

AV-CC

Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee
the council of Australia's university presidents

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Quality through Diversity

The AVCC response to *Striving for Quality*

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Quality through Diversity

This statement is the AVCC's response to *Striving for Quality: learning, teaching and scholarship*, an issues paper from the higher education review issued by Dr Brendan Nelson on 21 June 2002.

Striving for Quality is concerned with “maintaining and improving the quality of learning and teaching in Australian higher education institutions, and introducing better reporting on educational outcomes to the community”. It argues that quality can be improved through a stronger focus on learning and improvements to the teaching skills of university teaching staff. It also argues that prospective students and the community require better access to information about the outcomes of university education.

The AVCC has previously released *Positioning Australia's Universities for 2020*¹ as the major statement of its vision for Australia's universities in 2020. Quality of learning is an integral part of the AVCC vision for 2020.

- The AVCC vision states that “all Australians will access post school education or training with more than 60% completing higher education, at least 10% at the postgraduate level, with choice across a diverse range of quality universities.”

The challenge of providing a quality education to 60% of the population is substantial. It requires universities to adapt to the mass provision of higher education while ensuring the quality of learning for all students. To do this, it is essential that universities pursue a diverse set of missions that fit the wide range of student, employer and community needs for university education.

- The AVCC vision further states that “Australian educational exports will give Australia a pre-eminent place in the global educational revolution”. The continued success of Australia's education of students from around the world depends on universities continuing to provide quality learning designed to meet the needs of those students.

Positioning Australia's Universities for 2020 argues that there is no single solution that will ensure that the vision is achieved.

This argument applies equally to questions of ensuring and improving the quality of student learning. The challenge is not to find a single solution and impose it across all students, courses and universities. It is to create the environment that allows for many different, but effective, approaches targeted at the needs of each group of students.

1. June 2002, see http://www.avcc.edu.au/policies_activities/education_review/index.htm

To create that environment, effective national investment in higher education is essential.

This statement addresses the issues raised by *Striving for Quality* under four headings:

- the distinctive characteristics of university education;
- developing the student learning environment;
- improving the teaching knowledge and skills of staff; and
- measuring student learning.

In doing so, it assesses the proposals put forward against the AVCC working principles set out in *Positioning Australia's Universities for 2020*².

Deryck Schreuder
President

2. Page 8. The most relevant principles are

- supporting the diversity of universities;
- underpinning teaching and community engagement through research and scholarship;
- enabling Australia's Indigenous people to realise their potential;
- ensuring global competitiveness;
- internationalising educational opportunities;
- responding to students and other stakeholders; and
- be achievable for universities.

1. *The distinctive characteristics of university education*

The AVCC does not support any policy or funding proposals that would by intent, or result, re-establish the segregated, binary system of the 1980s. All Australia’s universities actively engage in the wide range of inquiry, teaching, research and community engagement needed to underpin the emergence of modern Australia and to connect Australia to the rest of the world through international scholarship and the education of international students.

The approach of all universities to learning is embedded in the fundamental interrelationship among teaching, learning, research and scholarship. The nature of the interrelationship means that the Government’s base operating funding of universities must support the full range of scholarship expected of university academic staff. Operating funding cannot be narrowed down, and reduced, to be for “teaching” alone if “university” is to retain any sensible meaning in Australia.

The AVCC therefore supports the conclusion of section 2 of *Striving for Quality* that university education is distinguished by the extent of critical, conceptual and reflective thinking required of students. That thinking is enhanced in universities through teaching based on relevant scholarship and research. It is developed in the full range of students through the diverse missions of the universities.

Distinguishing university education from vocational education and training

Section 2 of *Striving for Quality* considers the distinctiveness of higher education from other post school education and training. It discusses “the apparent convergence of purpose and role of the higher education and vocational education sectors”³. This concern is driven by an apparent similarity of purpose in providing “education and training for work”.

In recent decades new professional degrees have been introduced into universities such as nursing, social work, information technology, and tourism. Because of their more recent inclusion there is still some debate about whether university education is the best way to educate for these professions. Generally though, there is agreement that both the knowledge base and the level of critical thinking required of those being educated for these professions justify their placement as university courses.

We should not be driven by terminology. That one sector is called “vocational education and training”, as a rough descriptor of its dominant purpose, does not mean that vocational education and training cannot – or should not – occur in universities as part of a broader educational qualification. Nor does it assist in deciding which vocations should formally be “vocational”. Likewise, to the extent that “professional”

3. *Striving*, para 9.

describes university degrees and “vocational” non-university qualifications, neither term defines which vocational fields should be included in each sector.

There is no set list of professions that require university teaching. The British universities originate in the need for a more advanced level of clerical, legal and theological knowledge for the clergy than was possible either in the schools of the time or through learning from those already practicing. While the majority of students gained the required skills and knowledge and moved away, some chose to explore the knowledge base itself.

This pattern has been repeated many times since, as the requirements for particular professions have extended to include substantial elements of critical inquiry, problem solving and learning. Medicine, law, engineering, architecture, among others, are now considered, without question, as university courses.

It is clear that the requirements for successful employment continue to become more complex, demanding greater levels of formal education and training. The education system as a whole has to continue to develop to meet these changes. The line between which occupations require university-based teaching and which do not will continue to shift, based on the extent of the predominant need for critical, conceptual and reflective thinking compared with the skill based requirements.

The link between student learning and scholarship

The capacity to develop critical, conceptual and reflective thinking is dependent on strong, ongoing links from inquiry, scholarship and research to teaching and learning. This characteristic distinguishes university education from other higher education courses. *Striving for Quality* discusses this issue in section 6c where it states that “research based teaching is more rhetoric than substance”⁴, an observation the AVCC unequivocally rejects.

There has been much written on this issue⁵, usually to test the correlation of leading researchers to good teachers. Ruth Neumann has concluded that academics, identified by students as good teachers, are almost invariably active in research, though not the converse⁶. However, this does not directly address the real issue of whether all university courses do – or should – involve a knowledge base reliant on research and be taught by people who know what it is to research, who can integrate the knowledge base of the field, and who are capable of inculcating critical, conceptual and reflective thinking through use of that scholarship.

4. *Striving*, para 240.

5. In addition to those noted in *Striving for Quality* relevant Australian research includes P Coaldrake and L Stedman, *Academic Work in the 21st Century*, DEST Occasional Papers 99H; A Zubrick, I Reid, and P Rossiter, *Strengthening the Nexus Between Teaching and Research*, DEST EIP 01/2.

6. 'The Teaching-Research Nexus: Applying a Framework to University Students' Learning Experiences', *European Journal of Education*, Vol 29, No 3, pp 323-338, 1994

An effective university education should involve the student exploring the nature of their particular field, understanding that the field continues to develop, and being encouraged to test accepted positions. This characteristic of Australian university education is important to students, including international students from countries where the research base of courses is not strong.

It is, therefore, the challenge for every university to ensure that in each course a suitable mix of staff engage with students to fulfill the expectation that teaching is indeed research-based, including in the early years of degrees. The focus is the relevant department, school or university unit responsible for the course, not each individual teacher, given that each individual's emphasis will likely change over time. To meet this challenge universities need a resource base with sufficient flexibility to support the desired mix of skills in each department or school.

The meaning of diversity for Australia's universities

A further, distinctive, aspect of Australia's universities is their diversity. This is essential to meeting the requirements of the changing contexts and patterns of student enrolment, engagement and expectations as set out in section 4 of *Striving for Quality*⁷.

"Diversity" means that each institution sets its own emphasis on each of the multiple responsibilities a modern university has within each of teaching, research, scholarship, and community engagement. The result should be a complex and varied set of institutions, with interacting interests providing the choice, competition, and coverage that students, business, governments and community require.

This means that universities enrol students with different sets of characteristics, they have different entry level requirements for similar courses, they have different expectations of the outcomes from particular courses due to different emphases, the modes of teaching vary considerably, and so on. Some of these point to different ways to the same end; others indicate that different ends are desired. By doing so, universities ensure that students have options in how they learn.

The AVCC concept of "diversity" contrasts with the perspective of *Higher Education at the Crossroads*⁸, which argues for university "specialisation". Specialisation is a related concept with one major difference. Specialisation implies that each university pursues one or two major areas, minimising any others; diversity encourages

7. The nature of the student body clearly changes from decade to decade. However, the assumption in Section 4 that the student body used to be full-time, live-at-home, school leavers is not supported by the data over a longer period than from 1991 to 2001, the period considered in *Striving for Quality*. In 1983 DEST figures show full time students as 54% of the student body compared to a high of 62% in 1990 (DEST, *Selected Student Statistics 1998*, table 3). The reduction to 59% by 2001 is only a part return to previous levels. This reinforces that a substantial proportion of Australian university students have long been mature-age, part-time students who, in particular, are seeking learning to support their future aspirations.

8. DEST, April 2002

universities to engage in a number of areas, but developing their particular approach to each. This ensures a healthy range of competing options for students in each field. What both concepts have in common is an acceptance of difference among universities.

2. Developing the student learning environment

Universities have extensively changed the student learning environment over the past decade. They will continue to do so as they consider, try and, where proven, use new approaches to support effective student learning. The AVCC welcomes the clear implication of section 6b of *Striving for Quality* that this responsibility should be left to universities.

The Government's proactive role is to provide support for the development of better teaching practice through effective funding of the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (or a similar body) and of projects to test and assess options.

It also must act to review student income support arrangements to ensure that students have the financial capacity to complete their courses.

Section 6b of *Striving for Quality* considers the student learning experience and environment. The paper rightly acknowledges that there have been significant developments in teaching and learning in Australian universities, with the drive for that development coming from within universities. This has been done against reduced effective purchasing power and consequent rising staff workloads. The challenge is how to ensure that development will continue.

The AVCC agrees that the focus for teaching must be on students and how their learning needs can best be met. This concern underlies the AVCC's argument to support the diversity of universities, allowing them to pursue different approaches and, within each institution, target their teaching to the needs of each set of students. In this way the various options - such as modularisation, foundation years, capstone years, on-line learning, international exchange - are considered, tried and, where useful, used. In addition, each university supports its teaching and learning focus through specific centres, units, staff and policies.

Overall the section - rightly - does not propose substantial external intervention: the particular way in which learning should be supported is a question for each university, each course and each class.

The primary issue is to ensure that universities are encouraged to maintain their focus on the learning of their students through a funding framework that strengthens their capacity to set their particular missions and gives access to the necessary resources to achieve those missions.

The section raises some points that require further comment.

Student attrition rates

All universities recognise the need to monitor student progress and to support students with difficulties meet the requirements of their courses. The evidence shows that students pass over 85% of units of study, and have done so consistently over the past decade⁹. The issue is students' capacity and need to complete all units for a degree.

One major issue for students, that the Review has ignored, is their financial capacity to continue to study. The AVCC study *Paying their Way*¹⁰ has demonstrated that financial pressure can significantly impede students' study through the need to work, difficulty in finding childcare and the costs of transport. It is reasonable to extrapolate that one reason for students deferring, or not completing, their degree is that financial pressure makes work rather than study the necessary option, at least in the short term. The review must consider student income support if it is seriously to engage with the question of the conditions for effective student learning.

The structure of the student teaching year

Having replaced the traditional three term year with a two semester system, many universities now offer "third" semesters, or similar options, to allow students to complete their degree more quickly or at different times of the year. Additional teaching periods can be valuable in increasing flexibility, not as a requirement for all students but as a useful option for many.

The unacceptable implication of the paper¹¹ is that university study is merely a question of cramming one set of information onto another. It is not the case that the faster that this can be done the better it is.

University study is not just about acquiring the minimum desirable competency in an area, it is much more about giving students the opportunity to fully develop their critical, conceptual and reflective thinking. Good, deep, sophisticated learning takes time. While not designed specifically for that purpose, the semester and annual breaks create the opportunity for students to develop their studies further. They also allow students to earn income, full time, without having to study and work at the same time¹².

There are also practical limitations in relation to offering such options to students in Commonwealth funded places. If a university's load were spread over three rather than two semesters, it would have to reduce the load available in any one semester - unless the Government funded the initial upfront additional costs. In effect, there

9. *Striving*, para 186

10. AVCC 2001 http://www.avcc.edu.au/policies_activities/teaching_learning/students/

11. Also reflected in *Crossroads*, para 95

12. See *Paying their Way* Table 8.1: full time students who work during semester average a worrying 14.5 hours a week; they work an average 23.8 hours a week in non semester periods.

would be fewer students even though they might complete more rapidly. In addition, the need to offer a suitable range of subjects in each semester and ensure staff to teach them could increase costs – or require further reductions in unit options for students. To change the structure of the academic year requires substantial changes in the Commonwealth’s funding arrangements at potentially higher cost.

Student portfolios and credit transfer

There are now many ways in which individuals can combine different education and training experiences over their lifetimes. Universities have in place extensive arrangements to allow students to transfer between courses and institutions. Over recent years, universities have extended this to include previous vocational education and training, and prior learning achieved without formal recognition, where the previous learning can substitute for parts of the university degree.

There remains more that could be done, in particular by VET providers to recognise and to improve university-to-VET transfer. While universities have arrangements to facilitate transfers through exchange of information about students’ academic records, the suggestion that this be reworked into a student portfolio to encourage recognition deserves exploring.

Striving for Quality also asks (section 6d) what the Commonwealth role should be in supporting the quality of teaching and learning, with particular reference to the Australian Universities Teaching Committee. The AVCC supports continued Government support for the development of better teaching practice through its funding of the AUTC, or a similar body, and through funding for specific projects. In this way the Commonwealth would support universities as they improve teaching, without forcing particular models on them.

3. Improving the teaching knowledge and skills of staff

The AVCC:

- **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.**

Striving for Quality suggests in section 6c that there is need for substantial change in developing the teaching skills of staff. To do so it draws substantially on the four scholarships developed by Boyer of discovery, integration, application and teaching. Universities have made much use of the scholarships concept, whether explicitly through a formal focus on the four scholarships, or more commonly, through their use to support efforts to present a rounded concept of the academic role. In particular, the Boyer scholarships have been used to support greater recognition of the teaching role of academics.

However, it distorts Boyer's argument to isolate teaching scholarship as a goal in itself for some academics – essentially those whose research activity is low – as presented in *Striving for Quality*. The scholarship of teaching is more than just the practice of face-to-face interaction with students but extends to activities such as program design, educational policy and development of materials. Rather, in developing the teaching capacity of staff, and supporting those who in particular research the practice of teaching their fields, universities expect that staff attend to all four Boyer scholarships while being stronger in some than others.

The AVCC strongly agrees that all staff involved in teaching students should be skilled in how best to teach their students. Universities have developed programs to support their staff gain such skills and have put in place various incentives for staff to make use of the programs. In particular, new staff, who have not had teaching experience, are required by many universities to complete such programs, which can in many cases lead to completion of a formal graduate certificate or graduate diploma.

Universities must continue to develop staff's teaching capacity and knowledge but externally set requirements for accreditation or particular qualifications place the emphasis wrongly on a particular input rather than the desired outcome of improved teaching skills.

Promotion criteria now ensure due recognition of teaching achievements alongside research and community achievements. The mix of each can vary, but usually evidence against each is required for promotion at all levels. It is worth noting that promotion solely on an applicant's research record is usually not possible except for research only positions.

The AVCC does not agree with the paper's assumption that it should be possible to gain promotion to professor based on teaching achievements alone. Promotion to professor is a statement of internationally recognised leadership in the field, drawing on the applicant's ability to contribute across the spectrum of possible roles. Good performance as a teacher in the institution, where such performance is not acknowledged elsewhere and where it makes no contribution to the knowledge internationally on best practice in teaching the discipline, is not sufficient. Universities and their staff must generate and disseminate knowledge widely – publication is the major way to achieve that; teaching alone, no matter how outstanding, is not sufficient since it reaches a much smaller audience.

Universities have a number of staff appointed to teaching-only positions. Their number has remained fairly stable over the past ten years but most are now casual staff¹³. Such staff members are employed either to fill short-term vacancies or to support the work experience elements of professional programs. The latter group have current, or recent, professional employment outside the university. They are employed by universities for their practitioner skills and knowledge to ensure that students gain the relevant mix of conceptual knowledge and applied skills. Universities are now addressing the issue of the development of casual staff to ensure that both groups of staff have adequate preparation to carry out their teaching, including access to relevant courses and training for university teaching.

In summary, universities continue to develop the teaching skills of all their academic staff but do so as part of the broad scholarship required of all such positions.

4. *Measuring student learning*

The AVCC believes that it is essential to streamline reporting and accountability requirements while ensuring effective assessment of universities' individual achievements. Such an outcome must clearly meet the AVCC working principle that the funding and regulatory arrangements "should focus universities on their declared mission" and "should encourage universities to be responsive to the needs of ...students".

The ways in which universities teach and their students learn are complex and varied. Measurement of the outcomes is likely to be equally complex. *Striving for Quality* argues that we need to shift the focus of quality accountability and information from processes to the outcomes of student learning.

The AVCC believes that there is little evidence that the existing performance reporting arrangements do not provide the necessary performance information about each university.

However, there is considerable risk in pursuing national quality measurement if the measurement arrangements are based on an assumption that all universities have common goals and missions. Universities would again face regulatory requirements and incentives that encourage them to mimic each other rather than develop their particular contribution to a diverse national university sector. This would directly act against student-centred university education.

The production of complex sets of data can also affect the structure of university activity if teaching and research become arranged in ways that will produce the required data rather than the data reflecting what is done. In designing an effective set of measures – whether process-related or outcomes-focussed – the burden of

13. *Striving*, Table 8

reporting must be minimised and the requirements not be such that they normalise activity into common approaches. The Government supported this in *Crossroads*¹⁴.

In addition, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audits provide an external assessment of universities' internal arrangements to assess the extent to which outcomes are effective. *Striving for Quality* (para 89-90) misrepresents the role of the AUQA as being merely an assessment of process. The AUQA audit arrangements are intended to identify how universities' processes for quality assurance are – or are not - linked to improvements in outcomes, starting from the basis that each university's desired outcomes are distinctive to it and must be the basis of any assessment. The AUQA's effectiveness needs to be tested over its first one or two rounds of audits before conclusions can be reached about its future value.

Striving for Quality discusses a number of possible outcome measures and information options. These are discussed below.

The Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA)

The AVCC does not support Government requirements for students to sit the GSA.

The GSA is described as “an impartial measure of student performance that is not coloured by differences in academic standards in particular courses or institutions”¹⁵. The paper notes that for the GSA to be used this way students would have to be required to take it at first enrolment and at the end of their studies.

The AVCC has two major objections to using the GSA as a substantial indicator of learning outcomes.

First, there are serious questions about what the GSA tests. A limited subset of skills can be tested using pen and paper responses to questions. It is noticeable that students of the more generalist degrees – arts and science – have done comparatively well in the GSA results so far. This suggests that the test is measuring generalist skills but does not represent the full gamut of what universities aspire to develop.

As an indicator of learning outcomes the GSA does not address students' discipline-specific learning outcomes. This is the case for all degrees but it is a major lapse in assessing the professional degrees where there is a clear, dominant, expectation that graduates have the required professional knowledge and skills that underlie employment in particular fields.

14. Section 4i.

15. *Striving*, para 110

Second, the GSA is failing due to low student interest. Only 698 students completed the 2001 exit test¹⁶. As a voluntary scheme it is not likely to succeed unless substantial numbers of employers were to seek a GSA result from graduates in preference to their formal university results. Even this would not create student interest in sitting the test at first enrolment.

The alternative of requiring students to sit the test, to give a comprehensive comparative base, would likely meet substantial resistance from students (who may accordingly complete the test with varying degrees of seriousness). The cost of the test would also need to be met (\$12 million a year to test about 200,000 students¹⁷) whether through imposing a further charge on students (the present arrangement) or use of Government funds. This would not be a good use of those funds.

Articulating and monitoring academic standards

The AVCC supports ongoing university developments to:

- **make explicit the standards expected for each course;**
- **use criterion-based assessment;**
- **encourage discussion about student learning outcomes and assessment across universities by staff in related fields;**
- **increase the extent of external validation or comment on the standards and their application; and**
- **use a common grading scale.**

The AVCC does not support:

- **formally constructing national standards; and**
- **developing a single, formal, external validation that specified standards are being applied.**

A substantial section of *Striving for Quality* argues that the standards universities use in assessing students should be explicit and public and that there should be external surety that those standards are being applied by universities.

In doing so, *Striving for Quality* makes many important points about standards in contrast to the simplistic, and misleading, debate about “soft marking” and declining

16. ACER, GSA Exit 2001, February 2002

17. Based on indications from the ACER during the development of the GSA that the cost per student was about \$60.

standards that has occurred in recent years. Standards are not absolutes, nor timeless, but should change as expectations and needs change.

This position is supported by the AVCC, which said in its submission to the Senate inquiry of 2001:

“The test of assessment standards is that universities set marking levels, in particular pass marks, to a standard that demonstrates significant additional learning by the students compared to their entry level knowledge and the necessary knowledge and skills for future employment. These are not likely to be static as the content of courses and their target students change over time.”¹⁸

Unfortunately, the underlying assumption of *Striving for Quality* is that the standards set and measured should be consistent across the whole university sector (eg para 146)¹⁹. This assumption is too simple. It does not consider the nature of the mass student body, students’ needs, the various degrees offered across universities, and what universities aspire to achieve for their students.

The AVCC fully agrees that the standards expected of students should be explicit, known and fairly applied. The move towards criterion-based assessment, where appropriate, reinforces this position. Through stating the requirements clearly, assessment is much more accountable and open than in the past²⁰.

But it is not self-evident that the criteria used should be the same in all, similar, courses in Australia.

- Where the student intake for similar degrees varies considerably across universities, should they be subject to the same assessment standards or should the standards be allowed to vary by course, based on the outcomes specified for each? This is a critical question as the size of the student body increases.
- A course with students chosen from a wide range of entry qualifications is quite different to one that has selected students only from a narrow range. To distinguish among the latter set of students is likely to require more fine grained distinctions.

The pace at which courses require updating means that national standards are very likely to impede development through imposing a conservative mould of previous

18. <http://www.avcc.edu.au/news/scroll/submission.pdf>

19. The paper states that universities have 13 different marking schemes in place. In reality there are two main alternatives in use, which differ primarily on whether the top grade should cut in at 80 or 85.

20. The use of norm-based assessments in past decades, and the lack of any study based on other than staff memory, sharply limits the value of claims that standards have either fallen or risen (eg: Anderson, 2001 and 2002, cited in *Striving for Quality*). Such claims require a study of actual assessment material. Even so, such a study might find that the differences in curriculum and objectives are such as to prevent any serious comparison.

years' concepts. Universities should be encouraged to provide courses in different ways, with different emphases. This would provide students – and employers – with options, and keep pressure on each university to ensure that its courses are suitable in both curriculum and assessment.

The same concerns apply to the monitoring of standards by formal external processes, presumably driven by Government. Such monitoring assumes that it is possible to define and measure to an extent that would allow for an objective common assessment of the standards used. It would also consume resources better used to improve quality. It ignores the fact that there are many expectations of a university graduate – from employers, from the community, from professional bodies. An effective system must be responsive to all of these but give primacy to none.

At present universities are subject to external validation from a number of sources, most notably from the various accrediting bodies but also from employers and from community scrutiny. None of these carries full authority, but each has a legitimate perspective. These all build on ongoing discussion across universities from staff in related fields. The proposal by McInnis and James cited in *Striving for Quality* is one example of how such peer-based discussion and assessment could be developed in the future.

An effective focus on outcomes will rely on a set of assessments, each with its own limitations that, collectively, will provide the needed feedback for universities to assess and reshape their courses.

Performance data and a national higher education statistical agency

The AVCC believes that the Government should consider the creation of a national data agency to collect and publish all higher education data to provide basic public information on the outcomes and performance of Australia's universities and higher education providers.

Striving for Quality rightly argues that the data available on universities is collected by a number of agencies and reported in various ways. A sensible solution is to establish a separate, higher education data collection and publishing body.

Such a body would provide greater certainty about the collection and release of data. It should work to an agreed charter specifying its data collection and publication functions. This would be a worthwhile achievement and could help streamline data provision and follow-up action.

Such an agency could also work on the coherence of the data and how to interpret it effectively. It would need to work with related agencies collecting data on vocational education and training. The continual release of data would provide public information on major data items relating to students and provide information on student satisfaction, subsequent employment and further study.

Such information already confirms that university education is well provided. However, to make precise comparisons across the sector is very difficult due to the range of variables such as different courses, student characteristics and different labour markets.

The AVCC has worked with the GCCA and DEST to improve the direct relevance of student experience data by making the Course Experience Questionnaire a more flexible instrument that reflects better the different priorities of universities. This is one example of how national data can support sector diversity, rather than constrain it.

However, the better presentation of data is unlikely to improve substantially the use of the information by prospective students. Studies²¹ suggest prospective students use such information lightly because it has only partial relevance to them. Students are interested in different sets of information, few of which are gained through quantitative data from, or about, previous students. The challenge is for universities to improve the provision of the individual information and advice students need to make sensible choices.

5. Conclusion

Striving for Quality discusses a major issue essential to the higher education review: how to ensure the quality of student learning in Australia's universities. It demonstrates the extensive changes that universities have made over the past decade to improve student learning and to ensure that the learning environment is suitable for the substantial number of students who are now seeking university education.

Universities' responses have been based on defining their particular missions and working to achieve those missions. The direction for the future must focus on enhancing universities' capacities to refine and achieve their missions so that they can continue to ensure effective student learning. National, single, and centrally co-ordinated systems – whether for teacher accreditation, setting of standards, or the monitoring of standards – will act against the development of a more flexible university sector to the detriment of student learning.

Rather, each university should be accountable for its own achievements through the judgments of students, employers, community and Government. This would be assisted by the public provision of data to a higher education data agency.

Diversity will provide the environment for quality.

21. R James, G Baldwin, C McInnis, *Which University? The factors influencing the choice of prospective undergraduates*, DEST 1999, EIP 99/3; A Harvey-Beavis, L Robinson, *Views and Influences: tertiary education, secondary students and their advisors*, DEST 2000, EIP 00/08,