

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Bill(s) 2011

IRU Submission

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Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Bill(s) 2011: IRU submission

The IRU supports passage of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Bill(s) 2011 (TEQSA Bills).

The TEQSA Bills will create a national Agency which will have the lead role in implementing an effective national quality framework through three main elements:

- arrangements for the registration of higher education providers, including the recognition of Australia's current universities;
- arrangements for the accreditation of higher education qualifications which registered providers may deliver, including the accreditation of their own qualifications by universities and other providers with self accrediting powers; and
- the creation and operation of TEQSA to oversee the registration and accreditation arrangements.

Universities Australia has taken the lead for universities in working with the Government on the drafting of the current TEQSA Bills. In doing so UA has considered in detail the provisions of the Bills. The IRU fully supports UA's work in this regard. Hence in this submission we focus on two major issues which should guide the Senate Committee's deliberations:

1. the rationale for the creation of TEQSA; and
2. the place of universities within the quality framework and its reflection in the Bills.

1. Why TEQSA is needed

The TEQSA bills are an important part of the higher education reforms which the Government announced in 2009 following the 2008 Review of Higher Education (Bradley Review).¹ In accepting the bulk of the Bradley recommendations the Government put in train major changes in higher education to achieve a significant increase in the proportion of the population with higher education. Those changes involve funding all Australian students admitted to a place at a funded university backed by a national quality assurance framework to ensure that students are able to achieve learning outcomes of the required level.

The IRU supports the Government's plans to fund universities based on student enrolments at each university. As argued in the Bradley review it is important to ensure that there is public confidence that universities ensure a suitable standard of education for all students whom they enrol. There are potential concerns that some students may not be ready for university study or that they will not be supported to achieve suitable outcomes before a qualification is issued. The IRU does not consider this a major risk in reality for its members or other universities but accepts that the large number of students tied to the receipt of Government funding requires greater public certainty.

Beyond this the national framework is needed to oversee the growing HE sector that operates beyond Government funded provision, for Australian and as well as many international students. While universities will remain the dominant source of higher education the range of other providers

¹ Australian Government, *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report*, December 2008. Report prepared by Professor Denise Bradley, Mr Peter Noonan, Dr Helen Nugent and Mr Bill Scales.

is expected to expand and diversify. However, there have been too many examples of bad practice from non-university providers which has acted to the detriment of universities and other HE providers offering high quality higher education. It is essential that there be a consistent, effective, means to oversee the suite of HE providers. This includes universities which can no longer operate in isolation from the other HE providers.

IRU Universities also work with the HE regulatory bodies in their respective States to assist them in their current role to register HE providers and accredit their qualifications. There are nonetheless inconsistencies in the treatment across States which should be removed and a straightforward process for national registration introduced.

Hence there is need for a national approach that ensures due oversight of all higher education providers including universities.

The risk is that the creation of a common framework could apply too heavily to universities and other providers currently operating appropriately. The three principles for regulation of regulatory necessity, reflecting risk and proportionate regulation within which TEQSA must operate are essential to ensuring it finds the right balance in its operations between supporting public confidence in all providers and targeting its actions at those providers most likely to be at risk. The inclusion of the three principles is a major safeguard against TEQSA becoming a burden on universities and other low risk HE providers.

2. Reflecting universities in the quality framework and the Bills

Through their establishment Acts each university now has the power to issue qualifications based on its internal arrangements for ensuring that each qualification issued reflects a suitable standard of achievement by each student.

It is intended that this self accrediting power remain an integral part of being a university. However, the means by which this is proposed to be done does not give sufficient credence to the lead role that universities have in setting and adjusting the standards required of higher education qualifications. It is not sufficient that it be covered through the criteria for a university laid down in the proposed provider standards.

It is important to remember that the standard which the State regulators currently use to determine whether qualifications should be accredited in non self accrediting institutions is a benchmark of a university qualification of the same level and field. This benchmark will be the basis for the accreditation process that TEQSA will use, and continue to be that which universities and any other organisation granted self-accrediting powers will use.

That benchmark has changed over time as university expectations from graduates in particular fields has developed in response to societal, professional and business expectations of graduates. Universities have controlled that development to ensure that appropriate standards are maintained.

A major challenge for TEQSA will be to ensure its standards for accreditation remain alive to changes in expectations of qualifications through continued dialogue with universities and other providers. If it does not, universities could be held back from innovation in design and delivery in response to future needs not yet perceived or understood.

Spelling out the self accrediting powers which universities hold in the main TEQSA bill will provide the balance required to recognise the ongoing role that universities should have in leading the

development of HE and reduce the potential for the national framework as expressed through the various standards to become static and outdated.

3. IRU recommendations

The IRU recommends that the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee support passage of the TEQSA bills subject to the amendment proposed below.

The IRU recommends that *The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Bill 2011* be amended to state universities' power to self-accredit the qualifications they issue and list the institutions approved to use the title of university.