

Conference Abstract

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“Reflecting on the achievement of quality assurance in higher education through formal regulatory intervention”

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In recent years there has been a great deal of concern expressed by policy makers that not only should access to higher education be expanded but also that academic outcomes for students (both domestic and international) should be protected by formal government regulatory arrangements.

As part of this process one international trend in the provision of higher education has been the growing tendency for governments to promote greater levels of institutional autonomy and exposure to market forces, while at the same time demanding greater formal accountability to government regulators. This has usually involved the creation of formal regimes that aim to regulate levels of internal efficiency, implement quality assurance mechanisms and encourage greater financial accountability on the part of higher education institutions where they are financed from the public purse.

The literature on the rationale behind economic regulation as a means of alleviating market failures is an extensive one although it has seldom been applied to the regulation of higher education markets. It has long been argued that there are quasi-public good reasons in favour of subsidising higher education and related academic research, however, there has been so far a great deal less attention given to justifying the direct regulation of private and public higher education institutions on economic grounds. Nonetheless in recent years there has been a proliferation of regulatory regimes around the world designed to affect the behaviour of higher education institutions.

The purpose of the paper is to reflect on the nature of higher education market regulation by identifying the economic rationale for the regulation of markets more generally in terms of market failure and attempt to match this intervention with the various types of regulation imposed in New Zealand and abroad. Given the lack of work that has been conducted in the area it seems unlikely that the regulation of higher education markets is quite what would be expected of analysts and critics of government regulation and market failure.