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The Journal publishes scholarly articles on the theory and practice of higher education in the context of the private sector. It provides up-to-date perspectives of benefit to educators, scholars, students, practitioners, policy-makers and consultants, and covers:

- higher education policy and practice
- teaching, learning and curriculum design
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- postgraduate education
- academic leadership and management
- academic work.

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Readers are also invited to submit original commentaries on current issues relevant to private higher education. Commentaries in the form of responses to articles published in prior issues of the journal are welcome and may be considered for publication. Commentaries should be a maximum of 3,000 words and will be reviewed by a member of the Editorial Board. The commentary may be edited to ensure it fulfills the mission of the journal.

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Editor

Many thanks to our Journal Editor, Dr Laura Hougaz

Journal Editorial Board

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Prof Rosie Wickert
University of Technology Sydney

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Trinity College, University of Melbourne

Dr Michael Evans
Kaplan Higher Education, Brisbane

Prof Maria Fiocco
Curtin University, Perth

Dr David Guy
Intueri Education Group, Auckland, New Zealand

Prof Joo-Gim Heaney
Australian Institute of Higher Education, Sydney

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Dr Michael Tomlinson
Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), Melbourne

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Foreword

This second edition of The ACPET Journal for Private Higher Education for 2013 is being published following the election of a new government in Australia. The change of government has resulted in changes to the policy direction for the higher education sector. The opening commentary is therefore timely as it provides an overview of the current state-of-play affecting this sector, with particular consideration of the private sector.

In view of the evolving landscape in higher education, ACPET commissioned, and has recently released, a research report highlighting the current trends in higher education, and the growth and diversity of non-university higher education providers. The full report, which is available on the ACPET website, emphasises the significant contribution of private higher education providers in developing a truly diverse, flexible and responsive higher education system of high quality. A snapshot of this report is provided in this issue.

It is always interesting to read through the wide range of topics covered in the ACPET journal. This edition is no exception, with two further articles presenting, on the one hand, a discussion on academic governance in NUHEP institutions, and on the other hand, an international perspective of the status of private higher education in Saudi Arabia, focusing on their rapid growth, their quality and accessibility, in particular for women.

I hope that this edition will be of great interest to our members and many other readers.

With this issue, I take the opportunity to inform our readers that Professor Maria Fiocco has been appointed as the new Chair of the journal’s Editorial Board. Maria has extensive experience working in private higher education, has been a member of ACPET’s Higher Education Committee, and was a member of the journal’s foundation Editorial Board. It is with great pleasure that I welcome Maria to her new role and have no doubt that the journal will greatly benefit from her leadership and direction.

Finally, please join me in congratulating the authors whose work has been featured in this edition, and in thanking the members of the Editorial Board, all the Reviewers and the Editor for their ongoing work, dedication and achievement.

Introduction

This second issue for 2013 features some thought-provoking and diverse articles that reflect the various interests of our readers.

In his opening invited commentary, Sheehan provides a very perceptive analysis of the recent changes in the political landscape in Australia and examines the implications for the higher education sector, including the private sector. I am certain that the author’s sharp insights make this article interesting reading for all our readers.

The second article by Edwards and Radloff provides a snapshot of the Australian higher education sector following recent policy changes that have promoted growth and expansion. The article is a summary of a Research Report recently released by ACPET, and available on the ACPET website. It highlights the relative enrolment changes among the different types of higher education providers, suggesting that non-university higher education providers (NUHEPs) are continuing to grow their small but notable share of students. The article contextualises the potential role that could be played by non-university higher education providers in a future expansion of the system.

In the following article, the co-authors, Baker, Hougaz, and Wickert provide an informative first snapshot of the state of the art of academic governance across the NUHEP sector. They present the findings of a survey conducted across NUHEPs, and offer a set of effective guidelines that will support individual institutions to determine a model for academic governance that works for them as well as meets the challenging regulatory requirements.

The final article in this issue is a very interesting and stimulating analysis by Hamdan of the exceptional growth of the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia, including the status of private higher education institutions. The author discusses the purpose, philosophy and practices of these institutions, with a focus on the issue of access, particularly for Saudi women.

I hope that the varied facets of private higher education presented in this issue will be of interest to our readers, and that it will inspire them to submit commentaries and articles for future publication.
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Brendan Sheehan
LH Martin Institute, University of Melbourne

Abstract
With the recent election of the new Liberal government, new events and issues have arisen that may influence policy direction for higher education in Australia. This paper focuses on these issues and considers possible consequences for the non-university sector.

Keywords
policy, higher education, non-university private providers, NUHEPs, university

Introduction
Former prime minister Paul Keating’s declaration that “when you change the government, you change the country” is like most truisms: it is difficult to argue with at a general level but it is actually a gross oversimplification. By definition, voters want to change the country, at least to the extent of changing the government. But there is an enduring, even disarming, thread of continuity in Australian public policy over the past century and more:

• the federation project very nearly foundered in the 1890s over the issue of water rights to the various colonies from the Murray Darling Basin
• protection of Australian manufacturing industry was the issue that defined the first parliaments
• the first major piece of legislation introduced into the Commonwealth parliament in 1901 was the Immigration Restriction Bill
• Australian foreign policy has always been shaped by the need to nurture a great and powerful friend
• one of the major social policy initiatives of the Fisher Labor government in 1912 was a baby bonus of £5 payable to mothers of European extraction – think “one for mum, one for dad and one for the country” and multiply by two.

Still, the recent election of the Abbott government portends significant changes in policy direction in a number of areas, the most notable associated with climate change issues. On the face of it, education generally is an area in which little immediate change would be anticipated, with the major parties going to the election on broadly bipartisan platforms.

In the specific area of higher education, Tony Abbott set out in February 2013 “seven policy pillars”, the first and foremost of which was “stability”. Abbott told the Universities Australia conference:

“... we will be a stable and consultative government. If we put in place a policy or a programme, we will see it through. If we have to change it, we will consult beforehand rather than impose it unilaterally and argue about it afterwards. We understand the value of stability and certainty, even to universities.”

Unfortunately for universities, that stability and certainty locked in $3.8 billion in funding cuts, including a so-called “efficiency dividend”, effected by the Gillard government in its final year.

Unfortunately also for non-university higher education providers (NUHEPs), stability and certainty would mean that there is no likelihood in the foreseeable future of the policy and funding frameworks of higher education being reworked to accommodate a greater role for them through, for example, the extension of Commonwealth subsidies to private higher education students.

However, no sooner had the ink dried on Christopher Pyne’s appointment as Minister for Education than he set hares running with public musings about the need to review the demand-driven system whereby all students enrolled by a university attract a Commonwealth subsidy. He declared that you would have to be “living in a bubble if you think that there is not an issue in universities about whether there are quality issues about the extraordinary number of students being enrolled”.

In a sense, this merely continued the bipartisan approach: Pyne’s immediate predecessor, Labor’s Kim Carr, had expressed similar public views during his short tenure.

With ministers in other portfolios exercising their newfound authority, Prime Minister Abbott brought public musings to an
end and imposed a cone of silence, requiring that all interviews be “coordinated” through his office. While it has been widely commented upon, such a degree of central coordination and control is not at all unusual in contemporary media management arrangements and shows that Abbott intends to pursue an orderly and methodical approach to government.

First things first. The Commission of Audit is to report in January and March 2014 in order to inform the development of the Coalition government’s first budget in May 2014. The commission is charged with closely scrutinising all lines of expenditure and making recommendations about priorities, savings, and efficiencies.

It is not at all helpful for that process to have ministers unilaterally ruling things in and/or out. Abbott is starting with a largely clean slate on the budget, apart from a few signature policies such as abolishing the carbon tax and introducing paid parental leave, and understandably he wants to keep it that way, leaving room to move once the commission has reported. If the government is to take contentious decisions, as it certainly will, it wants to be “impelled” by the circumstances (“there is no alternative”), with the authority and justification of the commission’s report behind it.

During the election period, the Coalition argued that Australia faced a budget emergency. The problem was apparently not so much now as “going forward”. The river of gold flowing into Treasury coffers during the decade-long resources boom was spent by governments of both persuasions and was locked in, even as the river dries up and our terms of trade deteriorate. On top of that are recent big ticket areas of expenditure in the offing, including disability care, schools funding, defence capability, parental leave, and transport and other infrastructure. These commitments generally extend beyond the forward estimates period (beyond 2016, after the next election) and are therefore unfunded. The money is yet to be found for such programs. There are also the implications of an ageing population given the rising social costs of looking after the baby boomers in their retirement with fewer overall taxpayers. This will be exacerbated at the other end of the scale by the long-term trend of younger people entering the workforce later as they pursue education and training.

The former government faced these dilemma in framing its final budget, of how to reconcile a large and growing revenue shortfall with big spending promises. As one commentator put it:

“It’s a classic political dilemma. Australia has been spending more than it can afford for some time, but the government doesn’t want to cut services. It’s a difficult situation. The government needs to find a way to balance the budget and still provide the services people need.”

The Abbott government has since compounded its own declared emergency with a range of revenue and expenditure measures such as scrapping taxes, changing superannuation arrangements, and bankrolling the Reserve Bank to the tune of $8.8 billion which means that the budget task (returning the budget to balance/surplus over time) has become more difficult. The Budget bottom line has deteriorated at least 30% since the election, with the 2013/14 budget deficit headed south of $40 billion rather than the $30 billion projected in the pre-election economic statement.

One can imagine what the Commission of Audit is going to say about all this – and it won’t be along the lines of proposing tax increases: revenue does not come within the scope of its terms of reference.

It could be argued, and undoubtedly will be by some, that the higher education sector — in reality, the university part of the sector — has already contributed to the budget task through the nearly $4 billion in savings that have been extracted over the current forward estimates period (the next four years). The National Tertiary Education Union estimates that the savings measures of $2.8 billion announced earlier this year will reduce Commonwealth funding for each student place by $600 between 2012 and 2015.

However, that argument is not at all likely to insulate the sector from further “savings” and “efficiencies”. One respected commentator, Peter van Onselen (both an academic and a journalist), expects the Coalition government to take the axe to higher education funding in the manner that the Howard government did in its first budget (over the period 1996 to 2001. In that period, Commonwealth outlays on higher education declined from 56.7% of the total to 43.8%, with a commensurate rise in student contributions and fees).

It has been clear for some time that general budget pressures, and the ballooning cost of higher education, would bring the gaze of policymakers, post-election, to the efficacy of a demand-driven system — whatever the hue of the government.

The post-election gaze is unlikely to stop at the demand-driven system, and will certainly take in the architecture of the entire
system, including the place of non-university higher education provision, which has a small but growing role in provision.

Over the six years of the Labor Rudd/Gillard government, there was explosive growth in higher education participation, and funding, fuelled by the phase out of enrolment caps during the period 2010–2012. In announcing its last set of funding cuts in April 2013, the Gillard government claimed that student numbers had increased by 34% or an extra 146,000 students (more recently, it has been reported as 190,000 extra students) and funding had increased by 50% since 2007. That was on an upward trajectory, with enrolments projected to increase by another 100,000 students, and expenditure by another couple of billion dollars, by 2016.

In order to meet the target of 40% of 25–34 year olds having a bachelor degree by 2025, it is estimated that there will need to be at least about another 300,000 students in higher education by 2025 (with some estimates suggesting up to 500,000 additional students).

The requirements of meeting that projected growth is enough to cause any minister to contemplate the need for change.

The growth in participation in higher education has sparked a debate about entry standards, with a report by the Australian Council of Educational Research analysing university admission data Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) entry scores — which are used to determine university placements by ranking academic performance relative to every other Year 12 student — showing that ATARS are on average are declining.

Why this should have come as a surprise to anybody is, itself, a surprise. The main aims of the higher education reforms arising out of the Bradley Review process were to:

1. increase higher education attainment in the general population and
2. increase higher participation by poorly represented population groups (primarily low SES, disadvantaged, regional, and Indigenous people).

The overall effect must be that, on average, a lower ATAR than had hitherto been necessary (or no ATAR at all) will get more applicants into a university course than had previously been the case (though not into any university course at any university).

However, Christopher Pyne has declared that he will not be bound by the former government’s higher education policies, including its targets.

Pyne’s concerns are widely, although nowhere near universally, shared in the sector. There are no definitive data as to whether the average decline in ATARS for university entry has been accompanied by a decline in quality.

Nevertheless, there is a direct correlation between ATAR and risk of dropping out, with analysis by Andrew Norton at the Grattan Institute showing that school leavers who enter university with an ATAR of 90 or above have a 90% chance of completing their degree, and completion rates fall in a corresponding line with lower ATARS. On average, students with ATARS below 60 drop out at a rate of one in three, and those with ATARS below 50 drop out at the rate of 50%. Norton strongly supports retention of the demand-driven system on the grounds of both equity and efficiency, as do vice-chancellors of universities that have significantly grown their student numbers (and Universities Australia has urged caution on this).

The quality argument has been led by the Group of Eight (Go8) universities, the research-intensive universities at the elite end of the spectrum. They have argued that direct entry to university for school leavers should be restricted to those with an ATAR of 60 or more, with a minimum 70 for teaching. According to the Go8, this would save $750 million over four years, and that amount could be used to partially offset recent cuts and be partially reinvested in an improved system of pathway courses to provide access to higher education for students who do not meet the academic preparation benchmark straight from school.

Greg Craven, Vice-Chancellor of Australian Catholic University, has said that “it is an endearing eccentricity of the ‘university quality’ debate that it is about the quality of the students, not the universities. In fact, it’s about money.”

Of course, it’s about money. Craven is correct. His own university has doubled in enrolments since 2009 and, under current settings, is set to grow about another 25% by 2015. Inevitably, that results in less money going to the older universities — which are growing at nowhere near that rate — and, in a budget constrained environment, it has served to divert public funding from other university activities such as research. The negative impact of budget savings has fallen on research funding, and, so the research intensive universities claim, disproportionately on them.

However, the Go8 has now moved away from a rather crude, self-serving formulation of “what about us?”, to one of equity. There is a point to that perspective.

Sue Willis and Catharine Burnheim of Monash University have suggested that some of the money being spent on enrolling more low-ATAR students into degrees would be better spent on pathway programs and vocational education and training. Data show that low-ATAR students, who are selected on the basis of their performance in pathway programs, perform
strongly and in a wider range of fields than they would otherwise be able to access:

“Admitting under-prepared students with low ATARs not only increases their risk of non-completion, it restricts their choices. Lower ATAR students admitted directly to bachelor degrees are being selected on the basis of their current preparation, rather than their potential for university study, while graduates of pathway programs have a chance to prepare for a wider range of disciplines, and demonstrate their aptitude for tertiary study.”

The Coalition government will not simply restore the caps and return to the highly centralised student place allocation system of the past. Both the Minister for Education and the Prime Minister have ruled that out. Rather, the approach is most likely to be what is obliquely referred to as a “re-calibration” — the caps you have when you don’t have caps. It will most likely be around some form of minimum ATAR.

A recent proposal by Glyn Davis, vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne (one of the Go8) is that the appropriate cap is on funding rather than on student places, with the universities being broadly free to set their own goals and their student profile, allocating funding between postgraduate and pre-degree places, as well as undergraduate places (only undergraduate places are uncapped). However, as Curtin University (not a Go8 member) academic Tim Pitman, observed “(deciding) student profiles’ sounds better than ‘restricting access’ and ‘within the funding envelope’ certainly sounds more agreeable than ‘cutting higher education funding’ but they amount to the same thing.” Quite.

Still, it is one of the options, and it accords with the sentiment of Abbott’s seven pillars, which include not seeking to “micro-manage universities” (although the Howard government most certainly did as much micro-managing as the Rudd/Gillard governments).

It appears almost certain that the form and level of fees — both the government subsidy for students in Commonwealth supported places and the student contribution (what is usually referred to as the Higher Education Contribution Scheme, or HECS) — will come into the Commission of Audit’s considerations.

Minister Pyne himself briefly emerged from the cone of silence to indicate that the Commission of Audit should consider “securitising” HECS debt — that is, selling off the debt to investors, in one form or another.

Although Pyne referred to the sale of student debt in England as some sort of a precedent, he did not mention that it had not exactly been a booming success there. Two previous attempts have realised relatively small proceeds (a couple of billion pounds against a book value in excess of 40 billion pounds). To be attractive to investors, whatever the short-term boost to the balance sheet, it would have to be on such conditions (involving discounts, higher interest rates, guarantees, and the like) as to impose significant medium- to long-term costs to individuals and government.

The same conditions would apply in Australia. To be attractive to investors, the sale of the debt would have to be at a discount — say $12-15 billion for the $23 billion book value of the debt — and involve other sweeteners, such as an increase in the HECS interest rate to something approximating market rates. As economist Joshua Gans explains it, such a sale would be a mere accounting trick that does not make sense in terms of prudent financial management.

Whether as an alternative to securitisation or as part of a securitisation package, significant changes to HECS (HELP) seem certain. These could include the introduction of a real interest rate (perhaps something higher than CPI but lower than market rates), a lower repayment threshold (currently HECS debtors begin repaying when their income exceeds $51,000), methods to collect repayments from expatriates (bilateral agreements with the UK and New Zealand, to start with), and recovery of HECS debts from deceased estates. A proponent of such reforms in the past has been former education minister, Amanda Vanstone — a member of the Commission of Audit.

The Business Council of Australia (BCA) has also set out its own proposals for higher education reform. The BCA’s agenda includes deregulating university fees, an issue that is strongly championed by the Go8 universities and largely (though not universally) opposed by the rest.

Indeed, Go8 chair Fred Hilmer, perhaps the strongest champion of fee deregulation, has taken it a step further, proposing that the public subsidy be withdrawn altogether for some high demand disciplines such as law and business in return for universities being able to charge higher fees. This has been done elsewhere. Although when in opposition the British Conservative Party promised not to interfere with fees, in government they promptly trebled them and withdrew the public subsidies from all but the STEM fields of study (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, regarded as core disciplines). Hilmer’s proposal could be taken to its logical extension by “privatising” the student loan as well, supporting it by a public subsidy along US lines. Doing so would fix the growing public HECS burden, albeit at the cost of creating a hybrid system difficult to administer.

Withdrawing the public subsidy for non-STEM disciplines would at least “correct”, in what I would call a perverse sort
of way, an inequity in Australian higher education where, with a couple of minor exceptions, only university undergraduate courses attract a public subsidy. The increasing number of students taking higher education courses at NUHEPs — public and private — get nothing. This places the latter at a distinct competitive disadvantage relative to universities. It significantly disadvantages students undertaking unsubsidised higher education at NUHEPs, many of whom have had an unconventional pathway to higher education as against students undertaking subsidised higher education at a university.

The better way of correcting this inequity would be to extend at least some public subsidy for non-university degree and pre-degree courses. Over the past 18 months or so, collaborative arrangements have been established between universities and NUHEPs, resulting in the tentative emergence of a new style of integrated (or comprehensive) tertiary provider, with a strong orientation towards teaching and scholarship (the “polytechnic”, however described), using Commonwealth Supported Places, such as the Australian Polytechnic Network (APN). It remains tentative because former education minister Chris Evans, vetoed such arrangements while his successor, Chris Bowen, subsequently approved them, at least in the case of the APN. There is no indication of Minister Pyne’s attitude, but, in the current budget environment, it might be supposed that he would not be favourably disposed to see an extension of Commonwealth funding, particularly where it might be seen to support forms of education that in effect substitute for state funded VET activity (which was ostensibly Evans’ reasoning).

Rather, the approach is most likely to be what is obliquely referred to as a “re-calibration” — the caps you have when you don’t have caps.

In areas of shared funding in Australia’s federal system, particularly concerning health education and training, issues of maintenance of effort, substitution and cost shifting often loom large and hamper service delivery. The Commission of Audit might be expected to pay some attention to them (despite its tight timelines). If the BCA’s reform agenda is any pointer to Tony Shepherd’s, thinking, as it probably does, in tertiary education there would be some strengthening of the Commonwealth’s role to create a more national approach and a more connected tertiary (higher education and VET) system. However, we live in a federation and an ambitious reform agenda of this sort will founder, in the short term, on state sensitivities. States do, after all, constitutionally “own” education and training (even higher education, including universities — but that’s another story). As a sometime state official, I am sympathetic to the argument that “if you give away everything, sooner or later you have nothing left” — and the states end up as mere agencies of the Commonwealth, but that seems to be the ineluctable trend of constitutional evolution in Australia.

Whatever the Commission of Audit recommends in this area (if it recommends anything at all) Minister Pyne would be well advised to take a longer view about the development of Australia’s tertiary sector and eschew short term budget fixes that lock out NUHEPs.

If “quality” and “standards” are the drivers of the review of the demand driven system, a reasonable approach would be to take up the proposition put by Willis and Burnheim that more resources be put into pathway, enabling, and foundation programs.

Government-supported opportunities for access to higher education at the sub-Bachelor Degree level (including Associate Degree and Other Undergraduate programs, and Enabling courses) totalled 25,482 places in 2012. This allocation of places represented just 6% of commencing undergraduate students. Enabling courses comprised two thirds (16,428) of all these government-supported access places.

The purpose of enabling courses, where participation is free and universities are paid a top-up in lieu of the student contribution, originally was stated as being “to provide a pathway to higher education for students from disadvantaged groups who do not yet have the academic preparation to enroll directly in award courses”. In 2013 the enabling loading was increased from an estimated $1,833 to $2,500 per place, and from 2014 it will increase to $3,068 per place (with the rate indexed in later years). The distribution of enabling and sub-bachelor allocated places among universities appears rather haphazard and not necessarily related to low-SES and Indigenous student enrolment shares. Similarly, the allocation of Associate Degree places appears arbitrary. Of course, it becomes difficult to increase the number of sub-Bachelor allocated places with the cost of uncapped Bachelor places continuing to rise and with students who might benefit from such pathways being accepted directly into university undergraduate courses.

As far as I know, no Commonwealth money flows directly to NUHEPs (though some might flow through indirectly).

It turns out that there is a potential pot of money to fund an expansion of enabling/foundation programs in both the university and NUHEP sectors. The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), aimed at assisting universities to improve access to undergraduate courses for people from low SES backgrounds, expires at the end of 2013. The former government allocated new funding...
of nearly $600 million over four years, to the end of 2017, subject to passage of legislation containing the efficiency dividend. Given the rhetoric around standards, it would be incongruous to allow the program to just expire. The program might be redesigned somewhat to direct more funding into enabling/foundation programs, available to NUHEPs as well as universities.

In line with the recommendations of the Review of Higher Education Regulation Report, Minister Pyne has already moved to lighten the “regulatory burden” on universities. Pyne might usefully go further and initiate a reconsideration of higher education providers and institutional types.

A concept that has some currency is that of a university college which is used in a number of countries to denote institutions that provide higher education but do not have full or independent university status, with the university college often being part of a larger university or university system. A number of NUHEPs, have expressed interest in this concept (sometimes also referred to as a “polytechnic university”).

The rules that govern the accreditation of higher education institutions — the Higher Education Threshold Standards — carefully protect the title of “university” in any form of use — more tightly than anywhere else in the world. Since 2007, in Australia, a “university college” is specifically defined as an institution seeking ultimate registration as a full university (within five years). Among other things, a university college is required to provide AQF qualifications up to Masters coursework degrees in at least three broad fields of study and Research Masters and PhD or equivalent Research Doctorates in one field. It has five years to satisfy the requirements of becoming a comprehensive university (research and research training in at least three broad fields).

Ultimately, the rules that govern our system ought to reflect reality and the reality is a continuum of institutional types from “teaching intensive” to “research intensive”.

Dropping the research requirement, a university college would be a higher education teaching institution, perhaps affiliated with a comprehensive university, with its focus on scholarship rather than research in the style of a US Baccalaureate university. Such an institution would be a convenient vehicle for collaborations and partnerships between universities, TAFEs, and private higher education providers and it would facilitate greater differentiation and diversity within the system in a number of ways.

The existence of these institutions would provide students with a wider choice of institutions — and in thin markets, perhaps provide a local choice, which is vital in terms of providing reasonable accessibility to higher education opportunities. These institutions could also provide some relief to the Commonwealth Budget and provide students with some choice in terms of price.

The logic of the demand-driven system, as suggested by Bradley, is that Commonwealth funding follows the student regardless of the type of institution, public or private, university or NUHEP, as long as the institution satisfies accreditation and ongoing quality requirements.

Is that going to happen? Probably not any time soon, but it is an idea whose time must surely come.
Research Report –
Higher Education Enrolment Growth:
Exploring Recent Change by Provider Type

Daniel Edwards & Ali Radloff
Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

Summary of Report prepared by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET)

Abstract
This paper provides a snapshot of the higher education sector following recent policy changes that have promoted growth and expansion. The emphasis of this work is to highlight the relative enrolment changes among the different types of higher education providers in the sector during this growth period. The analyses show that most growth in the sector has been in universities – because it is universities which were the specific aim and beneficiaries of substantial change in policy and funding provision. However, the data also suggest that at the same time, other providers such as Private HEPs and TAFEs have managed to continue to find a market in domestic undergraduate enrolments and have continued to grow their small but notable share of these students in Australia. With these findings in mind, the paper contextualises the potential role that could be played by non-university higher education providers in future expansion of the system.

Keywords
undergraduate enrolments, higher education policy, access to higher education, education providers

Introduction
The Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education, carried out in 2008 presented an opportunity to the Commonwealth Government to refocus higher education on the national agenda (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). The policy direction resulting from the Bradley Review was, in simplified terms, built around two targets – one focussed on universal growth in attainment levels and the other relating to improving enrolments of those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Within this context, this paper maps the recent change in higher education enrolments. Drawing on new and previously unpublished data, it examines the massive growth in the system since 2009 and the extent to which this growth was distributed – by student enrolment characteristics, demographics and importantly by type of higher education provider (HEP).

The intention here is to provide a snapshot of the higher education sector as it is following recent policy changes, with an emphasis on highlighting the relative changes among the different types of higher education providers in the sector. Within this scope the paper also contextualises the potential role that could be played by non-university higher education providers in future expansion of the system.

This paper begins with an overview of the background and policy contexts, highlighting Government targets and policies relating to enrolments in higher education. It then explores in detail the overall enrolment changes in the sector, with emphasis on presenting data by provider type. It finishes by exploring the future for higher education in Australia by examining the current situation relating to the key targets for expansion and widening of access and looking at how these targets might be achieved, again with emphasis on the roles of different providers in the sector. Unless otherwise noted, all data in this paper is from the Commonwealth Government’s Higher Education Statistics Collection.

Background
For the past few years, higher education enrolments in Australia have been dominated by change: changes in funding allocation, changes in enrolment numbers, changes in Higher

1 Research report was officially released by ACPET CEO, Claire Field, at Higher Education Compliance and Quality Network (HECQN) Conference, held in Melbourne on 11 November 2013. The full report is available on the ACPET website at: http://www.acpet.edu.au/about/publications/
The recent changes in higher education most relevant to this paper are encapsulated in an ‘expansion agenda’, in which two key targets recommended by the Bradley Review are paramount:

- that 40 per cent of 25-34 year olds will have a bachelor degree or above by 2025; and
- 20 per cent of undergraduate enrolments will be made up of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds by 2020.

A key policy driver in facilitating the growth in university enrolments is the implementation of a student demand-driven funding system which provides funding for all public universities to enrol as many students as they deem eligible for study. This replaces the previous system of capped enrolment numbers for universities based on a quota negotiated between institutions and Government. The new policy draws on a key recommendation of the Bradley review, stated below:

“From 2012, Australian public universities ... will be funded for student places on the basis of student demand. The government will fund a Commonwealth supported place for all undergraduate domestic students accepted into an eligible, accredited higher education course at a recognised public higher education provider”


The policy as it currently stands applies only to public universities. However, it is important in the context of this paper to highlight that the original Bradley recommendation was more specific than the current policy when it came to ‘other’ (i.e. non-public university) providers of higher education. It recommended that the demand-driven funding system should “apply initially only to public universities, but would be extended to other approved providers when new regulatory arrangements are in place” (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008).

The role of the current demand-driven funding policy in the expansion of university enrolments is detailed in the following sections of this paper. The parallel growth in other providers (Private, TAFE) is also tracked in these analyses. The influence of this change on the achievement of these two targets is then explored at the end of the paper.
Quantifying growth

Undergraduate enrolments for domestic students in Australia have grown at a remarkable pace over the past few years. Figure 1, which charts the commencement numbers from the beginning of this century, to 2012, shows a sharp rise in the trajectory of enrolments in the last four years of this time series. To further emphasise the relative scale of the recent growth, Figure 2 highlights the difference in the level of enrolment increases during the 2009 to 2012 period, compared with changes in the two four year periods prior to this. The 2009 to 2012 period has seen an increase in commencers of 43,600, or 21.3 per cent. By contrast the 2001 to 2004 period experienced a decline in commencers (by 6.7 per cent) and the 2005 to 2008 period saw more modest growth of 7.8 per cent in commencements.

2009 is an important reference point in tracking enrolment change because this is the year in which the policy of demand driven funding was announced by the Government. As such, the time series comparisons which follow are based on quantifying change as of 2009. This year marked the last year in which the previous ‘status quo’ in enrolments among public universities (Table A providers) was in place. In the years following 2009, universities were given the opportunity to begin to prepare for the uncapped student demand-driven funding system which began in full in 2012. The ‘preparation’ for the fully uncapped system in 2012 was characterised by the softening of government caps or quotas on the number of students that each university could enrol. In 2010 and 2011 universities received funding for each student enrolled up to 10 per cent above the cap applied by Government at the time. As documented elsewhere (Edwards, 2011), many universities enrolled well above this limit, absorbing the costs of having non-funded places but establishing a new student base in preparation for the introduction of full demand-drive funding in 2012.
The growth in commencements to 2012 has led to some changes in the overall characteristics and types of students enrolled in undergraduate courses in Australia. In this section a range of student characteristics are examined. The focus here is generally on the 2012 commencement cohort and differences between providers.

The data suggest that in 2012, non-Table A providers accounted for 8 per cent of commencing domestic undergraduate students. Of all commencers, 5.8 per cent were at a Private provider and these providers enrolled 4.5 per cent of all domestic undergraduate students in Australia (Figure 3). As the pie charts show, the vast majority of enrolments are in the Table A, public university part of the sector.

An important element apparent in the higher education data for contextualising the differences in the sector is course-level emphasis by provider type. Figure 4 shows a substantial difference in the distribution of commencements by course type between Private providers and other HEPs. Essentially, Private providers have a smaller share of bachelor enrolments and more ‘other undergraduates’ among their undergraduate commencers. Other undergraduate courses aggregated in the higher education statistics include higher education accredited Associate Degree, Advanced Diploma, Diploma and ‘other’ qualifications. These figures do not include VET-linked qualifications of the same name (Diploma and Advanced Diploma) and do not include enabling courses or non-award, bridging courses provided by HEPs. In total, 35.8 per cent of all

### Table 1:

#### Domestic Undergraduate Numbers 2009 to 2012 by Provider Type – Commencements and all Enrolments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROVIDER TYPE</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>Change 09 to 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commencers (n.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table A</td>
<td>187,921</td>
<td>201,540</td>
<td>207,480</td>
<td>228,747</td>
<td>40,826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table B</td>
<td>3,480</td>
<td>3,567</td>
<td>3,631</td>
<td>3,614</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>12,860</td>
<td>13,750</td>
<td>14,622</td>
<td>14,324</td>
<td>1,464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>1,248</td>
<td>1,101</td>
<td>1,824</td>
<td>1,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>204,877</strong></td>
<td><strong>220,105</strong></td>
<td><strong>226,834</strong></td>
<td><strong>248,509</strong></td>
<td><strong>43,632</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROVIDER TYPE</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>Change 09 to 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All enrolments (n.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table A</td>
<td>558,364</td>
<td>585,175</td>
<td>605,413</td>
<td>639,876</td>
<td>81,512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table B</td>
<td>9,419</td>
<td>10,292</td>
<td>11,226</td>
<td>11,536</td>
<td>2,117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>25,434</td>
<td>27,446</td>
<td>29,626</td>
<td>31,096</td>
<td>5,662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>1,186</td>
<td>1,929</td>
<td>2,219</td>
<td>2,946</td>
<td>1,760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>594,403</strong></td>
<td><strong>624,842</strong></td>
<td><strong>648,484</strong></td>
<td><strong>685,454</strong></td>
<td><strong>91,051</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another important difference between the provider types is the distribution by the educational pathways students have taken prior to enrolment. The distribution of commencers by basis of admission shows that while secondary school is the most common pathway for Table A, Table B and Private providers, those entering a higher education qualification at TAFE are more likely to have been admitted on an ‘other’ basis. Commencing students in Private providers are also more likely to have come through an ‘other’ pathway. These providers also have a relatively large proportion of students gaining entry through mature age special entry provisions. These outcomes relate to the fact that overall, university commencers tend to be younger than those in Private providers and TAFEs, with 58 percent of Table A commencers, 43 percent of Private provider commencers and 32 percent of TAFE commencers aged under 20 years old.

There are noticeable differences between the provider types when enrolments are examined by discipline. In Figure 6, the distribution of commencers in 2012 is displayed by broad field of education. The data show that the most heavily enrolled fields for Private providers are Creative Arts (33 per cent of domestic undergraduate commencers), Society and Culture (25 per cent), and Management and Commerce (23 per cent).
Fewer than one per cent of commencements in Private providers were in the field of Science. TAFEs also have strong enrolments in Management (21 per cent) and in Creative Arts (19 per cent), but differ from Private providers in their relative size in Engineering (16 per cent), IT (10 per cent) and Architecture fields (9 per cent). Interestingly, TAFEs had no commencers recorded in the Society and Culture broad field in 2012. In Table A universities the most common field is Society and Culture (26 per cent), followed by Management and Commerce (17 per cent) and Health (16 per cent). Eleven per cent of Table A enrolments are in the Sciences – a field where the other types of providers have very few students.

Examining the differences between providers in terms of the ATAR of students commencing is also interesting, especially in the context of discussion around quality (Norton, 2013; Teece, 2013). Firstly, it is important to note that fewer than half of all commencing students in 2012 have an ATAR recorded in the higher education data. As shown in Figure 7, the proportion of students outside of the Table A universities with an ATAR recorded in the data is very small, meaning that comparisons across provider types are not particularly useful on the whole. With this large caveat in mind, the data in Figure 8 shows the distribution of ATARs by selected bands across provider types for the commencing students who did have an ATAR recorded.

The final figure in this discussion explores the SES background of the commencing undergraduate cohorts by provider type. The distribution of students by SES quartile is shown in Figure 9. The data show that Table A universities have the highest representation of enrolments by students from the lowest SES quartile (18.2 per cent of commencers based on this data), followed by Private providers (16.5 per cent). At the other end of the spectrum, 41 per cent of Table B commencers were from the highest SES quartile in 2012, followed by 36.9 per cent of undergraduate commencers at TAFEs. In all provider types, this high SES quartile was over-represented in enrolments (full representation would be 25 per cent).
Private providers contributing to growing participation

The data presented above has helped to highlight the similarities and differences between universities and other higher education providers. It is clear that the university part of the sector does and will continue to dominate the overall share of enrolments in higher education. However, it is notable that in the context of the past few years, when all the policy incentives were in place for promoting growth in public universities, the other providers of higher education in Australia continued to grow. As shown above, Private providers experienced a 22.3 per cent overall growth in enrolments between 2009 and 2012. This suggests that Private providers are serving a key constituency of students who clearly value the courses they are offering (otherwise one would expect that a Government subsidised university course would be preferable to a fee-based course).

A key question posed in the development of this paper is whether there is a greater scope for Private providers and TAFEs in the provision of undergraduate education in Australia, and linked to this, whether the introduction of Commonwealth Supported Places in these providers would stimulate a further expansion of the system and facilitate the achievement of both the attainment and the low SES access targets.

Meeting the attainment target

As discussed in more detail previously (Edwards, 2011; 2013), while meeting the 40 per cent attainment target appears to be a relatively simple proposition based on the trends over the past decade or so, the reality of the situation is that until very recently, the growth in attainment (from 24 per cent in 2001 to
36.8 per cent in 2012) has been driven more by immigration policy than by education policy. Recent growth in the sector has changed the extent to which Australian higher education in contributing to the attainment rates, but as shown in a previous paper for this journal (Edwards, 2013) and elsewhere (Birrell, Rapson, & Smith, 2010), if the higher education sector in Australia is to continue this recent upturn, sustained growth over the next decade is required.

However, the most recently available data on higher education demand suggests that the large growth in universities since 2009 may be slowing. The data in Figure 10 highlight the percentage change in applicant numbers for university each year from 2007. As is apparent from this data, applications for university in 2009 and in 2010 were relatively high. However, following this initial spike in demand, the rate of growth in applications for university has slowed in recent years, with the very latest data from 2013 suggesting demand has almost slowed to a halt. If this demand continues to slow, the likelihood of meeting the attainment target through expansion of domestic higher education enrolments is small.

In the situation described above, it is possible that an expansion of provision by Private providers (perhaps through the introduction of Commonwealth Supported Places) may be a way of re-stimulating demand for higher education in order to keep growth on track to meet attainment targets. As noted earlier, the Bradley Review did recommend that the demand driven system be expanded to other providers once the regulatory ‘arrangement’ was sorted out and the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) has now been enshrined in legislation since 2011.

An example of the potential additional growth that Private providers may be able to foster in an open demand system is highlighted by Edwards (2013) using the example of the VET system in Victoria. Data provided by the Victorian Government following the introduction of demand driven funding in VET showed a 75 per cent growth in enrolments, facilitated almost entirely by Private providers. While there are also important lessons to be learnt from the application of such a system, the response of Private providers to the market is shown here to be significant, and in the context of higher education it is possible that these providers respond by increasing awareness, demand and enrolments in higher education.
Exploration as to particular course types, disciplines and or geographic areas in which the expansion of CSPs could be facilitated through Private providers would be necessary to ensure that the choices in the sector remained balanced and that opportunities for study for all those interested in higher education could be facilitated. The different distributions between provider type by field of education and level of course described earlier (see Figure 6 and Figure 4) help to show there are areas where the smaller Private providers do not overlap with universities and it is in these niche areas, and in facilitating regional and remote participation, that some of the thinking in this regard might be useful.

Meeting the Low SES target

The growth of higher education enrolments in the past few years has been greater among those from low SES areas than it has been for other students. The data used in this paper show that low SES commencer grew by 29 per cent in the 2009 to 2012 period, twice the rate at which commencements from the highest SES quartile grew and at a faster rate than the national average of 21.3 per cent.

This increase is helpful in pushing towards achieving the low SES target of 20 per cent of undergraduate enrolments by 2020. However, despite the relatively large gains for this group, the data supplied for this paper suggests that the low SES representation in higher education has only marginally increased. The proportion of commencers who are from low SES backgrounds increased from 16.9 per cent in 2009 to 18.0 per cent in 2012, a small gain of 1.1 percentage points. On the measure that is specifically linked to the SES targets – all enrolments, the gain over this period of massive growth was more marginal, from 16.1 per cent in 2009 to 16.9 per cent in 2012.

The reality for the low SES targets is that even in a period of unprecedented growth in the past 20 years, the overall representation of low SES students in higher education in Australia increased by less than one percentage point in four years. Gaining the remaining 3.1 percentage points (as suggested in this data) to make the 20 per cent target in the space of seven years seems to be unrealistic if the status quo is maintained.

A potential way in which the status quo could be changed to increase the chances of expanding low SES participation...
is through the extension of CSP places to Private providers and TAFEs. While the data presented here show that these providers currently enrol a lower proportion of low SES students than do public universities, there is perhaps a possibility that the financial costs of upfront fees are responsible for this difference. Certainly the modes of provision supported by many Private providers are more conducive to benefitting under-represented groups due to relatively small class sizes and often a more pastoral approach to teaching and learning (Edwards, Coates, & Radloff, 2009).

Again, the Victorian VET example (while not completely translatable to higher education) suggests that the expansion of government funded education places in Private providers can be positive on participation of under-represented groups. The Victorian expansion, explained further elsewhere (Edwards, 2013) increased the participation of Indigenous students and the participation of students with a disability substantially in the VET sector.

Conclusion

This paper is being compiled at an interesting time. Only a month or so after a change in Federal Government, the sector is yet to have clarity on many of these big picture issues. What role do these policies and targets have under a Coalition Government? A big question that could again result in yet more reshaping.

In general, this paper has been produced to highlight the massive growth in enrolments over the past few years. It shows that this growth has been primarily driven by universities – because it is universities which were the specific aim and beneficiaries of substantial change in policy and funding provision. It has also shown remarkably that at the same time as this massive growth funded by the Commonwealth Government, other providers such as Private HEPs and TAFEs have managed to continue to find a market in domestic undergraduate enrolments and have continued to grow their small but notable share of these students in Australia.

A key aim of this paper has been simply to chart the differences of students in the higher education sector by provider type. The analysis here has established a number of differences in the student characteristics of enrolees by qualification type, field of education and demographic characteristic across the different types of HEPs, showing that the role in which each type of provider plays in the sector is relatively unique.

The concluding sections of the paper explored the role in which Private providers might play in increasing participation overall and participation specifically of low SES students. The implication from the finding here are that as universities begin to slow down their recent growth, Australia remains some way off achieving either of the targets set at the end of last decade. The role that Private providers could play in maintaining growth and expanding access should not be underestimated. However, the application of any CSP-related places into these providers should probably commence in a targeted way, with a focus on expansion of under-represented groups of students.

References


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Towards Maturity: Academic Governance in the Non-University Higher Education Sector

Anthony Baker
University of Technology, Sydney
Laura Hougaz
Australian Council for Private Education and Training
Rosie Wickert
UTS:Insearch

Abstract
Appropriate academic governance arrangements for non-university higher education providers are critical to ensure continuing quality in the academic programs of those institutions. Over the last fifteen years there has been substantial growth in the number of institutions in this sector and the regulatory environment has also changed. In recognition of the existence of many common issues, the chairs of academic boards of the non-university higher education sector have met regularly since 2011 as the Chairs of Academic Boards Forum (CABF). At the behest of CABF and with the assistance of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training, a survey of current academic governance practices was conducted across the sector. On the basis of the outcomes of this survey, and in light of the changing regulatory environment, the CABF is developing a set of good practice guidelines on academic governance. Selected findings of the survey are presented in this paper and discussed in the context of relevant regulations/guidelines. Draft academic governance guidelines for non-university higher education providers are presented.

Keywords
academic governance, non-university higher education, TEQSA, CABF, academic board

Introduction
The composition and structure of Australia’s non-university higher education sector has changed radically over the past twenty years. Institutions within this sector now range from small faith-based organisations to for-profit multinational corporations. Other providers include government agencies and commercial arms of public universities. With these developments, differing approaches to the governance, both corporate and academic, of non-university higher education providers (NUHEPs) have inevitably arisen.

The survey reported here focuses on academic governance arrangements and was commissioned subsequent to the first meeting of the Chairs of Academic Boards Forum (CABF) in November 2011. This meeting was called at the instigation of the Academic Board of UTS:Insearch in Sydney. One purpose of this initial meeting of the chairs of academic boards of NUHEPs was to ascertain whether such gatherings would be useful to this diverse sector, and, if so, what matters were of most concern.

The inaugural meeting of CABF was attended by representatives of 35 of the 132 eligible institutions that Ryan (2012) has identified as being eligible at that time. Despite the many and substantial differences in the history, size (in terms of staff and student numbers), academic programs, and modus operandi of the various NUHEPs across Australia, forum participants expressed a very strong interest in gaining an overview of current academic governance practices across the sector.

With the assistance of the Australian Council of Private Education and Training (ACPET), an exploratory online survey took place in 2012 and a report was presented to the second meeting of CABF in August of that year. Responses were received from 50 institutions, representing a response rate of 38%. The survey questions covered matters such as the constitution, composition, structure, independence, and operation of the academic boards of NUHEPs (then referred to as non self-accrediting institutions — NSAIs). Given the private higher education provider sensitivities about revealing information concerning their operations, the results were
Towards Maturity: Academic Governance in the Non-University Higher Education Sector

Anthony Baker University of Technology, Sydney
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Post-2012

The Threshold Standards that replaced the National Protocols have arguably strengthened the focus on academic governance, and, as the approach to oversight has changed from an audit of processes to self-reports in line with detailed reporting requirements, substantial evidence is now required of all higher education providers.

Chapter 1, Section 4 of the Threshold Standards is titled “Primacy of academic quality and integrity”. The five points in this section spell out in more detail the kinds of academic governance policies and measures that need to be in place to ensure that this Standard is met. Documented evidence of these policies and measures are required attachments for the TEQSA registration and renewal of registration processes (TEQSA, 2012a).

Table 1 shows selected Threshold Standards (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011) with examples of the kind of material that TEQSA expects to see as evidence of compliance with the standards relevant to academic governance and the role of the academic boards across the higher education sector, including NUHEPs (TEQSA, 2012a).

One of the main differences between AUQA and TEQSA is the approach taken to auditing. AUQA established a program of five-yearly visits that largely focused on the quality assurance processes operating in higher education institutions. Rather than auditor visits, TEQSA’s approach is to check compliance with the Threshold Standards via the submission of a dossier of specified forms of evidence, although unscheduled reviews may occur over areas of concern. In the case of an academic board, TEQSA looks for evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of the board with reference to the relevant Standards.

One way of characterising this difference between AUQA and TEQSA is that providers are now to be viewed more through a “risk against standards” lens than through a “quality assurance” lens. The implications of risk-based regulation for governing bodies of universities have recently been highlighted (Baird, 2013). In relation to Standard 3.7, this lens is evident in TEQSA’s Regulatory Risk Framework’s identified risk factors C.1 “Weak academic governance structure” and C.2 “Weak corporate governance structure/processes” (TEQSA, 2012b).

Pre-2012

Until the Threshold Standards were enacted in November 2011, NSAIs were accredited under the Guidelines for the Registration of Non Self-Accrediting Higher Education Institutions and the Accreditation of their Course/s (Relating to National Protocols A and B) (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2007). These guidelines gave effect to the National Protocols, and all providers covered by these guidelines had to reach a specified minimum level of compliance for accreditation. Audits undertaken by the then Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) used Quality Audit Factors (QAFs) that were related to the guidelines to assess, among other things, how well providers satisfied the minimum levels specified for registration as a higher education provider. Certain sections within those guidelines dealt specifically with academic governance and the relationship between academic and corporate governance (17.6) and between academic governance and quality assurance (17.3.1). NSAIs with international students also needed to comply with the requirements of the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act (see later for more on these requirements).

An analysis of twenty AUQA audit reports undertaken in 2010 found a need for improvement in academic governance in NSAIs (Winchester, 2011). In response, AUQA commissioned Professor Hilary Winchester, then Pro Vice Chancellor and Vice President: Strategy and Planning, University of South Australia, to prepare a paper on good practice in academic governance and quality assurance to assist NSAIs both to better understand their obligations in relation to academic governance and to meet those obligations (AUQA, 2010). These good practice guidelines informed the design of the survey questions.

Australia’s Higher Education Regulatory Environment

Since the end of January 2012, all higher education providers, whether university or non-university, are regulated under the requirements of the Higher Education Provider Standards (Threshold Standards) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011), which are administered by the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA). These Standards now unequivocally demonstrate that the Australian Government expects national consistency in the management and performance of public and private higher education, irrespective of the scope of higher education activity of the latter (Hawke, 2012).

Post-2012

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Table 1 shows selected Threshold Standards (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011) with examples of the kind of material that TEQSA expects to see as evidence of compliance with the standards relevant to academic governance and the role of the academic boards across the higher education sector, including NUHEPs (TEQSA, 2012a).

One of the main differences between AUQA and TEQSA is the approach taken to auditing. AUQA established a program of five-yearly visits that largely focused on the quality assurance processes operating in higher education institutions. Rather than auditor visits, TEQSA’s approach is to check compliance with the Threshold Standards via the submission of a dossier of specified forms of evidence, although unscheduled reviews may occur over areas of concern. In the case of an academic board, TEQSA looks for evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of the board with reference to the relevant Standards.

One way of characterising this difference between AUQA and TEQSA is that providers are now to be viewed more through a “risk against standards” lens than through a “quality assurance” lens. The implications of risk-based regulation for governing bodies of universities have recently been highlighted (Baird, 2013). In relation to Standard 3.7, this lens is evident in TEQSA’s Regulatory Risk Framework’s identified risk factors C.1 “Weak academic governance structure” and C.2 “Weak corporate governance structure/processes” (TEQSA, 2012b).
At a recent CABF meeting a TEQSA commissioner noted that TEQSA would be looking for a set of clearly defined and codified delegations that described the extent and authority of the academic board to do its business and for evidence of this authority being deployed by the academic board. Registration and re-registration as a higher education provider is dependent on a successful assessment against the Threshold Standards.

### Education Services for Overseas Student Standards

As indicated in the previous section, NUHEPs with overseas students are required to demonstrate compliance with

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**Table 1:**

*Selected Threshold Standards and Evidence of Compliance.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threshold Standard</th>
<th>Examples of evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 The higher education provider has a corporate governing body that has responsibility for oversight of all the higher education provider’s higher education operations, including conferral of its higher education awards, and to which management is accountable.</td>
<td>• A current chart of academic committee(s) showing structure and relationships; • Current documentation such as policies, schedules and/or registers authorised by the corporate governing body relating to financial, legal, academic and/or managerial delegations; • Evidence supporting effectiveness of the provider’s academic governance processes including those relating to course development, course approval, course monitoring and course review; • Reports from external or internal reviews of academic governance arrangements; • Formally approved composition, statute and/or Terms of Reference for the academic board or similar that has responsibility for setting academic policy and/or oversight of the maintenance of academic standards and effective quality assurance arrangements; • Development and review processes for academic policies, and examples of implementation; • Examples demonstrating how the provider’s strategic plan and associated plans (such as Teaching and Learning Plan) are used to guide decision-making; • Confirmed minutes of recent meetings of the corporate governing body, academic board, course advisory committees or similar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 The higher education provider’s corporate governance arrangements demonstrate a clear distinction between governance and management responsibilities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 The higher education provider’s corporate governing body protects the academic integrity and quality of the higher education provider’s higher education operations through academic governance arrangements that provide a clear and discernible separation between corporate and academic governance, including a properly constituted academic board and course advisory committees.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8 The higher education provider’s corporate and academic governance arrangements demonstrate:</td>
<td>• The effective development, implementation and review of policies for all aspects of the higher education provider’s academic activities including delivery of the higher education provider’s courses of study by other entities; • The maintenance of academic standards with appropriate mechanisms for external input, in accordance with international conventions or good academic practice; • Effective quality assurance arrangements for all the higher education provider’s higher education operations, encompassing systematic monitoring, review and improvement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2007** (Australian Government, 2007) to obtain registration on the **Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS)**. The scope of the 15 standards extends beyond academic matters, but at least eight of them are relevant to the work of an academic board. Compliance with Standard 10, for example, requires that the necessary academic policies are in place.

In line with Standard 14, the academic board would be expected to know that “the staff of registered providers are
suitably qualified or experienced in relation to the functions they perform for students. The educational resources of registered providers support the delivery of courses to students. The premises of registered providers, including the floor space available for each student, support students to achieve their course outcomes.”

It is clear from the regulatory environment described above that higher education providers, whether universities or non-universities, require a sophisticated understanding of academic governance in order to meet demanding registration requirements. So what is academic governance?

**Academic Governance**

There is a strong emphasis in the various documents of the so-called “new regulatory environment” on the need to distinguish between corporate governance and academic governance. In the glossary to the *Regulatory Risk Framework*, TEQSA provides the following definition of academic governance:

> Academic governance is a subset of the overall governance of an educational organisation, and deals with the framework that regulates academic decisions and academic quality assurance within the organisation. Academic governance includes the policies, processes, definition of roles, relationships, systems, strategies and resources that ensure academic standards and continuous improvement in academic activities, and is concerned with the integrity and quality of the core higher education activities of teaching, research and scholarship. (TEQSA, 2012, p. 33)

The academic board is intended to be the principal policy-making body on matters relating to the academic activity of the organisation and should hold authority for the approval, accreditation, and review of new and existing academic programs, both onshore and offshore. It is the role of an academic board to ensure that the academic activity of the organisation is undertaken within the agreed appropriate academic quality assurance framework and to test the academic activities against it.

According to the Higher Education Provider Standard 3.8:

> “the higher education provider’s corporate governing body protects the academic integrity of the higher education provider’s academic operations through academic governance arrangements that provide a clear and discernible distinction between corporate and academic governance including a properly constituted academic board and course advisory committees”.

Therefore the terms of reference or charter of an academic board must clearly indicate the scope of an academic board’s authority to make a decision over an academic matter, as distinct from making a recommendation or providing advice to the institution’s governing body.

All higher education providers are also required to have a corporate governing body, normally known in universities as a senate or council, and in NUHEPs as a governing board or council. In *Academic Governance and Quality Assurance: Good Practice for NSAI*s (AUQA, 2010, pp. 1-2), Winchester provides the following succinct distinction between corporate and academic governance, one that is applicable to all higher education providers:

> “Governance in general is the overall framework of structures and processes, and the overall environment within which all decisions are made in an organisation. ... Corporate governance is primarily concerned with an institution’s legal and financial standing, planning, compliance and reporting, which are the core responsibilities of the governing council or board of directors. Academic governance is concerned with the integrity of the core higher education activities of teaching and scholarship and in particular the structures and policies and processes which ensure quality outcomes.”

As noted earlier, AUQA auditors had concerns about academic governance in the non-university sector. In an analysis of relevant AUQA audits of NSAIIs, Treloar and Baird report that one of the most significant areas for improvement identified for NSAIIs is:

> “undoubtedly institutional or corporate governance, including risk management and the relationship between institutional and academic governance. Concerns over academic governance are also widespread, emphasising the pivotal role of the academic board or its equivalent peak body in academic policy and monitoring.”

*(Treloar & Baird, 2011, p.8)*

**Survey of NSAI Academic Boards**

**Development of the survey instrument**

ACPET worked with the CABF steering committee to develop a set of objectives for the research project, including a list of the information that the survey was aimed to capture. The definitions above, along with the then regulatory framework deriving from the National Protocols and concerns with compliance, provided the context for the design of CABF *Survey of Academic Boards of NSAIIs*. The questions focused on the membership and functions of academic boards in NSAIIs (as they were then called) and their role in advising the institution’s CEO and the corporate governing body on matters pertaining to academic development and delivery.

The initial draft of the survey instrument exploring academic board practices in the NUHEP sector was composed by ACPET
Towards Maturity: 
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Anthony Baker  
University of Technology, Sydney

Laura Hougas  
Australian Council for Private Education and Training

Rosie Wickert  
UTS:Insearch

research staff following a briefing and discussions with a representative of the CBF. The draft was then forwarded to members of the CBF steering committee a number of times seeking their comments and input. The survey draft was then forwarded online to a pilot group of NSAI representatives who were asked to complete it and provide relevant comments. Their feedback was incorporated into the final version of the survey, where appropriate.

Throughout all developmental stages of the survey it was considered important to keep the instrument reasonably short while ensuring that all the information needed would be captured. It was also important that the survey would be simple to access and complete in order to encourage maximum participation. The survey was therefore created and published as an online survey available through the ACPET online survey system.

The survey predominantly comprised structured response questions, but there were some open-ended questions that allowed for qualitative data to be collected to gain more insight into the respondents’ opinions and ideas on relevant issues.

An email was forwarded to all registered NSAI, personally addressed to the chairs of academic boards, seeking their support in completing the survey, clearly outlining its objectives, assuring the participants of their anonymity, and providing a link to the survey, making it therefore easily and directly accessible through the email. The response rate to the survey was 38%.

The e-survey tool used automatically classified and summarised the numerical data obtained through the survey instrument. Once collected, the data were made available to the researchers as an Excel spreadsheet, showing the responses in terms of frequencies and percentages. These data were then rank-ordered and compared, in order to identify and understand the significant patterns and themes that emerged. Selected findings are presented and discussed below.

Survey findings and relevant commentary

Academic boards of NUHEPs are on average much smaller than academic boards of universities — by about a factor of ten. The survey indicates that 72% of the 50 institutions that responded have academic boards with 10 or fewer members. Possible reasons for this difference are that there are fewer senior academic officers in the institution, there are fewer fields of study to represent, and there is less pressure to be representative.

For more than a decade, there has been a push in university governance to move away from a representative model of the governing body (comprising various stakeholder groups including students, staff, and alumni) to a “skills-based” model, mirroring corporate board structures. Although it is possible that NUHEP academic boards are more “skills-based”, perhaps reflecting the push for skills-based governing boards of universities, the most likely reason for the fewer members on their academic board is simply related to the smaller size and scope of the institutions when compared to universities.

Most of the 50 NUHEP academic boards (68%) reported having external members, with a sizeable majority having an independent chair. In this context, independent means that the chair was not a staff member and the only remuneration from the NUHEP related directly to the person’s role as chair of the academic board. The presence of external members perhaps reflects a lack of academic governance experience of the leadership of NUHEPs, and an expectation by the regulator that NUHEPs will seek external advice. A majority of NUHEPs have students and alumni as members of the academic board. Most academic boards have ex officio members including the CEO of the institution and perhaps “dean-equivalents”, i.e., academic leaders in a discipline area.

A term for membership of 1–3 years, found operating in 68% of the NUHEP academic boards, seems sensible, as long as there is a mechanism to ensure some continuity. There needs to be a balance struck between continuity and some turnover to ensure that new ideas are introduced. The noteworthy “no defined tenure” result (28%) suggests that rules around membership have not been fully developed in some institutions. Presumably there might be some turnover in internal members unless they are all appointed by virtue of their position in the institution. The majority of NUHEP academic boards have no limit on terms. It may be that these NUHEPs have appointed one or a few very experienced external members to their academic boards and want to retain them as long as possible. Again there may be a need to modify membership rules, so that some turnover of members is achieved.

It is surprising that a few chairs of academic boards responded that they do not operate under a charter or terms of reference. In terms of good academic governance it would appear necessary to have some delegated authority from the corporate governing body of the NUHEP, expressed in a charter or terms of reference under which the academic board can operate in its role of making decisions related to the academic activities of the NUHEP, approving academic policy, and overseeing the quality of academic activities.

The vast majority of NUHEP academic boards did not have a specific budget that reinforces the notion of a separation...
between academic governance and management. This result also highlights the need for an academic board to work effectively with management to ensure implementation of academic policy. Presumably any budget administered by an academic board might be for running its own meetings, and perhaps sending the chair to national meetings.

Normally an academic board will have a number of properly constituted sub-committees to execute its academic governance role. In following the legal principle *delegatus non potest delegare* (a delegate cannot delegate), each sub-committee is required to be established by resolution of the corporate governing body with defined composition, terms of reference, and reporting obligations. The governing body may delegate to the academic board the authority to change membership, terms of reference, and reporting arrangements of committees. Well-defined boundaries in the terms of reference of committees ensure good management of the division of labour with no unnecessary overlap. Differing names for sub-committees mean that it is difficult to quantify how many academic boards have a teaching and learning committee, for example, but a wide and appropriate range of sub-committees was in evidence. Of the respondents, 80% reported that each sub-committee has terms of reference.

The functions that an academic board should carry out include, but are not limited to, monitoring academic standards and academic quality assurance; setting academic policy; approving new units of study, courses, and programs prior to any external accreditation; assisting in establishing the academic aspects of the NUHEP’s strategic plan; reviewing progress in the academic dimensions of the strategic plan; reviewing existing courses or programs on a regular basis; and monitoring any academic collaborations or partnerships. Table 2 shows the functions fulfilled by academic boards, as perceived by the participating institutions.

The link between the academic board and the corporate governing body of the NUHEP is critical. Many academic boards appear to be well represented on the corporate governing body, although there are some governing bodies upon which an academic board is not represented at all. If the CEO is the only academic board member who is a member of the corporate governing body, it should be recognised that the CEO’s principal role on the governing body is not as the representative of the academic board. This indicates a lack of understanding of the essential linkage between corporate and academic governance that is present in effective higher education institutions. There could also be a risk that the presence of a member of the corporate governing body on an academic board might be an issue in establishing independence of academic governance, particularly in a for-profit institution. Ninety six percent of respondents to the survey, however, were of the view that their academic board was independent of the corporate governing body.

Frequency of the meetings of academic boards is a key issue. As an academic board is critical for good governance of an NUHEP, a regulator would expect it to meet frequently enough to transact its business efficiently in the meetings, but not so frequently that it might be a sign that it is involved in matters best left to others, for example, management. The modal frequency of four times per year is quite justifiable and it may be a matter of concern if an academic board met less frequently. Any proposed guidelines could recommend four to six meetings per year and indicate mechanisms for transacting business between meetings. Eighteen of the 50 respondents reported meeting three or fewer times a year.

The academic board should certainly receive regular reports on the progress of the NUHEP against the various agreed plans, such as the teaching and learning plan and the academic

### Table 2:

*Functions Fulfilled by Academic Boards.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of functions</th>
<th>Functions fulfilled by academic boards*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monitor academic standards and quality assurance</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide on academic policy and approve related procedures in conjunction with the executive team</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approve new courses, programs, and units/subjects of study</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advise on the institution’s academic aspects of the strategic plan</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advise on the development of and monitoring performance against the academic aspects of the strategic plan</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review existing courses</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor academic collaborations and partnerships</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentage of various functions fulfilled by academic boards of NUHEPS that participated in survey.
components of the strategic plan. There should be reports on student retention/attrition, student progression, student feedback, and pass rates. Other key reports might relate to graduate employability and graduate satisfaction. Such reports are essential so that the academic board can fulfil its academic quality assurance responsibilities. Tables 3 and 4 show results of the survey on these issues.

Depending on the nature of the institution, its academic board might receive reports on staffing matters such as staff development activities, staff surveys, staffing profiles, and extent of casualisation. These data are all quite important for the execution of the academic mission of the NUHEP, though it might be argued, and suit certain institutions, if some of these were principally in the management realm.

It is very important that academic boards engage in regular self-review activities to ensure that they are fulfilling their responsibilities. Only 34% reported undertaking self-assessment activities. As well as self-review it is important to receive feedback from the broader community of the NUHEP to ensure that the academic board is regarded as a key element of the academic governance of the institution. External reviews from time to time are also very useful. Benchmarking against other institutions is going to become absolutely critical for all NUHEPs because they need to demonstrate that their programs meet national standards.

The Role of an Academic Board

The material presented in this paper so far provides strong indications about the proper role of an academic board. Reviews of AUQA audit reports have suggested that confusion about the proper role of academic board is not uncommon (AUQA, 2010; AUQA, 2011; Dooley, 2007). Findings from the survey of NSAI academic boards show some variation as would be expected from such a diverse sector. Aside from AUQA publications (AUQA, 2010; AUQA, 2011), there has, to date, been relatively little to assist an academic board understand its role. Previous contributions to the important role of academic board in academic governance in the Australian context have been made by Dooley (2007), Markwell (2007), and Winchester (2007).

An academic board has a key role providing academic leadership; determining academic policy and standards; ensuring agreed policies and standards are maintained and improved; and that the policies, systems, strategies, and resources are in place to fulfil its roles. In summary, academic quality assurance should be the major function of the academic board.

Despite this, academic boards are not always accorded a central place in quality assurance of the academic activities of a university. Rowlands (2012, 2013) has found that academic boards in Australian universities are not effective in carrying out their quality assurance role and that the role of quality assurance has largely been subsumed by the senior management. Administrative
structures, including quality units, are in place to perform the data collection and analysis in order to provide evidence for the quality management systems, and report through the management structure. The data may be reported at specific “quality committees”, created by management, and at the academic board.

Perhaps the best means of clarifying the role of the academic board in quality assurance of academic activities is to explicate specific procedures that include the academic board as a vital element in the overall process. The leadership of the higher education provider, and of the academic board itself, should promote an active and engaged review of quality-related data. The need for greater engagement by academic boards has been raised before on the basis of a review of findings of AUQA audits on academic governance (Baird, 2007).

The National Conference of Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates (CABSS) is in the process of reformulating a 2007 national statement on the purpose and functions of academic boards within universities, and has produced a very useful discussion paper (CABSS, 2012). Recent meetings of CABF have resolved to develop a set of good practice academic governance guidelines for the non-university higher education sector, an activity in keeping with its objects. The draft guidelines presented below reflect many elements of the 2012 CABSS discussion paper.

**Academic Governance Guidelines for NUHEPs**

The guidelines that follow were developed by the CABF in consultation with the NUHEP sector. They are intended to provide advice to the sector about what constitutes good practice in academic governance in a way that is relevant to these providers.

In offering these guidelines, the CABF acknowledges the following points:

- Academic governance is not the sole province of an academic board but is a whole of institution responsibility that includes many individuals, boards and committees;
- Academic board, in conjunction with the chief academic officer is the principal source of advice on academic matters to the governing body;
- The charters of the governing body and academic board specify the delegations and powers of academic board. Within limits, academic board and related committees and processes reflect the nature of the institution which they serve. A ‘one size fits all’ model cannot apply in such a diverse field of higher education providers;
- Academic board should be independent of the management of the institution whilst adopting a constructive engagement with the strategy of the institution’s governing body;
- Academic board must have a clear and resolute focus on academic quality assurance and continuous improvement.

1. **Constitution**: Academic board should be properly constituted and have a clearly defined role, terms of reference and delegations that:
   - are approved by the governing body
   - meet the requirements of relevant legislation and regulations
   - clearly distinguish the duties and responsibilities of the governing body management and the academic board.
   - The academic board should be a committee of and report to the governing body. It is desirable that the academic board chair has rights of audience and debate at the governing body.
   - The chair of the academic board should not be the CEO of the institution.

2. **Accountabilities**: The responsibilities of academic board should be appropriate to its expert role for assuring the integrity and quality of the core higher education activities of the institution and its partners in teaching, research and scholarship, including but not limited to:
   - academic policy approval and compliance monitoring
   - academic admission standards
   - academic standards
   - academic infrastructure
   - oversight of academic risk
   - course approval and review
   - teaching and learning quality
   - assessment and moderation
   - academic integrity
   - promoting a culture of scholarship.

3. **Committee Structure**: Academic board should normally be supported by standing and ad hoc committees that have clearly defined roles, terms of reference, delegations and reporting lines that enable it to fulfil its responsibilities.

4. **Independence**: Academic board should have a majority and a quorum of elected and appointed members who do not hold formal management positions within the institution, and are capable of making academic decisions that are independent of both the governing body and management. Academic board should have a chair who will provide a clear and discernible separation between corporate and academic governance.

5. **Membership**: Academic board should have a balanced membership appropriate to the size and structure of the institution that allows expert, collegial and well-informed consideration of academic matters. This ideally includes:

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- senior officers and academic leaders of the institution
- elected staff and student members who can provide a relevant range of perspectives, voices and expertise
- external members to provide appropriate expert advice.

Members should have defined terms of membership with turnover that ensures continuity whilst also enabling engagement with fresh ideas.

6. Meetings: Academic board should:
- meet sufficiently frequently to effectively fulfil its role
- set its own agenda within its terms of reference
- be free to debate important academic matters with appropriate input from all levels of the institution’s community.

Academic board should keep accurate and publicly available records of Academic board and standing committee meetings.

7. Reporting Frameworks: Academic board should receive regular reports relating to the academic activities of the institution, including, for example, reviews of implementation of policy and benchmarking against performance indicators relevant to its terms of reference. Academic board should provide regular reports to the governing body.

8. Reviews: Academic board should undertake regular internal reviews of its performance, as well as external reviews every 3-5 years. Academic board should modify its processes in response to this feedback.

9. Resource Support: Academic board should have staffing and other resources that allow it and its standing committees to operate as required to meet their terms of reference and accountabilities, and have access to the facilities that are needed to fulfil their responsibilities, including secretarial support and record-keeping for Academic board and its committees.

Conclusion

The 2012 ACPET/CABF survey of academic governance across the NUHEP sector has provided an interesting and informative snapshot of a sector in development. As indicated earlier, the providers in this sector range from very small niche colleges to large multinational corporations. The survey data conveyed the diversity that is apparent in their academic boards.

There seem to be two major reasons for diversity. The first is fairly simple: the scope of the academic enterprise. If a college has only a few courses and a few students, a large academic board would not be expected and the college might want several external members because of relatively few experienced internal members. The internal membership would likely be small because the narrow academic focus means that there are fewer internal constituencies to represent and academic boards are often/usually representative in nature, at least to some extent.

The second reason for diversity is that colleges are at different points on the trajectory to institutional academic maturity. We might consider a mature institution to have been founded some time ago; to have a full set of academic and other policies; to have graduated a large cohort of students; and to have a well-qualified and experienced academic staff, a strong academic governance culture, and a strong staff development culture.

Obviously institutions do not start at that point, and the nature of the academic board should reflect different NUHEPs’ position on the trajectory to academic maturity. When starting out they need outside advice so may have a largely external advisory board. The only internal members might be the CEO and the director of academic programs. As the internal experience grows, the number of external members may decline and more of the senior staff will come on-board. As more time passes, there may be a decline in the representation of senior staff (such as heads of discipline) in favour of staff representatives (possibly elected). Depending on the size and nature of the institution, there should be student representatives. Ultimately, the college may feel that it has sufficient experience and no longer needs the external members. There may be an external chair, as often seems to be the case from the survey data, but even that might change eventually.

Whatever the trajectory NUHEPs take in enabling their academic boards and their committees to operate effectively, there is little question that the new Higher Education Standards strengthen the role and responsibilities of the academic board and heighten expectations of its performance. The challenge for NUHEPs is to determine a model for academic governance that works for them as well as meets challenging regulatory requirements.

References


Towards Maturity: Academic Governance in the Non-University Higher Education Sector

Anthony Baker University of Technology, Sydney
Laura Hougaz Australian Council for Private Education and Training
Rosie Wickert UTS:Insearch


Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Professor Rosie Wickert, Chair, Academic Board, UTS:InSearch, Sydney, Australia.
E-mail: rw@rosiewickert.net.au
An Exploration into “Private” Higher Education in Saudi Arabia: Improving Quality and Accessibility?

Amani Hamdan
University of Dammam, Saudi Arabia

Abstract
The last decade has witnessed exceptional growth in the number of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. This paper describes the status of private higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia and investigates the impact of the rapid growth of these institutions on quality and accessibility. The purpose, philosophy, and practices of the private education sector in Saudi Arabia are examined. This paper draws on the limited public information available on private higher education in Saudi Arabia and on the researcher’s own observations and experience teaching in Saudi private institutions. The main conclusion is that there needs to be more time to evaluate how the emergence and expansion of private universities will improve the quality of Saudi higher education, and if it has made improvements to accessibility for the growing numbers of high-school graduates in general, and for female applicants in particular.

Keywords
higher education, Saudi Arabia, private higher education, educational quality, educational accessibility

Introduction: General Context and Research Background

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is the second-largest country in the Arab world by area, after Algeria, and it is the largest in the Middle East. It occupies the bulk of the Arabian Peninsula. While the area has a long history as a recognised geographical and cultural entity, the modern Saudi state was only founded in 1932 under the leadership of King Abdul Aziz. In 1934 the exploitation of oil began to propel KSA from one of the poorest to one of the richest countries per capita.

Currently, KSA’s population is estimated at 28.8 million, 8 million of whom are non-native. This figure is projected to rise to 44.8 million by 2025, with approximately 49% of that number under the age of 20 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012). These demographic changes are already having significant implications for the education system, including access to it. More specifically, the high birth rate means that the government is under pressure to take extra measures to meet the growing demand for places in universities and colleges. Economic development is another trend that is affecting Saudi education. Despite the continued heavy reliance on petroleum revenues, KSA, like China (Zha, 2011, p. 752), is moving toward a more diversified economy that requires a labour force with a broad range of skills and knowledge. The main way in which the government has attempted to address this labour deficit is through the admission of foreign workers. The incredible growth of this group is confirmed by the latest statistics which show that 31% of the total population is comprised of foreign workers, a figure that is the highest in the region (Kapiszewski, 2006; Saudi Gazette, 2010). The large number of migrant workers underlines the need to offer more places in higher education to Saudis in order to address the skills shortfall.

Although the Saudi government is responding to some of the growth in demand for higher education by sponsoring selected students to study overseas (especially in Western institutions), the core priority is to expand the domestic university and college sector — in particular through the creation of new institutions. The drive to expand this sector has led to a steep rise in both the number of higher education institutions and in enrolments (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). The enrolment rate in 2011 was 37.8%, a level that is higher than the world average of 26% and higher than the average of 21% within the Arab countries taken as a whole (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). Since King Abdullah succeeded to the throne in 2005, improving the education system has become the government’s top priority. One of the most prominent education reform initiatives is the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Public Education Development Project, also known as Tatweer. Another initiative is the King Abdullah Scholarship Program; this funds the international programs mentioned above.

The scale of the expansion of higher education can be seen in Tables 1 and 2.
In recent years, Saudi Arabia has increasingly moved toward adopting a Western-oriented institutional model. Not only are increasing amounts of travel and tuition funding used to send students to Western countries, but, even more significantly, the emerging private educational institutions in KSA are run on a Western model and prefer to hire Western staff and faculty to run the programs.

The government’s encouragement of private investors to establish private universities (the term “private” in this paper refers to all educational institutions that are not operated by the state and these may be either for-profit or non-profit) is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the expansion of higher education (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). This development — and its role in the abrupt yet necessary expansion of higher education — is of international scholarly interest. A number of key questions flow from KSA’s openness to the substantial privatisation of this sector. These are dealt with below.

Research Questions

The establishment and growth of private universities in KSA raises a variety of issues. Arguably the most salient are those of accessibility and quality. Thus, questions arise concerning whether the emergence and growth of private universities has improved the accessibility and quality of Saudi higher education.

In attempting to answer these questions, I draw on publicly available information about Saudi education as well as on my personal observations and experiences while working in Saudi private institutions. I argue that the current growth of Saudi private universities is not challenging the status quo nor is it resulting in tangible improvements to the accessibility and quality of Saudi higher education.

Pressures to Expand Private University Education

Saudi Arabia’s demographic characteristics are unique to the Gulf region. According to the CIA World Factbook 2010, the Saudi population’s growth rate is 1.75% (2010 estimate) and in 2009 this resulted in the number of Saudi nationals reaching 28,686,633, with the number of migrant workers reaching 5,576,076 (Saudi Arabia Demographics, 2013). The high population growth rate has led to a rapid rise in the youth population in general and in the number of high school graduates in particular. Indeed, “the percentage of citizens less than 24 years of age is more than 62% and the number of high school graduates had increased by 443% from 1993 to 2008” (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010, p. 10). This expansion in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public universities</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>118%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private universities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>113%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities per million people</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public colleges</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private colleges</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>200%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities per million people</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is hoped by some stakeholders that private institutions will play a major role in reviving and reforming Saudi higher education. To this end, the government has been providing students with scholarships covering 50% of the tuition to attend private universities in the Kingdom. Yet the ownership and control structure of these institutions is being called into question. Their boards of directors are usually appointed by the owner of the university and consist mainly of businessmen who participated in its establishment, together with a few academic advisers from North America and Europe.

The private Saudi universities are seeking to build a prestigious reputation by pursuing American accreditation and are attempting to lure teaching staff from North America, Europe, and Australia with high salaries and extravagant benefits packages. These institutions are also hiring foreign consultants in an attempt to replicate Western curricula. The main objective of these measures is to appeal to Saudi families that would prefer their children (and particularly their daughters) to attend local institutions with international characteristics instead of having them go abroad beyond the reach of their family’s protection and supervision.
high school graduates is imposing unprecedented pressure on the Kingdom’s post-secondary institutions. Numerous studies have confirmed that “the higher education system in Saudi Arabia is unable to meet the rising demand for higher education” (Mosa, 2000, as cited in Alkhazim, 2003, p. 483). During the 2000–2001 academic year, around 60,000 of the high school graduates who applied to higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia were unable to find places. In 2001, between 25,000 and 30,000 Saudi students studied abroad at their own expense, and a further 6,000 studied abroad with government support (Ministry of Higher Education, 2001, as cited in Alkhazim, 2003, p. 483). These numbers have dramatically increased since then, and the estimated number of students who are being supported by the government with full scholarships for international studies has now reached 150,000, spread across 75 countries. Some of these students pursue educational opportunities elsewhere in the Arab world in such countries as the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar. Others are studying in the West, especially in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia.

The Saudi government’s strategy for higher education has a significant domestic component. The education authorities are primarily attempting to satisfy the overflow in demand for post-secondary education by expanding the number of universities and colleges within the Kingdom (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). This expansion involves the establishment of both public and private universities, a process that has entailed the partial privatization of higher education. Many private colleges and universities have been established since 2001, when there were only seven universities in the country, all of them public and operated by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). In contrast, by 2010 this number had increased to 25 public universities, eight private universities run by private investors, and 423 colleges of pure and applied sciences (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010, p. 10). See Tables 3 and 4. Furthermore, there are now 20 privately run colleges. See Table 5.

As part of its drive to increase capacity, the MoHE offers 10,000 scholarships per year for domestic study. These cover 50% of the cost of tuition in most Saudi Arabian private universities. The stated strategy is “to raise the level of quality of the private institutions of higher learning and to enable the greatest possible number of students to join them” (Ministry of Higher Education, 2008, p. 12). Some Saudi commentators have argued that this is likely to also be an attempt to subsidize the private education sector — and hence the investors in these institutions — using public coffers (AlKhazim, 2011).

One of the reasons for the government’s plan to expand access to higher education is that rapid economic growth has created a cluster of middle-class families with not only the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Year founded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King Saud University</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Abdulaziz University</td>
<td>Jeddah</td>
<td>1967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Faisal University</td>
<td>Al-Ahsa</td>
<td>1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm al-Qura University</td>
<td>Mecca</td>
<td>1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals</td>
<td>Dhahran</td>
<td>1963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic University</td>
<td>Medina</td>
<td>1961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Khalid University</td>
<td>Multiple locations</td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Abdullah University for Science and Technology</td>
<td>Jeddah</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taibah University</td>
<td>Medina</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taif University</td>
<td>Taif</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qassim University</td>
<td>Buraydah</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Ha’il</td>
<td>Hail</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazan University</td>
<td>Jazan</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Jouf University</td>
<td>Al-Jawf</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Baha University</td>
<td>AlBaha</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Tabuk</td>
<td>Tabuk</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Najran University</td>
<td>Najran</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Borders University</td>
<td>Arar</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princess Nora bint Abdulrahman University</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Dammam</td>
<td>Dammam</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Sultan University</td>
<td>Al Kharj</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shagra University</td>
<td>Shagra</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almajmaah University</td>
<td>Majmaah</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4: 
Private Universities in KSA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Subjects offered (according to university websites)</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Year founded</th>
<th>Co-ed or single-sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King Abdullah University for Science and Technology</td>
<td>Engineering, computer science, science</td>
<td>Jeddah</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>First co-educational institution in KSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Sultan University</td>
<td>Business administration, computer science, engineering, English language, interior design, law (women only)</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab Open University</td>
<td>Business administration, elementary education, IT and computing</td>
<td>Riyadh, Dammam, Jeddah</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Mohammad bin Fahd University</td>
<td>Business administration, engineering, computer science, interior design</td>
<td>Al Khobar</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfaisal University</td>
<td>Business administration, engineering, medicine, science, technology</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Male only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Yamamah University</td>
<td>Business administration</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effat University</td>
<td>Architecture, business administration, computer science, early childhood education, engineering, English and translation</td>
<td>Jeddah</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Female only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dar Al Uloom University</td>
<td>Business administration, education, English language, IT, law</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Male only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5: 
Private Colleges in KSA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Subjects offered</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Year founded</th>
<th>Co-ed or single-sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dar Al-Hekma College</td>
<td>Business administration, graphic design, management information systems, interior design, law, nursing, special education, law</td>
<td>Jeddah</td>
<td>1999/2000</td>
<td>Female only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Sultan College for Tourism and Business</td>
<td>Business administration, tourism and hospitality</td>
<td>Abha</td>
<td>1999/2000</td>
<td>Male only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Baha Private College of Science</td>
<td>Computer engineering, computer science</td>
<td>Al Baha</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Business Administration</td>
<td>Business administration</td>
<td>Jeddah</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soliman Fakeeh College for Science and Nursing</td>
<td>Medicine, nursing</td>
<td>Jeddah</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## An Exploration into “Private” Higher Education in Saudi Arabia: Improving Quality and Accessibility?

**Amani Hamdan** University of Dammam, Saudi Arabia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Programs Offered</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Campus Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Riyadh College of Dentistry</td>
<td>Dental assisting, dental hygiene, dental lab technology, dentistry, pharmacy, medical laboratory</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibn Sina National College for Medical Studies</td>
<td>Dentistry, medicine, nursing, pharmacy</td>
<td>Jeddah</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qassim Private College</td>
<td>Computing, dentistry, languages</td>
<td>Qassim</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Male and female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Fahd bin Sultan College</td>
<td>Business administration, engineering</td>
<td>Tabuk</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Sultan College for Tourism &amp; Management</td>
<td>Business administration, tourism and hospitality</td>
<td>Jeddah</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Male only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batterjee Medical College</td>
<td>Emergency medicine, general medicine, health administration, imaging and radiology, medical laboratories, nursing, physical therapy</td>
<td>Jeddah</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saad College of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Al Khobar</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Female only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arriyadah College of Medical Sciences</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Jeddah</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Male only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almarifah College for Science and Technology</td>
<td>Computer science, information systems, medicine, nursing, pharmacy</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Male only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buraydah College for Applied Medical Sciences</td>
<td>Business administration, clinical laboratory science, computing, dentistry, engineering, environmental health sciences, languages and translation, law, nursing, nutrition, pharmacy, physical therapy, radiology, rehabilitation medicine, special education</td>
<td>Buraydah</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohammad Al Mani College for Medical Sciences</td>
<td>Pharmacy</td>
<td>Al Khobar</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Colleges</td>
<td>Computing, medicine, nursing</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Male only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Farabi Dentistry College</td>
<td>Dentistry, nursing</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Ghad International Medical Science Colleges</td>
<td>Emergency medicine, health management, medical laboratories, nursing, radiology</td>
<td>Jeddah Riyadh, Dammam, Abha, Qassim, Tabuk, Najran, Medina, Al Monawwarah, Hafr Al Batin</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Separate male and female campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sulaiman Al Rajhi Colleges</td>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>Al Bukayriyah</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Male only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An Exploration into “Private” Higher Education in Saudi Arabia: Improving Quality and Accessibility?

Amani Hamdan
University of Dammam, Saudi Arabia

ability but also a strong desire to pay for a better education for their children. Another significant factor in the government’s willingness to support private higher education is growing dissatisfaction with the calibre of graduates in terms of key workforce-related skills such as critical thinking and problem solving as well as personal responsibility, independence, and a strong work ethic. It is this shortage of business skills among Saudi nationals that is a major factor driving the importation of large numbers of foreign workers. Thus, “education reform was cited as a pillar of the efforts to diversify the Saudi economy, to ‘Saudise’ the Kingdom’s companies, and to address labour market inefficiencies and growing youth unemployment” (Nolan, 2012, p. 14). The belief among many policymakers that existing public universities generally do not produce graduates who meet the requirements of Saudi Arabia’s growing economy is cited as a major reason for the decision to allow the expansion of the private-education sector (Alkhazim, 2009; AlMunajjed, 2008; AlSharief, 2010). This belief that the graduates of public universities are not geared to the needs of a modern economy is also becoming increasingly widespread among members of the general public. Indeed, the decision to establish private universities followed a national debate that concentrated on the issue of employability (see Bosbait & Wilson, 2005 for an elaboration of this).

The government recently acknowledged the importance of higher-education institutions responding to economic imperatives in an official report:

“All the specialisations in private colleges and universities are linked to the needs of the labour market, both current and future ... [they] have been selected very carefully so as to ensure the distinction of their products and their fulfilment of national development requirements [emphasis added].”


For instance, at a private university in the Eastern Province, the students’ choices of majors were based on a needs survey of the job market. This survey included a large-scale job-market analysis. Thus, it is clear that the privatisation agenda aims to offer programs and degrees that will not only attract students but will also qualify them for professional employment. More specifically, private universities are trying to overcome some of the barriers in order to make Saudi degree holders as appealing to employers as foreign workers with similar credentials. One of the most deeply rooted of these barriers is associated with Saudi Arabia’s “banking concept of education” (Freire, 2003) — an instructional approach that emphasises memorisation at the expense of critical-thinking skills.

As mentioned above, the labour market in Saudi Arabia, as in the other Gulf countries, is characterised by a large number of workers from Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Asia. According to the latest national statistics (2010), the Saudi population of 28 million includes over 8 million non-nationals, who together comprise about 33% of the labour force. The large number of foreign workers was driven by the oil-driven economic boom of the 1970s and 1980s and, at one point, this group comprised around 95% of the private sector’s labour force (Okruhlik, 2005, p. 155). While foreign workers play a valuable role in the Saudi economy, they do so at a significant cost. Most of their income is repatriated to their countries of origin, a phenomenon that represents an outright loss to the Saudi economy. The sheer scale of this outflow is immense, workers: “[r]emittances for the first eight months of 2009 totalled $15 billion” (Baxter, 2010, para. 1). Furthermore, the expertise that these employees gain while working in Saudi Arabia is irretrievably lost to the Kingdom when they leave. This expertise could instead be cultivated among Saudi citizens, who would eventually take their place as the core of the Kingdom’s elite workers. Increasing the labour market participation of Saudis is vital if KSA is to curtail its dependence on migrants. Private universities are seen as playing a pivotal role in effecting this change.

Quality and Accessibility

Governance and accountability in post-secondary institutions

The Saudi authorities have demonstrated great interest in holding private universities accountable for the quality of the education that they deliver. This interest is in part a reflection of the goal of building the national and international reputation of the Kingdom’s post-secondary institutions. It appears that the government is turning to a range of accountability systems — for universities in general, not only for private universities — to achieve this purpose.

One aspect of accountability is the government’s supervision of universities. All higher-educational institutions are under the umbrella of the MoHE, which is in turn under the control of the Higher Education Council. The Ministry determines and enforces all the rules, regulations, and practices of higher-education institutions in Saudi Arabia, including those of privately owned institutions. Technical and vocational education, however, comes under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour. The public-private distinction is somewhat blurred by this structure. There are major similarities between public and private universities from a governance perspective because both classes of institution are supervised by the MoHE. Both public and private universities are required to follow the MoHE’s rules and guidelines when seeking approval for new programs. Alkhazim (2009) suggests that this situation might even make it seem like the private universities are de facto public universities. This state of affairs contrasts with that
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of the other member nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council, where “[p]rivately owned educational institutions […] are not strictly controlled by the state” (Brandenburg, 2010, p. 6).

Importation of Western curricula and teaching staff

Saudi private universities are seeking national and international credibility and visibility — first and foremost through their pursuit of foreign accreditation. This is a complex issue, and falls outside the scope of this paper. The desire for reputational enhancement also extends into these universities’ curriculum strategies. Most if not all private higher-education institutions in Saudi Arabia employ curricula transplanted from the West with few modifications, a practice that is continuing virtually unrestricted. Indeed, according to the MoHE,

“…because of the importance of benefiting from the experience of international universities, most private universities and colleges in the Kingdom have entered into contracts of cooperation and partnership with a number of prestigious international universities” (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010, p. 12).

The Texas International Education Consortium (TIEC), for instance, has designed several curricula for Saudi Arabia “based on the American model for academic programs and administrative organization. It emphasizes learning competencies and applications of information technology in all programs” (TIEC, 2010). As can be seen from their website, TIEC claims to offer a comprehensive package designed for clients who are seeking to establish new university programs, with services ranging from curriculum design to staff recruitment and the acquisition and installation of technological support.

It seems that many of these imported, “packaged” curricula (which include textbooks and teacher resources) overlook the contexts, knowledge, skills, and needs that Saudi Arabian students bring with them to university. The chosen textbooks are not culturally appropriate, and many topics tackle aspects of the American lifestyle that are not relevant to Saudi students or to the Muslim Middle Eastern culture. These imported curricula make private higher education more imitative than creative (Mohrman, 2005; Mazzawi, 2009). As an example of this phenomenon, the textbook that is used to teach written communications in two private universities includes articles for reading comprehension on topics that are irrelevant to many Saudi students’ lives and values. Among other Western-oriented topics, this book contains readings that refer to Miller Genuine Draft dating, and, so on. These books are often used in the preparatory year or freshman year for the stated reasons that there are no equivalent books created for the Middle East cultures and that the relatively new private universities have only just begun to offer instruction in English. The ideal would be to use books created by local teaching staff that are tailored to the Saudi culture and to Saudi students’ needs, but this will take time. Moreover, there is an expectation that after two to three years the imported curricula will be reviewed and adjusted as appropriate.

It should be acknowledged that the imported curricula, which are mainly used in private universities, occasionally tackle subject matter that seems to be overlooked in Saudi Arabia's public universities. These courses sometimes cover crucial areas such as critical thinking and problem solving, logic and probability, professional development and competencies, communication skills (written, oral, and technical), and leadership skills. Nevertheless, these courses seem to have done little to challenge the deeply embedded tradition of rote learning, or to foster a culture of innovation and research (AlGhamdi & Deraney, 2013). The drive to build a national and international reputation is also manifested in private universities’ aggressive importation of Western staff (i.e., faculty). More specifically, the influx of non-Saudi faculty members into private institutions is largely being driven by the desire to foster an image of academic excellence and world-class status that will appeal to upper-middle-income and upper-income families that have the option of sending their children overseas to study (Langan, 2008). The need for rapid expansion to accommodate the surge in high-school graduates also helps to explain this phenomenon, as the importation of faculty staff is seen as the easiest and fastest way to build up these institutions. This influx of Western academics appears to be also a reflection of a “foreigner complex” and an unfounded dichotomy between the “knowledgeable, civilised West” and the “ignorant, uncivilised East” which has its roots in colonialism. The underlying assumption of this approach is that “the other” is intrinsically superior.

The rapid importation of foreign staff has resulted in the vast majority of faculty members in Saudi private institutions being citizens of Western countries, though a significant number of these individuals are of Arab descent (Alkhazim, 2009). The latest report by the MoHE indicates that (public and private) university faculty members are about 59.8% Saudi. Whereas before the emergence of private higher education in Saudi Arabia, imported labour comprised about two-thirds of the university staff (i.e., faculty members), this number has surged since the establishment of private
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universities. In the private sector, non-Saudis currently hold 90% of the faculty positions (Mazawi, 2005; Onsman, 2010). The MoHE offers similar statistics: around 30% of faculty staff in public institutions are non-Saudi, and, depending on the university, this number rises to 95% for private institutions (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012).

It is well known that foreign faculty members at Saudi private universities are usually lured there by lavish compensation and benefits packages. These include high salaries paid in US dollars, educational allowances for children, health coverage extending to dependants, yearly tickets to their home countries, and state-of-the-art villas. Saudi Arabian staff at private universities, on the other hand, receive salaries that are barely equal to those paid by the public universities. As a guide, the typical salary for a non-Saudi professor of business or interior design is 20,000–25,000 SR, while that of a typical Saudi professor in the same discipline areas is 15,000 SR. Large numbers of Saudis are working in adjunct positions in the private institutions and, because of the priority given to foreign teaching staff they cannot move into permanent positions.

This is especially regrettable given the fact that many Saudis who have been sponsored by the MoHE to earn doctoral degrees domestically or overseas, mainly in North America, are unable to find academic positions in Saudi Arabia (Alsherean, 2012). This reliance on non-Saudi professors has also contributed to excessive rates of turnover among academic staff. This phenomenon can be observed not only in Saudi Arabia but also across the entire Gulf region. Despite the generous salaries and benefits, there are several factors that lead many foreign academics to not stay for a long time. These include social conditions such as restrictions on academic freedom and free speech, the relative lack of support for research, and mobility restrictions on female staff (neither Saudi nor non-Saudi women are permitted to drive in the Kingdom). The high turnover rates are contributing to the “lack of rootedness” within Saudi Arabian private universities.

Low levels of research and excessive emphasis on the labour market

Rather than challenging the status quo, private universities are primarily promoting market-driven programming. Seven of these universities offer Master of Business Administration and executive MBA degrees, while none offers a non-vocational degree in the humanities or arts with the exception of Dar Al Uloom University, which offers a degree in English. Furthermore, the Saudi tradition of rote learning and suspicion of critical thinking are manifested in the near absence of innovative research in the Kingdom’s universities, including in the much-vaunted private institutions. While this absence is observable in the pure and applied sciences, it is most starkly evident in the social sciences and humanities. These are the fields that of course offer the greatest potential to challenge the status quo and, at a more basic level, to open the minds of youth to non-conformist thinking. In this regard, it should be noted that the teaching of secular philosophy continues to be dismissed and even banned. This prohibition extends to Islamic philosophy within both public and religious schools. In addition, most of the research that is generated in the social sciences and humanities is oriented towards policy rather than towards the critical analysis of Saudi Arabian society (Al Lily, 2011a, b).

Research funding reinforces the disparities between the pure and applied sciences on the one hand and the humanities and social sciences on the other. For instance, there is no funding for social-sciences research that remotely compares to that available for research in the pure and applied sciences through entities like the technological organisation known as King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST). This is Saudi Arabia’s most recognisable entity involved in financing, supporting and fostering scientific research in a wide range of scientific and engineering fields (KACST 2010).

Private Saudi universities are subject to pressures to favour the pure and applied sciences, and that is affected by the aspects of the Saudi tradition that are antithetical to innovative thinking and research. Moreover, private universities are affected by additional factors that impair their ability to develop into centres of academic excellence. Staff in private institutions are required to spend approximately 19 or more hours per week on teaching, in contrast to the maximum of 14 hours per week that applies in public universities. This requirement is because of the shortage of faculty members compared to number of students, and that significantly curtails the amount of time and energy available for research (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012).

Another undermining factor is the private universities’ almost exclusive emphasis on granting degrees that are oriented toward satisfying the labour market. Despite the economic value of this approach, this fixation on the labour market compounds the pressure to avoid innovative thinking and research, especially in the social sciences. Prestigious career-oriented subjects such as medicine, nursing, dentistry, and allied health sciences are given more attention, while the social sciences are neglected. Indeed, none of the emerging private institutions includes the social sciences as a field of study. Some voices even call for the closure of the existing social-science and humanities programs, as they apparently fail to provide training oriented to the labour market (Al-Dhakeel, 2009). Only three private universities have programs in languages or translation, with one more offering another humanities subject, this being special education.
Accessibility for women

My own experience of teaching in Saudi Arabia’s private universities brought to my attention the fact that there is little value given to constructive approaches to curricula for female students and to empowering young women through alternatives to the present system. Despite the fact that private universities are seeking to emulate the West in even more obvious ways than public universities — by importing American and European curricula, hiring foreign staff and courting international accreditation agencies — they have not decided to emulate the West in terms placing a strong emphasis on improving women’s access to higher education. This is especially the case for private institutions, which attach so much value to international standards but ignore equality of access to senior positions, which is an important aspect of modern Western institutions. Private universities continue to marginalise women in comparison to both male citizens and non-Saudi (Arab and non-Arab) men.

It is clear that, although women account for the majority of university and college graduates in the Kingdom,

> “[m]ost educated females never enter the workforce …. The female economic activity rate is only 28% of the male rate … and there are very few opportunities for women given the sexual segregation in the workplace that is the social norm throughout the Kingdom. Women work in girls’ schools, and there are some opportunities in back-office jobs in sectors such as banking, but having women dealing directly with male clients in retail establishments is regarded by many Saudis as embarrassing for the women as well as being socially unacceptable” (Bosbait & Wilson, 2005, p. 535).

Al Munajjed (2008) notes that the proportion of unemployed female degree holders is 78.3%. The same report indicates that more than 1,000 Saudi women who hold a doctoral degree are unemployed, although it is not known what proportion of female doctoral graduates this figure represents. In contrast, 76% of unemployed men have only a secondary education or lower (no statistics are provided in the report for the proportion of men with a degree who are unemployed).

Since the advent of private higher education in this conservative society, a few new fields of study have opened their doors to women. These include computer engineering, journalism, law (at two private colleges only), interior design, accounting, business administration, marketing, and finance. Effat University in Jeddah, the only private university that is headed by a woman, started as a college and was upgraded to one of the first private universities in the country. It is the only private university to offer a bachelor of engineering degree for female students in the fields of architecture, electrical and computer engineering, and computer and information systems. Many fields of study are still limited to men only. These include geology, piloting, and some fields of engineering. Substantial reform of women’s access to higher education is required if there are to be any meaningful increases in the proportion of Saudi women employed in technical and vocational areas, which currently stands at 26% (UNESCO, 1999, as cited in AlMunajjed, 2008).

It seems that the emergence of private universities has had a limited positive effect on access for women. Especially noteworthy is the establishment of a private institution — the King Abdullah University for Science and Technology — which is the first co-educational university in Saudi Arabia. The university offers a variety of graduate degrees for both genders. Effat University in Jeddah provides programs and facilities for women across three faculties: business, social sciences, and engineering. The university recently became the first private all-female university to gain accreditation from the National Commission for Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA). Alfaisal University is a private non-profit university that offers undergraduate degrees for both men and women in business, medicine, engineering, science, and general studies. The university also offers postgraduate degrees in business administration, and biomedical sciences.

Moving forward

It is important to acknowledge that private higher education in Saudi Arabia is still in its infancy. The private universities remain a work in progress and thus, despite the fact that they remain more imitative than creative, and despite the fact that they have not yet reached the level of challenging the status quo, they deserve some amount of credit for attempting to offer an additional option in higher education. In other words, it is still too early to judge the private universities.

There are certainly some reasons for being optimistic that the private universities will achieve their educational quality goals. The fact that their curricula remain in a state of flux and are being subjected to expert scrutiny is likely to lead to long-term academic benefits. The private institutions generally have smaller class sizes and hence more opportunities for interaction between staff and students. In addition, they are more likely to be at the leading edge of technology implementation in the classroom, including making extensive use of Blackboard. Finally, private universities appear to offer more freedom of expression in all areas, as well as more access to different ideas through exposure to diverse cultures.

The significant Western influence in the private institutions remains controversial. This influence is largely a reflection of the fact that, despite the Arab world’s long tradition of scholarship, Western universities have more experience in offering formal higher education as many have been in continuous operation...
for many years. Saudi universities therefore have relied, and continue to rely, on Western models since this is seen as the fastest and easiest way of establishing the institutional structure and of launching new programs. On the other hand, the emphasis on Western models (and on faculty members imported from Western countries) is sometimes excessive in terms of excluding opportunities to develop the new institutions in greater harmony with the Middle Eastern cultural, historical, and religious context. This emphasis is to some extent a reflection of a misguided inferiority attitude that traces back to the era of European colonialism.

Implications and Recommendations

The early twenty-first century has seen the advent of private higher education in Saudi Arabia. Established in response to a range of demographic, social, and political challenges, these new universities are aggressively asserting that they meet rigorous international standards. The question of whether this is actually the case — together with the question of whether these private universities are actually increasing access to higher education — is an important part of Saudi Arabia’s national debate on education reform.

There are indications that these private universities have failed to live up to their claims of world-class status. Even though these universities are investing heavily in importing Western staff and curricula, few resources are being directed towards the substantive development of their programs. As explained by Mohamed Alkhazim (2011), “All this talk about Saudi universities ranking amongst world universities is media propaganda and is not based on solid grounds” (p. 31).

Furthermore, the establishment of private universities has only made limited progress in improving access to higher education for Saudi women. Many fields of study continue to limit or entirely forbid the admission of women. On a more general level, the private investors in education — who are mostly Saudi businessmen — need to acknowledge that women are legitimate and valuable participants both in academia and in national development. The recognition of women’s rights in ways that draw on Islamic principles is a fundamental truth that is inspiring a new generation of Saudi women to demand recognition of their role as active participants in all aspects of society (Ghanea, 2004, p. 722).

If the situation is truly to progress, more employment opportunities must be made accessible to Saudi women within private universities in particular. These opportunities should include both academic and senior administrative positions. In this regard, it should be noted that “[t]he Ministry of Higher Education has placed women in some senior positions, including five deanships. The Ministry of Labor is seeking to provide 200,000 jobs for women in different sectors of the economy and has initiated technical training programs to help women become cashiers and receptionists. The question remains, however, how these jobs will be created and in what sectors of the economy, as well as what kind of logistic accommodations will be devised so that sex-segregation on the job can be maintained [emphasis added]” (Doumato, 2010, p. 11).

King Abdullah’s initiative for reforming higher education in terms of quality and accessibility appears to be bearing more fruit in public than in private universities (Alkhazim, 2011). If that is the case, the competitiveness of private institutions relative to their public counterparts is undermined. An important question is whether the expansion of private universities is going to take into account the need for diversity and researcher independence, and is thereby going to expand people’s thinking beyond the strictures of the widespread and powerful religious ideology whose staunchest upholders seem to exercise control over higher education as well as over most other prominent institutions in Saudi Arabia (Alkhazim, 2011). Another important issue is the question of whether these universities are going to promote the humanities, the social sciences, and fine arts.

Despite these evident deficiencies of Saudi private education, concerned citizens and outside observers can look to the future with some optimism. There has been an increasing emphasis from the government on the development of Saudi universities into internationally competitive centres for knowledge and research (Onsman, 2010). Universities have been challenged by government initiatives over the last five years with at least some degree of success in terms of “developing programs and adopting teaching methods that provide students with knowledge and skills necessary for their entry to the global labour market” (Onsman, 2010, p. 512).

Blessed with rich natural and human resources, Saudi Arabia remains a nation with enormous potential to achieve the ideals of higher education. These ideals were articulated by Henry Giroux (2007):

“Higher education is a moral and political enterprise that must struggle against all forms of dogmatism, commit itself to the most meaningful principles of an inclusive democracy, exercise rigorous practice of self-criticism, and provide a vision of the future in which students can function as informed, critical citizens capable of actively participating, shaping, and governing a world that takes seriously education.”

(Giroux, 2007, p. 203)
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Amani Hamdan University of Dammam, Saudi Arabia

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Amani Hamdan University of Dammam, Saudi Arabia


Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr Amani Hamdan, College of Education, University of Dammam, Dammam, Saudi Arabia. Email: Akhalghamdi@ud.edu.sa