

## TEQSA 2012 Provider Information Request: IRU comments

Universities Australia is co-ordinating a university wide detailed response to the TEQSA consultation paper *2012 Provider Information Request*. The Innovative Research Universities support and endorse the UA response.

In these comments the IRU focuses on the implications of the consultation paper's proposals for the adherence of TEQSA to the broader policy settings originating in the 2008 Review of Higher Education (Bradley Report), which, as endorsed by Government, are supporting a major shift in the size and nature of Government support higher education in Australia.

The comments address four issues:

- ensuring that universities and other higher education providers are not constrained from continuing to develop the nature of higher education learning and teaching and research through use of normalised assumptions of correct process;
- an effective mechanism for universities and other higher education providers to transmit the large array of data Government requires concerning the major activities of higher education providers (students, research, and qualifications) and the major inputs supporting those activities (staffing, facilities, Governance and finances);
- the pre-emptive requirements concerning the collection of data about student learning outcomes; and
- indications of TEQSA going beyond its core roles to the detriment of its essential functions and consequently to the effectiveness of the sector as a whole.

### ***Standards, normalisation and differentiation***

The creation of a national standards and quality body is an important element of the introduction of demand driven funding. In allowing universities to expand to meet demand some external surety that students continue to achieve suitable outcomes is required.

The major risk from creating a body such as TEQSA is that it freezes development of higher education by constraining providers within the parameters of the normal. To be effective, TEQSA has to give primacy to the outcomes each provider demonstrates over investigation of whether the processes each uses align with those used elsewhere. It needs to be actively receptive to changes in how higher education is delivered and supportive of differentiation across universities and between universities and other higher education providers. If not, it could undermine important aspects of a demand responsive system.

Hence, in the lead up to its creation TEQSA's creation IRU was supportive of statements that TEQSA would make judgements based on the evidence before it, giving providers scope to demonstrate that what they were delivering was of the standard needed. While clear that TEQSA has moved well beyond a "tick a box" emphasis, the strong reliance on sector wide data sets and indicators, as evidenced in the Information Request and the Regulatory Risk Framework raises the new problem of allowing indicators and data to overwhelm effective judgement about the value of the outcomes being achieved, and in particular to ensure TEQSA concentrates on cases of clearly inadequate outcomes.

The data request looks to measure a provider's data against notionally similar data from other providers as a significant element of its proposed use. This is significant because most of the proposed data is about inputs and activity. Little of it demonstrates anything about whether student

or research outcomes are suitable against the expectations of the threshold standards. The mere fact of stating that comparisons will be a central part of the analysis of the data will re-enforce the natural tendencies of a regulatory body to be wary of innovation, and discourages universities from endeavouring to be so.

In a different context, the Michael Knight Report on international student visas pointed to the problem of the regulator treating every single breach as of similar standing. As a result the major infringements were being lost amongst the host of minor. The intent of the TEQSA three regulatory principals is to avoid this; the tenor of its documents gives renewed life to the issue.

### ***An effective data provision mechanism***

The IRU supports the consultation paper statement that there be “a single and coordinated national higher education collection’ (p1). This would allow relevant Government Agencies to access the data they need with universities and other providers providing the data once. The TEQSA requirement for data renews interest in recommendation 46 of The Review of Higher Education (2008) for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research to take on a tertiary wide data collection and analysis role, independent of the regulatory uses and emphasis of DIISRTE and now TEQSA.

It is reasonable for TEQSA to have access to the array of data which universities provide to the Australian Government and annual reports to the State Governments if access is simple and its use considered. However, since the information is highly detailed, and in most cases will be of limited value to assuring the quality of the university operations, providing it in distinct, if largely parallel, form for TEQSA would go beyond what is proportionate and risk based.

The consultation paper also proposes that universities provide summary preliminary first half year data. While defined as a small additional task it goes against TEQSA’s reasonable burden expectations. The desire for data comprehensiveness is winning out over considered judgement about what is necessary for the effective operations of the Agency.

The data will give the appearance of being up to date but it is not going to assist TEQSA identify that an institution is at serious risk where other information is not already flagging the provider. At a given time only a very small number of providers, and particularly universities, will be subject to close TEQSA scrutiny of due to reasonable concerns about their operations. Such providers could be required to provide current year data if needed. Hence, targeted requests where reasonable grounds exist are the better approach and more consistent with TEQSA’s obligations.

### ***Student experience and destination data***

In 2011 the Minister, Senator Evans, formed the Advancing Quality in Higher Education Reference Group Chaired by Professor Ian O’Connor to advise him on the development of nationally agreed suite of student and graduate surveys to provide a valid framework to assess student learning outcomes.

The TEQSA request pre-empts the Minister’s consideration of the Working Group’s Report by defining the level of sampling and of returns required, whether for the national surveys or university specific surveys. TEQSA should wait the outcome of the Report to then work within the agreed suite of surveys with the methodology proposed for each.

### ***Extending the role of TEQSA***

The consultation paper pushes out the TEQSA role in at least two regards.

The paper lists ways in which the data provision will be of advantage to universities and other providers. Only one is directly connected to the core TEQSA role – that regular provision of data will streamline the registration and accreditation processes. The other notional benefits position TEQSA

as a higher education data sharing and mining agency with suggestions of work to standardise data and indicators and to support benchmarking. Benchmarking is a specific case of the potential conflicts that could emerge. Since the Threshold Standards require benchmarking, how could TEQSA impartially assess a provider against those standards both in cases of a university which has followed a TEQSA supported benchmarking approach and those where the university which has chosen a non TEQSA approach to benchmarking?

TEQSA risks confusing its role by becoming complicit in the day to day operations of the organisations it is to supervise. It should not look to help universities and other providers but focus on its key role of assuring that each provider is operating within reasonable expectations for quality.

Further, p3 claims that provider performance against the non-threshold standards are to be 'registered and evaluated'. The TEQSA Act does not specify a use for the non-Threshold Standards. TEQSA is presuming a use ahead of the discussions about the development of those standards, which should involve consideration of how they might be used. This could involve TEQSA; it might equally be left to universities and other providers to use independently of TEQSA as a guide to the standing of their teaching and learning, research and information provision.

### ***Conclusion***

Universities Australia is working with TEQSA to ensure effective mechanism for the provision of suitable data to it. The IRU comments go the issue of whether TEQSA remains on track to fulfil its mission to support the higher education demand driven system and does not stymie the effectiveness of those changes through enforcement of an overly regularised, single, approach to higher education.

25 May 2012