



Response to
'Striving for Quality: Learning, Teaching and Scholarship'
Issues Paper

INTRODUCTION

1. UWA's response to 'Striving for Quality' is based firmly on the position in our initial response to 'Higher Education at the Crossroads' that:

The maintenance of the quality of the learning process is paramount and requires improved resourcing. Since the early 1990s, UWA has put a high institutional priority on the refocussing and systematic enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning in an atmosphere of research and scholarship. It has particularly focused on the teaching-research nexus while developing innovative and responsive programmes.

2. UWA has a strong commitment to the notion that quality and excellence must be conceived in terms of the principle of fitness for purpose. Our position is that as an autonomous institution, we must set, and thereafter be accountable for, our own institutional mission, goals and objectives. The quality of the University's teaching and learning needs to be addressed in that context.
3. UWA's teaching and learning activities are geared towards an institutional mission which is characterised by a very high quality student body, both undergraduate and postgraduate; by a research-intensive culture in which the teaching and research nexus is actively fostered; by a comprehensive spread of disciplines in the arts, sciences and professions; and by an international focus for the standards and content of our programmes. UWA is committed to a 'high tech-high touch' teaching and learning ethos in which innovative programmes and flexible teaching and learning are offered in an interactive, campus-based, research-active environment.
4. This is an expensive mission and UWA's position is that both the State and the nation need such universities in order to be internationally competitive. **Our perspective therefore is that the decline in the public investment in the university sector is of major concern; the quality of the University's teaching and learning cannot be sustained if the teaching and learning infrastructure does not keep pace with initial standards and if student staff ratios continue to deteriorate as they have over the last decade.** This response, therefore, must be read in conjunction with the UWA response to the 'Setting Firm Foundations' funding paper, as the issue of the quality of higher education in Australia cannot be separated from the overall higher education policy and funding framework.

KEY ISSUES

5. Turning to some specific issues raised in 'Striving for Quality', UWA has identified five particular points on which to respond:

- (i) Should the Commonwealth mandate that the Graduate Skills Assessment becomes a requirement of entry to and exit from higher education, which is aimed at providing students and employers with an effective indicator of student generic attributes?
- (ii) How can the Commonwealth build on its role in assessing, monitoring and ensuring the quality of higher education institutions (including the AUTC and AUQA)?
- (iii) Should the Commonwealth, directly or indirectly, co-ordinate the development of an integrated, accessible publication of outcomes data, which is aimed at informing the community on the relative quality of universities?
- (iv) Should the Commonwealth, in consultation with the sector, examine the feasibility of including minimum standards for all higher education qualifications; and should higher education institutions establish a common approach to assessment practice, including a national grading scale?
- (v) Should the Commonwealth establish a national accreditation scheme for higher education teachers?

6. Taking each in turn the UWA perspective is as follows:

6.1 **Should the Commonwealth mandate that the Graduate Skills Assessment becomes a requirement of entry to and exit from higher education, which is aimed at providing students and employers with an effective indicator of student generic attributes?**

- UWA does not support a mandatory national GSA of the kind currently trialled in the system. There are many reasons for this, including:
 - that the current test/instrument has not been adequately scrutinised and assessed by the system;
 - it is unlikely that a single instrument used system wide could capture the fitness for purpose needs of a diverse system. For example, different institutions have a very different student mix and those with very high full time undergraduate students would be likely to have a very different influence on generic skills development than say, those with a high proportion of part-time, mature students already in the workforce;
 - it is unlikely that a single instrument could capture discipline differences adequately and the absence from the current instrument of a 'mastery of content' domain is considered a flaw in the measurement basis.
- While UWA is in favour of outcomes-based measure generally it would prefer to see a more mission-specific approach and therefore supports the AVCC in its opposition to the current proposal.

6.2 How can the Commonwealth build on its role in assessing, monitoring and ensuring the quality of higher education institutions (including the AUTC and AUQA)?

- UWA also supports the AVCC's position with regard to AUQA. Provided the AUQA regime develops an appropriate balance between process and outcome auditing, with more emphasis on the latter, UWA is in favour of giving the current system the opportunity to demonstrate its value and effectiveness.
- UWA also supports the continued activities of the AUTC as a good means of establishing and disseminating good practice information within the sector.

6.3 Should the Commonwealth, directly or indirectly, co-ordinate the development of an integrated accessible publication of outcomes data, which is aimed at informing the community on the relative quality of universities?

- UWA fully accepts its obligation to be accountable and to report publicly on aspects of its activities and performance.
- UWA also supports the need for carefully selected reporting elements so that there is an efficient and effective reporting system in which the reported data have value and utility to all stakeholders, including the Government and the institutions themselves.
- UWA is aware of the costs and potential dangers of poorly specified reporting requirements and the subsequent misuse of reported data for spurious purposes, such as inappropriate funding formulae or constructing 'league tables'. For those reasons, we can see some advantages in there being an expert, arms-length statistical agency which could professionally evaluate the data needs of the sector and offer some safeguards against both technical and political misuse.

6.4 Should the Commonwealth, in consultation with the sector, examine the feasibility of including minimum standards for all higher education qualifications; and should higher education institutions establish a common approach to assessment practice, including a national grading scale?

- UWA strongly endorses the AVCC position with regard to this issue, that institutions should move towards:
 - making explicit the standards expected for each course;
 - using criterion-based assessment;
 - encouraging discussion about student learning outcomes and assessment across universities by staff in related fields;
 - increasing the extent of external validation or comment on the standards and their application; and
 - using a common grading scale

but that there should not be:

- the formal constructing of national standards; and

- the development a single, formal, external validation that specified standards are being applied.
- This is consistent with UWA's fundamental view that there should be a diverse system with each institution pursuing a role and niche markets according to fitness for purpose and comparative advantage.
- To this end UWA is committed to a greater engagement with its various stakeholders, including employers, with regard to graduate standards and attributes.

6.5 **Should the Commonwealth establish a national accreditation scheme for higher education teachers?**

- Again UWA finds itself in agreement with the AVCC view and
 - agrees that universities must continue to develop the capacity of all staff to teach effectively and engage in relevant scholarship to support their work;
 - rejects the notion that it would be useful to mandate external teacher accreditation. It believes that each university should define the appropriate qualifications and skills required of staff and ensure that staff either have or acquire them;
 - believes that promotion to professor must involve evidence of international recognition of the applicant's leadership in their field whether that field is scholarship in the discipline or scholarship in teaching of the discipline; and
 - restates unequivocally that research and scholarship must underpin teaching to provide an effective university education.
- UWA reiterates its general 'fitness for purpose' view that staff recruitment, development and promotion in an institution such as ours, with a strong teaching and research nexus and high performance culture, must be designed with the institution's particular mission, focus and standards in mind. Each individual institution is responsible for the quality of the academic activities, both teaching and research, and should develop its own programmes and mechanisms to foster and reward quality. For example, at UWA all new staff take the highly regarded 'Foundations of the Teaching and Learning Programme' and all staff are expected to develop an academic portfolio of teaching, research and community service, for promotion and performance management purposes.
- Issues of quality in teaching and learning need to be addressed not just at the individual level, which was the primary focus of 'Striving for Quality', but also at the collective, structural level of schools, faculties and the whole institution. It is important that institutional policies and strategies for individual staff are well aligned with, and hence reinforced by, those applied to schools and faculties. At UWA the integrated cycle of planning and accountability ensures that compatible signals are sent at all levels about the values, performance drivers and reward systems in the University.