TEQSA – Provider Roundtable Discussions

Report

October 2015

1. Introduction

The TEQSA Corporate Plan 2015-19 outlines TEQSA's commitment to consult with Higher Education Providers (HEPs) to promote a shared understanding of TEQSA's approach and its core functions. To facilitate this, a series of roundtable discussions were held to seek provider views on the current operation of quality assurance and regulation of Australian higher education.

The sessions also aimed to provide the sector with an update on the initiatives being implemented by TEQSA to support a more streamlined assessment approach and to engage in a discussion with TEQSA on the challenges facing HEPs in meeting their regulatory compliance responsibilities.

2. Purpose

This report aims to provide an overview of the key themes identified through the roundtable discussions.

The report does not attempt to detail all feedback received by TEQSA through the discussions, but rather, highlight the key issues raised.

TEQSA would like to acknowledge the constructive feedback provided through this process and to thank all the providers and individuals involved for their contributions.

3. Roundtable Discussions

3.1 Schedule

During August-September 2015, roundtable discussions were held in every State and Territory. The schedule is at Table 1 below. Each session was led by a Commissioner and supported by a Director of the Provider Assessment and Engagement Team and staff from the Information Analysis and Reporting Team. Separate sessions were held for providers with self-accrediting authority and providers without self-accrediting authority to ensure the discussion could be relevant for all participants.

Table 1

Location	Date	Led by
Canberra, ACT	24 August 2015	Chief Commissioner Nicholas Saunders, Commissioner Cliff Walsh
Hobart, TAS	2 September 2015	Commissioner Cliff Walsh
Sydney, NSW	7-8 September 2015	Chief Commissioner Nicholas Saunders

Melbourne, VIC	4 & 9 September 2015	Chief Commissioner Nicholas Saunders, Commissioner Lin Martin
Brisbane, QLD	10 September 2015	Chief Commissioner Nicholas Saunders, Commissioner Cliff Walsh
Perth, WA	14-15 September 2015	Chief Commissioner Nicholas Saunders
Adelaide, SA	22 September 2015	Commissioner Cliff Walsh
Darwin, NT	24 September 2015	Commissioner Lin Martin

3.2 Attendance

All the roundtable discussions were well attended. Across Australia, approximately 250 representatives from 137 [80%] higher education providers, including 38 universities and 99 non university higher education providers (NUHEP), participated in the discussions. At most sessions there was informative and lively discussion.

4. Key Themes

Commissioners presenting at the roundtable discussions focused on risk across the sector, TEQSA process reforms and TEQSA future developments, including the introduction of the new Higher Education Standards and the Government's Regulator Performance Framework. The presentation can be found at http://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/ProviderRoundtableAug_September2015_Presentation.pdf and should be read in conjunction with this report.

During the sessions the following key themes emerged.

4.1 Attrition

The issue discussed at every roundtable was that of attrition rates and how these are defined and applied in TEQSA's risk assessment framework. There was a general view that the measure of attrition is more complex than is indicated in TEQSA's description of risk as set out in the current Risk Assessment Framework, which states:

"High attrition rate / low progression rate / or low or significantly decreasing completions, each indicate potential quality issues in admission processes, teaching and learning processes, and overall student experience. Factors that may be considered in assessing attrition, progress and completion indicators include for example, trend, graduate satisfaction measures, or relevant programs in place to increase retention / assist student progress / assist students complete their course. Consideration may also be given to the reasons for attrition, such as the proportion of students who transfer to another higher education provider."

Providers were very interested in the interrelationship between attrition rates and other risk factors, such as senior academic leadership, a high proportion of casual staff and planned investment in staff and infrastructure (financial sustainability). The importance of adjusted attrition was also emphasised and participants were interested in TEQSA's view of what would be an acceptable or 'usual' level of attrition.

Examples of cohorts which posed a challenge in relation to managing attrition were discussed including distance/online students, students with low socio economic backgrounds, regional students and those students who were the first in family to undertake higher education studies. Participants emphasised that early identification of 'at risk' students and strong support mechanisms have a positive impact on a provider's attrition rate.

Participants raised a number of issues that impact on attrition rates including: entry standards (both academic and English language) and the differentiation between providers which have high levels of school leavers with strong academic records and those which have mixed cohorts; poaching of students by other higher education providers; and international students who, after entry into Australia on a student visa, seek work. It was noted that for those students with no CHESN, the lack of a unique student identifier makes it difficult to track students moving into VET or other higher education providers.

There was a high level of interest amongst providers in benchmarking attrition across the higher education sector.

TEQSA will be undertaking an analytical study, using its available data sets, to better understand the causes of attrition. Commissioner Lin Martin is leading this piece of work.

4.2 Publication of Sector Risk Data

In TEQSA's original consultation with the sector in early 2012 on the development of the Risk Assessment Framework, higher education providers did not support the publication of de-identified aggregate sector or group-wide risk data.

This matter was raised in the roundtables, given that TEQSA has gained some valuable data from the analyses it has undertaken of its risk and provider data. Overall, there was strong support for the possibility that TEQSA might publish aggregate risk data, and a view that this would demonstrate increasing transparency in TEQSA's approach. Some providers felt that an increased awareness of differentiation across the sector, and access to comparative information for risk indicators among groups of like providers, would support the benchmarking activities of all providers. It was suggested that the sharing of qualitative reporting, such as identifying the standards that are most commonly addressed through the imposition of conditions, would also be useful.

The potential challenges with this approach were also noted. For example, some providers indicated that it would be preferable for data relating to certain indicators, including attrition and casual staff, to be accompanied by contextual information prior to publication, so as to ensure that they are read in the correct context and are not misconstrued. There were also questions about whether student related information would be published separately for international and domestic students.

There was also strong agreement that TEQSA risk assessments should always be made available to providers, rather than by exception only, as is currently the practice. Providers were

also interested in data that would demonstrate how the Australian Higher Education sector compares to the rest of the world.

TEQSA will consult with the sector over the next 6 months to finalise an approach to the publication of sector-wide risk information.

4.3 TEQSA Reforms

Very positive feedback was received on TEQSA's Core+ Model for renewal of registration processes, with providers describing the model as a significant improvement on previous models. The introduction of the model was seen as a positive response to providers' increasing capacity and willingness to provide timely and quality information to TEQSA.

Providers expressed broad support for TEQSA to move towards a monitoring and assessment approach. It was noted that this change in approach may result in a lessening of engagement with providers considered to be 'low risk' and options for continued engagement were suggested. Some participants expressed the view that the current cyclical review process provides internal leverage to drive and promote quality within a provider, and also highlighted the importance of site visits, which would need to be factored into a new approach.

Some providers supported the publication of commentary highlighting the success of TEQSA's reforms and the impact that TEQSA's oversight had had on the quality of the sector. It was felt that this type of commentary would act as an assurance measure supporting the sector's reputation internationally and domestically.

4.4 International Student Education

The recent media coverage of issues around academic integrity in the sector was raised and ways to respond to this were discussed. The possibility of developing a shared repository of information including information about education agents and testamurs/student records was discussed and whether TEQSA might play a role in facilitating this type of information sharing.

5. Feedback and Next Steps

TEQSA has received very positive feedback from participants following the roundtable discussions.

"If this is an example of the Agency's future 'modus operandum' it augers well for the further development and improvement of Australia's Higher Education Sector."

Two projects have emerged from the discussions with higher education providers, which would further inform TEQSA's approach to quality assurance as well as providing useful information to the sector:

- The development of an approach to the publication of de-identified aggregate sector or group-wide risk data, to provide information on sector trends and identified areas of risk

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or potential risk. TEQSA will develop a position paper which will be publicly available within the next 6 months for consultation with the sector. Commissioner Cliff Walsh will lead this work.

- The need to develop a greater understanding of the range of factors impacting on a higher education provider's attrition rates and how these can be measured and reported. TEQSA will undertake an analytical study, using its available data sets, to better understand the causes of attrition. Commissioner Lin Martin will lead this work.