The Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework
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The Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework

This paper provides an overview of quality assurance in the Australian higher education sector. It begins by considering the development of higher education quality assurance in Australia, particularly through the 1990s. The paper then outlines Australia's current multi-faceted quality assurance framework. It covers the various roles of the higher education sector, the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, as well as two joint Government initiatives: the Australian Qualifications Framework and the Australian Universities Quality Agency.

This paper is timely due to the recent introduction of two major quality assurance initiatives by Australian Governments represented on the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. In March 2000 the Council established the Australian Universities Quality Agency and endorsed the adoption of the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes. These two initiatives have been introduced to ensure that the higher education sector maintains and enhances its quality in an increasingly competitive environment, and they are discussed in some detail within this paper.

Introduction

Throughout the world there has been a move to mass higher education, associated with greater diversity of institutions and programmes and a large increase in the number and size of universities. This expansion of higher education has prompted the rise of a variety of modes of course delivery, including franchising arrangements with third parties under which the parent institution may exercise limited control, virtual course delivery, as well as the delivery of courses through satellite campuses situated at a substantial distance from the institution’s main campus. All these developments pose challenges for the efficacy of institutional quality controls.

In addition to the changes impacting the higher education sector referred to above, other new pressures are emerging, both nationally and internationally. Australia’s national policy environment encourages universities to seek greater commercial opportunities and align themselves more closely with industry needs. Efforts by the higher education sector to attract business investment rely to a considerable extent on available evidence attesting to the quality of their service and the skill level of their graduates. Formal, transparent and credible systems of quality assurance will help guarantee a successful future for Australian universities in this environment.

The world’s workforce is becoming increasingly geographically fluid across national, regional and international borders due to economic globalisation and the development of advanced communications and information technologies. In this context, knowledge has emerged as an economic commodity which has in turn placed pressure on existing national systems to ensure they are placed competitively in the international marketplace.
There is currently a strong move throughout developed countries towards having rigorous, internationally recognised higher education quality assurance processes. Foreign governments and institutions considering education relationships with Australia, and families considering personal education investment must have confidence in the quality of Australian universities and in the quality and reputation of Australian degrees.

These changes in organisation, scale and mode of delivery have led to increased public concern about the maintenance of programme quality. In response, many countries have taken steps to establish mechanisms for quality assurance in higher education. Governments must justify spending on higher education in competition with other demands for public spending. Communities whose taxes must support the system and individuals who need to be satisfied about the value and portability of their credentials all demand external validation of the quality of their investments.

Development of Quality Assurance in Australia

Since the late 1970s the Commonwealth Government has promoted a climate of critical self-assessment within the higher education sector, and Australian universities have been encouraged to monitor their own performance. Throughout the 1980s this focus was extended to include the improvement of efficiency and effectiveness, and an increased awareness of public accountability. From the mid-1980s greater emphasis was placed on system-wide studies. Major discipline reviews were funded to determine standards and to improve quality and efficiency. While these reviews served to highlight the importance of quality assurance within institutions and across the sector, there was no mechanism to ensure that the recommendations of the reviews were acted upon at the institutional level.

The Australian higher education sector experienced large scale structural reorganisation in the late 1980s, and rapid growth in higher education participation from the early 1990s. Given this, the Commonwealth Government was concerned to assure the community that the quality of higher education in Australia was of an appropriately high standard and that it would be maintained and enhanced.

In its 1991 policy statement, Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s, the Commonwealth Government sought to address the weaknesses of the discipline review approach to quality assurance. The statement announced a comprehensive set of measures to enhance the quality of higher education teaching and research. A major initiative was the provision of funding, additional to institutional operating grants, to those universities able to demonstrate a high level of quality assurance in the context of their missions and goals.

The Government established the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in November 1992 to provide advice on quality assurance issues, conduct independent audits of institutional quality assurance policies and procedures, and to make recommendations to the Government on the allocation of annual quality-related funds. These funds were made available to institutions from 1994.

Three rounds of independent whole of institution audits were performed under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Program between 1993 and 1995. The voluntary self-

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1 Baldwin, Hon P. MP 1991, Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s, AGPS, Canberra,
assessment undertaken by institutions under this Program fostered an enhanced and enduring awareness of the importance of internal quality assurance and triggered considerable change in institutional systems as procedural gaps were identified and outcomes measured. In fact, the audit program served as a mechanism for change. Rather than providing a snapshot of current activities as the discipline reviews had, this holistic approach had the advantage of involving much of the university in a self-analysis and it evaluated policy and hence commitment to the future.

In early 1998, after wide consultation, the Government integrated quality improvement into its yearly funding negotiations with institutions. Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans were required of universities from 1998 onwards and are published annually by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA). These plans are expected to contain goals and strategies to maintain and improve quality assurance in the key areas of teaching and learning, research, management and community service and they focus on outcomes.

In April 1999 Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers of Education, meeting as the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, referred the issue of a common approach to higher education accreditation criteria and procedures to a committee of higher education officials from the State, Territory and Commonwealth departments of education. The committee’s deliberations were informed by developments in quality assurance in the higher education sector in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as by developments in the international arena.

The committee recognised the strength of the current quality assurance arrangements and sought to build on that strength. It recognised the need for common accreditation processes across all States and Territories and the need to independently evaluate those accreditation processes, as well as the internal quality management processes adopted by universities. The committee presented its advice to Ministers in March 2000 and made two recommendations: that Ministers endorse the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Process and agree to the establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency. Both recommendations were accepted by Ministers and were integrated into the Australian quality assurance framework.
Figure 1: The Australian Quality Assurance Framework
As outlined diagrammatically in Figure 1, the framework encompasses the roles of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), the universities, State and Commonwealth Governments and the Australian Universities Quality Agency. The following pages detail these elements of the framework beginning with the AQF.

The Australian Qualifications Framework
The AQF was established by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in 1995 to provide for national articulation of awards offered in the Australian vocational education and training and higher education sectors. The AQF also maintains a public register of MCEETYA-endorsed post-compulsory education providers and accreditation authorities. The higher education institutions and accreditation authorities on the AQF registers have the full endorsement of Australian Education Ministers represented on MCEETYA and as such, the list protects the integrity of Australian higher education.

The Universities
Australian universities are established by or under Commonwealth, State or Territory legislation. They have the authority to accredit their own programmes, and have primary responsibility for their own academic standards as well as the quality assurance processes which underpin them. The capacity to responsibly exercise this authority is among the criteria for recognition as a university in Australia.

The relevant legislation vests responsibility for governance and management in a governing body in the form of a Council or Senate, which is accountable to the Federal, State or Territory Government. The governing bodies are generally composed of the Chancellor, senior academics including the Chair of the Academic Board, as well as external members, government appointees and staff and student representatives.

All universities develop annual Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans. The plans are an integral part of the institutional planning process. They indicate the institution’s goals, outline strategies and report on outcomes. They provide a definition of the attributes of the university’s graduates and include a range of outcomes information.

Universities have internal processes to ensure quality in the areas of admissions, teaching, learning and assessment. There are processes to assess new course proposals and to monitor and evaluate course curriculum on a continuous basis, including regular evaluation of student feedback. These mechanisms involve consultation with, and often accreditation by, relevant industry or professional bodies in addition to formal assessment by the university. Normally courses are subject to review on a five-yearly basis.

External bodies play an integral role in assuring the continuing high quality of higher education in Australia. It has become common practice in Australian universities to arrange for professional associations to perform programme reviews in fields such as

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2 More information on the AQF, including its public registers, can be found on their website at <www.aqf.edu.au>.
accountancy, engineering, architecture, dentistry and pharmacy. Professional accreditation bodies examine the general structure and content of curriculum, academic standards and course length. They establish general expectations concerning entry level to courses, practical experience, subjects to be covered and mode of study. This process enables universities to compare the quality of their academic activities with other institutions, and to ensure that their graduates are well equipped to operate at the leading edge of their profession.

Universities also cooperate with each other to provide external evaluation of honours degrees and higher degrees by research, as well as peer reviews in the competitive grants process. It is common practice to use international examiners in the evaluation of higher degrees. Many universities participate in national and international networks and benchmarking projects undertaken by those networks.

Different arrangements are in place among Australian universities for the assessment and improvement of staff teaching and research. Institutions undertake student evaluation of teaching, develop special projects for the improvement of teaching and offer internal awards for teaching excellence. Promotion criteria normally focus on the quality of teaching, research activity and community service contributions. Most institutions have entered into relationships with other Australian and international universities to facilitate staff exchanges, collaboration in research and benchmarking of course delivery standards.

Where an Australian university or other self-accrediting institution operates in a distant location and issues an award under its own name, the Council or governing body of the university or institution is responsible for quality assurance. For its overseas campuses the institution is expected to maintain standards at least equivalent to those provided in Australia regardless of any specific requirements of overseas governments. Universities are also expected to ensure the standards of courses provided through franchising and other arrangements in which the university is not directly delivering the course. Where there are serious concerns about the quality of delivery the arrangements may be subject to review by State or Territory Governments.

State and Territory Governments

Australian State and Territory Governments have a number of responsibilities in respect of quality assurance in higher education. These responsibilities were standardised by the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes that were endorsed by Australian Education Ministers in March 2000. Before this time the processes employed by the States and Territories varied. The Protocols were designed to ensure consistent criteria and standards across Australia in the recognition of new universities, the accreditation of higher education courses, delivery arrangements for higher education courses involving other organisations, the operation of overseas higher education institutions in Australia, and the endorsement of higher education courses for overseas students.

Establishment and recognition of universities

State and Territory Governments have responsibility for approving applications from institutions wishing to operate as a university within their State or Territory.

To establish a common standard and process for the recognition of universities across Australia, the Protocols specified a common definition of an Australian university, being ‘an institution which meets nationally agreed criteria and is established or recognised as a university under State, Territory or Commonwealth legislation’.

An Australian university must demonstrate the following features:

- authorisation by law to award higher education qualifications across a range of fields and to set standards for those qualifications which are equivalent to Australian and international standards;
- teaching and learning that engages with advanced knowledge and inquiry;
- a culture of sustained scholarship extending from that which informs inquiry and basic teaching and learning, to the creation of new knowledge through research, and original creative endeavour;
- commitment of teachers, researchers, course designers and assessors to free inquiry and the systematic advancement of knowledge;
- governance, procedural rules, organisation, admission policies, financial arrangements and quality assurance processes, which are underpinned by the values and goals outlined above, and which are sufficient to ensure the integrity of the institution's academic programmes; and
- sufficient financial and other resources to enable the institution's programme to be delivered and sustained into the future.

Delivery arrangements involving other organisations

The Protocols detail the powers of State and Territory Ministers over institutions that have a campus in their jurisdiction, yet are based elsewhere. Where the Minister in a State or Territory in which a campus is operating has serious concerns about quality of delivery they may, following consultation with the Minister in the State or Territory where the institution is established, conduct an independent review.

The review will enable the State or Territory Government to:

- establish conditions for the continuation of activities within the State of Territory;
- require that the operations of the institution within the State or Territory occur under the academic supervision of another institution; or
- close the campus and cease providing programmes in that State or Territory.

The Protocols also confirm that institutions offering an award, regardless of whether they have used curricula and materials supplied by another institution, will be subject to the accreditation requirements of the State or Territory in which they operate.

Accreditation of higher education courses to be offered by non self-accrediting institutions
Non-university providers wishing to offer courses leading to higher education awards are subject to regulation in the States and Territories. Mutual recognition arrangements are in place between jurisdictions, and providers may apply for courses to be offered concurrently in two or more States or Territories.
Higher education courses offered by non self-accrediting providers must:

- satisfy the award level requirements set by the AQF;
- be comparable to courses at the same level at Australian universities;
- be able to be successfully delivered at the level proposed; and
- providers must have appropriate financial and other arrangements to permit successful delivery of the course, and must be a fit and proper person to accept responsibility for the course.

Recognition of overseas higher education institutions

An overseas higher education institution refers to a university or other recognised higher education provider whose legal origin is in a country other than Australia. To gain approval to operate in an Australian jurisdiction, an overseas institution must meet the following criteria.

The institution must demonstrate that:

- it is a bona fide institution, legally established in its country of origin;
- the courses to be offered have been properly accredited in the provider’s country of origin by an authority that, in the opinion of the Australian jurisdiction’s decision-maker, is the appropriate authority;
- where the standing of the institution’s accreditation status is not acceptable to the decision-maker, the decision-maker may require the proposed courses to be subject to a full accreditation process;
- the course or courses are comparable in requirements and learning outcomes to a course at the same level in a similar field in Australia;
- the delivery arrangements, including the arrangements for academic oversight and quality assurance proposed by the overseas institution are comparable to those offered by accredited Australian providers; and
- appropriate financial and other arrangements exist to permit the successful delivery of the course in the Australian jurisdiction.

Protection of the word ‘university’

Until recently, it was taken for granted that a university in Australia was an institution established by specific legislation. All States and mainland Territories of Australia have legislative or procedural arrangements which effectively require an institution wishing to operate as a university in their jurisdiction to be established by the mechanism of a legislative instrument.

To protect the standing of Australian universities nationally and internationally, the title ‘university’ is now protected in two ways:

- by protection of the title ‘university’ in business names/associations legislation, and under Commonwealth Corporations Law; and
by establishment in all Australian jurisdictions of a legislative framework specifying consistent criteria and procedures by which an institution/organisation may use the title ‘university’.

Endorsement of courses for overseas students

Since 1991 it has been the responsibility of State and Territory Governments under the Commonwealth Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS Act), to endorse courses of study as suitable for overseas students. This endorsement is accepted by the Commonwealth for the purpose of issuing visas to students. \(^4\)

For the protection of students and the international reputation of Australian awards, this endorsement is only given where the endorsing authority has confidence that the courses concerned are offered at a standard equivalent to other programmes of a similar kind, that facilities and services are of adequate standard, and that the organisation providing the programme has the financial and other resources to ensure full and effective delivery of the programme.

The endorsement of courses for overseas students is given by the State or Territory where the course is to be delivered.

Endorsement of higher education courses for overseas students is only given by, or following advice from, State or Territory officers responsible for accreditation and the approval of higher education awards. If the course is to be offered in special circumstances such as at a distant location or through an agent, the endorsing authority requires that particular concerns be met.

The authority must be satisfied that:

- the special circumstances will be made clear to students before enrolment;
- the facilities and services are of adequate standard for the courses offered;
- in the case of delivery through an agent, the teaching staff are adequately qualified, effective quality assurance measures are in place, and appropriate guarantees by the principal institution are given for the protection of students; and
- the endorsement of the course is not transferable to another provider.

Where a course is to be offered by an institution other than a university or other self-accrediting institution there are also particular requirements.

- the course should be accredited according to the guidelines specified for non self-accrediting institutions, and the institution must have approval to offer the course in that jurisdiction; and
- the endorsement of the course is not transferable to another provider.

This Protocol will be supported by a National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students, which is currently being developed by DETYA. The Code seeks to provide a nationally consistent and legally enforceable framework for the registration of providers of education and training to overseas students.

The Commonwealth Government

The Commonwealth Government, through DETYA, plays a key role in the quality assurance framework. It substantially funds universities, monitors and publishes performance data and provides the sector with a range of tools and incentives to enhance the quality of outcomes.

Commonwealth funding for higher education, with some minor exceptions, is provided as a triennial funding agreement under the Higher Education Funding Act 1988. Integral to higher education funding in Australia is an accountability framework. As established under the Act, publicly funded institutions must submit annually an 'educational profile' to the Commonwealth that outlines their strategies to achieve outcomes in a variety of key areas, information regarding previous and projected student load, as well as a detailed financial report. A condition of receipt of operating funding is that institutions must spend financial assistance received only in accordance with the educational profile provided to the Commonwealth.

Through the profile process DETYA collects an array of information from universities. Information provided in preparation for these meetings enables DETYA to review the performance of institutions on a number of levels, and provides a means of assessing their resource needs. As part of the profile process each institution is required to submit plans in the areas of quality assurance, research, indigenous education and equity. The Commonwealth publishes annually universities' Institutional Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans, their Indigenous Education and Equity Plans and, from 2001, their Research and Research Training Management Plans.5

Quality assurance and improvement plans

As indicated above, since 1998 all triennially funded institutions have been required to submit an Institutional Quality Assurance and Improvement Plan to the Commonwealth as part of the educational profiles process. The plans outline the university’s goals and aims in the key areas of teaching and learning, research, management and community service. Each institution is required to provide detail of the strategies that have been adopted to achieve their goals and the indicators used to assess their success.

The plans are expected to include the outcomes data from two national surveys which assess the employment success of recent graduates, as well as graduate perceptions of teaching.6 The plans have enabled the Commonwealth to report to the wider community on the quality and quality assurance processes of Australian universities. More importantly they are a means of public accountability in the area of quality assurance for overseas students on the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students.

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5 The Indigenous Education Plans, Equity Plans and Research and Research Training Plans are not covered in this paper. Further information on these plans can be found at <www.detya.gov.au>.

6 These indicators are derived from the Graduate Careers Council of Australia’s Graduate Destination Survey and the associated Course Experience Questionnaire, which are sent to all graduates of participating Australian higher education institutions.
Australia's publicly funded universities, and enable students to make more informed choices about the institution that best suits their particular needs.
Performance management tools

The Commonwealth Government provides tools, incentives and information to encourage the improvement of outcomes within Australian universities. The Commonwealth recently funded the development of a benchmarking manual for higher education institutions. The manual provides sixty-seven benchmarks that universities can use to assess themselves against like institutions. The benchmarks cover the spectrum of university activities from teaching and learning to research, finances, internal management and internationalisation.

A system wide survey of the employment success of students after graduation, known as the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS), has been conducted since the 1970s by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia. The Commonwealth Government funds the survey and institutions provide the necessary administrative support. The survey is completed by graduates four months after completion of their courses. It provides information on the proportion of graduates in full-time employment (including industry, occupation and salary level) and full-time study (including level and field) from each institution. The survey provides valuable comparative information to the public, and useful benchmarking information to universities themselves to help them assess the success of their graduates in the competitive labour market. GDS data are also published annually by Commonwealth Government.

The Commonwealth funds the annual undergraduate Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) as well as the newer Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ). Both of these student surveys are disseminated by the Graduate Careers Council and are a valuable source of information on student perceptions of their experiences at university. The Course Experience Questionnaire covers teaching, goals and standards, workload, assessment, generic skills and overall satisfaction. The Commonwealth is currently funding the development of additional scales for the CEQ which will measure broader aspects of student experience in the areas of student support, learning resources, learning community, graduate qualities and intellectual motivation.

The PREQ was created by the Australian Council for Educational Research in conjunction with the Graduate Careers Council and was administered nationally for the first time in 1999. It measures research graduates' satisfaction with supervision, skills development, intellectual climate, infrastructure, thesis examination and goals. Both CEQ and PREQ data are collected from institutions annually as part of the profiles process and are included in their Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans.

Another Commonwealth-funded instrument to measure performance is the Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA), which has been designed to assess the generic skills of university graduates. This voluntary instrument, developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research, tests the generic skills of university students, both at point of entry to and exit from university. The components of the test are critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal understanding and written communication. The GSA was piloted in early 2000 with the assistance of universities and was taken in late 2000 for the first time by graduating Australian students. At entry level the test might be used by institutions to assist poorly performing students. At exit level the results could be used by

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institutions to determine graduate entry and by employers to make judgements about 
generic skills for employment purposes. The GSA could also be used to measure the value 
added by institutions or to compare the differences in student profile between fields of 
study.

The Commonwealth publishes The Characteristics and Performance of Higher Education 
Institutions which provides a range of indicators that illustrate the diversity of the sector. 
The indicators cover student characteristics, staff, research, finances, as well as some 
outcome measures. These measures include retention rates and the graduate outcome data 
referred to earlier.

Outcomes data are used by institutions to review their own performance (benchmarking 
within and across institutions) and by the Commonwealth to monitor quality across the 
higher education sector. The data are included in commercial student guides and help to 
inform student choice.

Programmes to support quality

The Commonwealth Government established the Australian Universities Teaching 
Committee (AUTC) in 2000 as part of its commitment to promoting quality and 
excellence in university teaching and learning in Australia.

The AUTC has been briefed to:

• identify emerging issues in teaching and learning in Australian universities and 
propose strategies for dealing with these issues;
• identify and support effective methods of enhancing learning;
• encourage dissemination and adoption of these methods across the Australian 
university sector;
• promote collaboration and exchange of information in teaching and learning both 
nationally and internationally, and encourage and foster innovation in higher 
education teaching and learning; and
• manage the prestigious Australian Awards for University Teaching.8

The Australian Universities Quality Agency

The elements of the quality assurance framework discussed above, those employed by the 
higher education sector and State, Territory and Commonwealth Governments, were 
developed and refined largely over the last two decades. However, universities and 
governments recognised the need for a means of independently verifying these quality 
assurance arrangements and agreed to the establishment of a new audit agency.

The establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency was endorsed by the 
Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs in March 
2000 as an independent national agency to monitor, audit, and report on quality

8 More information on the AUTC can be found at <www.autc.gov.au>.
assurance in Australian higher education. The new agency will commence its audits in 2001.
The Agency is responsible for:

- conducting quality audits of self-accrediting institutions and State and Territory accreditation authorities on a five-yearly basis;
- providing public reports revealing the outcomes of these audits;
- reporting on the criteria for the accreditation of new universities and non-university higher education awards, as a result of information obtained during the audits of institutions and State and Territory accreditation processes; and
- reporting on the relative standards and international standing of the Australian higher education system and its quality assurance processes, as a result of information obtained during the audit process.

Audits of the State and Territory higher education accreditation authorities will pay particular attention to their processes, consistency with agreed higher education quality standards, and consistency with comparable judgements made in other States and Territories.

Academic audits of self-accrediting institutions will be whole of institution audits based on a self-assessment and a site visit. They will focus on the key areas of teaching and learning, research and management and on the adequacy of an institution’s quality assurance arrangements. They will assess the institution’s success in maintaining standards consistent with university education in Australia. The Agency will make use of panels of experts with substantial senior academic and administrative experience in higher education to undertake the audits. The audits will not be overly burdensome on universities and the Agency will pay particular attention to maintaining the diversity of the higher education sector.

The Agency will not have responsibility for investigating complaints about institutions or accrediting agencies. Action taken in response to negative audit reports will be the responsibility of the governing body of the institution concerned or in the case of State and Territory accreditation authorities, of the relevant Department and Minister. However, reports will be publicly available and failure to respond appropriately to negative reports might result in funding sanctions by the Commonwealth or regulatory action by the relevant State or Territory.

The Agency is an independent not-for-profit company owned by members of the Ministerial Council. It operates independently of governments under the direction of an appropriately structured Board of Directors. The Agency receives funding from the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments and the costs of audits are to be met by the entities subject to audit.

The Board has a membership of:

- five persons elected by the Chief Executive Officers of higher education institutions (four by self-accrediting institutions including universities, and one by non-self-accrediting providers of higher education courses);
- six persons nominated by Ministers (three by the Commonwealth Education Minister and three by State and Territory Higher Education Ministers) and
- a Chief Executive.
The first Chair of the Board was nominated by the Commonwealth Minister, and subsequent Chairs will be elected by the Board.

Conclusion

This brief examination of quality assurance arrangements in Australian higher education does not seek to provide an exhaustive description of action that is occurring across the sector in quality assurance and improvement. It seeks to provide a snapshot of the broad quality assurance framework for the benefit of interested parties in Australia or overseas.

The Australian Qualifications Framework provides award descriptors and a list of Ministerial Council-endorsed accreditation authorities and recognised universities. It helps maintain the quality and integrity of Australian higher education.

At the institutional level there are a variety of quality assurance arrangements in place. Institutions are assisted in the task of quality improvement and assurance by the accreditation activities of professional bodies and registration boards, by the Australian Vice Chancellors’ Committee’s various codes of practice and guidelines, and by the contributions of employers to the identification of skills needed by graduates to perform effectively in the world of work.

The Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans submitted to DETYA for the 2000–2002 triennium show that Australian universities have developed a number of approaches to assuring and improving the quality of their operations. Within a diverse higher education system, quality management is becoming an increasingly important part of the strategic planning process and institutions are highly conscious of the need to deliver optimal outcomes in a competitive national and global environment. That Australian graduates are performing successfully in a demanding and dynamic labour market is a strong indication that our universities are succeeding in this endeavour.

State and Territory Governments are responsible for the legislative arrangements which protect the integrity of Australian universities and higher education award nomenclature.

At the national level, the Commonwealth Government monitors progress across the sector and reports publicly on the quality of the system, to help potential students make informed choices and to provide the necessary assurances to the national and international community about the standard of Australia’s universities. The Commonwealth actively encourages enhanced performance through initiatives such as the Australian Universities Teaching Committee and the development of sector-wide efficiency and effectiveness indicators.

The new Australian Universities Quality Agency will audit universities and accreditation authorities to verify the quality of the system.

Overall, Australia has a robust but flexible approach to quality assurance. It recognises that our universities are diverse organisations which best meet the challenge of maintaining and enhancing the quality of their provision if they are able to operate in a framework of government encouragement without unnecessary intervention. Within this framework, universities are expected to engage in a pro-active, rigorous and ongoing process of planning and self-assessment which will enable them to ensure the quality outcomes expected by their students and the wider community.