Quality should be the aim of reforms

Opinion
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Australia's tertiary education sector is one of the world's best and its success is the cumulative reward for a commitment to education excellence that is shared by thousands of educational institutions around the country: private and public, vocational and higher education, large and small.

Serious concerns raised as a result of the unfortunate closure of individual colleges, the actions of some education agents overseas, and unacceptable acts of violence against Indian students have brought into focus some complex issues to which the entire sector has a responsibility to respond.

With that in mind, the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) has welcomed the federal government's announcement of a review of international education.

A key outcome of the review must be to ensure that the vast majority of international education providers that do the right thing and provide high-quality education are not disadvantaged because of the unscrupulous actions of a minority.

Of course, while we hope the review will serve to strengthen the sector and encourage a shared responsibility in meeting complex challenges, we would also caution against the introduction of new layers of regulation that serve only to hinder the operations of proven quality institutions while not addressing the root problems.

The answer to these issues lies in more effective and efficient application of existing registration and accreditation systems - not the introduction of knee-jerk regulation that creates barriers to improvement or the development of quality education providers.

Quality is one of the key principles underpinning our entire education and training sector and when we work collaboratively, we achieve remarkable things.

The challenge for private providers is to ensure they continue to strive to deliver the best possible education services to all students, domestic as well as international.

As the government also moves to implement its higher education reform agenda, it is important to consider that most important of objectives - maintaining sight of the best possible educational outcomes for all students - and to
make sure the model of tertiary education that is evolving in Australia has student outcomes as its core focus.

The government's desire to put students clearly at the centre of its reforms is welcomed. However, these reforms must be available to all students seeking a tertiary education, not just those who choose a university setting.

Students today want choice, flexibility and quality. They want to have the choice of studying at an established public university, a quality private institution, a niche industry provider, a TAFE college, or an enterprise organisation.

They want to have the flexibility of courses that can be delivered online, by correspondence, in real-world industry settings or in traditional classroom environments. Or perhaps a combination of all these models.

Most of all, students want a quality education they know will equip them in the best way possible for a rewarding career or further study.

If we want to nurture our education sector so that it continues to grow and equip the nation for the future, it is fundamentally important that we give students more of what they want.

ACPET is strongly supportive of the underlying principles of fairness, quality and equity that the Bradley review reflected and we would expect that those principles are applied in the government's reform of higher education.

A new higher education model should remove artificial barriers to entry that favour one type of institution over another or one type of student over another, and adopt a single national regulatory framework that does the same.

ACPET has long advocated a single national tertiary system that encourages quality institutions to tailor and deliver innovative courses, utilising both academic and vocational education strengths.

The key tests for education providers in Australia should be based on student outcomes, not delineated by public or private business models.

Around 10 per cent of tertiary qualifications in Australia are now awarded through private institutions and this percentage is increasing in line with student demand for innovative, non-conventional higher education delivered through non-university institutions.

It is critical that government policy does not stifle the innovation, industry focus and flexible delivery that students want and which has clearly been the area in which quality private institutions have taken the lead.

This means all students attending institutions who meet rigorous national standards should be able to access government support in a demand-driven environment so they are encouraged to pursue their personal futures.

It means that all institutions, public and private, must be supported in their commitment to greater access and equity in tertiary education.

It means quality private institutions need equitable access to government funding for infrastructure so they can maintain their investment in the sector-leading technology and delivery methods that have stimulated demand in the first place.

Standards must also be developed afresh to recognise the true nature of higher education delivery in Australia, rather than focus solely on outdated university-centric notions of teaching and infrastructure.

Quality education is the cornerstone of improved productivity, quality of
life and better life prospects. It builds our nation, shields us against the worst of global recession and improves the opportunities available to all Australians.

It is vital we support our education and training institutions to remain competitive and innovative in an increasingly globalised education marketplace, and that we commit to a shared responsibility to put students first, and ensure our sector keeps pace with student demand.

- **Andrew Smith** is the chief executive of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training.