Compliance and improvement pivotal

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By Margaret Mazzolini.

As the embryonic Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) takes form, the five standards domains – Provider, Qualifications, Teaching, Research and Information Standards – are currently working in progress. At this stage there is little that would represent more little than a title, however in terms of the overall impact on the sector, TEQSA’s information requirements will be pivotal to striking a balance between quality compliance and quality improvement.

At a recent conference in Madrid, Ian Hawke, Chairman of TEQSA, commented that: “A formal standards-based approach in the information domain at the data collection level is a key that can be anticipated through this domain is a requirement for higher education providers to make a range of specified information available to students to enable them to make more informed decisions about where to study.”

Given the range of consultations already underway, it could be tempting to postpone decisions on appropriate Information Standards until the other standards are settled. However, TEQSA’s likely data requirements resemble a complex jigsaw, where pieces may become locked in place before being fully understood as to where they need to represent. DEEWR is already putting together the My University website and has embarked on a new information system, so presumably TEQSA information requirements will need to be fleshed out soon.

Likely data requirements for the five TEQSA standards domains will be partly interlinked, and relate in turn to those for the My University website, performance funding indicators, developing TEQSA requirements, the TEQSA risk matrix and (probably) TEQSA’s forethoughted thematic reviews. Combined, this is the likely interlink of requirements that resourcing and systems implications for institutions, and if the data requirements are separately scoped, TEQSA could end up with an overall data jigsaw where pieces overlap or leave gaps.

Quantitative indicators underpinning TEQSA Standards will be based on data already being collected from universities, together with new requirements. Both old and new requirements will apply to all higher education providers and will require consistent data definitions, collection and verification processes. Again, quoting Hawke’s presentation, “One of the challenges which TEQSA must confront is the adequacy of data collections...” While comprehensive data collections from universities are not new, they have been undertaken for decades, the same is not true of Australia’s 150 private providers. Under current arrangements, annual reports by third-party providers to State and Territory regulatory agencies are mandated. But there has been no standardisation of data definitions or quality audits to verify the accuracy of these returns (audited financial statements aside).

Given the increasing numbers of institutions offering both VET and HE qualifications, it’s unsurprising that TEQSA and its VET counterpart, the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA), require the same data to be provided and incorporate into their databases. Alignment of compliance requirements such as reporting timelines and Teaching Performance Fund. If, for example, questions on co-curricular social opportunities are included in the new University Experience Questionnaire, then related funding proposals may well receive more sympathetic hearings within institutions in future.

The My University website is likely to represent a key component of the jigsaw, even though it won’t have the status of a TEQSA Standard. Hawke commented that medium term TEQSA priorities will include the “relationship of TEQSA information requirements with those of the Commonwealth as funder and any new requirements for the My University website”.

In this context, it’s instructive to explore the companion My Schools website. The first-time user is naturally drawn to data that already displays the comparative ‘stars’ ratings in the Good Universities Guide and provides the information necessary to make an informed choice about which provider to attend. My University is likely to ‘broadcast’ the same information but with the additional value of being a government branded portal.

The current TEQSA discussion paper on Teaching and Learning Standards emphasises the importance of qualitative approaches such as peer review. Such qualitative approaches can provide rich data to inform internal quality improvement, but may not easily be captured across institutions. The developers of the My University website may choose instead to rely on the same set of quantitative learning and teaching indicators that DEEWR intends to use for performance funding via compacts, but even these indicators may undergo a reformulation to reflect the current compact template for a new portal. The current TEQSA discussion paper on Teaching and Learning Standards emphasises the importance of qualitative approaches such as peer review.

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A ndrew Norton is known for his higher education research, but the most popular topic on his blog (Observe from Carlton’s Looking Glass! http://andrewernorton.info/) has been about milk bars.

"In the backyard streets of Carlton was a little milk bar that had been around there since the 1870s, and was closed down in 2009 I wrote a post about the role of milk bars in my childhood growing up in the unit." said Norton.

"Obviously this struck a chord with people posted comments about their memories. It’s interesting because milk bars involved fluidity between social groups, and that is a feature of community engagement that is important for the success of ASQA as well as TEQSA."

"The current absence of well-accepted comparative measures in some standards domains, together with new implications for institutional resourcing and systems, will provide TEQSA with interesting challenges. If TEQSA is to gain respect, it will be important that pragmatic considerations such as data requirements for performance funding and for the My University website don’t tip the balance too far in the direction of compliance-based data provision and away from facilitating quality improvement. The art in putting together this jigsaw will be to balance the desire for rich, qualitative information to support evidence-based improvement within institutions, with blunter but more cost-efficient quantitative measures to facilitate benchmarking across the sector."

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Milk bars are big education attention

by Jennifer Bennett

tudent mobility between countries requires quality assurance of qualifications and credit transfers. This is especially important for higher education from developing countries that want to expand their reach. The My University website will also allow institutional comparisons on issues such as student survey results, measures of graduate skills and HE achievements and national literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN) test results.

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