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Stepping into standards

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Establishing standards does not demand standardisation of curricula - if we get it right. Kerri-Lee Harris takes an international perspective.

Academic standards are currently a hot topic in Australian higher education - at least among university leaders and commentators. In response to the AUQA discussion paper released in May, concerns have been voiced over potential erosion of institutional autonomy and standardisation of curricula. Yet the establishment of national academic standards requires neither - at least, not if the sector takes the lead.

The AUQA standards paper proposed the establishment of agreed, national reference points for measuring academic achievement. Such achievement standards would be discipline-based, describing what graduates must learn, and to what level, in order to be awarded a degree. So why should this be so contentious?

In some disciplines, the topic barely raises an eyebrow. In engineering and medicine, for example, external course accreditation is fundamental and graduate assessment commonplace. For many other subject areas the concept is more novel. However, the discussion has yet to filter through to these disciplinary communities. Rather, the debate is being held in the corridors of institutional leadership and management.

The reason is that the topic of academic achievement standards has been confused with institutional quality assurance and, in particular, universities' accountability to government. And the conflation of the two is perhaps no surprise. After all, AUQA has initiated the discussion nationally, and the baton may soon pass to the new quality and standards agency with responsibility for accreditation of higher education providers.

This focus on institutional QA is an unhelpful distraction. There are many good reasons for introducing nationally referenced monitoring and reporting of student academic achievement, beyond accountability to government. The principal benefits will be to graduates, providing greater clarity in the meaning of their qualifications, both within Australia and overseas. Conversely, should the sector do nothing, the principal cost will be to the reputation of Australian degrees and Australian higher education.

So what might this look like?

Imagine a situation where all bachelor degrees in science, in Australia, are based on two nationally agreed statements of learning outcomes. They align with the definition of a bachelor degree in the revamped Australian Qualifications Framework, and with the subject statement for science, developed through discipline-based consultations across the sector.

Imagine courses which are diverse in their structure and content, and in the teaching and learning activities employed. They all, however, culminate in an integrative,

capstone project. In this scenario, projects vary between courses, and majors, but are all assessed against common criteria. They are graded by staff within the awarding institutions, and samples of work are also assessed externally. And, finally, envisage a capstone grade included on each science graduate's graduation statement, along with an explanation of the capstone element, common to all BSc graduates, from all courses.

This is a hypothetical, yet there are precedents.

The Tuning process of Europe demonstrates how disciplinary communities can reach transnational agreements on the learning outcomes that define university qualifications in particular subject areas. Such agreements are not confined to professional degrees. There are now chemistry degrees across Europe receiving the Eurobachelor label in recognition of their alignment with discipline-based standards.

It is possible to distinguish five decision points in establishing academic achievement standards.

First, there is the need to define the learning outcomes valued and shared by the members of disciplinary communities. The subject benchmark statements of the UK are the outcome of just such an approach. These nationally recognised statements of expected learning outcomes cover around 70 subjects - from accounting to veterinary science, music to optometry. Similarly, the various Tuning projects, such as Tuning Europe, and more recently Tuning USA, involve discipline-based collaboration extending across institutional and political precincts. Some such projects are underway in Australia, although as yet they cover only a small number of subject areas.

A second, related decision is around the level of learning required. Both the subject benchmark statements and the Tuning project of Europe define threshold levels - the minimum requirement for the award of a degree at the bachelor or masters level. The UK statements also describe higher, typical, grade levels.

The notion of statements of learning outcomes and even grade descriptors, is familiar to many staff in Australian universities. However, these statements are typically developed for individual courses with little or no reference to external touchstones. By definition, national standards are external reference points against which local expectations can be set, and achievements measured.

Measurement of achievement is the third decision point in establishing standards, and the area most hotly contested. Assessment is obviously a critical part of the equation. It is necessary if institutions, and others, are to have confidence in the achievements of our graduates. The challenge, however, is finding an approach to assessment that neither standardises nor limits the design and teaching of individual courses. It is here that the spectre of national, standardised testing is often raised.

Indeed, standardised testing is one option. A number of tests are available to universities and colleges in the US, for example, including tests of generic competences and of discipline-based knowledge and skills. Similarly, the current OECD feasibility project Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) is soon to trial standardised testing in the disciplines of engineering and economics.

Yet standardised testing is certainly not the only option for measurement of learning against agreed standards. There are other forms of assessment that are likely to be far more acceptable to university staff, while also enabling comparison between graduates across a range of courses. For example, the chemistry Eurobachelor includes a capstone element - the bachelor thesis - which involves assessment against agreed criteria but through locally determined tasks and assessment. In such a system, academic judgement remains central and diverse curricula are accommodated.

The contentious issue of measurement can be somewhat neutralised if the two remaining decision points are disentangled from the mix. One is the need for external benchmarking. In the BSc hypothetical, samples of student work from capstone projects are subject to external examination. This is akin to the external assessment of the bachelor thesis in the chemistry Eurobachelor.

The final decision point concerns the reporting of standards of achievement. Here the critical questions concern who needs to know, and what information they need. And it is only at this point that there is the potential for an intersection between academic achievement standards and institutional accountability.

As a sector, we need to pay greater attention to academic achievement standards. With the increasingly global mobility of students and graduates, this is essential for protecting the reputation of Australian higher education awards. Establishing standards does not demand standardisation of curricula, if we get it right. It does involve a process, it will take some time, and there are very good reasons for us to start now.

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