

In Australia, as David Kemp and Andrew Norton acknowledge, the demand driven system has ‘facilitated competition between public universities for enrolments, and competition for student enrolments has become a significant driver for change.’\textsuperscript{271} They go on to recommend that Commonwealth-supported places should be extended to registered non-university and private higher education providers, but the analysts of educational markets, both theoretical and empirical, suggest that this is unlikely to have a positive impact on quality and innovation.

### The evolving role of the regulator

If there is one aspect of Australia’s current quality regime that everyone is committed to it is the role of TEQSA in registering and re-registering higher education providers, and in accrediting courses offered by providers without self-accrediting authority. In this context TEQSA is expected to be a very tough regulator, excluding those who do not meet the defined standards.

The teaching and learning standards that are likely to be implemented in 2016 require that the quality of institutional learning outcomes be assured through a process of external referencing. The type and amount of external referencing is not narrowly prescribed in the standards, but TEQSA will presumably expect that a provider can demonstrate a coherent and consistent approach. As discussed earlier, many universities have been involved in recent years in developing credible methods for assuring learning standards through processes of peer review, precisely to prepare for the new regulatory framework. It remains to be seen how the slimmed-down TEQSA will apply the standards, and how much pressure the sector will

\textsuperscript{269} Bita, 2015.
\textsuperscript{270} Watson, 2014, pp. 3–4.
\textsuperscript{271} Kemp and Norton, op. cit., p. 10.
continue to feel after so much recent reassurance about the central role to be played by ‘self-assurance’.272

There has been much less discussion about how quality assurance and quality improvement can be designed to encourage innovation in the provision of higher education, even though innovations often generate potential areas of risk. This can be seen in just one area of recent change that has been promoted as a vital equity policy – namely, the development of multiple pathways into higher education, credit transfer arrangements between VET and higher education providers, and the appearance of modular degree structures, or a ‘portfolio’ approach to meeting the requirements of a bachelor’s degree. This kind of flexibility has flourished in recent years, in sharp contrast to the rigid rules that have historically prevented students from transferring easily between similar institutions, let alone radically different ones.

For Sir David Watson, the failure to develop a widely supported credit accumulation and transfer system in the UK was not a technical issue but a ‘cultural and moral issue: we fail to use these systems for reasons of conservatism, snobbery and lack of imagination.’273 In stark contrast, the eminent Australian educationalist John Biggs argues that ‘the credit transfer system between universities discourages prerequisites and hence learning in depth, and encourages homogenized content and grade inflation.’274 Finding ways of preserving and extending what many believe is an essential aspect of a universal system of higher education, without the kind of ‘dumbing-down’ feared by Biggs, is perfectly possible. But it requires system-wide collaboration based on mutual respect across providers, and a focus on improvement rather than compliance, and on partnerships rather than competition.275

All of this points to the importance of a regulatory regime that encourages innovation as well as guarding the gates or ‘policing the boundaries’. Lee Dow and Braithwaite want to see TEQSA evolve into a body that treats the ‘regulatees’ not as objects but as partners. As they note, ‘there are many areas where quality of performance matters, not just meeting a minimum requirement for classification as compliant, rather than non-compliant.’276 Their recommendation that TEQSA should be smaller and charged with fewer functions has been accepted, so what needs

273 Watson, 2014, p. 11.
274 Biggs, op. cit., p. 235.
275 See, for example, the National Leadership Council, 2007, ‘Part 3: A new framework for excellence’, which argues for explicit learning outcomes ‘to guide students’ cumulative progress from school through college’.
276 Lee Dow & Braithwaite, pp. 23–24.
clarification is how the government will encourage the sector to share innovative and good practice, and to invest in improvement.277

Institutional and sector-wide quality assurance and improvement

In the most recently revised Australian quality regime, a great deal of weight is placed on institutional commitment to quality assurance, in which external peer review is essential. This addresses one of the key propositions put forward by Peter Ewell:

The likelihood that state interests will be served increases when quality approaches allow significant institutional discretion, and are implemented flexibly to empower local leadership and recognize significant differences in institutional circumstances.278

As noted at the start of this paper, Australian universities have very strong internal processes of quality assurance, built on disciplinary cultures of peer review and academic judgment. Over the past two decades external auditing of various kinds has stimulated many positive institutional approaches not only to quality assurance but also to quality improvement. There is, nonetheless, some disquiet at the bypassing of academic decision-making processes in favour of managerial authority, and the potential for tension where such processes are not insulated from revenue-raising pressures.279 Even for those most able and willing to contribute to the labour of quality assurance and peer review, there is little reward to be had from this kind of professional collegial work (since it does not lead to publications or income-generating program development).280

At the same time, as non-university providers contribute to the growth of higher education it becomes essential to build partnerships between both kinds of provider so that a shared culture of scholarship appropriate to higher education can develop.281 Leesa Wheelahan et al. argue that:

It is crucial that TAFE teachers who teach higher education also engage in scholarship and they need support to do so, otherwise students will be short-changed. This is an

277 The terms ‘best practice’ and ‘continuous improvement’ have deliberately been avoided here. Both concepts have been powerfully critiqued by authors such as Morley. It is perfectly possible to focus on improvement without it having to be ‘continuous’, and the idea of ‘best practice’ in teaching is, as discussed earlier, problematic.
278 Ewell, 2007, p 141.
279 Rowlands (2012) concluded that academic boards in Australian universities ‘are not effective in carrying out their quality assurance role and that the role of quality assurance has largely been subsumed by the senior management’.
280 The same tension is revealed in the current campaign to have the work of editing journals recognised as a contribution to research performance, for without that recognition it is increasingly difficult to get academics to do this vital work. If editing and peer reviewing for journals is not recognised by ERA, then it will not be recognised in most academic workload models, even though the whole edifice of performance metrics rests on that invisible work.
281 For an interesting study of this, see Baker, Hougaz & Wickert, 2013.
issue for government, tertiary education quality assurance and staff development agencies, mixed-sector TAFE institutes, and also teachers who ... have very strong feelings about this issue.\textsuperscript{282}

In an environment in which growing proportions of higher education teachers are employed on casual contracts with little paid time for professional development, these partnerships and collaborations are difficult to establish, let alone sustain.

The changes to the academic workforce are global. As a major US survey points out:

> The faculty landscape is evolving. But, there is little about what the ‘new instructors’ will look like, how they will behave, what they will act on, and what the effect on student outcomes will be. \textsuperscript{283}

Organisations such as the OLT have an important role to play focusing our collective minds on the challenges emerging in higher education – such as determining how to maintain the integrity of portfolio degrees, ensuring English language standards, probing the relationship between teaching and research, studying the impacts of employment practices such as casualisation and the unbundling of academic roles, ensuring that technological potential for good learning is exploited to the full, devising effective and efficient forms of external referencing, and much else besides.\textsuperscript{284} This kind of work needs to reach out beyond the circle of teaching and learning enthusiasts to the larger academic workforce. As the US survey of academic attitudes notes, we need a ‘robust, quantitative perspective on faculty views’, because while many are happy to conjecture and hypothesise about ‘faculty goals, objectives, and behaviors, there is not a systematic understanding of how these may differ across the professoriate, and how any differences affect the faculty behaviors which most affect student outcomes.’\textsuperscript{285} In particular, there is a lack of understanding as to why academics do or do not adopt new behaviours. This is equally true in Australia.

Early-career academics do not come to the role with no experience of, or thoughts about, teaching. Their experience and knowledge is inextricably and inevitably embedded in their discipline, field of study or profession, and it is highly likely that they have observed both good and bad teaching practices. They are often already aware of the particular challenges posed by teaching in their particular field, or to particular cohorts of students. The enthusiasm in some quarters for generic or accredited qualifications in higher education teaching are unlikely to be perceived as relevant (even if they are). The danger is that this form of credentialism displaces

\textsuperscript{282} Wheelahan, Moodie, Billett & Kelly, 2009. p. 38.  
\textsuperscript{283} FTI Consulting, 2015.  
\textsuperscript{284} The HEA put a number of important and clearly defined research priorities up for tender in 2014, including ‘meeting the staff development needs of the changing academic workforce’ and the evaluation of ‘teaching development in higher education’ (www.heacademy.ac.uk/professional-recognition).  
\textsuperscript{285} ibid., p. 5.
approaches that help to form new kinds of academic identities in which a long-term interest in professional development as a teacher becomes integral to life as an academic. The advantage of the HEA accreditation process at the more junior levels (leaving aside the insider language) is that it represents a form of recognition of prior learning (RPL). It encourages academics to reflect on what they already know, suggests the kind of subject and pedagogic research they should be engaged with and, when taken up in a departmental or disciplinary or degree program context, has the potential to create a shared sense of interest and enthusiasm for scholarly teaching. This kind of accreditation process might possibly help to create the discipline-focused enthusiasm for the scholarship of teaching described by Boyer and Shulman.286 It might equally be used in ways that have none of these benefits, and that contribute to deprofessionalisation.

While we know rather little about the attitudes of the academic workforce as a whole, there are plenty of grounds for thinking that the sector needs to focus on raising the status of teaching. If the objective is parity of esteem between teaching and research, it is highly possible that we have been going backwards as a result of the growing intensity of research performance pressures. While some have been allowed (or made) to abandon the research race to focus on teaching, this may simply preserve the current imbalance in esteem rather than challenge it.

The argument for the adoption of individual performance standards for teaching of the kind currently being discussed is, it has been argued, inappropriately focused. The focus should shift to the program, discipline or field of study as the locus of accountability for the quality of learning. The emphasis on inputs that is embedded in teaching performance standards is unlikely to encourage innovation or improvement in a systematic way. ‘Inputs’ need to be conceptualised in terms of professional development, and this in turn requires investment, linked to high expectations.

**Funding and accountability**

The recent proposal to allow higher education providers to set their own fees as they see fit has led to a new focus on accountability and transparency in relation to how this revenue will be spent. Even without this new external pressure there has been ongoing interest in how various kinds of revenue are spent. The Lomax-Smith review of base funding noted that there was no way of assuring that any increase in the level of funding for teaching would end up being spent on improving teaching.287 More recently there have been several analyses showing the extent to which student fees or contributions are being spent on research, with several commentators

arguing that the capacity to increase fees may result in no improvements in the student experience, but only more transfers to research budgets.288

The demand for greater transparency in an uncapped fee system has led some to suggest that public funding for teaching and research should be separated into two streams.289 Such a proposal raises many other questions about how to ensure that higher education teaching is adequately funded, and how to maintain scholarly standards. Nonetheless, the question of how higher education providers should be held accountable for their internal allocation of revenue is important, whatever other forms of quality assurance are in place. As John Byron argues, ‘This is public money and student money. It is well past time for the facts about how universities spend these funds to be bathed in the cold, hard light of day.’290

Even the US, long admired for the quality of its universities, has entered what Massy calls ‘the age of disenchantment’. ‘Society is no longer prepared to accept that higher education is self-justifying’.291 Moves are afoot in that country to adopt new tools to hold institutions accountable for their students’ success, including the development of a federal database to keep track of student outcomes. Under consideration are moves to make colleges share in the financial risk of the federal loans provided to students, and gainful employment regulations targeted at for-profit colleges.292

In Australia, mechanisms exist for the Commonwealth to hold universities accountable, although it is unclear whether these would have any significant future role if Australia were to adopt a much more market-driven and unregulated higher education regime. The mission-based Compacts (which replaced earlier Institutional Performance Agreements), introduced in 2012, were, as Lee Dow and Braithwaite note, ‘key opportunities to identify risks with the regulator, based on outcomes visible through data and forward looking strategic plans.’293 Similarly, the Lomax-Smith review of base funding recommended that Compacts were ‘a suitable vehicle to deliver performance funding for quality teaching’.294 It is equally the opportunity for the Department to hold the regulatee accountable and seek explanations for the

288 Larkins, 2015; Byron, 2015. Others have focused on the rising spend on advertising and marketing in an increasingly competitive marketised system. A Times Higher Education investigation found that universities spent 22 per cent more on marketing during 2010–2012, as the UK reforms were being introduced. See Matthews, 2013.

289 King & Maddock, 2015.
290 John Byron, op cit.
291 Massy, op. cit., p. 210
292 Stratford, 2015; Crotty, 2014.
294 Lomax-Smith, op. cit., p. 75.
past and assurances for the future’. After two rounds of Compact discussions it is clear that some vice-chancellors took this opportunity seriously and engaged fully in the discussions, while others provided the minimum possible engagement. It is this latter approach that contributes to the lack of public confidence, and to arguments that vice-chancellors should be required to account for how they spend their institution’s income.

**Conclusion**

This paper began with the premise that the higher education sector needs to be able to demonstrate the quality of its teaching and learning, and to assure the public – and students, in particular – about the value of their growing investment in higher education. How this might be done will, inevitably, involve measures of quality that are not ideal and processes that are not simple. There is much to be learned from the past two decades of policy and practice in Australia, and from the quality regimes of other countries moving to universal participation, such as the UK and the US.

What is clear is that the effectiveness of any quality regime depends on the relationship between its parts and, in particular, on the effect that regulatory or audit-type processes have on institutional cultures and their commitment to evaluating how well their students are learning, and to investing in better teaching. There is little enthusiasm among experts in regulation and quality assurance for models that rely on one central regulator, and lessons have been learned (both here and by overseas observers) from the first incarnation of TEQSA. In the UK the Higher Education Commission has proposed a ‘New Pluralist Regulatory Architecture for Higher Education’ that is subtitled ‘Protecting students, encouraging innovation, enhancing excellence’. These objectives could equally be adopted in Australia to determine the kind of regulatory regime that would support diversity and cope successfully with continued growth, new kinds of providers, cost pressures and global competition.

Ellen Hazelkorn challenges the higher education sector to take an interest, warning that it has already ceded much control in defining quality to the current ‘ranking

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296 This process has not been helped by high turnover at senior levels of the department. The movement of the most talented senior bureaucrats between departments is a problem for this kind of accountability mechanism.
297 In the UK the new Conservative government has announced that it will ‘link the student fee cap to inflation for those institutions that can show they offer high-quality teaching’, to be defined by a ‘teaching excellence framework’. For an excellent discussion of why this is going to be very difficult (for many of the reasons discussed in this paper), see Grove, 2015.
systems’. Rankings ‘have narrowly defined “excellence” and “world-classness” with implications for nations and individual institutions, and promulgated a small set of indicators as being a meaningful, albeit unproven, measure of quality.’ \(^{300}\) National and cross-national comparisons of institutional performance are here to stay, but they do not have to take the form of rankings based on the current research-focused metrics.

Performance management is also here to stay, but it does not have to take Kafkaesque forms. Language matters. As Bill Readings argued in 1996: ‘Today, all departments of the University can be urged to strive for excellence, since the general applicability of the notion is in direct relation to its emptiness.’ \(^{301}\) If the ‘language of quality’ is not one that academics recognise as relevant to their work as teachers and researchers (which is always and inevitably engaged with quality), then the formal practices of quality assurance and improvement may be resisted and subverted in precisely the places where quality is determined.

Australia has a good history of quality assurance for higher education, evolving alongside a system of similarly funded institutions with convergent missions. The challenge now is to develop a new quality regime that will be more flexible, and genuinely capable not only of keeping low-quality providers out but of helping to create a better-informed public understanding of where educational quality is to be found, and whether it is fit for purpose. \(^{302}\) An effective quality regime would also support work that focuses on quality improvement and innovation, identifying and promoting teaching that can be shown to lead to excellent learning.

The replacement of AUQA with TEQSA, and the subsequent narrowing of TEQSA’s role, has left a gap in the regime. There have been short-lived but interesting trials of performance-based funding, and improvement funding with equity targets. The Carrick Institute/ALTC was followed by a departmental OLT, which is now being replaced by a university-based institute whose role and purpose in a new quality regime is currently under review. We can be sure that the government, employer groups and vice-chancellors will be vocal about the elements of a new quality regime that will meet their particular interests but, as this discussion paper has argued, the broader academic community has much at stake in the issue.

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\(^{300}\) Hazelkorn, 2013, p. 12.

\(^{301}\) Bill Readings, 1996, p. 23.

\(^{302}\) See, for example, Massaro’s (1996, pp. 42–43) proposals for such a regime, which still deserve serious consideration 20 years after he put them forward. See also Massy, 2005.
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