

A big idea for Australian higher education: the National Centre for Student Success April 2023

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A vision for quality in tertiary education

Recommendation: To establish a National Centre for Student Success as a core enabler for whole-of-sector uplift, to meet the ambitions of the Universities Accord in learning, teaching and student experience and ensure continuous quality enhancement in higher education.

The National Centre for Student Success will build quality outcomes for all learners for the long term. The Centre is a quality improvement and quality assurance mechanism for students and teaching teams in our universities and beyond. The Centre uses tested research and experience to identify best practice in teaching, learning and assessment. It drives uptake by targeted programs that develop sector-wide standards of practice, foster collaboration and celebrate success. Past experience demonstrates the strong impact of collective action by the Australian university learning and teaching community to tackle the contemporary challenges of higher education sustainably. Formation of the Centre is in part stimulated by the Productivity Commission's recommendations in its report published March 2023.

The Australian higher education sector has shown its creativity and resilience in its response to the pandemic and the associated rapid shifts to digital learning and assessment. The Centre builds on this momentum to seek out the best initiatives (quality assurance) for systemic adoption (quality improvement and enhancement) in the sector. The Centre's work covers national priorities including assessment design and delivery, teaching capability and leadership, and student experience in the digital era. The Centre actively collaborates with and supports the work of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) to foster participation and success by mainstreaming inclusive practice. Particular attention is paid to the collection and uptake of sustainable approaches to embedding First Nations' knowledges, peoples and culture across institutional practice.

The Centre is a core enabler for learning, teaching and the student experience and addresses pressing areas for improvement and action, such as use of generative artificial intelligence, lifelong learning design for today's learner-earners – whether career starter, advancer or changer, attracting and rewarding outstanding teachers – whether combining research or industry practice with their teaching careers, and how best to support students as they transition into, through and out of higher education and between sectors. The Centre maintains productive collaborations with specialist centres and research groups across tertiary education. It builds strong relationships between vocational and higher education.

The Centre assists the tertiary sector to identify emerging key priorities for action in learning and teaching. It provides advice to education providers, regulators, Government, stakeholders and peak bodies to assure and improve quality. Early priorities will derive from the recommendations of the Universities Accord process and existing priorities such as implementation of the revised Australian Qualifications Framework and partnering with vocational education particularly to streamline students' pathways between sectors.

The Centre is a statutory authority, to aid the longevity of its planning and implementing, with broad, cross-sector governance, including students, and regularly consults and seconds learning leaders and practitioners. It works in partnership with the Higher Education Standards Panel and TEQSA and has mutually beneficial relationships with like organisations internationally.

National Centre for Student Success: a key enabler for quality and sustainability

Discussion

This proposal was prompted by informal discussions between higher education leaders and across many organisations over years. It captures a groundswell of support for a national, co-ordinated approach to quality enhancement for higher education. This proposal was circulated to sector peak bodies from April 4-6 and in that very short time garnered in-principle support from over 20 peak bodies with others expressing personal support. The breadth and diversity of support demonstrates the acknowledged importance of an authoritative and collaborative voice that can draw together all facets of learning, teaching and student experience to achieve step-change quality enhancement.

1. Quality improvement in Australian higher education

The Australian higher education system faces a challenging and dynamic environment following the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and rapid shifts towards digital and lifelong learning. The emergence of generative artificial intelligence is creating further challenges. Effective implementation of bold ideas that drive quality and sustainability in higher education needs strategies and solutions that are developed collaboratively and build collective capability. A competitive and resilient domestic and international education sector must be at the forefront, not only of qualification design and delivery, but also of pedagogical trends, teaching excellence and educational enhancement.

Effective strategies and solutions must be founded on high-quality research in learning and teaching. Australia is a world leader in higher education research but notably lags internationally in collective translation to practice. Despite pockets of excellence, Australia has no national mechanisms for translation to practice that unite diverse expertise across learning and teaching and the student experience. For example, to be effective, the inclusive education practice that supports success for equity-bearing students must be designed into curriculum, assessment, standards, teacher capability, leadership and governance. Sector-wide, sustainable solutions must be developed and deployed holistically.

The absence of a national quality enhancement body for higher education positions Australia as an outlier internationally. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) brings together thought leadership for vocational education but has no partner organisation in Australian higher education since the closure of the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) in 2016. Good models exist in international jurisdictions where they work with alacrity to assure ongoing and collaboratively-designed innovation and excellence at the national and then distributed level. Instructive examples include the following.

National body	Features
Ako Aotearoa <i>New Zealand</i>	Ako Aotearoa supports all forms of post-secondary education in New Zealand and has close links to school education. This creates the collaboration required for implementing lifelong learning solutions and joined-up solutions for better outcomes in education and training
Advance HE <i>UK</i>	Advance HE combines missions in excellence in learning and teaching, leadership in equity practice and building leadership capability in higher education. Notably, Advance HE is the custodian of the UK Professional Standards Framework which sets benchmarks for learning and teaching practice in higher education and is increasingly recognised worldwide.
National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education <i>Ireland</i>	The National Forum leads a series of contemporary priorities pursued at the national level which currently include: The Professional Development of All Those Who Teach; Teaching and Learning in a Digital World; Teaching and Learning Enhancement Within and Across Disciplines; and Student Success.
QAA Scotland Enhancement Theme Model <i>Scotland</i>	QAA applies the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) to Scottish higher education through deep collaboration and partnership. QAA Scotland also manages a national programme of 'Enhancement Themes', by which the sector identifies and agrees to work on specific areas.

Establishment of an enhancement body like the proposed National Centre has been recommended by the Productivity Commission in its recently released [5-year Productivity Inquiry: Advancing Prosperity Report](#). *Reform directive 5: Increase tertiary education teaching quality to underpin a well-trained workforce* sets out recommendations that would be addressed by the establishment of the National Centre (8.9-8.11) including to leverage information to improve quality, professionalise the teaching role and develop an Australian evidence base. The Productivity Commission specifically identifies recommended activities to ‘undertake external university teaching quality assurance... bolster the incentives for, and prestige of, higher education teaching...<and deliver> collection and dissemination of evidence on best practice post-school teaching, covering both VET and higher education’. The Commission mentions the newly established Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) as a possible vehicle. However, AERO is currently exclusively focussed on school education and accompanying data, so the scope and extent of this work would be a considerable shift from its core purpose.

Current mechanisms to inform and drive improvement in higher education are narrow and dispersed. Governance and regulation is delivered by the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA), informed by the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Various aspects of practice are informed by specialist centres (for example, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) or institutional education research centres) and professional associations, however none carry national authority for holistic and sector-wide quality improvement.

2. The value of a National Centre for Student Success

A national approach to quality improvement is a crucial enabler that will lift performance in all higher education institutions by setting benchmarks for excellent educational practice, developing strategic insight to guide institutions and stakeholders, directly improving practice and building learning and teaching expertise and leadership. Taking a system-wide approach, the proposed National Centre for Student Success would:

1. create **trusted, valued mechanisms for collaboration, discussion and dissemination** across the higher education sector including institutions, regulators, professional bodies and expert groups, and consult effectively with students, industry and community stakeholders. Existing specialised activities will be far more effective when channelled through a cooperative, national body focussed on practice, capability and accompanying strategic advice.
2. work in deep **collaboration with National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE)** and foster embedding of equity insights into pedagogy, mainstream delivery and enhancements.
3. develop **collaborations with leaders in vocational education**, such as the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), to create a student-centred view of lifelong and life-wide learning connecting vocational, higher education and workplace learning. This new approach recognises the critical importance of diverse and complementary learning in supporting contemporary life and careers.
4. implement a **Trial, Evaluation, Implementation and Monitoring (TEIM) program** to advance proven and scalable improvement initiatives that address key priorities identified by the Accord process, regulators and the sector. A model for the successful translation and scale-up of similar initiatives was developed and successfully implemented by the ARC-SRI Science of Learning Research Centre.
5. **synthesise holistic approaches and advice** to stakeholders that informs policy and practice at national, regional and local levels, and fosters communities of practice and local champions. Recent examples include cross-sector working groups working on micro-credentials who have endorsed this proposal¹.
6. develop **reward and recognition** for excellence in learning and teaching that fosters uptake for good practice, and builds capability and capacity for institutional and national leadership.

The proposed National Centre for Student Success is a fresh approach to collaboration but will learn from the experience of earlier national bodies such as the [Office for Learning and Teaching](#) with tight targeting of activities. [Evaluation](#) of prior national bodies that led learning and teaching enhancement demonstrates considerable value for modest investment, as [noted](#) at the closure of the preceding OLT.

¹ Victoria Micro-Credentials Community of Practice (CoP) and Working Group; Qld Cross-Sector Micro-Credential Working Party

The Centre would augment current government investment in quality in higher education and accelerate translation to practice. It would complement the ongoing quality assurance work of TEQSA by reinstating **whole-of-sector quality enhancement**. The Centre would also complement the equity focus of NCSEHE by marrying bespoke equity interventions, activities and support with inclusive, well-designed curriculum that is proven to benefit all students and, particularly, equity-bearing students.

Collaborative effort is particularly urgent to respond to a changing external environment. The demands of digital education, life and work, challenges to conventional career paths for graduates and increasing pressure on the academic workforce are wicked problems that are not easily solvable by individual institutions. A National Centre for Student Success creates a national mechanism to develop and share effective responses which are otherwise fragmented and often involve inefficient duplication of effort. National status and funding to drive systemic change would confer authority to lead and incentivise in-kind investment and participation.

3. Critical capability gaps for quality improvement

Effective quality improvement relies on productive interplay of critical factors including leadership and governance, people and capabilities, information and evidence, funding and environment, collaboration and knowledge translation. A number of key capability gaps are evident in the current sector which need action to foster high quality outcomes.

Learning leadership and professional capability development is a significant and systemic gap in Australian higher education in 2023. Emerging leaders have limited opportunity to build their skills at the national level, while recognition of excellence via, for example, the Australian Awards for University Teaching, is not translated into sector-wide action and uptake. Notably, two decades of bipartisan funding for innovation and excellence in learning and teaching via the national OLT, and its predecessor organisations, grew a generation of learning leaders, many of whom have gone on to become DVCs and PVCs in universities today. Some institutions have adopted the UK [AdvanceHE Fellowship](#) Scheme as an alternative but this is not universal and is not tailored to the Australian context. Developing leadership through sector programs in the National Centre for Student Success would have the dual benefit of growing sector leaders and delivering on needed sector-wide work.

Better and more nuanced data collections and analysis is required to shift the dial on student success and enhanced student outcomes. The National Centre would identify needs and foster solutions, noting the considerable opportunity in uniting and improving existing data sets. The potential is illustrated by examples from student experience data including:

- wider availability of admissions data (pathways, credit and prior learning) collected via the various Tertiary Access Centres (TACs). This would inform an actionable, national lifelong learning strategy.
- consistent and sector-wide collection of data on non-participating students to inform policy and local action, noting that a [2021 NCSEHE report](#) found that one quarter of university fail grades represent ‘ghost students’.
- better data on student study pathways including deferral; for example, a [2022 project](#) pointed to opportunities to improve graduate outcomes for students who defer and a [review of the Higher Education Standards Framework](#) carried out in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic identified other opportunities.
- better data on student failure and withdrawal that can inform strategies to reduce ‘[avoidable failure](#)’.

Advice on enhancing practice to meet regulatory standards is not systematic. TEQSA, as sector regulator, provides occasional guidance notes to assist institutions but this provision is not systematic and has very limited capacity to respond as practice evolves or meets new barriers. This issue was also identified in the [review of the Higher Education Standards Framework](#) conducted in light of changing modes of study over the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, TEQSA’s suite of guidance notes on online learning were released in 2022 but are already challenged by the dramatic uptake of generative artificial intelligence. Many other regulatory standards under the *Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) 2021* are not specifically addressed by TEQSA-initiated action. There is no current mechanism to advance and enhance practice standards systematically which, if enacted, would make a critical difference to educational quality and

student outcomes. A National Centre could have a key enhancement role across the quality standards and would foster communities of practice to accelerate action.

The **rate of change** in the environment for higher education is daunting. Life, work and study have been profoundly disrupted by social change, the move to increased digitisation and digitalisation, the imperative to close the gap on Indigenous outcomes, and global challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, skills shortages and interconnected global economies. As noted in the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper, disruption is also flowing through to education practice where students are increasingly diverse; academic staff are expected to deliver more with less; new ways of cross-institutional working are required; and learning qualifications need to respond to dynamic workforce requirements for transferable and new skills development.

The rate of change means individual institutions will struggle to respond, as was demonstrated during the precipitous shift to online provision in March 2020. The immediate outcome was 'emergency remote teaching', which is not sufficient for sustained delivery of quality online learning. Collaboration within and between institutions, nationally and internationally, was absolutely required to enable delivery to continue but responses were ad hoc and necessarily disjointed. The contrast with the range of support offered in the UK through [AdvanceHE](#) and partner agencies such as [JISC](#) is notable. An Australian quality improvement and enhancement agency could have facilitated rapid response in the emergency and then taken the lessons learnt forward into better quality and sustainable online learning, teaching, assessment and delivery.

4. Establishing the National Centre for Student Success

To achieve its goals, the National Centre for Student Success must have national credibility, be independent enough to ensure delivery against short and medium term goals and must provide value to incentivise engagement and participation.

National credibility would be derived from strong relationships with sector regulatory bodies, a recognisable high quality agenda and co-investment from both government and institutions. In addition to strong stakeholder partnerships, the National Centre would need to leverage existing distributed expertise and, in return, provide recognition and co-create impact for that work. A co-investment model could be constructed by: re-purposing a modest quantum of the existing higher education performance funding to maintain central co-ordination and governance; creating value-for-money online resources and enabling dissemination (leveraging the existing national [Learning & Teaching Repository](#), which houses all the open-access resources generated from prior work); and judiciously commissioning targeted work in areas of national education priority where funding is warranted. Co-investment from higher education providers would come from in-kind contributions and by repurposing time from teaching champions and leaders as part of institutional compacts, while also providing professional recognition and enhanced leadership capability development for individuals.

Independence would be balanced with accountability to government for funding and to the education ecosystem for value. Independence encourages longer-term thinking, sustainable action and maintains credibility. Efficacy can be achieved by tight governance that is respected by all stakeholders and overseen by a governing board with broad, cross-sector representation, including students. We already have strong evidence of how such a national body can work effectively in practice [with significant sector-wide impact](#).

Engagement and participation from institutions and individuals would be incentivised and made accountable by embedding a quality enhancement agenda within institutional compact/accord agreements. Immediate value would be improved delivery through application of best practice and the recognition of excellence and innovation.

Phased implementation

Development of the proposed National Centre for Student Success should be phased to ensure its success.

- **Phase 1: Building the model**
Building from the work of the Universities Accord Review, comprehensive consultation would engage stakeholder groups, set an ambitious but achievable agenda complementing existing capability,

propose the rules of engagement for collaboration and activity, and confirm the developed proposal with sector regulators (TEQSA, HESP) and the funders (Australian Government, HE institutions).

- Phase 2: Establishing operations

An initial establishment phase would set out immediate priorities for action drawing on sector priorities and the recommendations of the Universities Accord process to define short-term and medium-term goals and targets. In this phase, operations would be established and initial activities launched.

- Phase 3: Initial review and refinement

Evaluation of the activities of the new Centre would be built in from inception. An early review point would allow for recalibration to ensure value.

Initial priorities for the *National Centre for Student Success* would be determined by the recommendations of the Universities Accord. Possible themes and outputs that need urgent collective action could include:

What?	Why?
Re-imagining post-secondary education for lifelong learning	A learner-centric post-secondary education system would enable seamless pathways, transitions and cross-recognition between types of learning (degrees, certificates, short course, informal and non-formal). Achieving inter-operability is a wicked problem spanning curriculum design and practice, regulation, learner experience, intergovernmental arrangements, governance and funding. At the very least, it requires the articulation of a national lifelong learning strategy.
Embracing digital education	The abrupt shift to online learning during the pandemic response (2020-2022) forced dramatic changes in teaching and assessment which are here to stay. Digital transformation continues to gather pace and brings challenges and new opportunities for a seamless student experience. The impact of generative AI, which has been highlighted by the recent releases of ChatGPT, demonstrates how rapidly this field moves. Collective insight and close collaboration with industry and community will accelerate effective use of emerging technologies.
Implementation of recommendations to reform the Australian Qualifications Review	The AQF Review (2019) recommended substantial re-imagining of qualifications in Australia. The Review also recommended follow-on work to explore options and construct feasible solutions. Implementation of the AQF Review recommendations will require concerted effort from stakeholders across all post-secondary education sectors.
Enabling stakeholder co-design and delivery <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Voice • Industry partnership 	As universities welcome diverse learners and connect better with industry and community, collaboration and shared decision-making become crucial. The rise of students-as-partners and Student Voice Australia movements provide a wide range of approaches to work productively with students for institutional and sector enhancement endeavours. Deep and wide industry partnerships can be built through tailored combinations of work-integrated learning, course review and research (for example, for higher degree apprenticeships) . Both student and industry partnerships rest on developing appropriate capability within universities and other education providers.

5. Alignment with Australian Universities Accord – Discussion Paper

This submission proposes that a National Centre for Student Success be established as an **enabler** to underpin the effective operationalisation of the Accord Panel’s findings and recommendations that relate to enhancing the quality of higher education and the student experience. Consequently, the submission addresses a number of the Accord’s terms of reference and questions in the Discussion Paper through the relationships that it fosters or direct action in specific areas. Particular alignment to issues includes:

Q	Alignment
8	<i>Quality teaching delivering quality learning: reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment</i> The Centre will directly address quality assurance and quality enhancement in learning, teaching and the student experience
10	<i>Meeting skills needs through higher education: high quality general learning capabilities</i> The Centre will foster uplift and set standards to support lifelong learning with research-informed and evidence-based practice
15	<i>Lifelong learning: growing a culture of lifelong learning</i> The Centre will foster uplift and set standards to support lifelong learning with research-informed and evidence-based practice
17	<i>Strengthened tertiary system: better alignment and connection</i> The Centre will foster collaborations and build trust across post-secondary education through practical translation to practice
18	<i>Strengthened tertiary system: reform of the AQF</i> Implementation of a revised AQF could be an early focus for the Centre and aligns directly to its mission in improving the quality of learning and teaching
32	<i>System-wide approaches to increasing access and equity: best practice learning and teaching for students from under-represented groups</i> The Centre will collaborate with NCSEHE to create holistic advice for institutions and practitioners leading to sustainable embedding of good practice – built-in not bolted on
36	<i>Regulation and governance: meeting contemporary demands</i> The Centre will consolidate advice for institutions, peak bodies, regulators and Government where it applies to learning, teaching and the student experience
39	<i>Quality experience for students: ensuring quality</i> The Centre will directly address quality assurance and quality enhancement in learning, teaching and the student experience

6. Endorsements

The concept of a national centre to co-ordinate and drive quality enhancement has widespread support across higher education. Deputy Vice-Chancellors Academic/Education across Australian universities have expressed support for a national centre of learning and teaching in their submission to the Universities Accord Panel consultation.

We thank and acknowledge the key contribution of our two critical friends: Professor Kerri-Lee Krause, Provost, Avondale University; Deputy Chair, Higher Education Standards Panel, and Professor Andrew Harvey, Griffith University.

This proposal was circulated to sector peak bodies between April 4-6 prompting a rapid and strongly positive response. The following organisations have given **in-principle support** to the establishment of a National Centre to drive improvement across learning and teaching in higher education. Development of this proposal will require deep and comprehensive consultation.

Students
Student Voice Australia
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium
University Associations
Australian Technology Network
Regional Universities Network
Innovative Research Universities (support for national action)
Deans' councils
Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities
Australian Council of Deans of Education
Australian Council of Deans of Science
Australian Council of Engineering Deans
Australian Council of Deans of ICT
Education professional associations
Association for Academic Language and Learning
Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning
Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education
Australian Learning and Teaching Fellows' Network
Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training
Council of Australasian University Leaders in Learning and Teaching
Council of Australian University Librarians
Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia
Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia
National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia
National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services
Educational research and resource centres
Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning (Deakin)
Centre for Social Justice & Inclusion (UTS)
Sector leaders (including Chairs of Higher Education bodies)
The Honourable Professor Verity Firth, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Social Justice & Inclusion), UTS
Professor Nick James, Co-Chair, Council of Australian Law Deans
Professor Sophie Arkoudis, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education (Melbourne)