

Academic standards and the assessment of student learning: Some current issues in Australian higher education

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Abstract

This paper reports a recent national study by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education into contemporary practices in student assessment in Australian higher education and the issues of quality assurance facing the sector in the light of public speculation and concern about academic standards. A major issue emerging from the project is the importance of defining the relationships between approaches to student assessment and grading, quality assurance and academic standards. The paper discusses the issues surrounding academic standards in Australia in the context of the new national framework for higher education quality assurance and the role of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA).

Renewed discussion about academic standards in Australian higher education

In April 2002, the Australian government launched a major review of Australian higher education with a Ministerial discussion paper, *Higher Education at the Crossroads* (Nelson 2002). The Minister's framework for consultation was sweeping, canvassing the quality of learning experiences and outcomes, equity of access, institutional specialisation, governance and management, and possible new funding arrangements. One issue given particular prominence in *Crossroads* was the question of academic standards and the processes for assuring the standards of Australian awards:

Over the years there have been allegations that university standards are falling. Some critics contend that some universities now offer courses lacking intellectual rigour and that there has been a 'dumbing down' of universities. There are also concerns about a deterioration in the calibre of students entering university but the available evidence does not support this. There have been claims that 'softmarking' has become common practice, and the quality of education has generally been compromised. (Nelson 2002:19)

These concerns were given closer examination in a subsequent government paper prepared for the review which dealt specifically on teaching and learning issues, *Striving for Quality* (DEST 2002a):

There is currently no public statement of what standards of achievement or performance are accepted by the higher education community to be at the threshold or minimum for particular qualifications. At present such standards are the realm of individual institutions, and no attempt has yet been made to articulate them at a systemic or national level. (p.26),

and,

If articulated academic standards are to be maintained, academics need to share a common understanding of the standards, and fairly and consistently assess student achievement in terms of

the standards. To ensure such a common understanding, some form of moderation of assessment is necessary ... There is not a strong tradition of systematic moderation of assessment and evaluation of performance within Australian universities at undergraduate or postgraduate coursework level either between different markers in the same subject, across subjects, across courses or across institutions. (p.28)

The discussion of standards in the higher education review follows rising speculation about whether or not standards have deteriorated in Australian universities. Periodic concerns about slipping standards and grade inflation are hardly new for universities. But in the Australian higher education system the issue of standards has a special character. The federal government's concern with developing more explicit processes for ensuring standards can be traced to the importance of international students to the revenue of Australian universities and the possible threat to international markets if standards are perceived to be low or falling. Uncertainty about university standards would have the potential to undermine not only the high regard in which Australian higher education is held domestically but also the regard in which it is held throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Australian higher education has developed an excellent reputation in Asia, in particular South East Asia. The size of the international student market has grown surprisingly rapidly. International students now make up close to one sixth of the overall student body. In 2001, there were over 110,000 international students in Australia's 38 universities, with annual growth rates running at 10-15 per cent (DEST 2002b). The attractiveness for Asian families of Australian universities includes the proximity of Australia, the relatively low cost — with a weak Australian dollar — the safe, multicultural environment, and a government endorsed and funded university system based on Western higher education traditions.

It is significant, then, that many of the questions about standards have arisen in the main part from reports of inconsistencies in the grading of international students and allegations of management pressure to pass under-achieving fee-paying students, both domestic and international. The criticisms of standards are difficult to rebut. One reason is the highly abstract nature of standards, making claims about declining standards difficult to deny objectively, thus making standards a target for the media or for disgruntled staff within the academy itself. A more significant reason, however, is that the Australian higher education sector has had little sustained discussion and analysis of standards in recent years. As a result, very little is known about relative standards and it is difficult to identify the processes by which standards are defined and monitored.

The apparent absence of system-wide consideration of academic standards does not imply there are problems with standards or that standards are in decline, however this situation does raise questions about the processes for monitoring standards and highlights the need for new reference points for the standards of Australian awards.

Standards in the Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework

There is little doubt that the expansion of the Australian higher education system throughout the 1990s, the declining public funding available to universities, the rapid growth in international students, and the requirement to prepare graduates for international careers has invited new thinking about the nature of academic standards. Many of the issues for the Australian higher education system are familiar ones in developed nations. Expansion towards mass participation has created public funding difficulties and universities in Australia have faced steadily declining public revenue allocations. At the same time, government has expected universities to play a stronger role in national economic development and have

encouraged universities to be more entrepreneurial and to seek alternative sources of revenue. There has been a gradual deregulation of the system to foster competition for students between universities. While the federal government is committed to market forms of arrangement, and used the *Crossroads* higher education review to canvass the possibilities for greater deregulation of fees, it has also shown centralising tendencies, including interest in national mechanisms for articulating and monitoring student outcomes.

The *Crossroads* discussion paper clearly signalled the federal government's intention to consider how the Australian quality assurance framework might be strengthened. The reasons for this are best understood through a brief sketch of the Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework (DETYA 2000), which has been recently adopted. Shortly after the creation of the Unified National System in the late 1980s, the federal government introduced policy for quality assurance through the Higher Education Council (HEC 1992), an independent advisory body which had responsibilities to advise government on quality, access and equity. At the time, the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) became responsible for annual institutional quality audits, of which three rounds were conducted in the mid-1990s. Following the CQAHE audits, quality assurance at system-level involved institutions submitting a copy of their strategic plan and a statement covering the key indicators that institutions themselves use to judge to their performance, current outcomes and intended improvements, and improvements which have taken place since the previous quality assurance program. From 1998 onwards the federal government integrated Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans into its yearly funding negotiations with institutions and these plans are published annually (DETYA 2001).

The new Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework is based on a set of interrelated responsibilities (DETYA 2000):

1. Federal government: funding, performance data and quality assurance/research plans;
2. State and territory governments: accreditation of universities (based on national protocols);
3. Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF): national register and award descriptions;
4. Universities: responsible for academic standards
5. Australian Universities Quality Agency: whole-of-institution audits; and

1. Federal government: Funding, performance data and quality assurance/research plans

The Federal Government, through the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST – formerly the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, DETYA), has a central role in the quality assurance framework. The Federal government provides funds to universities covering a portion of their operating expenses, publishes a range of performance data, and provides tools and incentives to enhance the quality of outcomes, including the publication of institutional quality assurance plans (DETYA 2001). Australian universities annually provide DEST with statistics on various areas of institutional operations and performance. DEST publishes this information in a comparative format (for example, Andrews et al 1998, DEST 2001).

2. State and territory governments: accreditation of universities (based on national protocols)

State and Territory Governments have responsibility for approving applications from institutions wishing to operate as a university within their State or Territory. A prospective university must demonstrate a number of institutional characteristics, as specified in the protocols, before being accredited. Once accredited, Australian universities have the authority to accredit their own programs, and have primary responsibility for their own academic standards as well as the quality assurance processes which underpin them. The

capacity to responsibly exercise this authority is among the criteria for recognition as a university.

3. Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF): national register and award descriptions

The AQF was established in 1995 to provide for national articulation of awards offered in the Australian vocational education and training and higher education sectors. The AQF also maintains a public register of post-compulsory education providers and accreditation authorities. The AQF's 'characteristics guideline' specifies award characteristics at only the most general of levels. Guidelines for the bachelors degree, for instance, include:

- the acquisition of a systematic and coherent body of knowledge, the underlying principles and concepts, and the associated communication and problem-solving skills;
- development of the academic skills and attributes necessary to undertake research, comprehend and evaluate new information, concepts and evidence from a range of sources;
- development of the ability to review, consolidate, extend and apply the knowledge and techniques learnt, including in a professional context; and
- a foundation for self-directed and lifelong learning; and interpersonal and teamwork skills appropriate to employment and/or further study.

(see <http://www.aqf.edu.au/>)

4. Universities: Responsible for academic standards

Individual Australian universities have responsibility for academic standards. Universities have considerable independence in exercising this responsibility. As self-accrediting institutions, they have autonomy over course content, course delivery, assessment, grading and the graduation of students. External assessment, for instance, is rare in Australian undergraduate education, unlike elsewhere in the world, and few curricula are externally set or monitored.

5. Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA): whole-of-institution audits

Finally, the Australian Universities Quality Agency was established in March 2000 as an independent national agency to monitor, audit, and report on quality assurance in Australian higher education (AUQA 2002, DETYA 2000). The Agency commenced audits in 2002. It is responsible for:

- conducting quality audits of self-accrediting institutions and State and Territory accreditation authorities on a five-yearly basis;
- providing public reports revealing the outcomes of these audits;
- reporting on the criteria for the accreditation of new universities and non-university higher education awards, as a result of information obtained during the audits of institutions and State and Territory accreditation processes; and
- reporting on the relative standards and international standing of the Australian higher education system and its quality assurance processes, as a result of information obtained during the audit process.

The AUQA Audits of self-accrediting institutions are whole-of-institution audits based on a self-assessment and a site visit. They focus on the key areas of teaching and learning, research and management and on the adequacy of an institution's quality assurance arrangements. They assess the institution's success in maintaining standards consistent with university education in Australia. The Agency makes use of audit panels with substantial senior academic and administrative experience in higher education.

A possible gap in the QA framework?: An argument for moving towards an outcomes-based interpretation of standards

The various interrelationships in the Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework leave a potentially significant gap with regard to national academic standards. The Australian Universities Quality Agency is required during audits to ask universities about their standards and their quality assurance processes for standards, but the AUQA is clearly not a standard setting agency, nor are the whole-of-institution audits likely to explore issues of standards on a detailed discipline-by-discipline basis. Furthermore, the AUQA's focus is principally on quality assurance processes rather than outcomes. The agency is not in a position to comment on relative standards across universities. For their part, individual universities are under no obligation to review how their standards relate to those of other universities, though they may choose to adopt mechanisms for doing so. While informal collegial networks might operate *de facto* for formal systems, such networks seldom produce publicly available information on academic standards and the processes for defining and monitoring them.

In a Centre for the Study of Higher Education submission to the *Crossroads* review (James, McInnis & Devlin 2002), the question of this possible shortcoming in the national framework for quality assurance was raised:

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 ... 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.

While the national quality assurance framework supports the autonomy of universities, as self-accrediting institutions, to be responsible for setting and maintaining their own academic standards, the submission argued there is a need for processes to monitor standards *across* universities. At present, there are no mechanisms for ongoing and sustained discussion on the nature of standards at national level. By and large, academic standards are a matter of professional trust.

What kind of national process might improve the monitoring and maintenance of academic standards? A thorough analysis of the complex concept of standards is not possible in this paper. But it is sufficient to say at this point that standards are not absolute, they are continually being re-defined and created as knowledge grows in existing fields and as new fields emerge. And the pace at which standards are evolving is probably more rapid than ever before. This being the case, there is an argument for focusing foremost on a *student outcomes* based approach to defining and monitoring academic standards, one grounded in the assessment and reporting of student learning.

The argument for basing standards in student assessment is as follows. The assurance of academic standards has usually embraced a wide range of activities beyond the assessment of student learning. Traditionally, universities have given attention to input factors as a means for defining and protecting standards. These include factors such as entry stringency (student

preparedness or capability), academic staff qualifications, course duration, and course content. But the use of input factors as a measure or safeguard for standards is strongly challenged by contemporary trends in access, modes of delivery and modes of student participation. The selectivity of student admissions, for example, is a less significant factor in mass higher education systems that are actively seeking to attract a broader student base and to recruit students regardless of prior educational advantage or disadvantage. Likewise, process-based measures for signifying standards are likely to become less appropriate as the pathways through which students achieve learning outcomes are now often deemed less significant than the learning outcomes themselves — the duration of study, for instance, has become significantly less important than it was once thought to be. In these circumstances, in which university entry pathways and the modes of student participation and engagement with learning resources diversify, student learning outcomes might come to provide the ultimate test and safeguard for standards. Standards will be embodied in assessment practices and will be essentially outcomes-oriented; that is, standards will be more closely associated with the nature and levels of learning that students demonstrate during their university studies.

An outline of a possible national process for defining and monitoring academic standards

If the argument for an outcomes-based interpretation of standards is sound, the question is whether a national process can be devised to allow greater discussion and consultation across universities on assessment practices. As part of a large national study on student assessment for the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC), the CSHE examined the various possibilities for such a process and presented a proposal to the *Crossroads* higher education review (James, McInnis & Devlin 2002). In essence, the proposed process involves establishing mechanisms to promote dialogue among academics at the level of field of study or discipline to clarify expectations of learning outcomes appropriate to higher education, to improve assessment methods, and to provide the basis for comparable determination and reporting of levels of student achievement.

In the CSHE submission to the *Crossroads* review, we suggested the following eight elements or requirements for an effective national or system-level approach to articulating and monitoring academic standards, with the principal goal of addressing the lack of reference points for the standards of Australian degrees:

1. The process should provide a new, formal forum for ongoing dialogue and consensus-building on standards within the Australian academic community.
2. The process should be focused primarily within fields of study.
3. Dialogue on standards should be centred on assessment and grading practices and how these underpin 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.
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.

6. The assessment framework that emerges from the process should recognise and accommodate course diversity.
7. The process should generate public documents describing learning criteria, levels of achievement, and how these are assessed.
8. The process should contribute directly to enhancing teaching and learning through the articulation of clear goals and expectations.

The eight elements are based on the belief that the experience of staff directly involved in teaching and assessing student learning is central to standards; ultimately, the responsibility for standards rests with individual academic staff and their academic judgement. However, we also believe that individual academic judgement should not function without exposure to a wider professional viewpoint, particularly in a system undergoing rapid change. In this context, academic staff have responsibility for making explicit what is implicit in their work and for contributing to peer dialogue and consensus-building about standards. An effective process would increase the level of this dialogue, as well as formalising some of the present informal dialogue.

For this model to operate effectively, explicit criteria for learning outcomes and explicit levels of achievement are fundamental starting points. Without these it is not possible to have a serious discussion about standards. There is already a reasonable basis on which to build, for Australian universities generally have well-developed statements of expected learning outcomes. The CSHE submission indicated we saw little point in a 'minimalist' model that focuses only on minimum or threshold levels of achievement, in the belief that higher education is concerned with student achievement across the full range of achievement and universities should have appropriate mechanisms for measuring and reporting various levels of student achievement.

There are of course significant challenges and potential pitfalls in implementing a process such as this. The potential for bureaucratic excesses and excessive standardisation is recognised, and the labor-intensive nature of UK subject benchmarking exercise is a consideration for any national system with similar over-arching objectives. Therefore, any potential mechanism for defining and monitoring academic standards must not constrain or inhibit course differentiation, and must avoid being stalled in debates about the generality or specificity of learning outcomes statements. At the same time, however, steps might need to be taken, for it is reasonable to believe cognate degrees awarded by Australian universities should have some learning outcomes in common and these commonalities should be in the public domain. The preparation of some form of documentation, as a reference for Australian academic standards on a field of study basis, is probably necessary, though the format might vary across fields of study. As a minimum, the documentation should include expected learning outcomes, levels of achievement and assessment and grading practices.

One practical option for implementing a process might be to create Standards Networks using the existing Councils and Associations of Deans (James, McInnis and Devlin 2002). These networks could provide the forum for discussion, negotiation and consensus within fields of study on academic standards, considering what comparable courses 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 central idea is a simple one: 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.

Standards Networks would need the autonomy to determine how this is best done within a particular field.

Strengthening student assessment practices

Australia does not yet have the appropriate preconditions for a concept such as the Standards Networks as a process for defining and monitoring academic standards. There is not, for example, a single student grading system in use across universities in Australia, and universities presently use differing percentages for awarding distinctions and pass degrees. Establishing a common grading nomenclature and scale would be a helpful first step, probably a highly contentious one, but this alone would be a shallow change unless accompanied by a critical analysis of the underlying assessment tasks, criteria and levels of achievement used to determine grades in the first instance.

During 2001 and 2002, the Centre for the Study of Higher Education's national study for the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) has examined issues in the assessment of student learning beyond those of standards (James & McInnis 2001, James, R., McInnis, C. & Devlin, M., in press). The objective of the project was in the main part highly practical: to develop new resources to assist universities to enhance their assessment practices. The project was a response to growing concern throughout the Australian higher education sector with a set of new assessment issues, including the apparent incidence of plagiarism, larger class sizes, on-line assessment and the increasing use of group learning activities.

The CSHE research into assessment practices suggests the quality assurance of assessment lags behind other aspects of teaching and learning. While there is an obvious risk in generalising, some broad conclusions on the assessment *status quo* are possible. Assessment is possibly one of the least sophisticated aspects of university teaching and learning. We note, for instance, regular gaps and inconsistencies between institutional policies and faculty/departmental practices. While there appears little value in excessive central regulation of assessment practices, a greater alignment between institutional policy for best practice and faculty/departmental activities might be beneficial.

We also note that assessment is not firmly integrated with teaching and learning processes, though there are outstanding examples to the contrary. Assessment is often treated by staff as the culmination of the teaching and learning process. There is a strong emphasis on final examination and the culture of 'testing' is strong. Inevitably, the balance is firmly on the summative rather than formative role of assessment. This tendency runs counter to most pedagogical thinking and is arguably the result of an over-emphasis on the sorting and certification role of assessment in higher education.

In a similar vein, there is a tendency to 'over assess' through comprehensive attempts to cover prescribed subject content, rather than to use assessment strategies that sample student capacity to synthesise and analyse. The assessment of generic skills is uneven and far from fully integrated into assessment regimes. Often students do not perceive assessment tasks to be 'real', assessment is not seen to assess workplace skills.

To balance this account of shortcomings in assessment practices, the CSHE research also uncovered excellent examples of innovative assessment, efforts to embed assessment tasks in the learning process, and sustained strategies for reviewing faculty assessment practices. These initiatives are occurring despite major impediments to high quality assessment, such as larger classes and heightened academic workloads. The provision of 'low stakes' early

assessment for feedback purposes, for instance, is increasingly difficult due to resource constraints.

In all, however, there is considerable scope to professionalise student assessment practices. A major inhibitor to the renewal of assessment is the inherent conservatism in universities towards considering new or alternative assessment practices. This conservatism is shared by both staff and students. Australian higher education would benefit from greater exploration of the possibilities for using assessment not only as a mechanism for making standards more concrete and explicit, but also as a more sophisticated and strategic tool for helping shape effective teaching and learning processes.

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