

Issues Arising from the Abolition of the ALTC

We provide this background paper as four senior representatives of the Councils of Deans signatory to the letters to the Prime Minister of February 7th and March 16th, expressing their profound concern at the decision to abolish the ALTC.

The issues that we should like to raise are broadly:

- How credibility is to be restored to the Government's support for the value and status of teaching and learning in higher education.
- Maintaining the character and momentum of the work of the ALTC

Clearly the second provides many opportunities for the first.

The restoration of \$50m out of \$88m in the forward estimates is welcome news, as is the appointment of a leading figure such as Ms Alison Johns, and the agreement to staff the new operation with those who have experience of the ALTC's operations.

However, academic staff still believe that abolition of the ALTC signals that innovation in teaching and learning is now a lesser priority for Government; the restoration of funds being forced upon it, with no apparent renewed vision or commitment of its own. They regard the situation of teaching and learning as fragile and tenuous.

Furthermore, the role of innovation and change agency invested in the ALTC is regarded as quite orthogonal to the regulatory functions that dominate TEQSA's role. One agency is playing the role of coach and the other of umpire. Academic staff support the separation very strongly and do not accept that one agency can do both.

We are concerned that the restored ALTC project and programme funds are not reduced to ALTC-predecessor (eg AUTC or CAUT) style competitive grant schemes directed at uncoordinated individual initiatives, however excellent. By contrast, the work of the ALTC has been characterised by:

- Strategic long-term vision for incremental system wide innovation and development in teaching and learning
- Capacity building in organisational change and leadership
- Collaboration rather than competition across institutions and disciplines, and for the first time with external stakeholders (e.g. employers and professional bodies)
- Significant networking across institutions and, at this critical time, with TAFE and with private providers, as a key means of achieving collaborative national outcomes

We are concerned to see the resulting developments and momentum continue, and not be abandoned in any restructure of the ALTC's role via the new DEEWR branch.

Among the most significant and recent examples of the ALTC approach at work is the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards (LTAS) project. It has generated

- Grass roots review and ownership of discipline based academic standards, without which TEQSA's efforts among higher education providers would become a much attenuated bureaucratic exercise.
- Reviews that are re-evaluating teaching and learning goals in light of the Government's expanded participation and low SES targets.
- A renewed vision of organisational leadership in teaching and learning necessary to effect such changes

- Discipline academic standards and evidence in forms that have huge potential to provide new international competitiveness for Australian Higher Education,
- A basis for greater learning and closer collaboration at a national level through new international relationships (eg. UK Higher Education Academy and Europe's Tuning arising from the Bologna Process)
- A basis for new dialogues with professional and employer bodies, TAFE and private providers.

LTAS and projects on other themes such as assessment, learning spaces, pedagogy, new media, etc have caused existing teaching and learning networks to reinvent themselves, and generated new ones such as the law associate deans teaching and learning network. It has generated new vision and new initiatives by disciplinary deans councils, such as the development of academic standards in the sub discipline of marketing by the business deans, and joint ventures such as between tertiary departments of accounting and professional accounting bodies.

We believe very strongly that, essential to the formulation and effectiveness of such strategic vision and outcomes, is a Board or similar body that

- Includes major internal and external stakeholders and persons of wide experience in university teaching and learning
- Identifies, sets and monitors the strategic agenda of the organisation.

The Board should be committed to

- Collaboration amongst institutions and stakeholders
- Inclusion of all higher education providers and commitment to diversity (universities, VET, private)
- Sustainability and effective dissemination of project outcomes
- Leadership within and across institutions
- Innovation and incremental, evidence-based systemic change through networking and cooperation

The Board should include representation from the Councils of Deans, who are responsible for university engagement with and implementation of new policies and innovations in learning and teaching.

Higher education faces challenges brought about by greatly increased diversity of students, their circumstances of work and study, globalisation and the impact of ICT. It already presents a very different experience from when we were in the classroom. The characteristics of the ALTC's operation, which we have outlined above, have led the system to react constructively and competitively to these circumstances in ways that previous initiatives have not.

Conversely, loss of momentum in these directions will reduce capacity to react constructively. This is particularly important for the Government's agenda to achieve national productivity gains through expanded participation in higher education. In particular, a loss of momentum will reduce the effectiveness of the system's response to specific changes such as the new TEQSA regulatory environment, uncapping of domestic undergraduate places and ongoing changes to the international student market.

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