

What's an Australian university?

Vin Massaro*

The despondency and existential fear induced by the COVID-19 pandemic has probably overshadowed another challenge that will face post-pandemic universities. Will they have to pass a new test to retain their title?

One of the recommendations of the 2019 Review of the Provider Category Standards was to strengthen the definition of 'Australian University' by quantifying the minimum research performance to be achieved by all universities. Each would be required to achieve world standard research or above in at least three broad fields of education. The Minister has accepted the recommendation and will be seeking to legislate it in coming months.

The proposed new standards would lead to non-compliant universities losing their titles. They are unduly restrictive in light of what has occurred since the end of the binary system of higher education, and risk creating a group of apparently 'failing' universities which have operated successfully as *de facto* teaching intensive universities for some thirty years.

Furthermore, they would create a legislative requirement that will prove impossible to enforce while risking the quality of higher education as universities seek to increase their research performance at the cost of their teaching and learning, as they simultaneously suffer income reductions from international and domestic students.

Seeing these new requirements an external observer might reasonably assume that the Australian system of standards and nomenclature was subjected to careful analysis and judgement before it was introduced. The reality is that, like many things in public policy, it came about by the gradual accretion of inconsistencies followed by a crisis that needed an immediate response and too little time to think through the implications.

Australia's binary higher education system consisted of two sectors, one with universities deemed, created and funded as teaching and research institutions and the other with teaching only institutions - colleges of advanced education or institutes of technology.

When the binary system became the unified national system in 1989 no test was applied to the teaching only colleges seeking to rename themselves universities, although research funding was made open to all applicants (colleges had been prevented from applying) but would be awarded on a competitive basis. But slowly this changed to allow for some research base funding to enable institutions to develop their research.

Nevertheless, the Go8 universities have continued to win the great majority of research funding, and the next 12-15 universities in current research rankings have remained largely unchanged, although some of the pre-1989 universities have fallen behind universities formed from the former Central Institutes of Technology.

When in 1999 a private provider announced its intention to establish Greenwich University on Norfolk Island, it met with opposition from both the government and the higher education sector. The government's decision to prevent it using the 'university' title was challenged and it became apparent that there was no legislative basis for preventing an institution calling itself a university. Legislation was introduced urgently specifying that no new university

could be created without government approval and without meeting a set of standards to be determined by the COAG Ministerial Committee for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs - these became known as the MCEETYA Protocols. It took some time to get all of the states and territories to interpret the protocols in a uniform way when considering applications for new private universities, because they lacked quantitative or qualitative measures, but when TEQSA was established the protocols were included in its legislation.

The protocols applying to university status acquired almost mythical status as representing a uniquely Australian historical definition of the university, especially the essential quality of being a teaching and research entity due to a claimed nexus between research and teaching.

Yet, it was quickly forgotten that when the protocols were adopted they were applied only to new applicants for university status. Existing universities were effectively deemed to meet the standards without any assessment. In an assessment of the post-protocol system in 2004, I estimated that about half the universities would not have met the new university criteria had they been assessed to the same standards as new entrants.

Setting standards for the nomenclature of higher education institutions must be taken seriously because it is the primary indicator of the quality of the system. To be believable standards must be rigorous, transparent, consistent and non-discriminatory. To subject new institutions to a set of requirements that have not been applied to existing institutions renders the system questionable. So, to the extent that the proposed standards would subject all universities, whether old or new, to a common set of performance measures they are to be welcomed. The research-teaching nexus would become the critical defining feature of an Australian university.

However, because we are not building the system from scratch, they place a significant proportion of universities under unnecessary stress, albeit with a ten-year horizon over which they can strengthen their research to meet the new criteria. It also creates a test based on the research-teaching nexus without sufficient evidence of its validity.

As some existing or aspirant universities inevitably fail the test and lose or fail to gain the title some will seek recourse to the Courts to test the validity of the measure. The government's defence to such a challenge would have to be that high quality research leads to high quality teaching and that high quality teaching cannot be achieved without high quality research in the relevant discipline.

Such an argument would perforce require the government to demonstrate not only that it holds as a principle in those three research performance areas upon which the university has relied to achieve its university status, but across all courses that the university teaches – having high quality research in engineering will not have an impact on the quality of teaching in medicine.

That the definition itself requires only a proportion of a university's broad fields of education to meet the standard suggests that the measure is not as universal as it appears in guaranteeing that a university as a whole is of the required standard.

An argument for the criticality of a research-teaching nexus would need to include a reason for allowing those parts of universities where research is either not done or done minimally to remain part of a university or for the university as a whole to continue to hold the title. Yet

there are many parts of even research-intensive universities where research activity is uneven, suggesting there must be something beyond research that leads to good teaching. That so much teaching over the past several years has been delivered by a growing proportion of casual or contract staff with little access to research time or a requirement to undertake research further suggests that the centrality of the nexus is not sustainable.

One solution would be for the government to commit to having and funding 39 public teaching and research universities. But government is well short of such a commitment. Unlike systems such as the UK or US, Australian research funding has not been adequate to cover the full cost of research, with universities having to fund the gap from their own resources. This has relied on overseas student fees and the margins on some domestic student income. So the size of the government's financial input to support a complete teaching and research system, even were the international student market to be sustainable, would be of a magnitude that no government so far has been able or willing to deliver.

The most significant impact of the current COVID-19 is likely to be a reduction in international enrolments, which might well persist into the medium to long term. When this is coupled with the proposed reductions in government funding for domestic students, even strong research performers will find it difficult to maintain their research intensity. To place every university in competition with the stronger performers to achieve and maintain even the minimum requirements of the proposed new standard risks the failure of universities that have demonstrated that they can deliver excellent teaching without a major focus on research.

It has always been possible for teaching staff to use the product of excellent research in their teaching without having to be involved personally in its creation and this will continue to be the case. Some universities have chosen this as a strategy and shown it to be effective – the most recent QILT results demonstrate this well. A number of American universities have chosen the same path with demonstrable success, the pre-eminent example being the California system, with the teaching intensive California State University campuses working in parallel with their sister research intensive University of California campuses. It was the model upon which Australia's binary system was based.

Australia would do well to acknowledge that there are other successful types of institutions with the university title and remove the research requirement from the TEQSA standards altogether, focusing instead on all universities demonstrating excellence in teaching and student outcomes, allowing them to specialise in teaching that is supported by appropriate levels of scholarship.

From a regulatory point of view teaching excellence across a broad range of academic areas should be sufficient to qualify as a university. Teaching excellence in a narrow range of offerings would qualify the provider as an Institute. A university with a specialised focus could be treated as an exception, with the requirement being both excellence in teaching in its designated focus area and evidence of research in that focus area.

The question of research should be treated separately, with universities choosing to specialise in several or a few areas, based on their success in winning competitive funding from government or industry.

This is not a simple problem and any solution must deal with the facts on the ground. The 'university' title horse bolted in 1990, when all major providers acquired the university title,

so let us not complicate the issue by forcing them to meet standards now that we were not prepared to require of them when the flexibility to structure the system accordingly still existed.

This is certainly not the time to give the appearance of requiring universities to be teaching and research focused when the funding is not there to support them.

*Vin Massaro is a Professorial Fellow in the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education, at the University of Melbourne
vin.massaro@unimelb.edu.au

25 July 2020