Options for a national process to articulate and monitor academic standards across Australian universities

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This submission is an extract from a paper being prepared for the Australian Universities Teaching Committee on the relationship between student assessment, grading and academic standards. The submission draws on a Centre for the Study of Higher Education Invitational Symposium on 12 April 2002 at which participants with diverse expertise from across the sector discussed the adequacy of present arrangements for defining and monitoring standards and canvassed future possibilities. The views expressed in this submission are those of the authors alone.

Higher Education at the Crossroads raises the question of academic standards and the quality of educational outcomes in Australia higher education. The paper poses the question: ‘is the existing quality assurance framework sufficiently rigorous to assess the quality and standards of educational outcomes?’ (p.21). In our view, while the national framework quite properly supports the autonomy of universities, as self-accrediting institutions, to be responsible for setting and maintaining their own academic standards, there is a need for processes to monitor standards across universities. This submission outlines key elements of a process that would provide greater confidence in the standards of university degrees in Australian universities.

Setting standards is the business of the academy. The process we propose would involve establishing mechanisms to promote dialogue amongst academics at the level of field of study or discipline to clarify and share expectations of learning outcomes appropriate to higher education, to improve assessment methods and to provide the basis for the determination and reporting of levels of student achievement.

1 In addition to the authors of this submission, participants at the CSHE Invitational Symposium included: Professor Don Anderson, ANU; Professor Margaret Gardner, University of Queensland; Mr Conor King, AVCC; Professor Stuart Macintyre, University of Melbourne; Dr Greg Marie, University of Western Australia; Professor Geoff Masters, ACER; Mr Gavin Moodie, VUT; Dr Carol Nicoll, DEST; Associate Professor Mike Prosser, University of Sydney; Associate Professor David Treloar, University of Western Australia, Dr David Woodhouse, Australian Universities Quality Agency.
The problem of knowing the standards of university degrees

The higher education system currently lacks adequate and explicit mechanisms for knowing about the standards of degrees. This has come about as the informal conversations that once guided notions of standards within disciplines have been eroded by pressures on academic work, the changing nature of disciplinary bases, and the sheer diversity and complexity of the current system. This situation has the potential to diminish domestic and international confidence in Australian higher education. The traditional standards or ‘touchstones’ of the academy need to be more systematically articulated and disseminated.

We use ‘standards’ to refer to the nature and levels of learning outcomes that students are expected to demonstrate in their university studies. This places the onus for setting and monitoring standards squarely with academics and academic communities within fields of study and disciplines. Standards are neither absolute nor timeless; standards are continually being re-defined and created as knowledge grows in existing fields and as new fields emerge.

Over the last 12 months, the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) has investigated assessment issues and practices in universities as part of a project conducted for the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC). We have concluded that there are presently few objective reference points for knowing the intellectual standards of Australian degrees. At state forums and in case studies we talked with staff about assessment practices and standards. Staff often have difficulty explaining how they know about the standards of their degrees and are unable to point with confidence to formal processes for monitoring standards, particularly against external reference points. Moderation processes are almost non-existent and the involvement of external examiners is confined to postgraduate level. This is not to suggest staff lack confidence in the overall academic standards reached by the majority of students, but the processes by which standards are defined and monitored are uneven and rarely explicit. By and large, academic standards are a matter of professional trust, underpinned by governance processes that guarantee academic autonomy, and internal systems for course approval. These are generally inaccessible and sometimes arcane from the perspective of external stakeholders.

This situation highlights a significant gap in the national framework for quality assurance. While universities have sole responsibility for academic standards in the Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework (AHEQAF), there are no requirements for universities to engage in cross-institutional dialogue to ensure reasonable levels of consistency across the system. The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), is required to report on the ‘relative standards of the Australian higher education system’ but its focus on the processes of institutional level quality assurance does not provide for comment on standards across institutions or within fields of study. Nor should it. As an external body to the academy, AUQA is required to look at the ways in which institutions set and assess standards including moderation methods but it does not have a role in the ongoing and sustained process of determining and monitoring standards at system level.
Elements of a process to articulate and monitor academic standards

We propose some modest steps to remedy the lack of reference points and processes for knowing about the standards of Australian degrees. Outlined below are eight elements for a national/system-level approach to articulating and monitoring academic standards.

1. The process should provide a forum for ongoing dialogue and consensus-building on standards within the Australian academic community

The experience of staff directly involved in teaching and assessing student learning is central to determining and monitoring standards. The responsibility for standards ultimately rests with individual academic staff, informed as it has always been by the collective views of their academic peers. As we have noted, this process is increasingly problematic given the sheer size of the academic enterprise, the multiplying pressures on academic workloads and major shifts in disciplinary structures.

In this context, academic staff have responsibility for making explicit what is implicit in their work and for contributing to dialogue and consensus-building about standards among peers. An effective process would therefore support and formalise this dialogue: it would need to be ongoing (it has no end-point or end-product) and would need to provide a forum for the discussion and negotiation necessary to develop shared values and broad yet meaningful agreement on standards.

2. The process should be focused primarily within fields of study

Since student learning outcomes are generally specific to the fields in which they are studying, the logical site for dialogue on standards is within fields of study. The academic communities within fields of study should be the focus for, and take the lead in, defining and monitoring standards that are relevant and appropriate. We acknowledge of course that these academic communities are subject to change and that the organisational dynamics vary considerably.

3. Dialogue on standards should be centred on assessment and grading practices and how these underpin standards

The assurance of academic standards embraces a wide range of activities beyond the assessment of student learning. However, assessment and grading practices are possibly the most important safeguard. The role of assessment is likely to be further highlighted as university entry pathways and the modes of student participation and engagement with learning resources diversify: the maintenance of standards through entry pre-requisites and ‘time spent on task’ have become significantly less important as mechanisms for ensuring standards than they once were. The accurate measurement and reporting of student knowledge, skills, achievement or performance is increasingly the final test of academic standards.

4. The process should lead to the articulation of a discipline-based assessment framework that includes broad criteria for learning outcomes and levels of achievement

Explicit criteria for learning outcomes and explicit levels of achievement are fundamental starting points for a process to clarify standards. Without these it is not possible to have a sensible discussion about the standards of Australian degrees. Australian universities
generally have well-developed statements of expected learning outcomes. We believe, however, less attention has been given to articulating levels of achievement within learning outcomes. One consequence is that grading can be rather crudely ‘norm-referenced’—students are graded according to the ranking of their performance among peers. This grading procedure often lacks transparency and leads to grades that do not report the actual level of student learning. Greater dialogue is needed on the criteria for learning outcomes and expected levels of achievement (qualitative, non-numeric), and on the links between these, assessment practices and grading.

5. The process should be concerned with how standards are defined and monitored across the whole range of student achievement, from ‘adequate’ achievement to ‘high’ achievement.

We see little point in a ‘minimalist’ model that focuses only on threshold levels of achievement. However, at the very least there should be agreement within the disciplines as to what levels of expectations and performance are appropriate to higher education. There should be a sufficiently clear distinction between the nature of the demands of higher education and other levels of education. The academy should be concerned with student achievement across the full range of achievement and should have appropriate mechanisms for establishing criteria, for setting various levels of achievement, and for measuring and reporting on them.

6. The assessment framework that emerges from the process should recognise and accommodate course diversity

Notwithstanding element five, if a process for articulating and monitoring academic standards stifled diversity and led to standardisation it would be rightly criticised. The process of reaching agreement on standards will require the opportunity for independent advocacy to ensure that the voices of all participants are respected and conceptions of standards are permitted to evolve through the consideration of all perspectives within a diverse and changing system.

7. The process should generate public documents describing learning criteria, levels of achievement and how these are assessed

The process should lead to documents recording the deliberations and outcomes of the ongoing discussions held within fields of study. The set of documents pertaining to all fields should be a publicly available reference for Australian academic standards. The format in which these matters are recorded should reflect the particular characteristics of fields, but at the least should include expected learning outcomes, levels of achievement and assessment and grading practices. The documents describing standards should be treated as working documents that evolve and are fine-tuned on a regular basis. The documents would support the process of discussion (which is the most important outcome) rather than be an end in themselves.

8. The process should contribute directly to enhancing teaching and learning through the articulation of clear goals and expectations

Processes for defining and monitoring academic standards should directly support the quality of teaching and learning by making goals and standards clearer. Students who understand standards and who are encouraged to study towards them are likely to have better learning outcomes; equally, academics who are motivated to articulate their goals
are more likely to be effective in their teaching and assessment. Any steps that might be taken to make the expected learning outcomes more explicit would support and enhance procedures for credit transfer and the recognition of student learning across courses, while also underpinning greater student independence within flexible and self-paced learning environments.

**An example of a possible operational model**

Here we outline one possibility for implementing a process based on these principles. This is simply one example of the possibilities that might be explored. The central idea is that groups of academics formed around common field of study interests should be encouraged and supported to take responsibility for setting and monitoring broad standards at a national level. We will refer to these groups as ‘Standards Networks’ and believe they could have a variety of forms.

The process of formalising the articulation and monitoring of academic standards would best start with existing associations based on common interests in fields of study. The existing Councils and Associations of Deans provide an excellent potential mechanism for consultation within some fields of study and could readily take a wider role to include a process for articulating and monitoring standards, styled along the lines of the ‘Standards Network’ within each field. Some Deans groups already work in this way as a result of their relationship to professional accreditation organisations.

A Standards Network would be necessary for all fields of study, so the creation of new groups would be necessary wherever there is presently no appropriate Council of Deans or similar group. This essentially means a focus in the first phase on the program level and drawing on, for example, the various groups of deans of law, education, science and so on. These groups may embrace cognate disciplines as appropriate. A discipline-based approach would be too ambitious in the first instance but it is envisaged that ultimately various groups and coalitions might form to pursue the articulation of standards based on common disciplinary interests.

Clearly, appropriate incentives will be required to encourage the formation of networks with common interests in academic standards. We have not developed the practicalities associated with these ideas at this point, prior to looking for some in principle support for the notion from the higher education community. We envisage that networks may pursue diverse processes to reach similar end-points. Some for instance may develop models similar to that of accreditation commissions in the United States.

Some form of registration may be necessary to give credibility and legitimacy to the operation and outcomes of the Networks, and a set of protocols may be necessary to guide their efforts, but these would be of a generic nature.

It is most likely that a new agency would be not required to co-ordinate activities, but a sponsoring body in the initial implementation phase would be needed to provide a focus for the exchange of information and dissemination across field of study networks. This is especially necessary for the inclusion of new and emerging fields of study.
Standards Networks could initiate and sustain discussion, negotiation and consensus within fields of study on academic standards, in effect, formalising the informal dialogue that takes place between academic staff in their fields and recording this dialogue for the benefit of stakeholders. The Networks could consider (for instance) the question of what Arts degrees have in common in terms of learning outcomes, what minimum levels of achievement must be reached, and what levels of achievement qualify for excellence. The Networks would have flexibility in the protocols to determine how this is best done within a particular field. According to the nature and needs of the particular field, the resulting processes may involve moderation of assessment, the publication of exemplars of student work at various levels, or external examination.

The concept of Standards Networks has the advantage of placing responsibility for defining and monitoring standards squarely within fields of study and disciplines. Since the process could operate as an adjunct to existing bodies it would require minimal resources, though start-up government support would be necessary in the initial stages. This is a major initiative requiring a significant commitment from the academic community. A viable short-term objective would be to fund the trial of such a model in two or three major fields of study to explore the outcomes and benefits.

The option presented here is an opportunity during the current review of higher education to take an important step in advancing the articulation and monitoring of standards in Australian higher education.