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AUSTRALIA

AUSTRALIA: De-mystifying the university

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Following on from the positive response of the Australian public to the federal government’s My School web site, the My University web site was inevitable. Parents are delighted with the accessibility of the information, the simplicity of the data and the ease with which comparisons can be made through the My School site. Following on from the positive response of the Australian public to the federal government's My School web site, the My University web site was inevitable. Parents are delighted with the accessibility of the information, the simplicity of the data and the ease with which comparisons can be made through the My School site.

A My University site will likewise help de-mystify university for those with little familiarity with the sector and this could contribute to encouraging those who might be put off by 'the unknown' to re-look at university as an option.

League tables for universities are also inevitable although there may be debate about whether newspapers can publish them or not. It won't matter whether or not they do - there are fewer than 40 universities and one will be able to work out the order(s) on the back of an envelope.

In any case, I don't see the issue with league tables - we had the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund table and we all survived. I'd say this had a positive impact in some senses as it put teaching and learning on the senior executive agenda in universities across the board for the first time.

There are at least four reasons why the My University website is a good idea. First, universities derive some of their funding from the public purse and accountability to the public is important. This website will provide easily accessible information to the public about how well these funds are being used to provide quality education.

Second, universities derive some of their funding from students and their families. Users have a right to see comparative data on the performance of different universities in various areas of operation and the website will allow this.

Third, this site will help de-mystify university for those with less familiarity with the sector. This might contribute to encouraging those who might be put off by 'the unknown' to re-look at university as an option.

Fourth, this development will encourage universities to work harder to explain to the public what it is that they do and offer. This is critically important and particularly so in a context of widening participation, and encouraging those who might not otherwise do so, to consider going to university.

I have at least five concerns. First, will the comparisons be between 'like' universities or between all Australian universities? The My School web site does the former and this is fairer and more valid than comparing apples and pears. But among universities, how would 'likeness' be determined and by whom?

Second, the indicators used to derive the summary figures that will appear on the site are proxies for quality and this is problematic, to say the least. A major concern here is that the indicators being proposed do not determine the 'value add' of university education by taking
pre and post measures, but instead measure attributes to which university education may have contributed much, or very little.

Third, like the tests students in the school sector must face, the indicators used to derive the data for the My University website may be related to minimum standards - which doesn't help with the agenda of pursuing excellence in tertiary education.

Fourth, not all who use the site will have sophisticated understanding of the contexts in which the measures are taken, nor, therefore, of how to interpret the figures.

Fifth, universities that have low comparative scores on some indicators might be undertaking life-transforming work that might not be evident in the figures or on the site.

I welcome the introduction of the My University web site. Now let's talk about the indicators.

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