

Higher Education in Transformation

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Challenges in the New Millenium

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Michael Gallagher¹

Head, Higher Education Division

Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs

Canberra. Australia.

¹ The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Department nor the Australian Government. Peter Nicholson, Margot Bell, David McCann, Margaret Pearce and Julie Randell made helpful contributions to the paper.

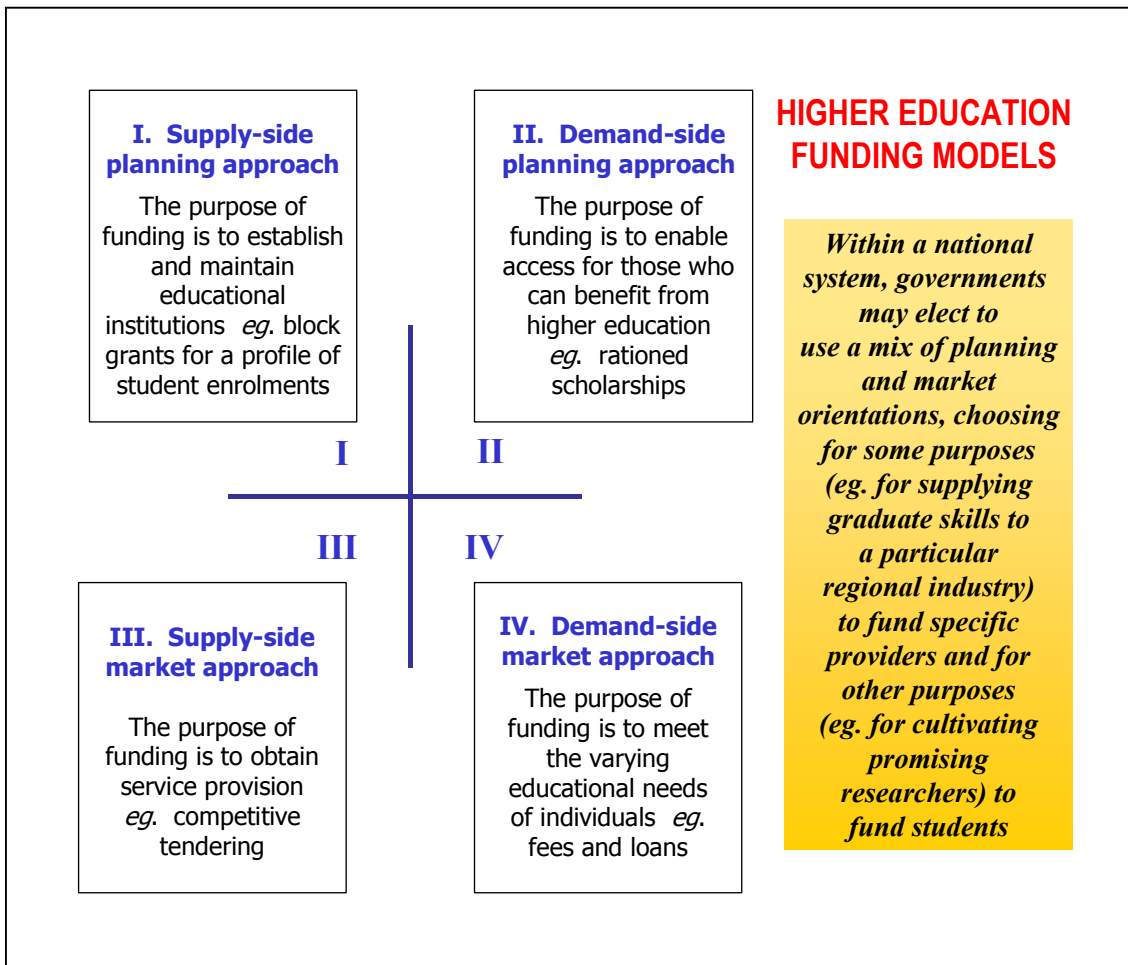
This paper focusses on some aspects of the diversification of higher education supply.

In countries like Australia and in many nation states of Europe, higher education policy has been conceived primarily if not exclusively as relating to the governance, financing and accountability of public universities. In contrast, in many Asian countries, higher education has been seen to encompass all post-school vocational, technical and professional education and training delivered by public and private institutions.

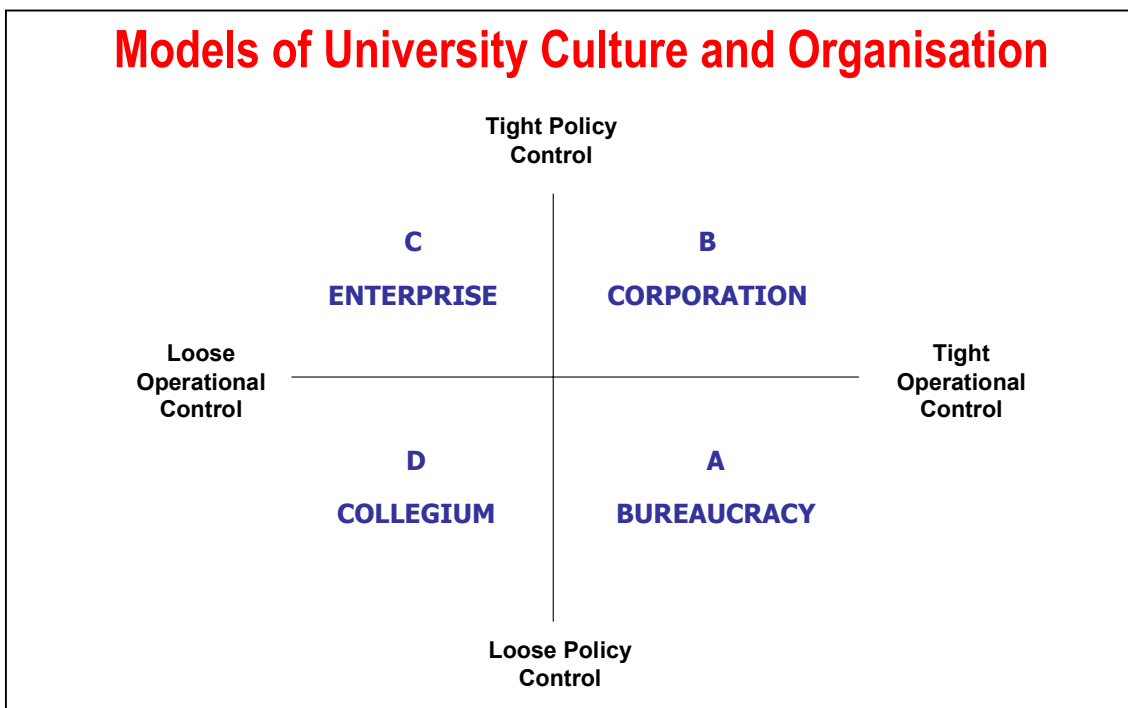
Universities have largely proved resilient to changing pressures to date, with some more adaptable than others. However, far-reaching changes are emerging which will not only challenge the capabilities of universities themselves but also require clarification of public expectations of their role and call into question the sustainability of long-established social protection policies for them as institutions.

Increasing contestability in the field of education – being driven by fiscal policy imperatives, the emergence of new forms of supply and changes in manifestations of demand in the new global knowledge economy—is transforming higher education in advanced economies. The focus of public policy will have to broaden beyond concern about universities (whether public, private or hybrid) and to comprehend the accelerating diversity of providers and the variety of arrangements (physical and virtual) for accessing education and training opportunities (in various ways, places and times) beyond the compulsory schooling years and across the barriers of national policies and regimens.

Enabling access, from mass to universal participation, becomes a greater concern to higher education systems development than establishing supply. That implies either a radical shift in the orientation of financing policy for higher education from the supply to the demand side (see Diagram 1), with attendant new forms of quality assurance and consumer protection, or the assertion of stronger central controls and accountabilities over both public and private higher education institutions. And to the extent that the operations of higher education providers cross national arrangements, there is a need to establish or revise international protocols regarding award standards and the equivalence of qualifications. Where that cannot be satisfactorily achieved we may see more systematic reliance on direct assessment of learning outcomes as a means of verifying individual suitability for education and employment.



Universities as organisations can be seen generally to have both collegial and bureaucratic characteristics. Some have been moving to more corporate forms, driven in part by government policy requirements. However, the enterprise form may be more appropriate for some universities in the future (see Diagram 2).



Models of University Culture and Organisation (cont.)

Quadrant C: ENTERPRISE

- strong strategic direction
- devolved operational responsibilities
- broad room for internal units to operate flexibly
- emphasis on outcomes and business success

Quadrant B: CORPORATION

- strong central policy direction
- intrusive control of operational detail
- emphasis on planning and performance reporting

Quadrant D: COLLEGIUM

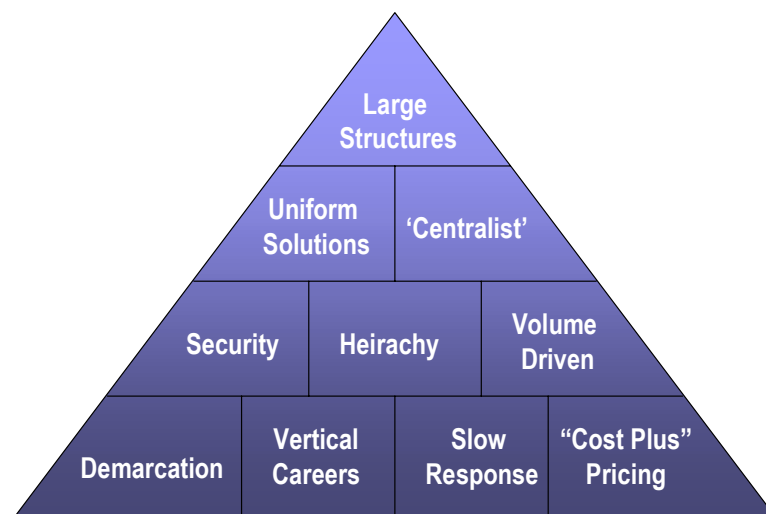
- weak central policy and operational control
- operational powers retained by internal units
- emphasis on consultative processes and peer review

Quadrant A: BUREAUCRACY

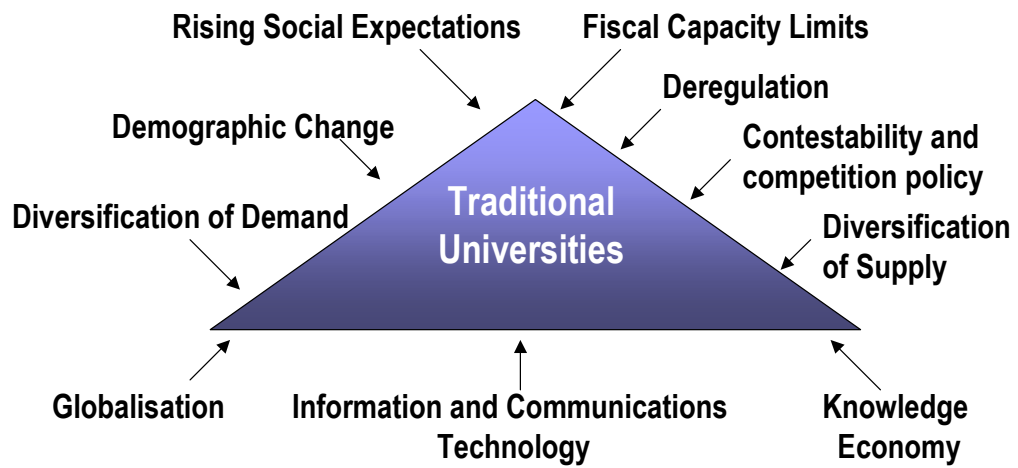
- weak central policy direction
- strong control of administrative detail at various levels
- emphasis on regulations, standardisation, precedent, risk aversion

A strength of the collegial form is its devolution of responsibilities. Its main problems are an inherent difficulty in making decisions. When compounded by industrial rigidities and bureaucratic processes, the old-economy university lacks the flexibility needed to function competitively in the new environment.

Old world Organisation – Old World Economy



The change forcefield



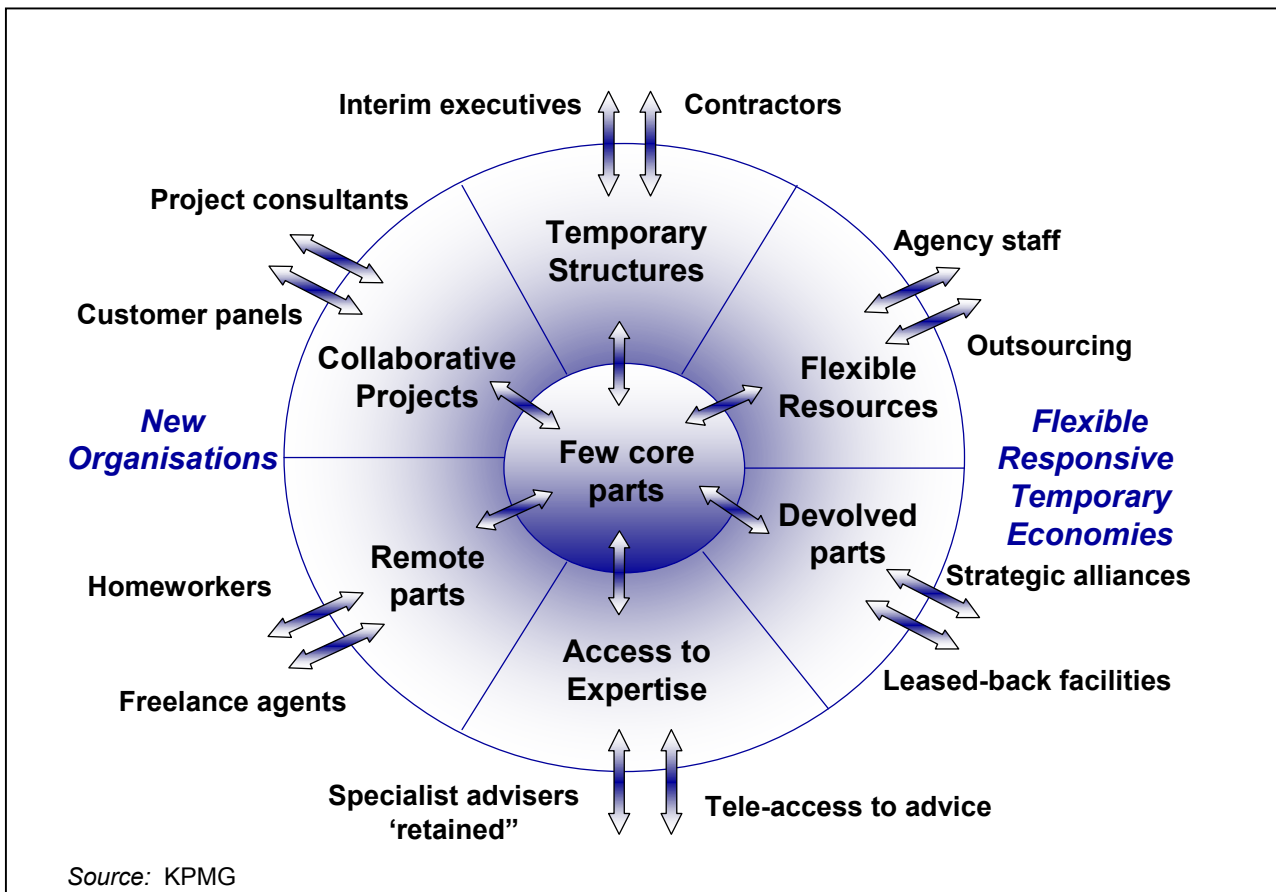
“Already the office blocks of our cities are being turned into apartments as their previous inhabitants find it too expensive to keep an asset available for 168 hours a week and yet have most of their people doing their work elsewhere – on the train, in the plane, with the client, in their homes, or an assignment.

More importantly, organisations no longer feel that they have to own all the people needed to get the work done, let alone have them where they can see them. Partnerships, outsourcing, flexible labor and interim managers are a way of keeping risks within bounds and of exporting the slack needed to cope with the peaks or the emergencies.

...Power, in the new organisations, comes from relationships, not from structures. ”

Handy, C. (1997)

Modern consulting firms, that function in the knowledge business in similar ways to universities, are becoming more fluidly organised. For universities to shift to such a form would require profound changes to culture and practice, governance, industrial relations and management systems. However, it is the more flexible organisations that are taking the large share of the emerging new market in education.



Developments in the supply of higher education

Australian universities are built on long standing funding models, traditional patterns of demand for on-campus or distance education provision, traditional pedagogy which relies on lectures and tutorials, access to on-campus teaching and learning resources such as libraries and collections and often extensive research programs.

Conventional higher education institutions in Australia

Public

- **Comprehensive universities – broad range of disciplines, teaching and research (eg University of Sydney)**
- **Regional universities (eg Southern Cross University)**
- **Technology universities (eg Swinburne University of Technology)**
- **Distance education universities (eg Charles Sturt University)**
- **Specialist colleges (eg Australian Maritime College)**

Private

- **Bond University and the University of Notre Dame**
- **Other specialist private providers (eg colleges of theology)**

Newer higher education providers in Australia

- **Corporate arms of traditional universities (eg Deakin Australia)**
- **Professional associations (eg APESMA)**
- **International consortia of universities (eg The Global University Alliance)**
- **International consortia of universities with business alliances (eg Universitas 21 and Thomson Learning)**
- **National broker of university courses (eg the OLA)**
- **Corporate ‘universities’ (eg The Coles Institute)**
- **For-profit ‘universities’ (The Russo Institute)**
- **Virtual universities (eg USQ On-line)**
- **Consortia of content specialists and universities (no Australian example as yet but Fathom.com in the US and UK)**

This traditional view of a university is being challenged by the emergence of other models of provision. Our commissioned and in-house research has revealed a raft of new players in the higher education market place frequently, but not always, utilising new technologies to provide their delivery platforms.

We commissioned two studies into the convergence of new media and education and the development of corporate, virtual and for-profit universities (Cunningham, et al 1998 and 2000). From those and other reports a baker's dozen key features of the corporate, for-profit and virtual university movement can be identified. It's a mix of best practice with caveats. It excludes features of disreputable operators. Several of the attractive features of the new providers are attainable, given some important parameter shifts, by established Australian institutions, and some of the developments of potential concern may well be influenced by action on the part of consumers, competitors or regulators.

Features of new supplies

- **Borderlessness**
- **'earner-learner' focus**
- **Convenience**
- **Customisation**
- **Integration**
- **Application orientation**
- **Practitioner teachers**
- **Structured off-the-job and on-the-job training**
- **Modularisation**
- **Diverse modes of delivery**
- **Quality assurance**
- **Disaggregation/specialisation**
- **Education as business**

1. Borderlessness

Borderless higher education may be defined as encompassing developments which cross (or have the potential to cross) the traditional boundaries of higher education, whether geographical, sectoral or conceptual. It has been initially driven by the staff training needs of multi-national corporations, with some corporate universities extending into the wider business of private for-profit education. Insofar as it embraces lifelong learning needs of individuals, it spans a range of formal and non-formal activities in post-compulsory education and training and continuing professional development as well as on-the-job training. To the extent that it is virtual, its borderlessness can evade national accreditation/quality regimes.

2. “earner-learner” focus

The growing segmentation in the education market involves new providers targeting the lifelong learning cohort (25 years and over). Earner-learners want job-relevant courses to suit their needs, whether for continuing professional registration, advancement in their job or change of job.

3. Convenience

Time-poor “earner-learners” seek convenient services. Providers serving them offer what they need, when they need it and where it suits them, through, for example, “Just-in-time” training packages for immediate relevance (as distinct from “Just-in-case” acquisition of knowledge), learning centres close to work, classes offered between 6 – 9.30pm in three 4-hour sessions and over weekends, compressed terms offered continuously throughout the year, and on-line services available around the clock around the world (7/24).

4. Customisation

Providers focus on tailoring courses to fit the specific needs and circumstances of their clients. For the most part, the clients are enterprises and the customisation is designed more to serve the purposes of employers. However, the new information and communications technologies are enabling personal customisation on a mass scale. Customisation can also mean addressing cultural expectations. For example, some Australian universities are offering courses in languages other than English (e.g. Mandarin) UWA.

5. Integration

The majority of US corporate Us are reported to concentrate on sharpening the competitive edge of their own companies through improved individual and group performance. A few make a service product out of this investment and sell it to others, mainly those in its supply chain and its customers, but also to other corporations and the general public. Integration is the key strategy in the new economy, where business to business learning dominates the market of e-learning in the US and Europe, with leading companies being built through cooperation rather than competition. So we see convergence across industry sectors and partnerships among rivals including public and private education providers, communications corporations, technology companies and publishing enterprises, and professional and industry associations.

6. Application orientation

Practical, performative learning is what is valued rather than theory. Tacit knowledge or *know-how* is also valued, concentrating not only on operational procedures including the use of new technology but also on the so-called ‘soft skills’ of effective interpersonal relations for management and team work, negotiating, communicating, practical problem solving, identifying risks and opportunities, and strategic thinking.

7. Practitioner-as-teacher

Practising full-time professionals are typically engaged by the best practice providers to bring their expertise to the classroom in a part-time capacity. This practice reflects the application-orientation of the knowledge being transferred. The teacher-student relationship is based on a practitioner-participant model, with faculty viewed by students (and perceiving themselves) as facilitators rather than instructors.

8. Structured off-the-job AND on-the-job training

Not only is structured, off-the-job training more attuned to corporate requirements but also the organisation of on-the-job training is less incidental, more outcomes-based, and more closely aligned with business needs. Corporates take a more strategic view of learning on the job, to build the intellectual capital of the organisation.

9. Modularisation

Learning in bite-sized bits is the main menu. Modules can be competence-based, articulated sequences which can be constructed into a coherent program. Learners can also cocktail their own courses from multiple sources in their own sequences and accumulate them towards a longer program.

10. Diversified modes

The best practitioners have hi-tech and hi-touch. They combine virtual with personal ways of teaching and use mixed mode delivery, including synchronous and asynchronous on-line, delivery via satellite video, self-instructional tools, and face-to-face teaching and discussion groups, especially for the “soft skills”.

11. Quality

The operations of best practice corporate Us and for profits are professional, driven by a focus on students as customers. Class sizes are small. Considerable time and money is spent on making as seamless as possible the transition from the work environment to the classroom. Quality Assurance processes are built into every step of the education process from first inquiry to graduation. All processes are systematically structured and designed to be evaluated against clearly defined objectives and expected outcomes. There is a commitment to the professionalisation of teaching. Teacher training, even though it may be only for a week, is mandatory. Teaching performance is directly monitored.

12. Disaggregation

Horizontal and vertical disaggregation of the functions of traditional tertiary education institutions is another distinguishing feature of the new wave providers. On the horizontal dimension, the new providers focus only on teaching and learning, without the overheads associated with the support of the research and community service functions of conventional universities. They specialise in a limited range of relevant course offerings and do not sustain the library and amenities infrastructure of campus-based providers. On the vertical dimension, the new providers separate the functions of course design, curriculum development, teaching, student feedback, assessment and other customer services, such as for enrolment, course change, credit transfer and enquiries. This “unbundling”, reducing indirect costs, involves part-time and casual engagement of staff and alliances with other service providers, and enables economy of scale and flexibility benefits to be realised.

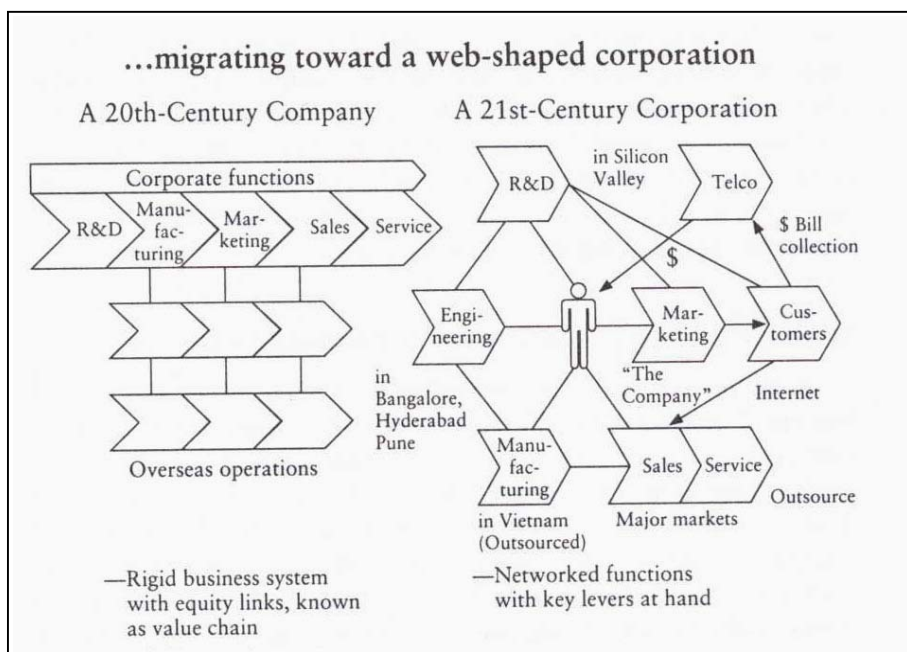
13. Education as business

The 13th feature, the dough that makes the profit for the baker, is the commercialisation and commodification of education. For the corporate university the overall objective is the survival and growth of the firm. For the proprietary university, the object of learning is the customer who creates shareholder value.

The number of corporate universities in the US will soon outnumber traditional universities. While the use of the term ‘university’ is restricted in Australia there are nevertheless an increasing number of ‘institutes’ which operate in much the same way. Examples include the Coles Institute, Deakin Corrs Schneider and the QANTAS College Online. In addition, many professional associations are establishing a broad range of professional development programs, some of which lead to fully accredited awards. For example, APESMA is currently working with other professional and industry bodies to establish a university for business and industry to offer fully accredited, industry relevant courses.

US trends show that the corporate sector is increasingly interested in education and training as a means of achieving competitive advantage. In its more sophisticated form this leads to examples of supply chain education and training where provision is extended beyond the corporation to suppliers, distributors, retailers and even customers. While much of the provision may be short-term training, it often extends to accredited award courses. These trends are also evident in Australia.

Another development is the purpose built for-profit university or institute built on a business, rather than an academic model. Increasingly, such organisations seek to reduce costs and improve efficiencies by unbundling their products and services. Instead of one company trying to cover all aspects of education and training provision, a market has emerged for providers who are specialising in segments of provision, for example in the provision of courseware for e-learning or the provision of educational testing. They form relationships, networks and alliances with other companies to complete a chain of provision. These relationships are not necessarily permanent or fixed in their location and the overall model parallels the emerging twenty first century corporate models. The following diagram (Ohmae, 2000) shows the evolution of prevailing corporate structures and relationships and these structures are increasingly being adopted by entrepreneurial education and training providers.



Another form of provider is illustrated by those companies that provide training for individuals to complete company certified training. These certification systems are for the most part IT-related, eg Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer, Cisco Certified Internetworking Expert, Sun Certified Architect, Master of Network Science (3Com), and so on, but they are not limited to the IT

industry. Examinations, certification and accreditation of training providers, are conducted by the companies or professional associations.

Some certificates function like degrees and are the minimum standard for entry to certain jobs. While for the most part these certificates are not accredited by recognised accreditation agencies labour market mobility is facilitated, as certification is linked to corporate products and portable throughout the world. Because these are private organisations, nobody knows how many certificates have been issued, but educated guesses suggest over 2 million. Thus this is a huge and growing market. An American study last year of the proliferation of IT certifications (Adelman, 2000) found more than 300 of these certifications compared with only a handful in 1990. With hundreds of thousands of individuals taking these courses at any one time, this is a clear indication of a vast new educational enterprise that has developed largely outside traditional educational institutions. The US study refers to this as a “parallel postsecondary universe”.

Implications for the structure of higher education

The purposes of the corporate, virtual and for-profit universities and institutes differ fundamentally from those of traditional not-for-profit universities, especially public institutions, whose role is valued for its diverse social contributions to the individual learning of students for personal fulfilment, for effective participation in the workforce and for constructive contribution to society, and also for the advancement of knowledge and understanding.

It is not obvious that the new forms will replace the old but rather complement them while causing the old ones to transform themselves or risk being locked out of the growing and more lucrative (earner-learner) sectors of the new knowledge market domestically and internationally. Some Australian universities appear to be wanting the best of the old and the new worlds by investing in high quality university campus facilities and services for teaching and research, and partnering in more flexible ways with others in various markets as a means of resourcing their campus investments. A few are making their core investment in the expertise and technology for e-learning to such an extent that the campus becomes peripheral.

(Gilbert, 2000) suggest that well targeted markets will pay a premium for prestigiously branded content, delivered through high quality communications media, with learning accredited by all members of a quality-assured global consortium of esteemed universities. (Hilsberg,2000) argues that universities remaining as vertically-integrated institutions will give way to globally distributed provider consortia because they will not be able to compete on quality, convenience or price. Hilsberg argues that with a proliferation of educational content providers, commercial value is to be found in the packaging of services. Reputably-branded content can be delivered in large scale at marginal costs (and attract advertising/sponsorship revenue in the process), with customised services as buyable extras. The costs involved in course design and formatting, development of learning resources (and their maintenance and updating), organisation of chat groups, responding to student inquiries, marking of assignments, etc. can be reduced through a variety of strategies. These include, for example, arranging for the learners to give feedback to each other, engaging tutors and markers from low cost locations. Upfront costs associated with the development of on-line courses are often regarded as high fixed costs however new technologies will enable content to be re-used or repurposed at much reduced cost.

By necessity, Australia has a long and widely recognised tradition of distance education, and for many years there has been a debate about the relative efficacy of distance versus on-campus education. This is no longer an issue and today, in Australia, the very same quality assurance

processes apply equally to all university courses regardless of their mode of delivery. Because of this, the move to online courses has been less problematical than in other countries.

We acknowledge that in many Asian cultures, there is a high degree of importance placed on the close relationship between the teacher and the student. The importance of teacher-lead instruction and learning is equally important in Australia – but it has taken on a different dimension with the advent of the Internet.

While the Internet enables students to access a huge range of general and expert information, the role of the teacher is changing to that of a learning facilitator. Lecturers still teach, conduct tutorials and advise students, however this may be conducted not only face-to-face but also using the full range of Internet technologies. Some students prefer such courses as the rich instructional media better facilitates learning, and they report that they get better attention from the instructor and are able to access a wider range of views from students around the world.

We see the development of web-enabled courses as bringing the best of both worlds together to improve the quality of the learning experience for the student. In recognition of these gains in quality, Australian universities offer many web-enabled courses to on-campus as well as external students.

Debate continues in Australia as elsewhere as to the possible directions of all these developments. Some have yet to be convinced that simulation and non-personal contact modes are effective forms of learning, and for some, even more effective than conventional modes of contact. Many are not convinced that even if quality is enhanced that costs will fall and some see many hidden costs, including longer hours for staff engaged in facilitating on-line learning. Most continue to believe in the value of “the campus experience”, especially where the campus is research intensive. And the “not-invented-here” syndrome persists, with academics preferring the courses they design to someone else’s (however small the enrolments). At the same time, staff are seeking intellectual property rights over the courses and learning materials they prepare for on-line use.

We are also grappling with the total shape of the new forms of provision. Even within Australia’s public higher education system there is increasing diversification in the composition of the student body, the range and structure of educational programs, modes of teaching, concentration of research, links with industries and regions, staffing structures and conditions, and sources of income. Research and consultancy services are being offered by institutions not traditionally included in the higher education sector, such as professional associations and industry bodies. There are many small-scale, niche providers of higher education programs, with some 86 identified in 1999 catering for over 31,000 students in over 200 courses of study (Watson, 1999). There is a blurring of the boundaries between the schooling, vocational education and training and higher education sectors, with higher education programs provided by the other sectors and some providers being multi-sectoral. The boundaries are also blurring between public and private institutions as well as between education, entertainment and other media.

In sum:

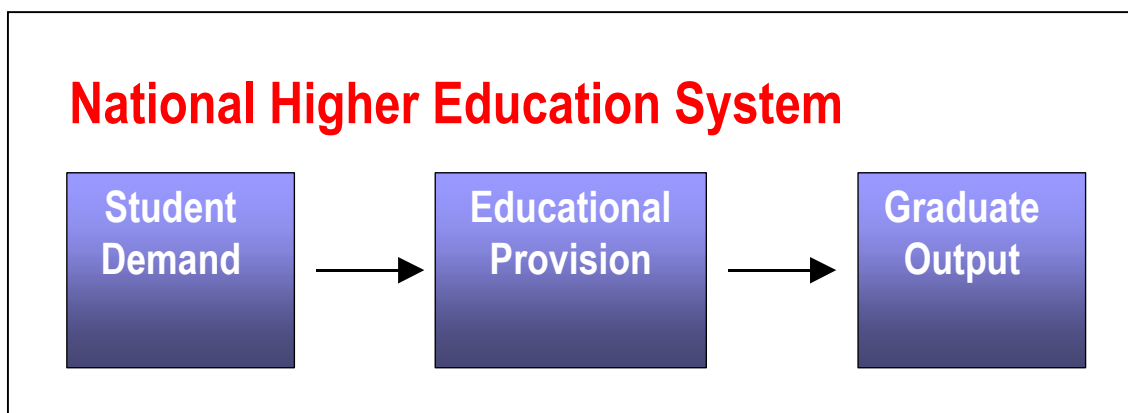
- knowledge is now at the centre of the economic system but this does not simply mean that established education providers will necessarily expand.
- universities no longer enjoy a monopoly in teaching and research, knowledge generation and dissemination.
- universities no longer enjoy a monopoly over issuing of degrees and other qualifications.
- New educational products are being offered by new providers operating flexibly to meet emerging needs that look likely to increasingly challenge universities in terms of quality, convenience, relevance and price.

“Mass higher education is being expected to proceed via an institutional structure designed for elite higher education.

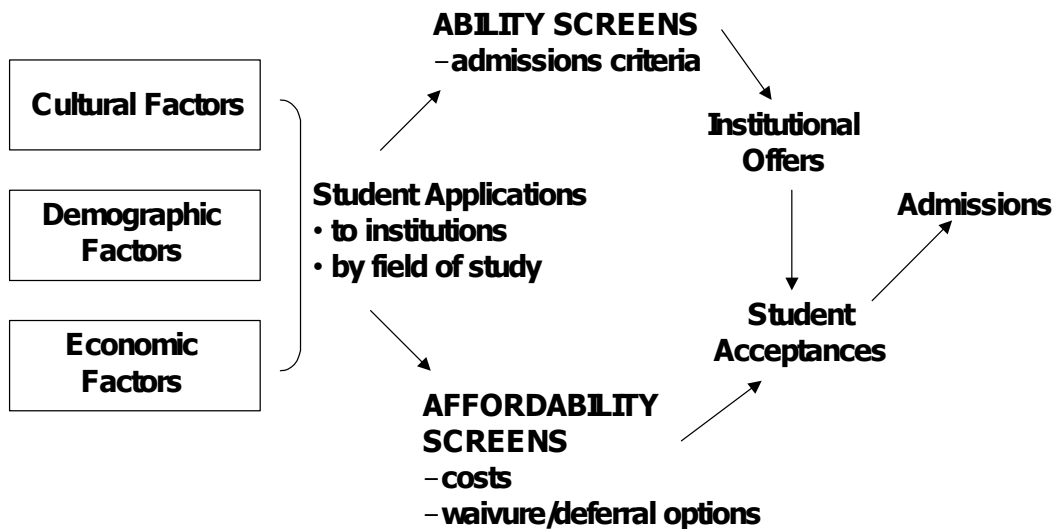
The HE sector is caught between a government imperative to expand HE in order to sustain a globally competitive economy on the one hand, and an equally important government imperative to limit public expenditure on the other. Universities have not been able to develop a true market for higher education, nor have they been encouraged to restructure the sector to meet the globally competitive challenges.”

Newby,H. (1999)

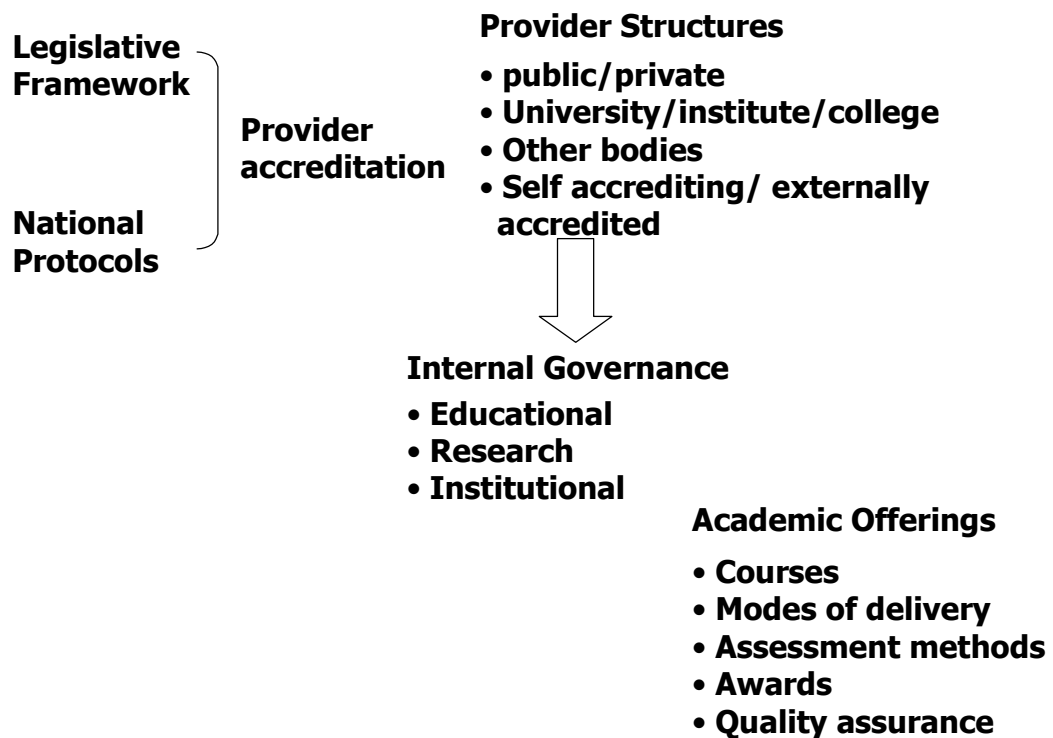
The conventional approach to educational system planning focusses on the structure of institutions to provide a given scale of enrolments to produce a projected level of graduates to meet labour requirements. The labour requirements forecasting approach has not been followed in Australia in respect of higher education for over a decade because of the inaccuracies of central predictions. Rather, the system has been driven more by student choice of field of study within a scale of enrolment that the Government is prepared to subsidise. A generalised model is illustrated in Diagrams 5 – 9. The main feature of this model is the neutral treatment of providers that meet national accreditation requirements.



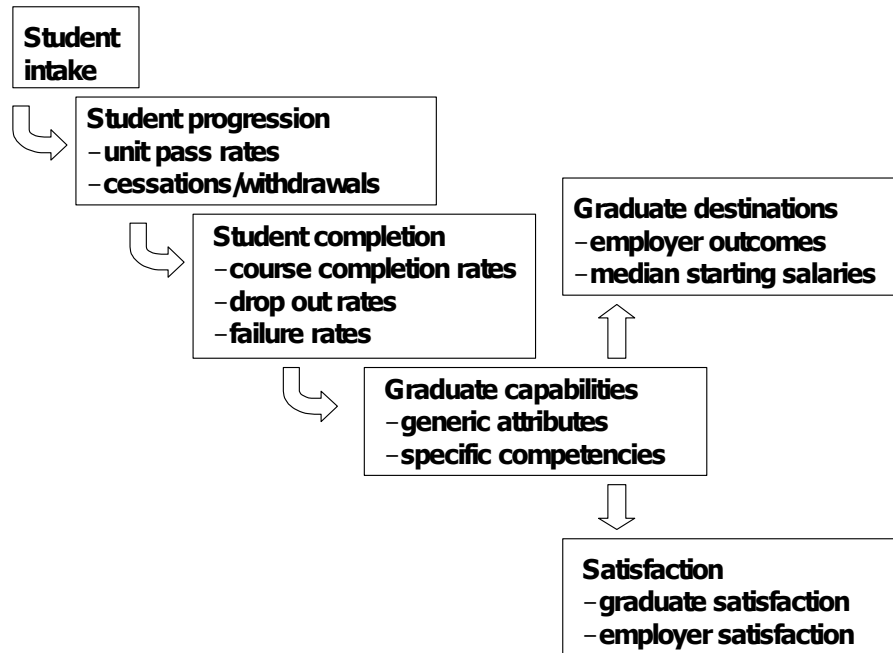
National Higher Education System – Student Demand



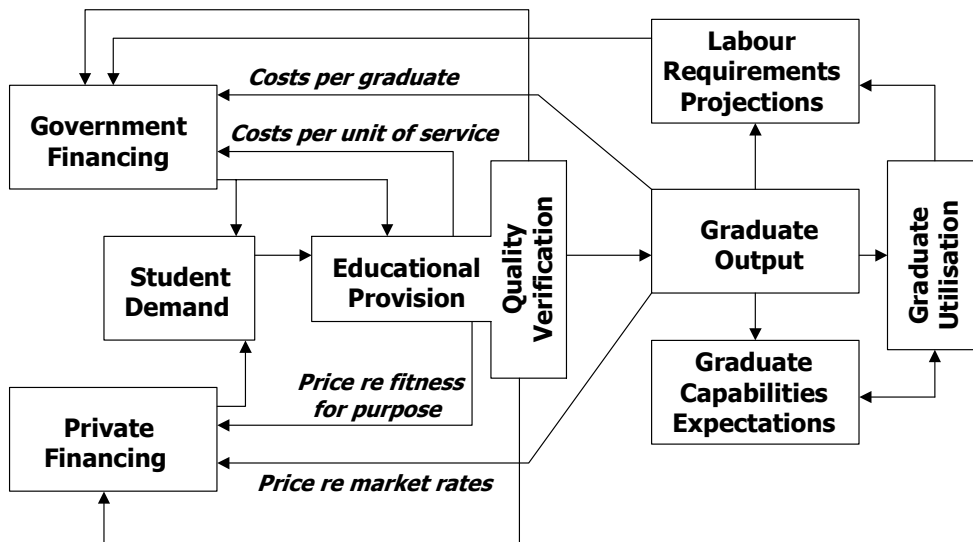
National Higher Education System - Educational Provision



National Higher Education System - Graduate Output



National Higher Education System - planning and accountability overlays



Quality and Recognition issues

The institutional framework for higher education quality assurance in Australia is one that could be described as a series of checks and balances, with responsibilities spread among a range of players. The aim of this rigorous framework is the protection of the reputation of the Australian higher education sector, as well as the protection of national and international students studying at Australian institutions.

Central responsibility rests with the universities which are established as autonomous bodies by legislation, but this is within a robust framework set by Commonwealth and State Governments. This framework includes the protection of key terms such as ‘university’ by companies and business names legislation and the Australian Qualifications Framework that provides a structure for Australian awards and maintains registers of approved higher education providers and courses. Governments have recently implemented an additional layer of protection with the adoption of accreditation protocols and the establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency.

There is no obvious order in which the various elements of the framework should be discussed. However, we start with universities which are clearly at the centre of the higher education quality assurance framework. We then talk about the roles of the States, the Commonwealth and the two bodies set up by Australian Governments: the Australian Qualifications Framework and the Australian Universities Quality Agency.

Universities

Australian universities are established under Commonwealth, State or Territory legislation. The Acts set out their functions and powers. They have the authority to accredit their own programmes, and have primary responsibility for their own academic standards as well as the quality assurance processes that underpin them. The capacity to responsibly exercise this authority is among the criteria for recognition as a university in Australia.

The relevant legislation vests responsibility for governance and management in a governing body in the form of a Council or Senate, which is accountable to the Federal, State or Territory Government. The governing bodies are generally composed of the Chancellor, senior academics including the Chair of the Academic Board, as well as external members, government appointees and staff and student representatives. They are answerable in a formal sense to the relevant State, Territory or Commonwealth Parliament and are subject to Auditors-General and Ombudsmen.

Responsibility for quality assurance is based on the functions and powers detailed in the establishment legislation. The university council and its subsidiary committees are responsible for the academic and administrative processes of the university. Quality in the areas of admissions, teaching, learning and assessment is overseen by the body with responsibility for academic matters, generally the Academic Board. There are processes to assess new course proposals and to monitor and evaluate course curriculum on a continuous basis, including regular evaluation of student feedback. Normally courses are subject to review on a five yearly basis.

State and Territory Governments

Australian State and Territory Governments have a number of responsibilities in respect of quality assurance in higher education. These responsibilities were standardised by the *National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes* that were endorsed by Australian Education Ministers in March 2000. In brief, the States and Territories are responsible for the recognition of new universities and accreditation of higher education courses, monitoring delivery arrangements for higher education courses offered through other organisations, the operation of overseas higher education institutions in Australia, and the endorsement of higher education courses for overseas students.

Commonwealth Government

The Commonwealth Government, through the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, plays a key role in the quality assurance framework. It monitors and publishes performance data, and provides the sector with a range of tools, incentives and programmes to enhance the quality of outcomes. Government funding for higher education is provided under the *Higher Education Funding Act 1988*. Integral is the accountability framework under that Act. As established under the Act, publicly funded institutions must annually submit an 'educational profile' to the Commonwealth that outlines their strategies to achieve outcomes in a variety of key areas, information regarding previous and projected student load, as well as a detailed financial report. A condition of receipt of operating funding is that institutions must spend financial assistance received only in accordance with the educational profile provided to the Commonwealth.

Protection of international students

The Commonwealth seeks to protect international students studying in Australia, and is currently in the process of developing a *National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students*. The Code seeks to provide a nationally consistent and legally enforceable framework for the registration of providers of education and training to overseas students on the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students.

The *National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes* that were agreed to by Australian education Ministers last year make it clear that any body issuing a qualification must take responsibility for the education leading to that qualification. Thus, for example, in the case where an Australian university or other self-accrediting institution operates in a distant location, the governing body of the institution is responsible for quality assurance and will be subject to audit by the Australian Universities Quality Agency.

For overseas campuses the institution is expected to maintain standards at least equivalent to those upheld in Australia regardless of any specific requirements of overseas governments. Similarly, universities are also expected to assure the standards of courses provided through franchising and other arrangements in which the university is not directly delivering the course. Where there are serious concerns about the quality of delivery the arrangements may be subject to review by State or Territory Governments.

Australian Qualifications Framework

The AQF was established by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs in 1995 to provide for the national articulation of awards offered in the Australian vocational education and training and higher education sectors. Bachelor, masters and doctoral degrees, and the awards of graduate certificate and graduate diploma are protected. This means that

courses leading to these awards must meet certain criteria – ensuring that all university and non-university higher education awards across Australia are of a similar standard.

The AQF also maintains a public register of Council endorsed higher education providers and accreditation authorities. This register can be found at the website referred to above. The higher education institutions and accreditation authorities on the AQF registers have the full endorsement of Australian Education Ministers represented on the Council and as such, the list protects the integrity of Australian higher education. In other words, any institutions not on the register claiming to be a university, or any private provider of courses not accredited by a state accreditation authority on the register, have no official backing and it is a case of ‘buyer beware’ for any prospective students. The AQF is also currently discussing the idea of developing a register of overseas higher education providers that have been approved to operate within the Australian states and territories.

Australian Universities Quality Agency

Across the globe universities and governments are recognising the benefits of having a means of independently verifying their higher education quality assurance arrangements. In Australia the establishment of the AUQA was endorsed by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs in March 2000. The agency is an independent national body that will monitor, audit, and report on quality assurance in Australian higher education.

The agency is responsible for:

- conducting quality audits of self-accrediting institutions and State and Territory accreditation authorities on a five yearly basis;
- providing public reports revealing the outcomes of these audits;
- reporting on the criteria for the accreditation of new universities and non-university higher education awards, as a result of information obtained during the audits of institutions and State and Territory accreditation processes; and
- reporting on the relative standards and international standing of the Australian higher education system and its quality assurance processes, as a result of information obtained during the audit process.

The audits undertaken of self-accrediting universities will assess the adequacy of each institution’s quality assurance processes in the key areas of teaching and learning, research and management. The audits will focus on the institution’s internal mechanisms to assure high academic standards for all students, and will scrutinise the processes that are in place to investigate allegations in relation to academic standards.

The audits will be based on an initial self-assessment by the institution, followed by a site visit by the audit team. The Agency will make use of panels of experts with substantial senior academic and administrative experience in higher education to undertake the audits. The audits will not be overly burdensome on universities and the Agency will pay particular attention to maintaining the diversity of the higher education sector.

The agency has recently appointed a Chair (Professor David Beanland) and an Executive Director (Dr David Woodhouse), and is ready to commence work on its audit methodologies. The agency aims to have completed a trial audit by the end of 2001 and to commence the first round o

Some important aspects of this framework are:

- The quality of an Australian award of a given institution should be the same regardless of where the course is delivered, whether in Australia or overseas.
- The quality of an Australian award of a given institution should be the same regardless of the mode of its delivery, whether through class contact or virtually, on a campus or elsewhere.
- The assessment standards for an Australian award should be the same for all students no matter where or how they undertake their studies.
- The policies, procedures and outcomes of Australian institutions awarding qualifications will be subject to periodic external audit.

At present, certificates issued on the basis of company certified training do not fall within the Australian Qualifications Framework. Yet these certificates have global currency and international conventions may require countries where such certificates are issued to indicate their standing and equivalence. There are also some cross-over arrangements whereby such training is embedded with AQF qualifications. The new quality audit processes can be expected to consider those arrangements. Similarly, the offerings of consortium partners that contribute to the award of an Australian qualification, whether quality-assured through another nation's procedures or non-government arrangements will still be subject to verification by Australian authorities that they meet Australian standards. Inter-governmental agreements may need to be established to facilitate such verification. Particular consideration will need to be given to arrangements relating to the mutual recognition of e-qualifications.

The quality assurance framework needs to be robust in accommodating the diversification of higher education suppliers to protect the integrity of the national system while enabling wider choice for students in their access to higher education.

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The *National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes* can be found on the DETYA website at http://www.detya.gov.au/highered/mceetya_cop.htm

Award descriptors can be found on the website of the Australian Qualifications Framework, at <http://www.aqf.edu.au/>

More information on the AQF, including its public registers, can be found on their website at <http://www.aqf.edu.au/>

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