

DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING STANDARDS IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF TEQSA

DISCUSSION PAPER

June 2011

This paper initiates a process of discussion on possible approaches to articulating, reviewing and reporting on teaching and learning standards in Australian higher education. It presents the policy context, including the role of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA); incorporates an analysis of relevant developments as background; and proposes a way forward.

The TEQSA legislation introduced into the Parliament of Australia in March provides, among other things, that a Higher Education Standards Panel (Standards Panel) will be responsible for developing the Higher Education Standards Framework, including teaching and learning standards. The Standards Panel must consult with interested parties when developing the standards.

The Standards Panel will be independent of the TEQSA Commission and will provide advice and recommendations directly to the Minister for Tertiary Education and the Minister for Research. This will ensure the separation of standard setting from the monitoring and enforcement functions carried out by TEQSA.

The Interim TEQSA Commission seeks feedback from higher education providers, professional associations, industry bodies and government agencies about directions for development before detailed work begins. The outcomes from this discussion process will be provided to the Standards Panel for further consideration once the Commission is formally established.

The contribution of Professor Richard James and Dr Kerri-Lee Harris of the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education to the preparation of this paper is gratefully acknowledged.

There are three sections in the paper, each with associated discussion points:

1. **The policy context for national teaching and learning standards**, including proposed statements of principle for TEQSA's approach.

Feedback is sought on the proposed definition of teaching and learning standards. Feedback is also sought on the proposed statements of principle describing TEQSA's approach to teaching and learning standards.

2. **A brief review of international and domestic developments**, including student surveys, qualification frameworks, explicit statements of learning outcomes, common tests and peer review.

Feedback is sought on the analysis of these developments in terms of their utility in developing a teaching and learning standards framework.

3. **Steps toward Australian teaching and learning standards**, how Australian higher education, including TEQSA, might further develop a national approach to teaching and learning standards.

Feedback is sought on the proposed structure of the framework, including on the relationships between the various elements. Feedback is also sought on the particular considerations and possibilities described for developing standards statements, measures and indicators, and processes for expert review.

1. The policy context for national teaching and learning standards

A working definition of teaching and learning standards

Internationally, the diversity of higher education contexts, purposes and values has hampered efforts to make teaching and learning standards more explicit. The term ‘standards’ is used in a variety of ways, including to describe aspirational goals, learning objectives, consensual reference points and formal units of measurement. Some definitions of standards focus solely on thresholds, others refer to multiple levels of achievement.

The following definition is used in this paper, and is proposed as a general working definition for developing an Australian teaching and learning standards framework.

Teaching and learning standards in higher education encompass:

- those dimensions of curriculum, teaching, learner support and assessment that establish the pre-conditions for the achievement of learning and educational outcomes fit for the awarding of a higher education qualification
- the explicit levels of attainment required of and achieved by students and graduates, individually and collectively, in defined areas of knowledge and skills.

As clarified in later sections of this paper, TEQSA’s regulatory role is concerned with agreed minimum levels within the standards framework. Beyond that, TEQSA has responsibilities that focus on improving and enhancing the quality of higher education more broadly.

Clearly there are important conceptual differences between *teaching standards* and *learning standards*.

Teaching standards might best be viewed as ‘process’ or ‘delivery’ standards. These are the aspects of institutional provision or educational delivery commonly accepted to have an effect on the quality of student learning. These include curriculum design, the quality of teaching, student learning support, and the infrastructure which directly supports the processes of teaching and learning.

Learning standards are best viewed as outcome standards. Learning standards describe the nature and levels of student attainment—what students and graduates know and can do. Student attainment is known by various expressions, such as learning outcomes, competencies and the like, often with significant shades of meaning. Broadly, however, learning standards apply to desired areas of knowledge and skills and the levels of attainment required for graduation and for the award of grades at pass level or above.

Quality assurance of teaching and learning

From fitness for purpose to standards

The emerging focus upon standards as central to quality assurance signals a shift in emphasis for Australian higher education. Previously, approaches to quality have principally been conceived as ‘fitness for purpose’, and quality assurance has involved investigating the alignment between the established goals of an institution and the policies and processes in place for achieving these goals. Quality assurance, when framed in these terms, operates largely around internal reference points. In contrast, the concept of standards implies a greater emphasis on agreed, external points of reference in measuring and improving quality.

Whereas for fitness for purpose the key question might be: *do policies, processes and outcomes fit the purpose of the particular higher education provider?*, the questions from a standards way of thinking might be: *how do the policies and processes lead to the delivery of particular outcomes, and how do these outcomes ‘measure up’?*

The shift in thinking from fitness for purpose to standards requires the development of a new framework. Standards will need to be specified, and appropriate measures determined. The teaching and learning performance indicators currently used in Australian higher education, for example, were originally intended to serve the purposes of quality monitoring and continuous improvement, and have not been constructed with a formal conception of standards in mind. As a result, minimum levels of performance have not been specified for current measures of teaching and learning quality. Importantly, a standards approach inevitably raises tensions between desirable diversity and the need for comparability and common points of reference. The new teaching and learning standards framework will need to address this tension.

The roles of a national regulator and quality assurance agency

Both teaching standards and learning standards are highly important from the point of view of an agency that is both the national regulator and the national quality assurance agency.

Information on educational processes is valuable as it is a diagnostic aid that is not excessively lagged. Institutional quality assurance processes recognise this.

Despite the value of monitoring teaching standards, student achievement or attainment is the ultimate goal of higher education.¹ The reasons for the international interest in defining and measuring student outcomes lie partly in the diversification of higher education providers, course objectives and modes of course delivery. This has led to concerns about the preparedness of graduates and the comparability of graduates from different courses and similar courses offered by different institutions.

¹ International interest in teaching and learning standards has converged on outcomes, as have formal definitions of standards:

‘predetermined and explicit levels of achievement which must be reached for a student to be granted a qualification’
(Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee of the House of Commons, 2 August 2009)

‘explicit levels of academic attainment which are used to describe and measure academic requirements and achievements of individual students and groups’ (UK Higher Education Quality Council 1997)

TEQSA is developing learning standards because there is consensus that Australia must be confident that all graduates meet national minimum levels of attainment appropriate for the field or discipline in which they have studied, and appropriate for the level of the award they are granted.

TEQSA's responsibilities

TEQSA is being established with some general principles for its mode of operation outlined in legislation. Its requirements, guidelines and procedures must:

- recognise the diversity of institutions and programs
- be rigorous and transparent
- provide for an efficient, streamlined approach to regulation and quality assurance
- provide useful information to students, the community, governments and employers.

TEQSA will be required to undertake evaluations of the quality of providers, provide information about the quality of higher education and provide independent advice on standards, quality and regulation. Developing an agreed approach to national teaching and learning standards is an essential step in achieving these functions.

As the national regulator and quality assurance agency for higher education, TEQSA will have a keen interest in ensuring that institutional quality assurance processes are robust and that institutional standards meet or surpass threshold national levels for the relevant standards.

Teaching and learning standards form one of five specified domains in the Higher Education Standards Framework:

- provider standards (based on the National Protocols)
- qualification standards (based on the Australian Qualifications Framework)
- information standards
- teaching and learning standards
- research standards.

There are points of intersection between teaching and learning standards and the provider and qualification standards that will operate as threshold standards which providers must satisfy. Teaching and learning standards will relate to both the provider course accreditation standards and the qualification standards. The domain of teaching and learning standards—the focus of this paper—is presently less well developed than these related domains, which have been the focus recently of national debate and decision.²

² Provider standards have been drafted from the National Protocols and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) has recently been revised.

TEQSA's work in developing a teaching and learning standards framework is not taking place in isolation. There are related initiatives underway involving government, higher education institutions and academic discipline communities. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) is developing indicators for teaching and learning for use in the allocation of Teaching and Learning Performance Funding.³

Various activities and programs supported by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) have focused on academic standards, including a project in the area of external moderation of coursework assessment,⁴ one on automated assessment systems⁵ and, in particular, the discipline-based work of the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards (LTAS) project.⁶ The final report of this project is now available⁷ and another project on teaching standards trialled in nine Australian universities has concluded.⁸

These various activities involve efforts to make more explicit the standards that have often been tacit in higher education with the goal of improving transparency and the communication of standards to stakeholders.

The development of explicit, national teaching and learning standards in higher education will take some time. Initially, TEQSA will seek to establish the foundation of a framework that is viable in the short term yet can be honed and enhanced into the future.

Proposed principles for TEQSA's approach to national teaching and learning standards

The following statements of principle are designed to clarify TEQSA's approach to standards-based quality assurance of teaching and learning.

1. The autonomy of institutions will be respected and TEQSA's processes will accommodate innovation in curricula and support the role of institutional assessment and evaluation activities.

³ DEEWR has commissioned the development of a University Experience Survey (UES) for performance funding purposes and has foreshadowed the intention to use the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and a composite indicator of teaching quality, to be developed, for use within mission-based compacts and performance funding arrangements.

⁴ Professor Kerri-Lee Krause (Project Leader) and Professor Geoffrey Scott are managing the project with funding support from the ALTC.

⁵ The ReMarksPDF project has been managed by Professor Stephen Colbran (www.remarkspdf.com) with funding support from the ALTC.

⁶ LTAS is a prominent standards-related project currently underway in Australian higher education. This project has engaged national discipline communities, focused attention on identifying the 'learning that matters', and generated lists and statements around expected learning outcomes independent of institutions or their particular courses.

⁷ <http://www.altc.edu.au/standards/overview>

⁸ The Teaching Standards Framework project final report is now available at <http://www.altc.edu.au/project-teaching-standards-framework-project-2010>

2. Course and discipline-specific skills and knowledge, as well as the generic skills developed through higher education, will be considered by TEQSA when reviewing learning standards.
3. National teaching and learning standards must accommodate the diversity of stakeholders and their viewpoints on standards. TEQSA is not the only custodian of standards, nor are higher education institutions. This responsibility is distributed and shared more widely, including with disciplinary communities and professional associations.
4. National standards for teaching and learning need to be able to respond to change and emerging situations. Standards should be subject to regular review.
5. Institutional standards for teaching and learning will differ but all institutions must meet or surpass national standards.
6. National teaching and learning standards should provide information that can be used by institutions for monitoring and accountability and to assist with their own quality improvement.
7. Experts will play a key role in the development and application of teaching and learning standards by TEQSA.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Does the proposed definition of teaching and learning standards provide a firm conceptual base for the development of a framework? Does it provide clarity for the purpose of communications between institutions, TEQSA and other involved parties? Is there a better definition that could be used?
2. It is proposed that teaching standards and learning standards are conceptually distinct and therefore require consideration as separate sub-domains for TEQSA quality assurance and regulatory activities. Are there any problems with creating two sub-domains of this kind?
3. Are the seven principles for TEQSA's role within a national teaching and learning standards framework appropriate?

2. A brief review of international and domestic developments

This section of the paper examines current practices and developments both internationally and within Australia that relate in various ways to the articulation, monitoring and measurement of both teaching and learning standards. Its purpose is to explore the lessons that might be drawn from existing policies and practices and how these might inform the development of standards for TEQSA. It is a step towards considering what teaching and learning standards should attempt to cover and what measures, indicators or evidence would be required.

The section explores:

- a. student and graduate surveys
- b. descriptions of learning objectives within qualifications frameworks
- c. discipline-specific statements of expected learning outcomes
- d. test-based measures of generic skills and discipline-specific learning
- e. measures of teaching quality
- f. peer review and external examiners
- g. diploma supplements for reporting graduate attainment.

a. Student and graduate surveys

Australian higher education has an advanced survey system for data collection in relation to performance, though not all higher education providers routinely participate in such surveys. Such student surveys may generate data that can be used to measure and evaluate teaching and learning.

Student surveys may be grouped into two types:

Survey-based measures of the quality of teaching or the quality of the educational environment, such as the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) in Australia and the National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK.

- These approaches are based partly on the assumption that student perceptions of the quality of teaching and of the learning experience say something about the quality of student learning, as well as the recognition that the quality of the student experience is a legitimate aspect of student life to be explored.
- Surveys of this kind have their merits, for data collection is relatively straightforward and lag times need not be excessive.
- The CEQ has been a suitable instrument for the purposes for which it was designed—to measure from the student perspective some elements of the learning environment and the quality of teaching known to be associated with learning.

- In the Australian context, the CEQ is a widely used and well-established instrument so it has the advantage of providing rich data over a long time period. It may not, however, take into account evolutions in approaches to teaching and learning nor cover all aspects of the contemporary student experience.
- Such surveys also have other limitations. They are not designed to give information about student attainment nor do they reveal the appropriateness of learning objectives for the level of the course, a key consideration in interpreting data from any teaching evaluation.
- The CEQ includes student self-reports of their generic skills development, which is a questionable approach from a standards perspective.

Survey-based measures of student engagement such as the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) used in the USA.

- The Australian Government has commissioned the development of a University Experience Survey (UES) as part of the performance funding framework. The UES will collect information about student engagement and satisfaction with their university studies. The UES will measure aspects of student experience associated with high level learning outcomes such as academic challenge, student engagement and student/staff interactions.
- Surveys of student engagement are likely to be good diagnostic tools for institutions for understanding the effects that their programs and efforts have on students and for understanding the patterns of study adopted by students. Data from student engagement surveys are arguably better proxies for student learning than student surveys of the quality of teaching, given that there is evidence that what students are doing does matter. They also acknowledge that learning in higher education can take place in contexts other than formal learning through lectures, tutorials and so on. It can occur through work-integrated learning, service learning and peer learning. For standards purposes, surveys of this kind may have merit because they measure important aspects of the learning environment and the effects of these on students.
- Equally, they have limitations given that they are not direct measures of learning outcomes and, like the CEQ, are silent on the appropriateness of the learning objectives and the levels of student attainment.

b. Descriptions of learning objectives within qualification frameworks

National Qualification Frameworks (QFs) are increasingly common, playing a central role in supporting the international mobility of students and graduates. They are also recognised as key elements in quality assurance and accreditation processes.

Most QFs are national, although central to the Bologna Process has been the development of an agreed European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This meta-framework is presented as a complementary translation device, not a replacement of national QFs. The EQF is, however, informing the evolution of QFs in many countries, including countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

It is common for QFs to present a series of qualification levels, described in terms of the expected learning outcomes at each of these levels. In this way, they are aligned to learning standards. The levels—with higher

education typically spanning the upper three to four strata—provide a point of reference when accrediting qualifications within an education system, and when equating qualifications across different education systems.

The Australian Qualifications Framework presents a QF which is quite typical in that it focuses on learning objectives, consists of 10 levels, and has higher education degrees (spanning Levels 6 to 10). The AQF also prescribes levels for each named award and specifies the typical volume of learning:

- QFs are based on descriptions of expected learning outcomes for graduates from each qualification. The EQF definition of learning outcomes is typical of QFs: “what a learner knows, understands and is able to do”.⁹
- Levels represent broad bands, and most national QFs list a number of distinct qualifications within a single level.
- QFs seldom describe learning objectives within disciplinary fields. The unit of analysis is typically the level of the award.
- The learning outcomes are often presented as requirements to be demonstrated, not simply statements of aspiration.

For example: “... are awarded to students who have demonstrated ...” (from the *Dublin Descriptors*); “The first part is a statement of outcomes, achievement of which is assessed and which a student should be able to demonstrate for the award of a qualification” (from the *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*); and “Graduates of a Bachelor Honours Degree will demonstrate the application of knowledge and skills ...” (*Australian Qualifications Framework*).

- Despite the emphasis on demonstration of learning outcomes, QFs are typically silent on the forms of assessment of student learning that are employed.

c. Discipline-specific statements of learning objectives

Internationally, most of the prominent initiatives around teaching and learning standards in higher education involve the development of discipline-specific lists of learning objectives (i.e. focusing on learning standards). This is true of both the Tuning process, originating in Europe, and the Subject Benchmark Statements (SBS) of the United Kingdom. These programs, and Tuning in particular, have had widespread influence, including upon recent initiatives in Latin America, the USA and Japan.

A similar pilot exercise has been conducted in Australia by the ALTC. The LTAS project commenced in 2009 and by December 2010 involved activities in each of eight broad discipline areas with draft statements being published in six subject areas. The AQF was used by the LTAS discipline groups as the starting point for development of the discipline-specific statements.

⁹ The European Qualifications Framework. European Commission. Accessed 28 January 2011
http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm

- Across the various projects the primary focus has been at the level of bachelor degree, although some disciplines have also distinguished a bachelor from a bachelor with honours and masters degrees.
- Many higher education degrees do not map neatly to the discipline or subject areas depicted in these statements. This is acknowledged by each of the projects described above, including LTAS.
- Tuning and LTAS focus on threshold levels of learning outcomes—the level of attainment that could be expected of all graduates. The SBS include statements at both threshold and a higher level referred to as ‘typical’.
- Tuning has developed a web of definitions, distinguishing learning outcomes from competences, with the former being what is expected, while the latter is what is attained. Competences are further disaggregated into subject specific and at least three forms of generic competences. The utility of the Tuning emphasis on definitional issues is questionable. It should be noted, however, that the genesis of the Tuning project was the ‘harmonisation of educational structures across Europe’, a very different context from that of developing teaching and learning standards in Australia.
- Statements of learning objectives, including the LTAS statements, are presented as guides to curriculum design only. They explicitly exclude reference to teaching modes, learning activities, or assessment methods.

d. Test-based measures of generic skills and discipline-specific learning

A common theme across the various statements of expected learning outcomes or learning standards is the priority given to skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and communication. Described variously as generic or transferable skills, these are fundamental to QFs and also gain prominence in discipline-specific statements, typically alongside more discipline or field-focused objectives. Given their generic nature, it is unsurprising that external tests have emerged for generic skills developed for application across courses and institutions.

Tests such as the Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA) developed by the then Department of Education, Science and Training with the assistance of ACER, and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) offered by the Council for Aid to Education in the USA, are independent of institution, curriculum and discipline. The OECD’s Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) generic skills project is drawing on the CLA to explore the potential for testing of higher order thinking skills and written communication.

Generic test-based measurement of absolute attainment or value-added attainment

The GSA, CLA and similar tests of generic skills are specifically designed for quality assurance of institutions and courses. While having limits to their scope, the results from such tests might be used as absolute scores and compared to other courses, institutions, and/or external standards. Alternatively, they might be used as a measure of the learning value added by the institution through comparisons of before and after data.

- Measurement of value-added graduate attainment has not been undertaken to any great extent in Australia, although it might be possible with the GSA. The GSA, which tests generic skills, was introduced some time ago but has not had sector-wide uptake.

- The Australian Government is planning to introduce an Australian version of the CLA as part of its Higher Education Performance Funding framework. The CLA will be administered to first year and final year undergraduate students to assess their critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving and written communication competencies obtained during their university degree.
- In the USA, the CLA is used as part of a voluntary system of institutional monitoring and reporting, in which institutions publicly report both absolute and value-added results for samples of students. The expressed primary goal for the data is diagnostic.
- Phase 1 of the AHELO feasibility study, including the development of tests in generic skills, economics, and engineering, is due for completion in June 2011. These tests are currently being piloted in 17 countries, in institutions representing diverse educational systems, cultures and languages. Testing is of students nearing the end of their bachelor degrees, or equivalent. Recent reports on this work indicate that value-added measures within disciplines might be explored in the future.
- Australia is a participating country in the AHELO engineering strand. However ACER is extensively involved across the various AHELO strands of work.

External testing has appeal outside of institutions as a mechanism for monitoring institutional performance that has face validity. Externally designed tests, however, have some limitations and possible undesirable consequences. Within institutions such tests elicit criticism for reasons including:

- the limited capacity of one-off written tests to appropriately assess the acquisition of higher-order cognitive skills
- the potential of an emphasis on generic skills to overshadow the equally important assessment of learning within discipline contexts and the learning embedded within particular curricula
- the risk that if absolute student scores are not appropriately controlled, they will fail to distinguish the contribution of the actual teaching from the entry standards of the institution.

Discipline-specific tests

The AHELO feasibility project is developing and trialling tests designed as a common measure of performance across institutions, systems, and languages. In addition to the generic skills strand, other strands are using the discipline-specific learning objectives of Tuning and testing the feasibility of such an approach in two specific subject areas: engineering and economics.

The above are all tests that are conducted on students or recent graduates. Surveys of groups other than students could also be used to provide information about whether students are obtaining, through their studies, the skills required to secure graduate employment. The Graduate Outlook Survey (GOS), undertaken annually by Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) is one such survey. The GOS investigates graduate intake numbers, recruiters' perceptions of the calibre of their candidates, and the attributes which they considered most and least desirable in regard to their applicant pool.

e. Measures of teaching quality

The Teaching Standards Framework (TSF) project was initiated to develop an approach to teaching standards for the Australian higher education sector. Macquarie University had developed a teaching standards framework for its own internal auditing purposes in 2009. This was designed to provide criteria that could be used to assess both institutional and organisational unit performance data in a way that contributed to the continual improvement of learning and teaching. In early 2010, Macquarie proposed that this approach be tested as a possible tool for assessing teaching quality across the Australian university sector. Nine Australian universities participated in testing and re-designing the framework between August and December 2010.

This project has proposed six teaching standards for further evaluation.¹⁰ The framework it has produced would allow for its use within institutions for quality assurance and enhancement purposes and its final report suggests it might form the foundation for a national approach while warning that much more evaluation, testing and discussion is necessary. Nevertheless, the final report states that there was support within the participating universities for the utility of the approach which was trialled.

Another project which might yield useful data is one arising from the work by DEEWR to establish a Higher Education Performance Framework. A composite Teaching Quality Indicator which will require data from providers in receipt of Commonwealth funds for teaching may include data about staff qualifications, professional development, teacher induction programs and institutional approaches to peer review.

f. Peer review and external examiners

Peer review is fundamental to judgements about quality in higher education. While it is central to processes in the research domain, external peer review of teaching and learning is less common. Where it does occur, the focus is most often on curriculum design and related teaching processes. As well, peer review of teaching occurs in some Australian universities as part of their institutional quality improvement processes. Learning outcomes appear less often to be subject to external review and assessment although the accreditation processes of some professional bodies are designed to allow judgements about whether the student learning outcomes of the course or courses under review are appropriate.

In Australia there appears to be growing interest in achieving externally referenced attainment or learning standards through more systematic processes of peer review and assessment. Assessment of student work in higher education typically involves the professional judgement of staff in the relevant subject area. The involvement of disciplinary peers from outside the institution automatically involves external referencing of standards. These standards may, however, remain largely implicit unless these processes are informed by articulated statements of standards. One challenge for the transparency of learning standards lies in making the nature of peer or expert review processes explicit, including making explicit the grounds on which judgements are made.

¹⁰ The Teaching Standards Framework project final report is now available at <http://www.altc.edu.au/project-teaching-standards-framework-project-2010>

- While the UK’s external examiners’ system has received some criticism in recent years, supporters point to its success in assuring standards while maintaining diversity in course structures and modes of assessment of student learning.
- The need for meaningful points of assessment can challenge an external examiner model in education systems with modularised course structures. This has been the experience in the UK as courses have become more unit-based. In Australia there is possibly some movement in the other direction, as capstone units, projects and assessment tasks become a more common feature of bachelor degrees.
- Peer review processes have significant costs and return for effort is an important consideration.

g. Diploma supplements for reporting graduate attainment

Internationally, institutions are enhancing the documentation provided to higher education graduates. Diploma supplements go by various names in different countries—the Australian Higher Education Graduation Statement (AHEGS) is Australia’s version. In all cases, these are award-specific documents containing verified information about the particular qualification that has been awarded to an individual. They seek to articulate the attainment of particular learning standards expressed through statements of student grades and other achievements.

Like the European Diploma Supplement model, the AHEGS model provides a mechanism for reporting the location of an award within the national qualifications framework, and for reporting on individual graduates’ academic achievements leading to the award of the qualification.

In discrete sections, the AHEGS includes information at the level of:

- the higher education system, including the AQF and national quality assurance processes
- the issuing institution
- the particular award, including admission requirements
- the achievements of the individual graduate, including explanation of the grading and/or examination system used.

As most Australian universities are now issuing the AHEGS, this is a potentially useful tool in the long term for reporting on teaching and learning standards in a common and internationally recognised format.

DISCUSSION POINTS

4. Does this short review omit key developments or trends that are worth considering?
5. For the sake of brevity, the review has presented blunt assessments of the utility of various developments. Are any of these assessments inaccurate or misleading?

3. Steps toward Australian teaching and learning standards

This section of the paper presents a preliminary proposal—a first step in refining a national approach to teaching and learning standards. The proposal describes the relationships between institutional processes, explicit national statements of standards and external review.

Alongside the existing roles of institutions, disciplinary communities and professional associations, there appear to be three interwoven elements necessary to achieve national teaching and learning standards:

- explicit standards statements
- key indicators or measures that can inform judgements
- specification of processes for expert review associated with monitoring and reviewing standards.

Each of these elements needs to be developed and each is critical to the validity and effectiveness of standards.

Developing the architecture

Figure 1 is an attempt to capture the complexity of relationships and possibilities for national teaching and learning standards.

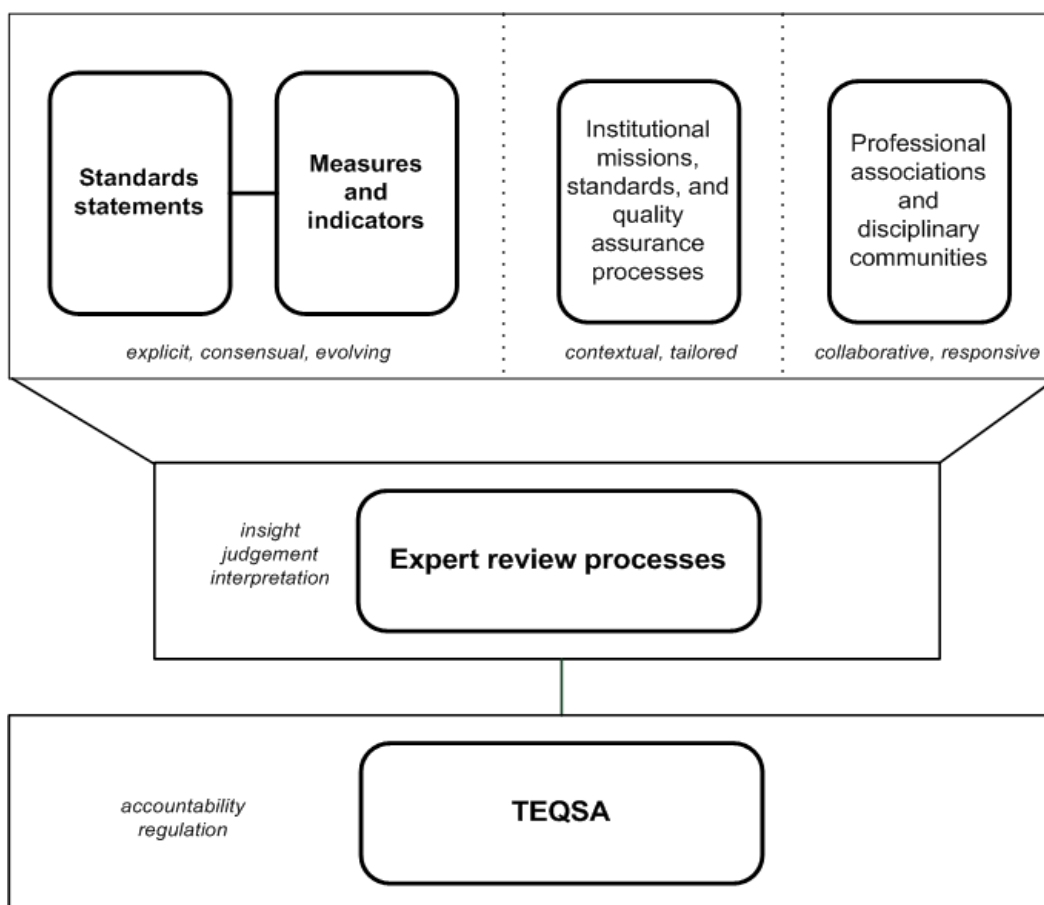


Figure 1: Architecture of the proposed teaching and learning standards

An effective national approach to teaching and learning standards must achieve a strong nexus between explicit agreed statements of standards and processes for expert review and judgement. Professional insight is central to understanding standards in an enterprise as varied and complex as higher education. While statements of standards are clearly essential, the difficulties in codifying higher education standards are also acknowledged. In this context, the rigour of the processes for dialogue and consensus building around standards is very important.

Individual institutions have policies and processes for internal quality assurance that are designed to safeguard their teaching and learning standards. The development of national teaching and learning standards statements, measures and indicators should benefit institutional quality assurance as there is currently no national framework against which institutions and academics in program leadership roles can benchmark institutional teaching and learning standards. While professional accreditation and registration bodies play a very significant role in some fields, not all courses have external reference points such as these.

Expert judgement and expert review processes are central to the building and implementation of a standards framework. It is recognised that no amount of drafting and redrafting of standards statements will ever be able to articulate the complex knowledge professionals hold in their heads—statements of standards for higher education will be poor representations of what professionals know. As recognised by the ALTC Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project, discipline communities, broadly conceived, have an important role to play.

Teaching standards (process standards) and learning standards (outcomes or attainment standards) differ in important ways and require differing approaches within a common framework. For its part, TEQSA will pay due attention to both types of standards. While learning outcomes are the ultimate test of quality, it is also true that the monitoring of student learning involves lag times that may not allow timely responsiveness to teaching standards that are below par. As part of its risk management approach, TEQSA needs information on delivery practices and processes and to be in a position to be responsive to such information, for it cannot rely solely on quality control exercised through the monitoring of outcomes.

Developing explicit standards statements

A process needs to be determined for developing and agreeing to appropriate statements of standards. Both higher education institutions and TEQSA require a level of detail in statements of standards that is sufficient to frame monitoring processes and allows for systematic, transparent reporting while not being unduly costly, constraining or prescriptive.¹¹

The following model for structuring standards statements might offer flexibility and avoid problems created by excessive detail and prescription. The proposal is to develop statements of teaching standards and of learning standards, and that these be developed in each of a small number of categories. The number of standards statements would be kept small, and could make reference to other documents and initiatives, such as the AQF and

¹¹ For example, proposals for rigid standards for institutional practices in areas such as staff-student ratios and staff qualifications would generally be seen as restrictive, unhelpful and a barrier to innovation. Factors such as these are of course important, but they need to be judged contextually rather than be pre-specified for all settings.

the statements of the LTAS project. There would also be accompanying reference points in each category, advice to reviewers and to institutions.

Standards categories

Broad categories are needed for identifying and locating teaching standards and learning standards within a coherent, explicit framework. The categories are purely for organisational purposes and should be broad, identifiable areas of significance that will bring structure to the standards framework. Within teaching standards, for example and for illustrative purposes, such categories might be course design, course resourcing, quality of teaching, quality of learner support, quality of provision for student diversity, quality of provision for online learning and so on. It is feasible that some categories, once they are agreed to, may not be applicable to certain providers or certain courses, and thus a mechanism for diversity would be embedded within the framework.

Standards statements

For each category there should be a shortlist of statements of standards. These would be the principal touchstones for measuring, assessing and reporting on performance within the category. The list for each category would be relatively short and would focus on fundamentals. Where possible, statements of standards should embody criteria and levels, although it is recognised that level descriptors may not be feasible in all cases. TEQSA would focus on minimum levels in terms of accountability.

Reference points

For each category there should be accompanying reference points that identify priority areas for consideration. From a regulatory perspective, the reference points would be the least prescriptive elements of the standards framework. However, they might be detailed and specific in order to assist institutions and expert reviewers. Reference points would not in themselves be the subject of direct assessment for standards monitoring.

Figure 2 presents a draft example of how this structure might look in practice.

Teaching standards category:

- Provision for student diversity.

Standards statements:

- Regardless of their backgrounds, students have equal opportunities to succeed academically.
- Institutional policies explicitly recognise the educational needs of student sub-groups, and programs and resource allocation are aligned with these needs.
- Approaches to teaching and learning are designed to accommodate the linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of students.
- The learning outcomes for student sub-groups are monitored.
- Student sub-groups reach attainment levels comparable with those of all students.

Reference points:

- Use of data to identify where students are having difficulty and the actions that follow.
- Indigenous students, students from rural and regional Australia, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and international students are among the identifiable groups for which there are explicit policies and programs.
- Procedures for English language testing and English language support ensure that students have clearly defined levels of English language proficiency on graduation.
- Students from different backgrounds are effectively integrated within all learning environments and institutional pedagogical practices support and encourage student interaction and integration.
- Curriculum content incorporates diverse perspectives in recognition of student diversity and the educational needs of different student sub-groups.
- Learner support programs identify targeted groups of students for specialised support.

Figure 2: Example of a three-part structure for developing and describing standards.

Developing measures and indicators

A national approach to standards is not an exercise in institutional ranking. It is about institutions checking how their courses, their teaching and their students' learning measure up against agreed national standards, not how they rate in comparison with other institutions.

Possible approaches to measurement include:

Student survey data

The evaluation of the student experience might provide important measures for some aspects of teaching standards. There is currently no single model of effective teaching and learner support in higher education. Some contributing factors, such as class size, provision of feedback and clarity of expectations, are recognised as important yet there are no measurable thresholds or optima in any of these areas. In the absence of direct measures, student feedback on their experience can be a suitable proxy.

In addition to a role as a proxy for measuring teaching and learning support, measures of the student experience are important in their own right. Students' experiences of their education are a legitimate concern for a national regulator.

Survey instruments can be designed to accommodate diversity in institutions, teaching and learning approaches and student populations. Australia has a significant history of research into the student experience and student evaluations of teaching, providing a solid foundation for further development in this area. Information from a purpose-designed survey, such as the proposed University Experience Survey, may usefully serve institutions, prospective students and TEQSA.

Common test instruments

The review presented in Section 2 of this paper examined the use of common test instruments as measures of learning outcomes. While there is good reason to be cautious about such testing for the purposes of regulation the views of all stakeholders need to be explored. Clearly it is in the best interests of Australian higher education to ensure that no students graduate without first meeting at least minimum levels of fundamental skills, and it is reasonable to expect all institutions will be able to show that their graduates achieve such levels. An external test of generic skills might play a role here.

However, there are a number of concerns with moving in this direction. First, a test for all students would be costly, while a less expensive sampling approach would introduce issues of its own. Second, a test that is high stakes for institutions would need to be high stakes for students too, otherwise students will not wish to participate or those that do so may not take the test seriously. Third, there is always the risk of the tendency to 'teach to the test'. However, as many graduates are already subjected to skills testing for employment it would be valuable to discuss how, in partnership with professional bodies and employers, the higher education sector might address this need to guarantee the generic skills of graduates without undermining the information that derives from the richer assessment that takes place within units and courses.

Other indicators and considerations

A discussion of teaching and learning standards is incomplete without some reference to entry standards. National standards for entry are expressed through the AQF. The Qualifications Pathways Policy of the AQF specifies the responsibilities of institutions in providing pathways into and between qualifications. The policy is focused on processes for clarity of information and the flexibility of pathways. Importantly, in terms of national standards, this policy also enshrines institutional autonomy in setting program prerequisites and in assessing students' likelihood of success in a given program of study. Decisions around admission to particular programs need to be made at the program level and are matters for institutional policy and internal standards.

Nevertheless, TEQSA will be interested in whether an institution can demonstrate that it selects students who:

- can benefit from its particular approach to curriculum design, teaching and support
- have the potential to reach the level of academic achievement required for the program to which they seek entry.

Also likely to be of interest to TEQSA will be cohort profiles, progress rates and the performance of particular student subgroups.

Developing processes for expert review

Review of teaching standards

There is a case to be made for the sector exploring how it might systematically expand existing practices of external review of curricula, beyond professional programs. People with appropriate expertise and experience might be recruited to review programs in their general discipline area. Such practice could make an important contribution to a national approach to teaching and learning standards.

As part of such a process, expert reviewers might be required to comment on ways in which programs address the learning outcomes statements of the AQF and any relevant discipline-specific statements. External reviewers might also provide feedback to the institution on the alignment between a program's stated learning objectives and assessment design. A further requirement might be to consider the effectiveness of student learning support, how these services might have been aligned to program objectives and tailored to respond to the particular difficulties students experience in seeking to meet those objectives.

The challenge for TEQSA lies in determining how to best utilise such practices for its role as the national regulator. If any such processes were mandated, rather than voluntary, they would need to be both cost-effective and efficient, for TEQSA and for institutions.

Review of learning standards

The greater the emphasis on attainment standards, the greater the attention to the nature and quality of assessment and grading practices. Assessment and grading practices are the critical point of linkage between teaching standards and learning standards.

The relationship between learning objectives, assessment methods and the grading of attainment or achievement is central to any serious attempt to understand and monitor standards. In large part, learning standards rest on assessment practices and depend on their trustworthiness. Thus, external review of assessment practices might have a central role to play in the development and application of national learning standards.

An external review system might incorporate some direct review of student work and of the judgements that have been made on student work. Such a system might provide a robust mechanism for cross-referencing on matters of scholarly judgement, while supporting appropriate diversity in assessment task design and criteria. External review of assessment processes can take different forms—a particular approach may not need to be mandated either nationally or indeed institutionally. While an institution may have external review of assessment in every course, how this is undertaken in practice may differ from course to course, discipline to discipline.

It might be appropriate for external review to focus on capstone assessment tasks. For the purpose of measuring attainment standards, capstone assessment could be any task completed toward the end of a course, and requiring students to demonstrate achievement against the core learning outcomes for the course.

For the purpose of national standards it is also appropriate for external review to emphasise threshold-level attainment, to examine the minimum requirements for a pass, and to reference these to the AQF, and national teaching and learning standards statements, including any relevant, agreed discipline-specific learning outcomes statements. A satisfactory pass should at least meet these external levels and in many cases would exceed them, both in terms of criteria and level.

It is appropriate that TEQSA, in its role as national regulator, recognises the centrality of assessment and with this the central role that professional academic judgement plays in both defining and assuring standards.

As with teaching standards, a case can be made for more widespread, expert review of learning standards. The challenge again, for TEQSA, is to what extent it can draw upon such review as part of its quality assurance processes.

DISCUSSION POINTS

6. Is the broad architecture of relationships depicted in Figure 1 an appropriate basis for the development of a standards framework?
7. Is the approach suggested for structuring standards statements in Figure 2 a viable way to proceed?
8. What role does testing of generic or discipline-based knowledge and skills using common instruments have to play in ensuring, monitoring and demonstrating learning standards in Australia?
9. Are there other possible measures or indicators that should be considered?
10. How should TEQSA utilise expert review, both for review of teaching standards and for review of learning standards, in ways that are time and cost-effective?

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