



The Promotion of Teaching Excellence in Higher Education: A Comparison of the Australian and New Zealand Approaches

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In this paper a comparison is made between the structure and operations of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council and the Ako Aotearoa National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence of New Zealand. Both of these organisations were established in the mid 2000s and were created at a time when higher education institutions in both countries were attempting to increase their research profiles in response to changing funding criteria. Although the two organisations were established for similar reasons they did not operate in quite the same fashion and with the same degree of focus. Instead large differences in the scale of funding has meant that the Australian agency undertakes far more activities than its New Zealand counterpart, although the relative influence of the two bodies in their respective jurisdictions is similar.

Introduction

The provision of higher education is regarded by many as being vital to both the achievement of economic development and greater social equity. Concern in recent years has, however, not just been for expanding the number of young people receiving a higher education, but also that the standards of the quality and the effectiveness of learning and teaching in universities is also maintained, or even raised (Wolf, 2004).¹ This has occurred at a time when many universities are attempting to raise their research profiles. In recent years the trend in most countries has been to

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grant government education providers with greater institutional autonomy, but at the same time link their funding for research more explicitly to the overt research outputs of these institutions (Dill, 1997; Mora, 2001). This has resulted in universities attempting to boost their research profiles in order to attract and retain government funding. For many universities, therefore, the main way in which the prestige of the institution is enhanced is through research (James, 1990; Winston, 1999).

In order to ensure that in attempting to raise their research reputations universities do not neglect their teaching functions a number of governments have established standalone agencies dedicated to the promotion of good teaching practices in higher education. These agencies are not uniform in organisational design and responsibilities, but instead have taken a variety of different forms.

The purpose of this paper is to compare, and contrast, the structure and operations of two of these organisations in Australia and New Zealand. The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (the ALTC) and the Ako Aotearoa National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence of New Zealand (Ako Aotearoa) were both established in the mid 2000s. These two organisations were created at a time when higher education institutions in both countries were attempting to increase their research profiles in response to changing funding criteria.ⁱⁱ In both cases these organisations were influenced by developments that were occurring in the United Kingdom; where the Higher Education Academy was established in 2004 in response to a greater concentration of focus in that country of universities on research.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is not the purpose of the paper to compare the efficiency of the two organisations. To do so would require measuring the outputs of the two organisations; this would create serious methodological challenges. The outputs of government agencies, such as these, are inherently difficult to measure, both in terms of quantity and quality. In addition as these services are free and do not have market prices associated with them, aggregating the varied outputs of these service providers is problematic (New Zealand

Treasury/Statistics New Zealand, 2010). Even without such an assessment, however, it is possible to get a clearer view of the functions and operations of these two organisations through a comparative study. In particular the impact of the greatly different level of funding of the two institutions on the nature of their respective operations will be analysed.

The layout of this paper is as follows. In the next section a description of the general background to the establishment of these two organisations is provided. This will be followed by a comparison of the size and scope of the two organisations. This section will include an analysis of the relative size of the funding of the two organisations and the impact of this on the operations of the two organisations. A section on the corporate governance arrangements of the two organisations will follow. In the final section some conclusions will be made.

Background

Before the Australian and New Zealand agencies were established a similar body was created in the United Kingdom. In the United Kingdom the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (the Institute) was founded in 2000 in response to the Dearing Report (1997) (the National Committee into Higher Education). The Institute aimed to enhance the status of teaching in higher education, to improve the quality of teaching and to set standards of good professional practice in higher education. In 2004 it was merged with the Learning and Teaching Support Network (the Support Network) and the TQEF National Coordination Team to form the Higher Education Academy (the Academy). The Learning and Teaching Support Network was an earlier initiative of the higher education bodies in the United Kingdom and aimed to share and disseminate existing knowledge of good practice in teaching. Its function was not so much to initiate research into good teaching practices, but instead to make available to academics and institutions information of existing practices.

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Because of its diverse origins the Academy, once established, carried out a variety of separate functions. On the one hand it continued to carry out the networking and dissemination functions of the Support Network, and on the other hand it also carried out the functions of professional recognition of successful teaching academics and awards. In addition it also conducted research into improvements in learning and teaching; which was more the role of the Institute. The Academy, therefore, carried out all of the functions that the prospective agencies in Australia and New Zealand could carry out after they had been established.

The Academy, today, is funded from four higher education funding bodies in the United Kingdom and operates from three main locations (York, Cardiff and Edinburgh) as well as an additional 24 subject areas locations, shattered about the country in the universities. This makes it a sizeable body and one that received a total income of £29.6 million in the financial year 2009/10 (The Higher Education Academy, 2010).

Australian initiatives in this field followed on closely from that of the United Kingdom. The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) was established in August 2004 as an initiative of the Howard Coalition Government, in response to recommendations made in the report; *Our Universities: backing Australia's future* (2003). In making these recommendations a Discussion paper was issued in September 2003 on the nature of a proposed *National Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (Australia, Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003). Some of the proposed functions of the Council were carried out prior to its establishment. The Australian Awards for University Teaching, for instance, were granted by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee between 2000 and 2004, and before that by the Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development (between 1997 and 1999). The Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching also operated between 1992 and 1996, as did as did the Commonwealth Staff Development Fund between 1900 and 1996.

The ALTC, however, operated on a far larger scale than its predecessor organisations, and over a much broader scope of responsibilities. Funding to the Australian Universities Teaching Committee was only around \$2 million per annum, whereas the ALTC was funded to the tune of \$30 million per annum in the late 2000s (Australian Universities Teaching Committee, 2002; ALTC, 2010).^{iv}

The ALTC was established initially as the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education and become fully operational in 2006. It was named after a former Liberal Party Minister of Education and colleague of the Liberal Party Prime Minister John Howard. It was established as a separate company, was fully funded by the Australian Government and appointments were made to its Board by the Government. After a change in government the Rudd Labor Government changed the name of the organisation from the Carrick to the ALTC. The commitment of the Labor Government to the body was not as enthusiastic as that of the Howard Government and in the wake of the floods in Queensland and Victoria in late 2010, and the need to increase spending on flood affected infrastructure, announced the axing of the organisation (Lane, 27 January 2011; Australia Treasury 2011).^v A subsequent agreement was made to pass on some of the functions of the ALTC to the Australian Government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Lane, February 17 2011).

At the same time that plans to create the Australian institution were taking place similar moves were being undertaken across the Tasman in New Zealand. On the 30 November 2004 the New Zealand Associate Education (Tertiary Education) Minister Steve Maharey announced that the New Zealand Government was prepared to provide up to \$NZ 4 million a year for the operation of a national centre for tertiary teaching excellence (Maharey, 2004). It was proposed by the Minister that the Centre would promote effective teaching and learning through the description and documentation of effective teaching practices, would provide a clearing house for research on teaching and learning, the

promotion of networks of educators throughout New Zealand and would undertake research into teaching and learning.

To design the national centre a Teaching Matters Forum (the Forum) was created to advise on the establishment of the centre. The Forum was made up of representatives from universities, polytechnics, registered training organisations and private providers. The Forum held workshops and presentations throughout New Zealand and in 2005 made its recommendations in two reports to the Minister (Abbott & Airini, 2005; Tertiary Education Commission, 2005). In February 2006 the Tertiary Education Commission issued an invitation to submit a proposal to host the centre and subsequently in August 2006 it was announced that a Massey University led consortium had won the contract to establish and operate the centre (other members of the consortium included the Auckland University of Technology, the University of Canterbury, Christchurch College of Education, Universal College of Learning and the Manukau Institute of Technology). Under the contract arrangements the Centre was based at Massey's Wellington campus with regional hubs established in Auckland, Christchurch and Palmerston North (Cullen, 2006). The Ako Aotearoa National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, as it became known, became fully operational in 2007, a year later than the Australian body.

By the late 2000s the two agencies were operating fully and were promoting improvements to teaching and learning in their respective countries. Despite the similar goals of the two agencies their size and structure were not the same. In particular the vastly different levels of the funding the two agencies received meant that they were to concentrate on decidedly different areas of activity.

Size and scope

The first, and most obvious, difference between the two organisations was their relative size. The Australian organisation was, as you would expect, considerably larger than the New Zealand one. The revenue of the ALTC in 2008/09, for instance,

was \$A 28.6 million compared to \$A 3.4 million (\$NZ 4.3 million) for Ako Aotearoa in New Zealand. The greater size of the ALTC, however, was not just due to the greater population of Australia, but was also due to the more lavish nature of funding of government agencies in Australia compared to New Zealand.^{vi} Tables 1 and 2 provide, respectively, data on the relative size and scope of the two agencies in terms of population and student numbers. From the data it can be seen that in terms of population the Australian agency was funded twice as much as the New Zealand one; and in terms of student numbers almost three times.

Table 1. Relative size of the ALTC and Ako Aotearoa

| <u>ALTC – Australia</u> | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|------------|-------------|------------|--------------|----------|
| | Revenue | Population | Revenue/ | Student | Revenue/ |
| | \$A | Australia | Population | Enrolments | students |
| | | million | \$A | EFTS | \$A |
| 2004/05 | 3,799,260 | 20.127 | 0.189 | 661,206 | 6 |
| 2005/06 | 26,903,776 | 20.395 | 1.319 | 674,092 | 40 |
| 2006/07 | 14,944,003 | 20.698 | 0.722 | 691,928 | 22 |
| 2007/08 | 23,323,155 | 21.073 | 1.107 | 725,892 | 32 |
| 2008/09 | 28,601,545 | 21.432 | 1.335 | 757,850 | 38 |
| 2009/10 | 31,935,133 | 21.875 | 1.460 | 813,049 | 39 |
| <u>Ako Aotearoa - New Zealand</u> | | | | | |
| | Revenue* | Population | Revenue/ | Student | Revenue/ |
| | \$A | New Zealand | Population | ennoblements | students |
| | | million | \$A | EFTS | \$A |
| 2006 | 124,291 | 4.185 | 0.030 | 267,925 | 0 |
| 2007 | 1,280,879 | 4.228 | 0.303 | 266,081 | 5 |
| 2008 | 2,839,176 | 4.269 | 0.665 | 263,354 | 11 |
| 2009 | 3,407,698 | 4.316 | 0.790 | 281,054 | 12 |
| 2010 | 4,966,695 | 4.368 | 1.137 | 285,999 | 17 |

Source: Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching; Australian Learning and Teaching Council; Ako Aotearoa National Centre for Teaching Excellence; Statistics New Zealand; Australian Bureau of Statistics; New Zealand, Ministry of Education; Australia, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

*New Zealand figures have been converted into \$A using exchange rates given by the Reserve Bank of Australia.

Table 2. Relative scope of the ALTC and Ako Aotearoa

| | <u>ALTC – Australia</u> | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| | Total Expenses | Staff expenses | Award expenses | Scheme Expenses |
| | \$A | % | % | % |
| 2004/05 | 1,105,465 | 27.2 | 12.7 | Na |
| 2005/06 | 4,401,581 | 18.5 | 15.7 | 44.5 |
| 2006/07 | 16,359,525 | 11.4 | 21.1 | 55.9 |
| 2007/08 | 30,594,515 | 9.8 | 12.9 | 64.3 |
| 2008/09 | 27,921,631 | 12.6 | 12.1 | 66.1 |
| 2009/10 | 28,383,236 | 13.7 | 12.6 | 63.0 |
| <u>Ako Aotearoa - New Zealand</u> | | | | |
| | Total Expenses | Staff expenses | Award expenses | Regional National Projects |
| | \$NZ | % | % | % |
| 2006 | 184,731 | 13.9 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| 2007 | 1,487,935 | 9.9 | 0.0 | 60.1 |
| 2008 | 3,326,000 | 14.1 | 8.1 | 28.6 |
| 2009 | 4,026,000 | 14.7 | 6.8 | 35.6 |
| 2010 | 3,753,870 | 14.4 | 6.4 | 34.6 |

Source: Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching; Australian Learning and Teaching Council; Ako Aotearoa National Centre for Teaching Excellence.

It has been noted in the past that governments are generally larger in wealthier countries as government expenditure tends to grow faster than the economy for both supply and demand reasons. On the demand side, the appetite for public goods and services expands as nations become wealthier; while at the same time the ability to raise revenue rises (this is often referred to as Wagner's Law).^{vii} In the Australian case as GDP per capita, and subsequently tax revenue, is substantially higher than in New Zealand, government agencies in Australia generally have larger amounts of resources available to them. On the supply side public sector wages tend to increase more strongly than public sector productivity (often referred to as Baumol's disease), increasing the share of government expenditure (New Zealand Treasury

2011). This meant, for instance, that the higher level of salaries among the staff of the Australian agency meant that a greater budget was required for the same level of employment.

As a consequence of the greatly different levels of funding, the scope of operations of the two organisations differs somewhat. First of all the Australian institution was designed to provide services solely for the higher education sector and not for vocational education institutions (whether government or private). The New Zealand institution, in contrast, covered all tertiary education institutions, which was a reflection of the more integrated approach to tertiary education in New Zealand. In New Zealand there is single Tertiary Education Commission that administers the funding of tertiary education providers and reports to a single Minister for Tertiary Education. The New Zealand body, therefore, was created to provide support for all tertiary education institutions. This means that not only was there a lower level of funding for the New Zealand agency, but also that what there was had to be spread over a greater number and variety of institutions.

The fewer resources of the New Zealand organisation meant that it has been far more constrained in its provision of services to the tertiary education sector of New Zealand. Indeed from the very beginning it was envisaged by the Teaching Matters Forum that because of the limited resources available Ako Aotearoa would be more a networking organisation and disseminator of existing information on learning and teaching than its Australian counterpart (Tertiary Education Commission, 2005). This made it more a similar to the Learning and Teaching Support Network of the United Kingdom rather than the Institute of Learning and Teaching in that country. Because of the budgetary constraints imposed on it Ako Aotearoa provided far less resources for New Zealand academics for independent research on teaching and learning practices, not only in absolute terms, but also has a proportion of its total budget compared to that of the Australian agency. The Australian organisation, therefore, is far more a body that is engaged in the creation of research into best practice teaching and learning.

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The New Zealand agency on the other hand places a great deal more emphasis on the online dissemination of learning and teaching best practices. This networking function was also a reason for the organisation establishing three hub centres in Auckland, Palmerston North and Christchurch, which aimed to link into regional networks of tertiary education teachers.

In addition the New Zealand organisation put far less emphasis on the granting of awards to academics for good teaching performances. The New Zealand awards have been far fewer in number (around twelve per annum) than the Australian ones and took up considerably less in terms of the total budget of Ako Aotearoa compared to that of the ALTC. The ALTC, in contrast, made something like 250 awards per annum, which meant that the holders of these awards are far more common in the Australian higher education sector than in New Zealand. This in turn has meant that the whole process of applying for, granting and receiving awards is far more important in Australian higher education than in New Zealand. Australian academics, for instance, are more encouraged to apply for awards and after receiving them use them in their normal rounds of promotions and job applications.

Although the Australian organisation was able to gain from the more generous funding of the Australian Government one of the drawbacks of it was that when budget constraints became tighter in both countries it attracted the attention of the Australian Government looking to make budget cuts. Although it is still possible that the New Zealand Government would in the future decide to wrap up Ako Aotearoa for budgetary reasons, the far more modest scale of the organisation may mean that it will survive.

To a large degree the nature of the activities carried out by the two organisations was influenced by the scale of their funding. The Australian organisation had access to far greater levels of funding so was able to promote teaching and learning through the funding of direct research and large scale granting of awards to Australian academics. The New Zealand body, in contrast, concentrated far

more on the dissemination of existing knowledge. Both agencies were successful in the sense they have both been able to highlight the importance of teaching and learning to some degree, but achieved this in different ways.

Even if it is possible to highlight the successes of these two organisations it should also be recognised that there have been important limits to the degree of influence that they have had on teaching and learning in higher education. It must be recognised that the universities in both countries have fairly well entrenched teaching and learning practices that in many instances are improving only slowly (Coolbear 2011).

Corporate governance

Besides the size and scope of the two institutions the corporate structure of the two agencies was quite different. One of the original views of the Teaching Matters Forum, when it made its recommendations to the New Zealand Government on the structure of the proposed centre, was that it should be governed by a board that was comprised of a mix of people that were education experts and representatives of the tertiary education sector as a whole (Tertiary Education Commission, 2005; Abbott & Airini, 2005). In making this recommendation it was hoped by the Forum, that a board made up of solely of senior managers of universities would be avoided. Instead it was envisaged that the board would provide educational expertise, as well as a variety of views that reflected the differences between the various sub-sectors of the New Zealand tertiary education sector. Table 3 provides a list of the backgrounds of the board members of Ako Aotearoa and the ALTC in 2009. It would appear from this Table that the Teaching Matters Forum's recommendation was largely adhered to.

In the case of the ALTC the list in Table 3 seems to indicate that it was governed by the type of board that the New Zealanders sought to avoid. The advantage of the New Zealand style of board was that it drew more on the skills and expertise of people in the sector more directly involved in learning and teaching.

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Table 3. Occupations of the board members of the ALTC and Ako Aotearoa, 2009

| Australia | New Zealand |
|---|---|
| 1. Former Vice Chancellor | 1. One former Vice Chancellor |
| 2. Vice Chancellor | 2. Associate Professor Teaching & Learning, Legal Institute |
| 3. Vice-Chancellor | 3. Consultant and company director |
| 4. Vice Chancellor | 4. Professor, Maori education expert and consultant |
| 5. Vice Chancellor | 5. Principal Lecturer, Association of Staff in Tertiary Education |
| 6. Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic | 6. CEO of a polytechnic |
| 7. Principal private college | 7. Senior manager Te Wananga O Aotearoa |
| 8. Director research institute | 8. Former Professor & education consultant |
| 9. Former government and corporate director | 9. Maori private training provider, board member various TEOs |
| | 10. CEO Institute of Sport |
| | 11. Professor of education. |

Source: Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching; Australian Learning and Teaching Council; Ako Aotearoa National Centre for Teaching Excellence.

It would be expected that such a group of people would also take a more direct interest in the operations of Ako Aotearoa. The disadvantage is that there was potential for disharmony on the New Zealand board due to the divergence of backgrounds of the various participants. A board made up of a group of people with similar backgrounds is generally more likely to be of similar minds.

Organisationally the two agencies differed in that the New Zealand Government sought to keep costs to a minimum by housing Ako Aotearoa in existing tertiary education institutions.

The Government also sought to decentralise its operations by breaking it up and housing it in a number of so called ‘hubs’ in a selection of different locations and institutions. The result was that although there was a small head office located in the Wellington campus of Massey university there were also three other small offices in Auckland (Auckland University of Technology), Palmerston North and Christchurch (University of Canterbury). The role of the separate hubs was to integrate and network more fully with the various parts of the tertiary education sector and so assist with the collection and dissemination of information on teaching and learning.

Massey University led the consortium of education institutions that won the contract to operate the centre and it was funded in a similar fashion to other research centres in New Zealand that are lodged in universities and dependent on government funding. The ALTC in contrast was created a stand-alone institution, not attached to any particular education institution and operated from a head office in Sydney. Its predecessors, such as the AUCT, did for a time employ staff from universities to act as a secretariat to the organisation. Once greater levels of funding were made available, however, the organisation was established with its own staff, building space and employment policies etc. This desire to establish itself on a larger, more independent scale did, however, make it more difficult to establish a more decentralised model of delivery. Despite Australia being a larger country and governed federally the structural model devised was a more centralised one than the New Zealand model.

Most aspects of the organisational structure of the New Zealand agency appears to have been influenced by the financial constraints placed on it. The composition of the board reflects the greater expectation that representatives would provide educational expertise to the organisation, and the lodgement of the centre in existing educational institutions was a clear cost reducing measure. Even the “branch office” structure was a reflection of the agency’s greater emphasis on information dissemination. These aspects stand in strong contrast to the more centralised

structure of the Australian body and less diverse form of board membership.

Conclusion

A general concern to raise standards of teaching and learning in higher education in Australia and New Zealand led to the establishment of agencies in each country dedicated to promoting the raising of standards. Although these two organisations were established for similar reasons they did not operate in quite the same fashion and with the same degree of focus. Instead large differences in the scale of funding meant that the Australian agency undertook far more activities than its New Zealand counterpart, although the relative influence of the two bodies in their respective jurisdictions is similar.

The differences between the Australian and New Zealand models do seem to exhibit examples of both Wagner's law and Baumol's disease. By any reckoning the Australian agency was more lavishly funded and its employees better remunerated. Tighter budget constraints, however, seem to have also altered as well the character of the New Zealand institution from its Australian counterpart. The New Zealand body relied more on supporting, facilitating and especially disseminating information and research about good teaching and learning practices, rather than the funding original research itself. In addition the Australian body was far more active in awarding good teaching practices, along with funding the research interests of Australian academics than the New Zealand body.

Funding constraints have also had an influence on the structure of the respective agencies. The New Zealand body has had a more general expectation that board members will make a direct contribution to the functioning of the body rather than just be an oversight committee. More emphasis was also put on it being a networking institution rather than an originator of research, which helps to explain the rationale behind the hub centres that were created. Budget constraints also explain the preference for an agency lodged in existing educational institutions.

One of ironies of the operations of the ALTC was that the more lavish funding of the organisation meant that it stood out more as a target for budget cuts once the Australian Labor Party Government felt the need to cut back on the previous governments initiatives in order to finance flood reconstruction. This is in contrast to the New Zealand case where Ako Aotearoa managed to survive.

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ⁱ It has long been accepted that education and training contributes to economic growth and development through the formation of human capital (Denison, 1962; Becker, 1964), although it is also recognized that it is not only the quantity of students educated that counts but also quality (Wolf, 2004).

ⁱⁱ In New Zealand between 2004 and 2007 the Performance Based Research Fund was progressively introduced as a funding process which assessing the research performance of tertiary education organisations and then funding them on the basis of their performance. In Australia between 2004 and 2007 the Howard Government developed the [Research Quality Framework](#). This was replaced after 2007 by the Excellence in Research for Australia.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the United Kingdom assessments of research outputs began in 1986 with the establishment of the Research Assessment Exercise.

^{iv} The Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development was a little more generously funded it being granted by the government over \$6 million per annum between 1997 and 2000 (Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development, 1999).

^v The Rudd Government earlier reduced funding of the ALTC as part of its 2008-09 budget (Australia, Treasury, 2008).

^{vi} It has been noted on occasion that Australian government agencies tended to have greater funding than their New Zealand counterparts (see for instance Abbott and Cohen 2011).

^{vii} Adolph Wager (1835 to 1917) was a German economist, Rector of Friedrich Wilhelm University and advisor to Bismarck. He is best known for his principle of increasing state intervention in industrializing nations.