

8TH ANNUAL HIGHER EDUCATION SUMMIT

PANEL SESSION: NEW GOVERNANCE AND REGULATION - STREAMLINED, TAILORED AND MORE EFFICIENT?

Context:

1. Principal Officer of TAFE SA's HE Registration (small scope; 4 qualifications: 3 degrees & 1 associate degree)
 - therefore interested in HE Governance & Regulation
2. Chair of TAFE SA Network Executive; Executives from each of the three TAFE SA Institutes who collectively have oversight of the strategic direction of TAFE in South Australia and the Network Services that support all three Institutes
 - therefore interested in pathways from TAFE to university and any changes to regulatory of governance arrangements that might make this more streamlined and straightforward
3. Managing Director TAFE SA Adelaide South Institute
 - therefore interested from both of the perspectives already mentioned and also that HE and VET governance and regulatory arrangements are more cohesive to assist Institutions (like mine) that operate in both sectors

Will reforms improve the performance of the sector?

What do we mean by performance of the sector?

One of the key reforms outlined in 'Transforming Australia's HE system':

'Real Action for Real Participation' covers Attainment, Access and Engagement as three indicators of improvement:

- Attainment: Increased number of graduates – 40% of 25-34 yr olds to hold a bachelor degree or higher by 2025
- Access: Increased diversity of students – 20% of HE enrolments at undergraduate level to be from a low SES background by 2020
- Engagement: Increased student engagement – increased emphasis on the student learning experience to boost retention, progress and completion rates – establishment of Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TESQA)

Proposed/emerging system reforms appear to be:

- ESOS and HE registering and auditing functions with one body; TESQA, who it is anticipated will build on the work of Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) with a renewed emphasis on teaching and learning
- A standards based outcomes focussed QA framework for HE (an early consultation draft of these Higher Education Provider Standards has been released for comment – more work is required to achieve standards to drive improvement of the sector)
- One Ministerial Council covering the VET and HE sectors of tertiary education; Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment – MCTEE

- Targets and settings to achieve growth and sustainability in the HE sector

These system reforms should be able to ‘support’ improvement in the sector, the real test will be in implementation and real improvement will be delivered by higher education institutions.

Will an integrated quality and standards tertiary body work? How should it operate?

As yet the construct of an integrated Tertiary Quality and Standards body is unclear. Establishment of TEQSA for HE only and a national regulator for VET are being pursued as separate yet aligned initiatives initially. The ability of these two initiatives to ‘integrate’ and ‘work’ as one in the future will depend (in part) on the degree to which each is created with this clear goal in mind rather than focussing on current sector specific understandings.

Structures that could evolve are:

1. a national regulator undertaking the regulation (would need state and territory presence although this could be done on a fly in and/or consultancy basis)
2. a national regulator delegating regulatory work to state and territory offices and benchmarking and moderating this work (could utilise structures already in place in states and territories but operate with a changed focus – state presence could be either commonwealth or state employees)
3. a national regulator overseeing the regulatory work undertaken by the states and territories (would increase comparability but may not have the required authority to effect a changed focus)

The legal status and reporting lines for a national integrated tertiary quality and standards agency would also need to be considered and decided.

If we are aiming towards an integrated tertiary sector covering VET and HE, it would seem to make sense to have an integrated tertiary quality and standards agency to assist in building cohesion where possible between VET and HE.

This doesn’t mean the standards or qualifications for each sector would or should be the same, however, being overseen by the same body could facilitate integration of the sectors and limit the creation of hindrances to integration.

An integrated Standards and Quality Agency could assist:

- institutions delivering both VET and HE qualifications
- cross sectoral relationships between VET and HE and student pathways
- in providing confidence to institutions about the standards required of other institutions in the same or different sector
- in clarifying the role of each sector through overtly identifying the points of difference and expecting the same standard in areas where the same outcome is required – this could lead to greater integrity for both VET and HE as well as greater cohesion

The AQFC 'Strengthening the AQF' Project should also assist by providing clarity about the requirements of qualifications at various AQF levels. This then provides an opportunity to critically examine the current and optimal structure for high level VET qualifications and sub degree HE qualifications that sit squarely in the VET and HE intersect space.

Will the changes result in more bureaucracy, inconsistent and complex processes and higher costs?

If increased national comparability of teaching and learning is the aim of a national quality and standards agency then this brings with it the need to ensure the system itself is carried out comparably across jurisdictions – the need to build in regulation of the regulator, audit of the auditor as part of the development of the system.

This need not be in the shape of unwieldy bureaucracy, but to limit inconsistencies, effort (and therefore \$s) will need to be put into benchmarking and moderating the processes and decisions of auditors. Quality and transparency of national audit function will be paramount.

What will be the implementation challenges?

As with implementing all reforms, significant effort will be expended on ensuring practices and systems reflect the new requirements, it is a fine balancing act to put new systems in place whilst still maintaining focus and effort on core business.

Taking a national quality standards based system and applying it to an institution as the quality framework for the business is challenging – the aim should be to utilise the system to assist the institution delivering quality outcomes but all too easily national standards can be viewed as external compliance requirements not directly related to improving quality and so they become 'in addition to' rather than 'part of' academic quality improvement mechanisms.

Example of VET implementation of AQTF 2001:

- initially angst about processes to be put in place that seemed time consuming for little benefit
- external consultants were engaged by some VET providers to install AQTF compliant systems for audit purposes
- early AQTF standards focussed very much on consistent inputs for every organisation, now moving towards an outputs focus and a fit for purpose mentality
- evidence began to emerge that these requirements could be utilised to improve processes and outcomes, more so for those who chose to use the system to drive continuous improvement not compliance

Implementation challenges will be many but will be eased by a well supported communication strategy and sufficient time and resources achieve an effective rather than cosmetic implementation.