

The Accountability for Quality Agenda in Higher Education

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Making sense of a new agenda in higher education policy

Preface for the dialogue with the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment

Governments in many countries exert pressures on universities to be more accountable for the results they manage to achieve with the resources available to them. A recently added twist, ironically within the context of falling government investment and rising student demand, is that governments are intruding into areas which have long been regarded as prerogatives of autonomous universities.

The accompanying paper has been prepared as a draft to focus discussion between Australian and British policy analysts in the first instance, and later with US counterparts. The main reason for a bilateral discussion initially is that there are three significant factors in common between the Australian and British higher education contexts.

First, there are commonalities in the structure and culture of universities in the UK and Australia.

Universities in both countries are primarily public institutions, which are assisted by the nation state through normative financing mechanisms, but rely increasingly on self-earned income from commercial operations and competitive sources. They have traditionally enjoyed, by comparison with public universities in continental Europe, the Americas and Asia, a relatively high level of autonomy, notably in respect of governance, revenue and expenditure, student admissions, academic and general staff appointments, curriculum, teaching, research, student assessment, and the award of qualifications.

Public universities in North America have many similar characteristics but they function within mixed public-private systems and where states or provinces, as distinct from national government, have the major financing responsibilities for teaching-related purposes.²

The Australian degree structure is (with some recent institution-specific exceptions) closer to British (in particular the Scottish undergraduate specialisation model) than North American or European models.

There are also similarities in the skills-based approach to vocational education and training, as distinct from the broader capability approach of the German and other European VET systems.

Additionally, both Australia and Britain have reduced supply diversity by collapsing former polytechnics into the university model, whereas structural differentiation continues to be a feature of European systems while there is great diversity among North American universities as well as between them and community colleges.

Second, in both countries there has been a longstanding convention of parity of esteem of higher education awards.

This convention is underpinned by normative supply-side funding, whereby all courses in similar disciplines are funded at the same rate across all institutions at least for domestic undergraduate and research higher degree students. The convention extends to equivalence in expectations of the capabilities of graduates of different institutions.

Both countries share the ambiguities and anomalies arising from the legacy policies of the elite era

2. In Australia, the federal government has assumed funding responsibility for higher education.

which continue to operate in the context of diversification of post-mass higher education supply and demand.

Third, in both countries there has been an increasing interest on the part of government in matters of higher education quality assurance and research quality verification. Indeed there are some shared policy and program features, reflecting regular interactions among policy makers and academic and professional staff between the two countries.

In continental Europe a strong rationale for focusing on higher education outputs and results has been the change in the approach to system steering from direct to indirect mechanisms, with greater institutional discretion over the use of resources.

In Australia and Britain the agenda is driven by other forces, viz. the enlargement and diversification of higher education demand and supply, and the changing nature of labour markets.

In Australia, the agenda is being driven by a number of different bodies and, apparently, from a number of different points of view. It is not clear whether the dots are joined between 'strengthening' the national qualifications framework and its descriptors, standards references, provider accreditation and re-accreditation, and academic performance reporting. There is no single authority with whom to converse.

In Britain, the new Coalition Government has indicated an interest in revisiting the higher education policy landscape, with an initial focus on graduate employability but its longer-term approach, in the context of fiscal parsimony, has yet to be clarified.

In both countries, the language as well as the agenda is unclear. Why is this agenda on the table? Who has put it there? What is it intended to achieve? How is it to be implemented? What actual impact might it have, positively and negatively?

This paper is intended to help make sense of what is happening and inform public debate to promote balanced outcomes.

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Introduction

Concurrently across several countries there is an interest in accounting for the quality of higher education³ through the exploration of a “standards-based approach” and a “focus on outcomes”. This relatively new “accountability for quality agenda” is ambitious and ambiguous. It brings together a concern for relevance, performance and transparency. It represents both a continuation of previous developments and a departure from some prior core tenets, in seeking to address changes in the role and character of higher education. It is being pursued primarily by governments and in ways that cut across the conventional responsibilities of higher education institutions themselves to validate the educational qualifications they award. Thus it involves tensions between political and professional perspectives, in an area where “by and large, academic standards are a matter of professional trust” (James, 2003) but the bases of trust have been eroded (van Vught et al., 2010).

This paper explores the forces driving this agenda, the range of public policy purposes related to it, and the options for universities in responding to it in ways that do not demean higher education and safeguard their substantive and operational autonomies.

The paper has particular regard to the Australian Government’s 2009 response to the Report of the Review of Australian Higher Education and the subsequent policy debate.⁴ It considers the Australian proposals for change in the context of policy directions identified by OECD Education Ministers at their 2006 meeting in Athens, the 2006 report of the Spellings Commission in the USA,⁵ and the 2009 report of the UK House of Commons Select Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills.⁶

The paper is organised into five parts. The first part outlines the dimensions of the emerging accountability for quality agenda: its scope and apparent purposes. The second part considers the declared and underlying drivers of policy change. The third part looks at various manifestations of the agenda in Europe, Britain, the USA and Australia. Part 4 discusses definitions of key concepts and debates about the issues, with reference to the scholarly literature. The final part explores ways forward by establishing common ground and reconciling differences between the higher education sector and government in designing an appropriate and workable framework for the advancement of quality in higher education.

This relatively new “accountability for quality agenda” is ambitious and ambiguous. It brings together a concern for relevance, performance and transparency.

3. Higher Education in this paper refers to all programs leading to diploma and degree qualifications at ISCED 5B, 5A and 6, regardless of the institutions or providers that offer them. There is contested ground between the Vocational Education and Training, and Higher Education sectors at the diploma levels.

4. Australian Government (2009), *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System*. Canberra.

5. US Department of Education (2006). *A test of leadership: Charting the future of American higher*. (Report of the Commission appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings). Washington. DC.

6. House of Commons, (2009) *Students and universities*, report of the Select Committee for Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee. London.