QUALITY CONTROL BARRIERS IN ADAPTING 'METRO-CENTRIC' EDUCATION TO REGIONAL NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

The massification and globalization of higher education, combined with the widespread adoption of processes underpinning accreditation and quality control of university programs, have tended to result in learning contexts that are increasingly narrowly conceived and tightly controlled. Underlying many quality control measures is a 'one size fits all' presumption that all qualifying students will receive the same standardized package of resources, teaching, assessment and learning opportunities in each location where a program is offered.

This 'metro-centric' view gives little regard to the challenges faced by regionally-based institutions and remote campuses in striving to achieve student learning outcomes that are comparable with city-based experiences. Metro-centrically imposed standards for the student learning experience ignore greater delivery costs faced by regional campuses due to thin markets and diseconomies of scale, plus higher costs for regional construction and for ongoing supply of information technology. In addition to these economic constraints, procedural inflexibilities within 'mother' campuses linked to quality control procedures, combined with accreditation requirements imposed by professional bodies, provide additional layers of control inhibiting regional campuses from responding to local needs and conditions with adaptations that would enhance the richness of regional and rural student learning experiences. Bureaucratic inflexibility as described here sits in tension with current government policies aspiring to increase participation and retention rates for rural students.

This paper outlines and critiques some of the ways in which quality controls in higher education serve to damage regional student learning through the imposition of inflexible curriculum design and contextually incongruent

teaching standards. The paper theorizes how greater operational flexibility can be achieved whilst assuring the quality of rural learning experiences. While the importance of professional accreditation and other proxy measures for quality learning are not denied, it should be possible to adopt some context-sensitive measures whilst maintaining standards in regional education. For example, the types of assessment tasks, class engagement activities and regionally relevant case studies tailored to the smaller class sizes typical of regional and remote campuses could be embraced as an opportunity rather than viewed as a deviation from standard.

INTRODUCTION

Pressures upon public expenditure in the wake of the downsizing of governments, plus movement to a mass system of higher education, have led to requirements of greater external accountability on the part of higher education, and a consequent increased demand for information about the quality of academic programmes (Shah, Lewis & Fitzgerald, 2011; Nagy & Robb, 2009; Brown & Carpenter & Collins & Winkvist-Noble, 2007, p. 173). In the Western world this demand for information has been met in part through the work of quality assurance agencies. Often, quality assurance agencies concern themselves almost exclusively with a single university function, teaching and learning (Brink, 2010, p. 140). Compared with their metropolitan counterparts, regional and rural university campuses in Australia tend to display a relatively weak profile of research activities; and thus for these campuses, the consequences of uniform imposition of quality assurance measures across a single institution's campuses are most keenly felt in the area of undergraduate teaching.

This paper describes some of the practical ways in which the pursuit of quality assurance agendas impacts upon academic programmes in small regional and rural campuses, to the detriment of stakeholders in the local educational enterprise. Whilst the practices and pressures described here are not unique to small regional campuses, the paper suggests that there is a compounding effect whenever the quality assurance agenda is brought to bear upon the activities of campuses operating in a regional and rural context.

REGIONAL AND RURAL UNIVERSITIES AND EQUITY TARGETS

In rural and regional Australia, the provision of higher education comes in a variety of shapes, sizes and dispensations. At one end of the spectrum is Barber's (2011a, pp. 3-4) 'regional university' headquartered in a regional city or town, whose 'regionality' is determined in part by the Australian Standard Geographical Classification of Remoteness. At the other end of the spectrum lies the 'small campus' with fewer than 2,000 students enrolled in on-campus courses (Wallace & Madsen 2006, p. 26). Unlike regional study centres, small local campuses offer at least some internal (on-campus) as opposed to external (distance) education (Wallace & Madsen 2006, p. 35). These 'satellite/regional/remote' campuses may belong to the 'distributed university:' an entity that in the ideal case forms 'a single and

cohesive institution distributed by happenstance across a variety of locations but functioning as a whole' (Bambrick, 2002, p. 2). In the discussion that follows we are not referring to completely autonomous university campuses that are located in large regional cities. We are concerned with satellite or second tier locations in multi-campus institutions where there is a parent/child relationship, and where ultimate responsibility and control over all locations lies with the mother campus. Whether a satellite campus has a low degree of autonomy, or has responsibilities along the spectrum to full autonomy (noted in the diagram below), quality control expectations will tend to issue in centralised chains of accountability. Wallace and Madsen (2006) observe that small campuses articulate with their parent institutions in a variety of ways, making it difficult to generalise across these institutions. Nonetheless, common to all the local provision described here is a tendency for the implications of quality assurance procedures to magnify and ramify when applied to the local, small-scale tertiary operation.
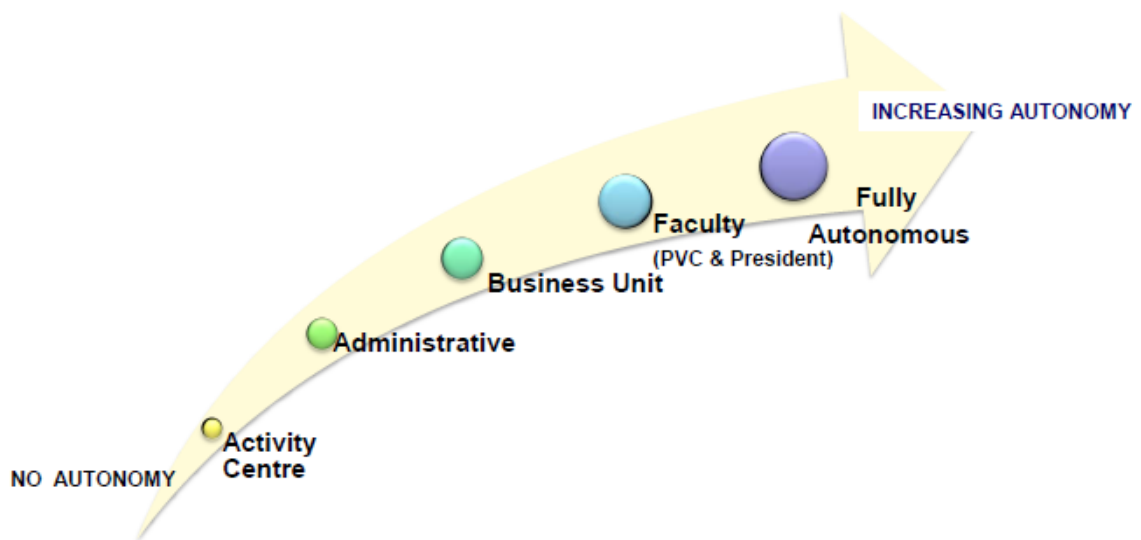
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In the current Australian policy context, universities face the challenge of improving quality outcomes and maintaining high standards while meeting the government's aspiration to increase the enrolment of students from targeted equity groups (Shah et al., 2011, p. 265). The Australian government has set a target of realising 20 per cent of university enrolments from equity groups by 2020. Rural and regional campuses potentially offer access to disproportionately high numbers of students from all three disadvantaged groups targeted under the government's equity plans - students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students from regional and remote areas, and indigenous students - making these campuses a natural focus for efforts to achieve government equity targets (DEEWR, 2008, pp. 27, 29; Allen Consulting Group, 2010, p. vi). The government has devoted money and resources to assisting regional university campuses in meeting new equity targets. Initiatives in this area include commissioning a critical investigation into the relative costs of providing

undergraduate education for regional versus metropolitan campuses (Allen Consulting Group, 2010) with a view to rethinking the regional student loading; and strengthening regional collaboration between universities and VET providers through the formation of a single Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE) tasked with guiding the formation of an interconnected tertiary education and training system (DEEWR, 2011). To this end the government has commissioned the Australian Qualifications Framework Council (AQFC) to develop strategies to improve articulation and connectivity between the Higher Education and VET sectors (DEEWR, 2011).

Whilst policy statements and physical resources are important, issues inhibiting the effectiveness of higher education institutions operating in regional locations are more complex than limitations of infrastructure and funding. Shah et al (2011, p.269) worry that government policy on academic standards and outcome-based funding may favour elite and well-resourced universities, at the expense of universities that are committed to education, research and engagement in home regions experiencing high proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is the contention of this paper that bureaucratic inflexibility arising from efforts to meet institutionally centralised quality assurance criteria and processes sits in tension with current government policies aspiring to increase participation and retention rates for rural students. Process constraints that result from long tentacles of control extending from 'mother' campuses can create inflexibilities in adapting higher education to local needs. These controls, typically associated with the need for consistency through standardization frameworks (both professional and institutional), apparently rest on the assumption that achieving uniformity of provision across campuses of a single university offers evidence of quality educational provision. To understand the nature and operation of quality-induced constraints, it is necessary to understand how the notion of quality currently plays out in higher education; and how issues *around standardisation of provision work in tandem with quality assurance concerns.*

DEFINING QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The notion of quality carries connotations of positive value. Thus, to invoke the notion of 'quality' is to invoke some notion of goodness or excellence. To ascribe quality to something is implicitly to endorse that thing. Like many value terms, the meaning of 'quality' is difficult to pin down, being relative to the user of the term and the circumstances in which the term is invoked (Harvey & Green, 1993). Harvey and Green (1993) list the following stakeholders in higher education with differing perspectives on the notion of quality: students, employers, teaching and non-teaching staff, government and its funding agencies; accreditors, validators, auditors and assessors (including professional bodies). Clearly, it is important to attend to the differing perspectives on quality informing the preferences of different stakeholders if we are to achieve constructive dialogue and learning around this notion (Dew 2001, p. 5; Harvey & Green, 1993). Given the very different ways in which the term 'quality' may be used, too often discussions of quality in higher education involve individuals and groups speaking past one another as they use a single label to

describe different perspectives on different things (Harvey & Green, 1993). Barnett (1994) goes so far as to suggest that any form of evaluation of higher education carries a normative sense of what higher education should be, and for this reason, "our quality evaluations are in reality an evaluation of rival conceptions of higher education" (Barnett 1994, p. 172).

In recent years, discussions of quality in higher education have tended to converge upon the language used to describe quality in a business and management context, as well as quality assurance in manufacturing (Brink, 2010, p. 142; Harvey & Green, 1993). Dew (2001, p. 4) identifies five familiar ways of framing the issue of quality in higher education and other (i.e. management) settings: quality as *endurance*, as *luxury and prestige*, as *conformance to requirements*, as *continuous improvement*, and as *value-added*. In their exhaustive analysis of the notion of quality in higher education, Harvey and Green (1993) identify 'five discrete but interrelated' ways of thinking about quality: as *exceptional*, as *perfection* (or consistency), as *fitness-for-purpose*, as *value-for-money*, and as *transformative*. Harvey and Green also offer sub-distinctions under many of these headings.

It would take us some distance from the purpose of this paper to pick our way through these varying conceptions of quality. Nonetheless, a few comments are in order here. The notion of quality as 'exceptional' is perhaps the least discussed notion in the current context where we have a mass system of higher education subject to the forces of globalisation (Lomas, 2002). This notion treats quality as something we intuitively recognise, and in an educational context, often reduces quality to a matter of existing institutional reputation (Harvey & Green, 1993), "which gives the advantage to the old, the rich and the beautiful" (Brink, 2010, p. 140), creating a cycle whereby a high level of resourcing endorses reputation, and a good reputation in turn attracts further resourcing (Harvey & Green, 1993). The 'elitist' notion of quality as excellence contrasts with the inclusive and functional notion of quality as *fitness-for-purpose,* since every product and service has the potential to fit its purpose and thus be judged a quality product or service (Harvey & Green, 1993). The two notions of quality to which academics pay most attention are 'fitness-for-purpose' and 'transformation'. In a survey of accounting academics, Watty (2006, p. 298) discovered that the current higher educational construct of quality as 'fitness for purpose' sits at odds with academics' own sense that quality in accounting education ought to be about transformation (Watty, 2006, p. 298). Lomas (2002) reports the results of an informal survey, in which 33 per cent of senior managers endorsed the notion of fitness-for-purpose, and 31 per cent endorsed the notion of transformation, as the preferred meaning of quality in higher education.

Despite academics' apparent preference for the notion, 'quality' as 'transformation' (of the student) is difficult to operationalise. According to Harvey and Green, "the heart of the education service is the relationship between the lecturer and student in the teaching and learning process" and this is necessarily a unique, negotiated process in each case (Harvey & Green, 1993; Watty, 2006, p. 298). One of the peculiarities of education is that, unlike other service industries, the provider is not

just doing something *for* the customer but doing something *to* the customer: transforming the customer (student) through a form of cognitive transcendence (Harvey & Green, 1993). Learning is an incremental process, with knowledge and increasing cognitive ability gradually acquired over time in a way which may prove difficult to measure (Lomas, 2002, p. 76). The problem with any fitness-for-purpose definition of quality in higher education is that different stakeholders may have different views about the purpose of higher education (Harvey & Green, 1993). In the education industry, there are difficulties in identifying both the consumer and the end 'product'. It is difficult to decide whether students, or employers, or both, should count as consumers of educational provision (Harvey & Green, 1993). For most industries, the notion that the customer determines product specification is an idealisation. Typically, the producer anticipates customer requirements and translates these into a product that will give satisfaction at a price the user is willing to pay. Advertising is then used to cultivate desire for the product (Harvey & Green, 1993). It might be argued that students are 'immature consumers' (Dill, 2010, p. 160) who have little notion what they require from an educational provider until they have been transformed by the educative process. So, whereas for some products, customer dissatisfaction may generate *post hoc* effects on quality, encouraging producers to change the product (Harvey & Green 1993), some commentators would caution against assigning too much weight to student (dis)satisfaction surveys as part of the quality audit process (Dill, 2010, p. 160).

As used on the ground, talk of 'quality' often blends two or more of the definitions described by Harvey and Green (Lomas, 2002, p. 72). Already, we see a way in which attention to quality assurance, and the interplay and tension between different notions of the same, might set up obstacles to higher education provision in a regional context. Barber (2011b) contends that the positive move encouraging higher education providers to set their own institutional goals through mission statements (operating under a notion of quality as *fitness-for-purpose*) is counteracted by DEEWR's attempts in 2012 to impose a uniform set of indicators against which every university's award funding will be assessed (implying a notion of quality as *perfection* or *consistency of product*). Barber suggests that inviting providers to set their own mission compacts with the government whilst using standardized indicators to measures such things as the student experience, teaching quality, academic attainment and student satisfaction, sends universities the mixed message that they should 'go forth and diversify' whilst excelling in precisely the same things (Barber, 2011b, p. 11).

THE QUALITY AGENDA

As played out in contemporary higher education, the notion of quality assurance imposes two distinctive features upon the higher education scene. In the first place, talk of quality assurance in higher education replaces a *product* view of quality - whereby quality is determined by the educational 'product' - with a *process* view (quality as conformance to specification), whereby the educational provider demonstrates that it is meeting certain internally specified criteria. The reliability of

the process becomes the vehicle for claiming excellence in the *perfection* sense of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993). That is to say, quality assurance is not about specifying the standards against which to measure or control quality. Rather, quality assurance is about ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality, however defined and measured, is delivered (Harvey & Green, 1993). The role of quality assurance is to identify whether, at an institutional level, a higher education organization is achieving the purpose it set for itself in its mission statement. At a more precise academic level, that purpose is set through the particular aims and learning outcomes articulated for a given academic programme (Lomas 2002, p. 73). Throughout this process, the quality assurance agency makes no judgment upon the standards proposed (Brink 2010, p. 143).

In terms of the management theory from which this notion of quality control derives, the philosophy is one of prevention rather than inspection (Harvey & Green, 1993). The quality assurance process tends to lead to a 'culture of quality', in which everyone in the organisation, not just the quality controllers, become responsible for quality (Harvey & Green, 1993). In a quality culture, there is no need to check final output, and in fact to do so is to shift responsibility away from those involved at each stage (Harvey & Green, 1993). In many national contexts, quality assurance agencies' failure to judge standards reflects universities' fierce protection of their institutional autonomy (Brink, 2010, p. 143). Barrow (1999) argues that, from a Foucauldian perspective, a quality management system can be regarded as "an array of the 'technologies of government': the strategies, techniques and practices used to seek to realise programmes" (Barrow, 1999, p. 31). Under such a scheme of 'governmentality', the state and the management of higher education providers rely upon the self-discipline of actors in the organisation to maintain a degree of surveillance-at-a-distance, whilst ensuring that the requirements of the system are met. Whilst staff may be capable of articulating and using the elements of the quality management system, this does not ensure that the institution's definition of quality is either understood or achieved (Barrow, 1999, p. 35). How this surveillance at a distance works through participant self-discipline can be illustrated through the new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011, which became operative on 1 January 2012. Under this act, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) establishes a nationally consistent system of post-secondary awards offered by all higher education providers operating in Australia. Whilst the AQF outlines requirements, it is the role of providers to demonstrate compliance with these requirements. By 1 January 2015, each provider must be able to demonstrate clearly to the regulator how it ensures standards are upheld across the range of its accredited programs.

The second notable feature of the current higher education culture of quality assurance is the way in which the quality assurance process apparently leads to the standardization of many aspects of higher education provision. Some of the implications of this move to standardization for institutions in general, and for satellite campuses operating in rural and regional locations in particular, are traced below.

STANDARDISATION

The imposition of *standards* as part of a quality assurance regime, and *standardisation* (of academic provision) are notions that should remain distinct (Gee, 2001). The two are often conflated, reflecting the fact that in an academic context, standards and standardisation tend to work in tandem. Standardisation can be seen both as being caused by, and as arising in response to, increased competition in a global market for higher education. According to Nagy and Robb (2009, pp. 229-230), "the global nation increasingly requires a standardised framework for education …. as the importance and need of a mobile and flexible workforce in knowledge-based economies continue to rise". One consequence of the massification of higher education has been a tendency for universities to modularise their course provision, adding modules to absorb student numbers and improve student course choice. Modularisation of course provision, allied with the imposition of quality assurance procedures, has led to the standardisation of educational provision within any given institution. Standardisation has the virtue of making things reliable and predictable. Standardisation expresses itself across different aspects of course provision, including institutional guidelines specifying: teaching contact hours per module; the type, number, and format of assessment tasks per module; and assessment points within a given module (the latter indicating how many times per term or semester and during which study weeks, the students will be asked to submit an assignment).

Of all the stakeholders in higher education, students benefit most from standardisation and the consistency this brings (Buglear, 2011). Standardisation, especially as part of a modularised system, leads to comparability and commensurability of study units, and thus inter-changeability and portability of courses and course credits, as students exercise choice by mixing and matching modules for course credit, or by seeking partial award credit for study undertaken in another programme or at another institution. Standardisation at the level of validation and review processes, also serves the interests of university bureaucracies, and to some extent, the interests of academics who can draw upon reliable and familiar procedures when seeking validation for new modules, courses and programmes.

Against all these benefits of standardisation must be weighed a number of negatives. These include the fact that standardisation tends to be used to specify a minimum rather than aspirational quality. It leads to a reduction in the autonomy of key players in the academic arena, and is coupled with a reduction in the diversity of outcomes. Standardisation can lead to inflexibility in course delivery, sometimes to the disadvantage of the student, who in compliance with institutional policy on standardised assessment points may be required to submit multiple assignments across a number of modules in the same study week. This inflexibility might be particularly disadvantageous to students enrolled on rural and regional campuses, disproportionate numbers of whom may be mature-aged and struggling to juggle family commitments plus commitments to travel long distances to regional campuses and study centres (Bambrick, 2002, p. 4), in addition to meeting multiple

assignment submissions. In at least some cases, local academics delivering courses that remain the 'property' of faculties or departments located at the mother campus might lack the discretion to negotiate revised submission deadlines for stressed students. Such lack of flexibility is most likely where the centrally-based course administration specifies firm deadlines for submitting student papers for cross-campus moderation.

One of the key strengths of standardisation – its predictability and lack of 'surprises'- often leads to inflexibility. This lack of procedural adaptability becomes a drawback for campuses operating in a regional context. Regional cities are often dominated by a limited number of large scale industries that are associated with the geographical position of the community. In the Australian context this can include mining, agriculture, forestry, fishing, tourism and others. It is not uncommon for small communities to both grow and decline in relation to relative changes in the industries that have traditionally supported the community. The ability for the workforce to quickly acquire and adapt skills to meet emerging job opportunities contributes significantly to community resilience. Recognition of the particular challenges and support structures that can better facilitate flexibility and responsiveness to local needs are important for building a skilled workforce; and thus the capacity of regional universities to respond to such skilling needs forms a key ingredient in the sustainability of regional communities. Key to success in meeting these reskilling needs is the ability of regional campuses to respond to changing workforce and skill needs in a timely fashion by offering new programmes at short notice. Standardisation of validation procedures within a higher education institution inevitably impose the same lengthy validation processes upon all new programmes, both those developed at leisure for uptake on metropolitan campuses as part of longitudinal planning, and programmes urgently required to meet short-term skill requirements in the regions serviced by satellite campuses. Buglear (2011, p. 102) argues that in some institutions, the need to submit appropriate documentation to a standards and quality body for approval often means that newly appointed module leaders struggle to make changes to the assessment regime for a module before its first delivery. If a small-scale issue such as changes to assessment can cause such problems, imagine the longer timelines required in planning and bringing to fruition programmes meeting urgent but short-term skills necessary to revive a flagging local economy. In too many cases, the tight window of opportunity to make a difference to the local economy will be exhausted long before the new programme becomes validated.

REGIONAL CONTEXTS AND REGIONAL PROVISION

In Australia, the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) came into effect on 4th January 2012 and will be administered by the new national higher education regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) (TEQSA, 2012). These standards describe the government's expectations for self-accrediting university providers. The standards contained in the Framework include the following;

- Course documentation must ensure *equivalence* in learning outcomes between various modes of study;
- Course resourcing has adequate electronic and/or physical library, laboratories and studios and information sources to achieve the learning outcomes in the course of study;
- The numbers, qualifications, experience, expertise and profile of academic staff are appropriate to the nature, level and mode of delivery. Staff must be appropriately qualified in the relevant discipline. In particular staff should have at least one qualification standards level higher than the program in which they teach or have equivalent professional experience.
- Primary supervisors must be active researchers in the field that they supervise and Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students must be able to form part of the scholarly intellectual community.

These criteria apparently overlook a variety of factors creating dissonance between the learning experiences of students on regional and satellite campuses, and the experiences of their metropolitan counterparts. Some of these factors relate to resourcing and the physical environment. The speed of reliable internet access assumed in metropolitan contexts is unavailable or intermittently available on remotely-located satellite campuses. Geographic isolation also means that not all technologies available in metropolitan campuses (e.g. recording of lectures) are available regionally. Expert technological support for both students and staff may be fragmented and available only in windows of time. Physical library stocks may be limited on satellite campuses, and there may be delays in mailing physical library resources to remotely located students. All of this serves to compromise the equivalence of student learning experiences across the distributed university. It is broadly recognised that 'regional parts of Australia are generally poorer and more disadvantaged than metropolitan areas', with fewer services and employment opportunities, and lower educational outcomes (Richardson & Friedman, 2010, p. 15). A high proportion of those regional and rural students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds can often be the first in family to attend university. These students require greater scaffolding of learning to secure their retention and academic progression (Shah et al., 2011, p. 268). Providing enhanced academic support services to foster independent learning represents a real cost commitment for providers, and possibly at the expense of investing in other aspects of the student learning experience.

Other differences in the learning experiences of regional and rural students reflect problems in staffing satellite campuses. Problems in staff recruitment to satellite campuses often make it difficult to meet staff qualification requirements as laid out in the Threshold Standards. Bambrick (2002, p. 4) expresses the hope that what regional academic staff lack in experience and qualifications may sometimes be compensated by their enthusiasm, and the recency of their own student experience (the latter presumably improving their empathy with at-risk learners). However, ongoing investment in newly-qualified staff can be compromised by the costs of travel. High travel and accommodation costs associated with commuting between

campuses render professional development expensive and thus something only made available with considered frequency. The time consumed in travelling between campuses impacts upon time available to engage in research and represents a real opportunity cost (Allen Consulting Group, 2010, p. viii), which may be paid for in the compromised career development of young staff who are under pressure to publish whilst preparing their first teaching materials. Career development of young academics and the building of research cultures may be further hampered where a university distributes senior expert staff across campuses that are linked primarily by technology (Wallace & Madsen, 2006, p. 31). Failures in staff development ultimately impact upon the student learning experience at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Sparse staffing at satellite campuses can make it difficult to supply primary supervisors actively researching in the field that they supervise, with staff frequently required to act as co-supervisors for students working in areas beyond their own research expertise. Low numbers of higher degree by research (HDR) students studying through regional campuses tells against the production of a tightly-knit localised scholarly community. All too often, for HDR students enrolled regionally, membership of scholarly communities must be synthesized through virtual means.

The Threshold Standards create an expectation that learning locations will provide equivalent socialisation and networking opportunities for all students enrolled through the same institution. This is difficult to achieve given the thin student populations attending classes on satellite campuses, as most regional campuses face lower levels of demand for undergraduate courses than do metropolitan campuses (Allen Consulting Group, 2010, p. vii). The local student population is further limited by the mixed demographic of students enrolled on satellite campuses. Regional students are generally from low SES backgrounds and frequently travel to learning institutions from a wide geographic zone around campuses, limiting attendance at tutorials. Many students will be mature-aged students whose family responsibilities prevent them studying at metropolitan campuses (Bambrick 2002, p. 4). These same family responsibilities often may limit their capacity to attend classes. The restricted student body creates difficulties when implementing the teamwork projects and team work skills featured on the professionally accredited programs that satellite campuses often specialise in delivering. The pool of students from which teams for group work can be drawn is small. Teamwork can implicate students in working with the same small pool of students progressing through year levels. This prevents local students from benefitting from the broadening of viewpoints that collaboration with the diverse cohort of students studying on metropolitan campuses would bring.

These are just some of the ways in which the student experience on satellite campuses diverge from the standardised student experience package that distributed universities hope to demonstrate as part of their quality assurance compliance. Whilst lack of uniformity of the student experience may be viewed by the parent institution as a compliance issue, the question arises whether the differing student experience represents a problem for regional and rural students. Who is to

say that 'metropolitan learning experience' always equates to 'superior learning experience'? It could be argued that at least some areas of non-compliance actually reflect benefits enjoyed by the non-metropolitan student. When introduced as part of an assessment regime, teamwork activities are designed to formally induct students into certain skills valued in the workplace: skills that regional students may experience on an informal basis, by virtue of mutually supporting each other through several years of study in a consistent class cohort. Students enrolled at satellite campuses may enjoy unusually close collegial relationships with their peers, which might be envied by some metropolitan-based students who may feel 'lost' or anonymous in larger class cohorts. If satellite campuses are to develop and transform their student capital to best effect, then parent institutions must offer latitude in interpreting the Threshold Standards for the local context, and do so by allowing satellite campuses to embrace small class sizes as an opportunity, rather than viewing these as a deviation from standard. Only then can satellite campuses tailor assessment tasks and class engagement activities to reflect the local learning environments, whilst enlivening lessons using regionally relevant case studies, to the benefit of local students.

Increasingly, the student experience is expected to incorporate elements of what Mantz Yorke dubs 'work-engaged learning' (Yorke 2011, p. 118). The notion of combining education and the workplace is problematic, since this involves negotiating complicated relationships between stakeholders (Gibbs & Armsby, 2010, p. 186). Employers participating in work-engaged learning may lack the time or the interest to undertake formal training in the ways of academic assessment (Yorke, 2011, p. 124). Rural and regional businesses and services are often sparsely staffed, and this means that rural and regional professionals may be pressed to find the time and resources to host students on work-based placements, much less engage in formal assessment training. Cultivating local networks amongst regional professionals is also time-consuming for regional academic staff. However, most regional campuses offering work-based practicums for their students would find that the benefits of creating these close professional networks outweigh the costs. This is because many students enrolled at satellite campuses, who intend to work in regional areas, need to understand what it means to work as regional and rural practitioners; and they can only do this through direct engagement with practicing rural professionals. However busy regional professionals might be, they understand the importance of recruiting and retaining new staff; and for this reason, they may provide a more welcoming environment for work-placements than many metropolitan firms. Once again, this example demonstrates how the particularities of a rural or regional context, potentially a problem from the viewpoint of institutional consistency, may work to the benefit of students.

CONCLUSION

This paper describes, from the perspective of regionally-based students and academic staff, some of the advantages and the disadvantages of moves to standardise university procedures as part of quality assurance practices. Many

standardised practices focus upon delivering a uniform student learning experience across all campuses of the 'distributed university'. It might be argued that, in an era where increasing numbers of students living close to metropolitan campuses are opting for the external mode of study, higher education providers should not be obsessed with the goal of delivering a uniform on-campus learning experience to all members of their student cohort. Excessive attention to the standardisation of student experiences across universities may burden satellite campuses with unrealistic expectations regarding what can be delivered locally, whilst failing to acknowledge and celebrate the positive features of the local student experience. As the example of work-engaged learning demonstrates, the particularities of the local learning environment may provide real learning opportunities to be exploited, rather than some deviation from an idealised norm or standard. Rural and regional satellite campuses must make the argument that small class sizes benefit students and that, for the purposes of quality audit, studying on regional and rural campuses can bring forms of student enrichment that should be recognised and celebrated rather than being sidelined or disguised.

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