

Provider Category Standards. Higher Education Review

A pundit once described Australia's economy as nothing more than a quarry and a beach. If Australia's Higher Education Providers Standards Reviewⁱ is adopted then that description will remain as apt in the future as it is today.

The key driver of the review was to ensure that category standards were fit for a purpose, accommodated innovative and changing practice (whatever that means) and comparable to international benchmarks.ⁱⁱ It claims to be a pragmatic review rationalising underutilised and inefficient categories.ⁱⁱⁱ

To this end, it has rationalised some redundant categories and does require TEQSA to improve processes associated with self-accreditation.^{iv}

However, it does not acknowledge that tertiary education and provider categories are vital instruments for state and Federal governments to stimulate economic and social policy. By requiring all universities to be research universities it reduces Australia's capacity to revitalise its tertiary arrangements and limits the capacity of governments to stimulate economic and social reform.

It peddles out the same message that had such currency with the Bradley report^v. That is, there is a strong link between teaching and research and that students are better off in research focused universities.

In a benchmarking exercise, the review sought to internationalise itself by referring to higher education systems in seventeen countries. In over 70 per cent of these countries, the key distinguishing feature was that they ran parallel university systems.

That is, some universities were research focused and others were applied/professional universities with strong links to industry and the community. Research was not the rationale for their existence but nor was research, especially applied research, excluded from their activities. The review ignored this evidence.

By ignoring this evidence, the review lost the opportunity to internationalise our tertiary arrangements in line with economically and socially advanced countries, including our major trading partners.

It had the opportunity based on the weight of international evidence to create a parallel university system focused on improving access and equity, strengthening industry and community linkages, improving the status and opportunities for VET systems and students, and strengthening our skilled and paraprofessional workforce. This strategy may well have been a tonic to an economy that is teetering on recession.

Australia is identified by the OECD as having a shortage in its intermediate skilled workforce^{vi}. This limits our capacity to be a productive country. Australia sits at the bottom of the OECD ladder in association with countries such as Turkey, Portugal and Mexico in terms of the hollowing out of its intermediate skilled workforce. More recently a Harvard measure of economic export complexity ranks Australia below countries such as Morocco, Uganda, San Miguel, Senegal and Slovakia in terms

of the development of a diversified export capability^{vii}. An applied university sector would have been a key instrument in reducing this imbalance.

Australia has more theoretically trained graduates than most countries in the OECD. Far from improving productivity our economy is stagnant, has low wage growth and intermediate skilled workforce shortages.

The review urges universities to engage with business. Its own consultation process ignored industry, with the exception of the Business Council of Australia. Submissions were dominated by education institutions.

The review does not mention the words access and equity and did not consult any welfare organisations.

It has not addressed the failure of the existing system to cater for mature age and part-time students, those with social disadvantage or the inept transition arrangements between VET and universities.

It argued that the category University College be made redundant for various reasons including the fact that only one provider exists in the category and that the word college has different meanings.

Yet it determines that the Overseas University category should remain, arguing that is how we show 'that Australia is willing and confident to open its doors and work alongside (and in competition with) the best in the world.'^{viii}. Of the two overseas universities registered in Australia, one has no campus and does not offer courses. It's called the "University College of London"! A category with a provider in remission and horror of all horrors a "University College".

It is incomprehensible as to why the review felt that institutes would aspire to become National Institutes of Higher Education. Some might say that the word institute has dreadful connotations.

What is alarming is that the justification for the creation of this category is the basis of institutes' alleged aspirations, rather than the social and economic well-being of Australia.

A different university category is needed. Using international best practice as an exemplar and being cognisant of community and skill needs in this country, an applied/professional university category should have been created. This could have been easily achieved by amending the University College category.

The review is a missed opportunity. Its outcomes reflect a narrow and self-serving consultation process. Some say the consultation process was a sham.

If Australia's existing tertiary arrangements continue or follow the path laid out in this report, then the economy will continue to decline. An economy not dissimilar to the one described by Alison Wolf as one "that produces nothing and each generation of graduates makes its money from creativity, ingenuity and imagination"^{ix}.

B Mackenzie

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ⁱ Commonwealth of Australia, *What's in a Name? Review of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards*. Final Report. (Canberra, October 2019).

ⁱⁱ Commonwealth of Australia, *What's in a Name? Review of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards*. Final Report. (Canberra, October 2019) at vii – viii.

ⁱⁱⁱ Commonwealth of Australia, *What's in a Name? Review of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards*. Final Report. (Canberra, October 2019) at vii-viii.

^{iv} Commonwealth of Australia, *What's in a Name? Review of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards*. Final Report. (Canberra, October 2019), Recommendation 8 at viii.

^v Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H. & Scales B. (2008) *Review of Higher Education: Final Report*. (Australia, 2008)

^{vi} OECD. (2018) *Skills for Jobs*. Retrieved from <https://www.oecdskillsforjobsdatabase.org/#FR/>-

^{vii} Retrieved from <https://atlas.cid.harvard.edu/>

^{viii} ^{viii} Commonwealth of Australia, *What's in a Name? Review of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards*. Final Report. (Canberra, October 2019) at p15.

^{ix} Leadbeater, (1999) cited in Wolf, A. , Dominguez-Reig, G. & Sellen, P. (2016) *Remaking Tertiary Education: Can we Create a System that is Fair and Fit for Purpose?* Retrieved from <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/remaking-tertiary-education-web.compressed.pdf> at p32.