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28 July 2010

Dr Shona Batge
Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
ewer.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Dr Batge,

Submission to the Inquiry into Industry Skills Councils

Universities Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a response into the Industry Skills Councils enquiry that was referred to the Senate on 22 June 2010. Universities Australia is the national peak organisation representing all thirty-nine of Australia's universities in the public interest, both nationally and internationally.

Universities are well placed to provide input into the National Training Framework, with many universities operating in the dual-sector environment, and many more having established formal relationships with technical, vocational and private training providers as well as strong and established links with industry and business. In rural and regional Australia universities are both key players in education and training and significant employers in their own right.

Universities Australia firmly believes that the alignment of graduates with industry skills needs is vital to the competitiveness and productivity of every organisation and crucial to Australia's national interest.

Reform in Australia's higher education system, moving to a student demand-driven funding mechanism will mean that the preferences of enrolling students, rather than government or business planning decisions, will largely determine the emerging skills profile of graduates. While overall this move is a positive one, it places even greater importance on collaborative links between Industry Skills Councils and training and education providers to deliver sufficient numbers of appropriately qualified graduates to meet industry needs.

Previous collaboration with the eleven Industry Skills Councils has been limited in the past due to a lack of transparent governance and decision making structures; an absence of formal consultative mechanisms to provide input into the content and structure of the Australian Quality Training Framework, and nationally endorsed Training Packages; and a perceived distance taken by Industry Skills Councils to training and education providers not merely universities.

One Geils Court
Deakin ACT 2600

Ph: +61 (0)2 6285 8104
Fax: +61 (0)2 6285 8101
Mobile: +61 (0)416 249 350

GPO Box 1142
Canberra ACT 2601
AUSTRALIA

glenn.withers@universitiesaustralia.edu.au
www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au

Universities Australia believes that broadening the remit of Industry Skills Councils to include input from the university sector would assist in providing high quality and appropriate skills for industry as well as strengthen the nexus between the training environment and the workplace.

Universities Australia would be encouraged by Senate recommendations which seek to:

- improve consultative mechanisms between Industry Skills Councils and training and education providers;
- establish a transparent process for electing members to Industry Skills Council Boards, with the possible inclusion of at least one member of the training and education sector on appropriate Councils;
- provide a national mechanism for strategic input into the National Training Framework that has equal input from industry professionals and training providers (possibly through Skills Australia); and,
- introduce or convene co-operative arrangements (in the form of national skills advisory forums for example) between relevant Councils and between Councils and appropriate education and training providers.

Australia's universities are keen to work with government and industry to ensure that sufficient numbers of appropriately qualified graduates are available to meet the future employment needs of this country.

Universities Australia welcomes the opportunity to discuss this submission with members of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Dr Glenn Withers AO
Chief Executive Officer