Role for TAFE in improving higher education standards

Concerns about academic standards are a pervasive feature of debates in Australian higher education. The implication is that our degrees are being ‘dumbed down’ because we will take almost anyone, particularly when demand is low as it is at the moment in many fields of education as a consequence of the strong labour market. Is this a problem?

The late Martin Trow famously distinguished between elite, mass and universal higher education systems. When half the population or more participates in HE Trow described the system as universal, between 16-50% as a mass system, and between 0-15% as an elite system. Most industrialised countries have been progressively moving from elite to universal systems over the last 30-40 years in response to changes in society, the economy and technology.

In a 2003 paper, Dr Tom Karmel and Nhi Nguyen from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research estimated that in 2000 the lifetime probability for attending HE was 47%, so Australia is on the cusp of a universal system. In fact, this declined from a high of 51% in 1996.

Those who advance the dumbing down thesis forget three things. First, a near-universal system such as we have in Australia does indeed mean we will take almost anyone because that’s what a universal system does, otherwise it wouldn’t be universal. Second, we wouldn’t have a near-universal HE system unless it was needed by society and the economy. In fact, we need more graduates, not fewer, in professional fields such as engineering, accounting, nursing and teaching, among others.

Third, a universal system will inevitably mean that students who enter HE will do so with different levels of academic preparation, particularly adults who are entering or re-entering higher education. Unlike the elite systems in the past, we do not draw exclusively from a narrow, elite section of the population who have had the privilege of an elite secondary education focussed entirely on preparing them for university. The elite universities may draw from this population, but the rest have to draw on a much wider pool of students and arguably society needs them to do so as this underpins national prosperity.

The irony is that while the elite universities are able to select the best prepared students, they are also the most resource rich. This isn’t likely to contribute to increasing academic standards in the Australian system, because these are the students who least need the extra resourcing. The key question for policy is not therefore who should we take, but how can we make sure that the outcomes students achieve are at the level they should be, not just at the elite universities, but at all universities.
Closer collaboration with TAFE could allow universities to increase academic standards by building on institutional specialisation and complementarity. Involving TAFE as a partner in delivering HE could free up resources in the less well endowed universities so that they can focus on institution-wide curriculum reforms which are more cost effective than providing direct support to students who need it. Both are needed, but universities are not adequately funded to provide both.

TAFE traditionally offers a more supportive learning environment for students new to tertiary education or those without the levels of academic preparation they need to study HE. Classes are smaller and more frequent and TAFE teachers are usually better qualified to teach than those in universities, although this is being eroded as a consequence of the substitution of HE teaching qualifications with the certificate IV in training and assessment as the basic TAFE teaching qualification.

TAFE can contribute to raising academic standards in universities in three ways. The first is through being publicly funded to offer two year associate degrees for students whose tertiary entrance rank suggests they will struggle by being thrown in the deep-end in a degree. This suggestion has been canvassed by Swinburne University’s Vice-chancellor, Professor Ian Young. It deserves more attention.

The second is broadening VET qualifications from their current exclusive focus on workplace-specific outcomes to include preparing students for more advanced study within their field, including HE. This would make students’ experience of transition more coherent and supported. A 2006 NCVER report by John Stanwick showed that in Australia in 2003, almost 14% of all students commencing bachelor degrees in HE had a prior TAFE diploma or advanced diploma as their highest previous qualification, however this rose to 30% for students aged over 25. TAFE qualifications are thus an important access route to HE and they need to prepare students to study at that level.

The third is to engage TAFE to conduct transition, enabling and bridging programs for degrees using accredited modules or courses in TAFE. This would allow students to access publicly funded TAFE provision, which consequently means adequately resourced provision. Close collaboration between institutional partners would be needed to ensure such provision is contextualised within students’ broader degree programs and taught by qualified teachers rather than outsourced to underpaid sessionals. This would free university student support units to work with individual academics in constructing student support strategies, in developing assessment, and in their teaching and learning.
Rudd’s education revolution needs to make it easier for the sectors to work together in the ways outlined here. Current policy makes this difficult because it entrenches sectoral differences and does not facilitate the institutional specialisation and complementarity we need to underpin academic standards.

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