

Some critical Issues relating to Australia’s strategy for international education

A submission in response to the *Connected, Creative, Caring: Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030 Consultation Paper, March 2021*

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Introduction

My background in making the following comments is that for the last 30 years, my principal research interest has been in developing better methods for measuring performance in enterprises – public, private, educational, governmental. In fact, I am one of the few researchers worldwide actively engaged in this area, and one of the very few with a Statistics viewpoint. As can be seen from my [CV](#), I have published extensively, including material specifically addressing issues with higher education, from strategic planning to satisfaction surveys, and particularly with reference to the notion of “Quality”. I am convinced that coming to grips with the various meanings of “Quality” for the diverse stakeholders involved is essential, if real progress is to be made.

I believe that, directly and indirectly, this Consultation Paper raises some issues that are critical to resolve in the long-term interests of both Australian and international students, and the financial welfare of Australia’s universities. I have described these in summary form below, but would welcome the opportunity to elaborate on any aspect, in the interests of effecting the changes required. I have also provided footnotes to the relevant part of the Consultation Paper (CP.

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1. A Missing Issue²

There is a large unasked question that is, and has been, an elephant in the room for many years, and that is:

What has been the impact on academic standards (a key element of Quality) of courses provided to Australian students of increasing numbers of foreign students and the consequent pressure to ensure that most of them graduate?

2. What does “Quality” mean, specifically, for Australian students and for international students?³

Here, I need to provide some further detail, because “Quality” is only half the story.

In fact, it has been known⁴ since the mid-1980s that people make their purchasing based on Relative perceived *Value*, where *Value* is a trade-off between their satisfaction with the *Quality of the product or service received*, balanced against their satisfaction with *Price Paid*. If they can get superior Value elsewhere, they will go there.

It is customary to represent Value (= *Worth What Paid for*) in a so-called *Value tree*, that provides a critical elaboration of the key quality attributes of “Quality”. Importantly, these attributes may well vary significantly, depending on whether we are talking about

- a) international students or Australian students
- b) undergraduate students or postgraduate students
- c) and so on.

² Cf. CP page 4 paragraph 3, commencing “Firstly, it enhances Australia’s high-quality education system, enriching the experience of Australian students and placing them in a global context.”

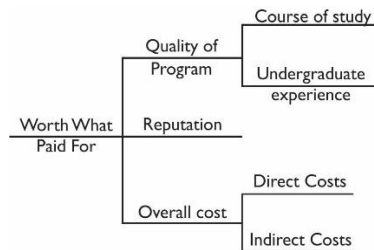
Also page 10, first bullet point: “...deliver the best possible student experience for all students from pre-commencement to post-graduation employment outcomes and promote ongoing alumni engagement that fosters a lifetime connection to Australia.”

³ Cf. CP page 4 paragraph 5, commencing “Thirdly, this sector contributes to the development of human capital in Australia and overseas”.

⁴ Kordupleski R. *Mastering Customer Value Management*. Cincinnati, OH: Pinnaflex Educational Resources, Inc.; 2003.

See also Fisher, N.I. (2013), *Analytics for Leaders*. A Performance Measurement System for Business Success. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Fisher, N.I. (2019), “A Comprehensive Approach to Problems of Performance Measurement. With Discussion”. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series A*. **182** (3), 755–803.

To be specific, a suitable overall structure of a Value tree for this purpose would be:



Undergraduate experience is a series of sub-processes, from *Application to the university* through to *Post-study placement*. Each of the other branches has attributes that have to be determined from expert knowledge and focus groups of the actual students. For example, for *Course of Study*, a focus group of Australian undergraduates might produce as their most important attributes:

- Academic level suitable for my career plans
- Excellent resources
- Knowledgeable instructors
- ...
- Stimulating material
- ...

In contrast, prospective overseas undergraduates may well have quite different priorities for the course itself:

- Lecturers who speak clearly
- Excellent resources
- Material well within my abilities
- ...
- High chance of passing
- ...

However, I don't know! The only people who *do* know are the overseas students themselves. And of course, local and international students will have different views about what's important about the *Undergraduate Experience*, about *Direct Costs* and *Indirect Costs*, and about the *Image* of the institution.

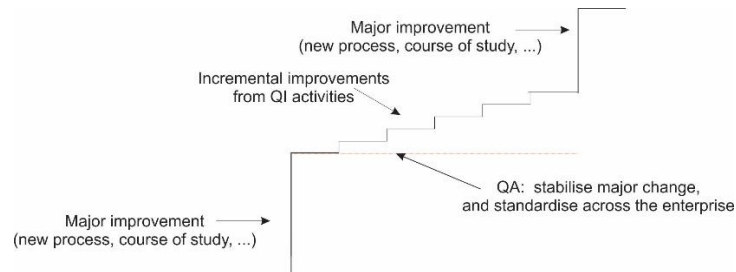
To understand where Australian universities need to improve, regular market research surveys based on carefully designed Value trees appropriate to each market, is essential. These are known as Customer Value surveys⁵.

3. Since the answers to 2(a), and to 2(b), and to 2(c), are all likely different, what does this imply about what each group studies, and how they should go about their studies?

⁵ See the references in the previous footnote.

4. Quality Assurance versus Quality Improvement⁶

It has been my observation over many years that these two concepts are not carefully differentiated in the Higher Education sector. In fact, they are complementary, and each is necessary:



Quality Assurance provides just that: assurance that a certain level of performance – whether good or bad – is consistently achieved throughout an enterprise. It asserts nothing about whether or not there is any ongoing improvement in what’s being done. So the assertion in the display box on page 9 about “... driving continuous improvement in quality assurance” is not really meaningful.

5. Benchmarking appropriate metrics⁷

This is where properly designed and conducted Customer Value surveys can play a critical role. The average ratings for the main branches of the Value tree provide exactly the relative benchmarking capability that is needed. The statistical analysis of the data also produce relative weights, that provide guidance about what needs to be improved, *and in what order* (focus on branches that are weighted heavily, and where the rating relative to the competition is low).

⁶ Cf. CP page 9, paragraph 2 of highlight box: “The Australian education eco-system is built on unrivalled government and private sector collaboration, driving continuous improvement in quality assurance, employability outcomes and student protections.”

Cf. CP page 12 paragraph headed **Setting the standard**.

⁷ CP page 16, first bullet point: “Increased student satisfaction onshore, offshore and online, including for domestic students in courses with international students and improved perceptions of online education quality.”