

Clarity before cash -- ELECTION 2010

Stephen Matchett *The Australian* October 6, 2010

Business educators are looking to Canberra for unambiguous policy direction.

THE business education community has a surprising wish list for whoever is education minister next week: it doesn't want more money, at least not immediately.

Instead, opinion leaders Business Education spoke to say they want something much harder to deliver: policy clarity.

Both sides of politics are keen on expanding the national skills base, they just don't want to explain in detail how they intend to do it.

Some argue -- although no one is willing to say so on the record -- that a coherent policy program eluded Julia Gillard as education minister, that the government meant well and was prepared to spend on post-school education and training, but that there was no overall strategy from Labor.

The opposition is equally uninformative. "We had the Bradley review of universities running simultaneously with the Cutler inquiry into innovation, as if the two issues were not inextricably linked," one observer argues.

Carol Nicholl, head of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, wants to know what happened to compacts, the idea that universities will co-operate with Canberra to set their institutional objectives, with funding to follow according to their achievements. "Universities need to know how they will be measured according to performance," she says.

And everybody is interested in what will happen to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, which is under attack before it has even been legislated. "TEQSA is undercooked, not enough work has been done on how it will operate," says Tim Brailsford, executive dean of business and economics at the University of Queensland and president of the Australian Business Deans Council.

It's an argument that applies to other priority areas where the Rudd-Gillard government demanded action but never explained in detail what it wanted or how it intended to implement change.

There is all but universal agreement on the areas the sector wants to be addressed: skills

shortages and how the training and university sectors can co-operate to address them.

Canberra's push for standardised course outcomes and assessments for every qualification is also attracting enthusiasm from some and anxiety from others. And while everybody wants an answer to the contentious question of the international education market, nobody quite knows what Canberra will, or can, accomplish.

For many policy observers, all these issues are aspects of the same problem: the absence of an integrated skills policy.

According to Peter Cole, dean of information technology at Murdoch University and president of the IT deans council, Australia is not producing enough IT graduates. He says the achievements of IT academics are underestimated by Canberra's emphasis on journal articles rather than conference papers in allocating research funding. There is also a "lack of clarity" on the immigration status of international students. These factors will combine to create a 10,000 IT graduate shortage within five years.

The engineers agree about the issues. The University of Adelaide's Peter Dowd, who is president of the Australian Council of Engineering Deans, says international students account for about one-fourth of enrolments and the revenue impact of any loss of numbers would inevitably effect the viability of classes. While domestic student numbers are improving, it is not enough to meet the economy's needs, he says.

Martin Riordan, chief executive of TAFE Directors Australia, also warns of a shortfall of trained workers. "Skills did not get treated adequately in the last budget because of the global financial crisis and now is the time for investment." TDA also argues for a review of the employer-sponsored visa process to address skill shortages.

The Business Higher Education Round Table agrees there is a need for an emphasis on skills that makes articulation across the vocational and higher education easier. "To improve productivity we have to keep improving," says BHERT executive director Sharon Winocur.

All these ideas are guaranteed to appeal to centralising ministers and mandarins, and the Labor government certainly put uniform course accreditation and a national approach to securing skilled labour on the agenda. But rather than a strategy to increase the number of graduates with specific skills, Canberra seems focused on a new compliance regime.

"Whoever wins on Saturday, TEQSA is a major challenge. It is needed to implement the spirit of the Bradley report's recommendations, but consultation is the way to ensure the sector is committed and implementation should not be rushed," Nicholl says.

And consult is what whoever is minister next week will need to do. Because how to create a single system that assesses course content and graduate outcomes, or whether to do it

all, is where consensus ends.

"TEQSA is a good thing, a great opportunity," according to Andrew Smith, head of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training." We need a regulatory framework that recognises the full range of higher education providers and standards that recognise a range of institutions deliver it already."

But academics at Group of Eight universities are worried about what an external agency prescribing course outcomes across the post-secondary system means for their independence. Margaret McKerchar, head of the Australian School of Taxation at the University of NSW, regards more regulation as unreasonable: "You don't need to regulate Go8 and other established universities, they should be left to offer what they think is needed."

Brailsford also questions the ALTC's work to create detailed discipline standards. The agency is using accounting as a pilot for business disciplines, although academics, "can self-regulate and compete on the international stage. The question is whether the ALTC should be drilling that far down in the discipline, with many others to follow . . . What's the real benefit?"

Brailsford also worries what external assessment of course outcomes will mean for universities, which have always been self-accrediting institutions. "Most universities will have to introduce specific quality assurance portfolios, we are already starting to see this happen. But quality assurance is a misnomer, it will just assure minimum compliance."

He would prefer to see Canberra set up a version of the European assurance model, which evaluates business schools on inputs and outputs and leaves what happens between to the university.

And anticipating the expansion of private providers, McKerchar says there is a much more pressing regulatory requirement than monitoring long-established institutions: "We need greater regulation of who gets university status."

It's one of the few areas where business educators divide on traditional lines. The trainers and administrators look to system-wide standards while the universities want to be left alone to get on with managing their own affairs. It's a question the new minister will have to answer. It is not as obviously important as international student numbers, but it will have a much larger influence on the long-term structure of post-school education than fluctuations in export demand.

While everybody wants action, a clear solution suiting all interests is impossible. As Dowd asks: "Everybody is committed to quality, but what are the effective ways of assessing it?"