

# Degrees of association

Four years on, non-university higher education providers have embraced the associate degree, say Peter Ryan and Tim Smith.

The associate degree had a troublesome birth into the Australian higher education sector. Universities had offered associate degrees for some time in direct conflict with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

The absence of this qualification from the AQF created a prohibition on the use of the title by non-university providers, as the various state and territory accreditation regulations required all higher education qualifications submitted for approval to align with the AQF. The notable exception was the Victorian regulations which recognised associate degrees in conflict with 3.9 of the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes.

However, no associate degrees were ever applied for under the Victorian provisions, likely as a result of the perceived difficulties that would have arisen if the qualification was delivered interstate or registered for delivery to international students.

For a number of reasons, including competitive neutrality and a desire to distinguish their higher education courses from the vocational advanced diploma, non-university higher education providers were keen to accredit associate degrees in their own right. The underlying inequity of a situation where the title associate degree was the preserve of the university sector was not lost on those who were effectively excluded.

Even though the basis for inclusion of the associate degree seemed straightforward and simple, it was hotly contested and meetings were held and submissions called for. At one time it seemed ACPET and private providers were taking on the entire tertiary education 'establishment'; vice-chancellors, the TAFE system and state governments were all opposed.

The main point of contention was whether the associate degree should remain an exclusively higher education award or be extended to vocational education providers (including TAFE Institutions). After much deliberation

the qualification title associate degree was endorsed by the various education ministers in July 2003 and added to the AQF as a higher education qualification in October of that year.

What has become of the associate degree in the two and a half years since formal approval and inclusion in the AQF?

The university sector, which had fought strongly to exclude others from using the title, appears to have had little success in marketing associate degrees. DEST statistics show that in 2002 there were 2411 students undertaking an associate degree at an Australian university. This figure fell to 2160 in 2003 and 1954 in 2004, the last year for which figures are available. This is in spite of the fact that the number of associate degrees on offer at Australian universities rose from 67 to 78 and the number of universities offering associate degrees increased from 9 to 14.

In stark contrast, the number of associate degrees accredited by non-university providers since 2003 currently stands at 37. Considering the development of associate degrees in the non-university sector is in its infancy and given the average 12-18 month lead time for course development and accreditation, this is some achievement. Some of these 37 associate degrees have been accredited in more than one state and some are delivered by more than one provider, especially in the case of the theological colleges and there are more to come with a number of associate degrees currently under consideration by various accreditation authorities.

There are no detailed figures of students studying at non-university providers and therefore, the actual numbers undertaking associate degrees can only be estimated. However, the total number of students undertaking a course with a non-university higher education provider is expected to grow by over 50 per cent in 2006, a figure supported by an increase in FEE-HELP advances to non-university

providers of 65 per cent this year.

Associate degrees have taken on a number of roles. In some cases they are stand-alone qualifications with a definite vocational outcome, often providing an articulation pathway into the final year of a university bachelor degree. In other cases, associate degrees have been nested as an exit point within a non-university provider's own bachelor degree. The flexibility inherent in the associate degree has not only expanded study opportunities for local students but has also created more choice for international students.

Although both private providers and TAFE institutes have received approval and accreditation of associate degrees with full AQF blessing, they

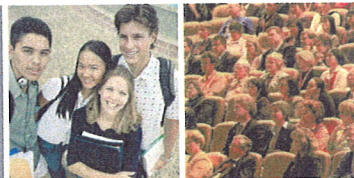
have one thing in common – they are all full fee for service courses with no government subsidy. Given these new choices and pathways for higher education study, students are voting with their feet and enrolling with non-university higher education providers in ever-increasing numbers. Despite the original protestations, it is clear that the time of the associate degree has come and its star continues to rise, especially in the non-university higher education sector.

**Peter Ryan is managing director of Consult Ed, a specialist education consultancy. Tim Smith is the national executive officer of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET).**



**aiec**  
2006 australian international  
education conference

It's about the students



Reaching and securing students is just the beginning; delivering on Australian education's promise and working to secure students' futures is everyone's responsibility.

The Australian International Education Conference 2006

Perth Convention Exhibition Centre  
Perth, Western Australia  
10 - 13 October 2006

[www.idp.com/aiec](http://www.idp.com/aiec)

Early Registration closes **21 July 2006**