

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES QUALITY AGENCY

**Setting and Monitoring
Academic Standards for
Australian Higher Education**

A DISCUSSION PAPER

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Executive Summary

In its second cycle of audits of universities, which began in 2008, the Australian Universities Quality Agency's (AUQA's) owners (the nine ministers responsible for higher education) require the Agency to assess and report on the standards an institution is achieving: "AUQA should be able to recommend ...improvement (including at the subject or discipline level) to ensure that acceptable academic standards (based on ...minimum standards or other reasonable measures of graduate outcomes or success) are being met."

At present, the Australian higher education system lacks certain features that would enable AUQA (or any other body) to do this. Therefore, the AUQA Board convened an expert group in 2007 to produce a Framework for Standards. To build on this work, AUQA appointed in 2008 another expert group to develop ways of measuring and reporting on standards of academic achievement. This Advisory Group has drafted the current document for public discussion. Its aim is to contribute to the higher education system's common understanding of and description of standards of academic achievement.

Section 1 addresses some of the common uses of the word 'standards' and defines the meaning relevant to this document, ie 'academic achievement standards'. Section 2 sets out a possible process for developing statements and exemplars of generic and discipline-specific academic achievement standards. This process would draw heavily on the disciplinary communities, including the relevant professional groups, and build where possible on the work of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC).

Some existing approaches to assessment will be useful for measuring student achievement against these new definitions, but there will also be a need to develop new measures and ways of measuring. Section 3 initiates this discussion, but further work will need to follow the activities set out in Section 2. Finally, Section 4 addresses ways of reporting on the standards achieved.

The task outlined here will not be quick or easy, but it will result in a significant improvement to academic work. Students will have a better idea in advance how their work will be measured and reported, and a clearer picture of what their final reported achievement signifies. Employers will have greater confidence in the meaning of the results that graduates present to them, regardless of the institution from which they come. Academics themselves will be able to face with greater confidence – and, one hopes, rebut – the frequent accusations of falling standards and 'dumbing down'. The counter-arguments will be clearly based on strong and explicit evidence.

In doing this work, Australia will be well to the fore in addressing a matter that is attracting great attention in different countries. In the USA, the Spellings Commission recommended that accrediting agencies pay more attention to this; in the UK, the head of the Quality Assurance Agency announced early in 2009 that the QAA would investigate how to make more explicit and comparable statements about achievement standards. The OECD's Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project arose from the concerns of all OECD ministers of education over the lack of mechanisms for assessing and comparing graduate learning. Thus, there could be an opportunity cost of Australia making no further progress in this area if others are able to develop benchmarking exercises that demonstrate standards. On a positive note, it is anticipated that some of the costs of this work will be able to be absorbed in doing things differently, rather than additionally.

Introduction: A new emphasis on student achievement

The project's objective and rationale

This AUQA project is intended to make a major theoretical and practical contribution to understanding and monitoring academic achievement standards in Australian higher education.

Higher education's strategic importance to Australia's economic and social prosperity makes it imperative that our institutions have robust strategies for demonstrating students' academic achievement. Domestic and international expansion demands more transparent and relevant measures. To enhance equity and excellence, institutions need to demonstrate that their graduates have the capabilities that are required for successful engagement in today's complex world.

This will need our current approaches to be augmented. In the absence of more objective measures of student achievement, institutional reputation remains the dominant indicator of the quality of university education, even though reputation hinges largely on size, research outcomes and history. High-quality teaching is vital, and Australia has played a leading role in this area. Information on 'student satisfaction' has shown positive results, but happiness is not necessarily achievement, and the greatest learner satisfaction comes when learners are stimulated and supported to high achievement.

This paper gives the rudiments of a structure that is designed to clarify and advance current practice in the Australian higher education sector. Importantly, it is designed to support diversity and excellence in ways that enhance each institution's distinctive mission. It has the potential to position Australian higher education at the forefront of international practice, and hence to build the standing and reputation of our higher education institutions.

Background to this development

For the last 20 years, there has been increasing attention to the quality of higher education. Quality has many meanings, but the most common is 'fitness for purpose' (Woodhouse, 2006). Attention to quality, therefore, has meant that institutions of higher education are expected to show that they are achieving their purposes or objectives. More recently, attention has turned to the 'level' or 'standard' of those achievements. This attention is observed world-wide. In the USA, the accreditation system is criticised for not holding institutions to account for the level of performance of their graduates; in the UK, the increase in first and second-class honours awards is interpreted as evidence of falling standards; in Australia there are frequent accusations in the media of 'dumbing down'; and several countries are beginning to question the extent to which their higher education systems add much academic value to students beyond the achievement that occurs at school level. Research suggests that institutions cannot report how well their students are, and hence the institution itself is, performing, and the sudden popularity of institutional rankings is due in part to their apparent (albeit spurious) ability to answer questions about level of achievement.

These trends raise questions about 'fitness of purpose'. Are the graduates of our universities 'good enough' to enable the country to achieve the development it wants? 'Good enough' to work effectively in the professional areas for which they have been educated? 'Good enough' to be accepted for further study or employment in other countries? 'Good enough' to give the country a high international reputation? 'Good enough' to function as effective citizens and community members? Many people want to know the answers to these questions: the government, because of its funding and national planning; parents and students because of their payments and ambitions; employers because of their business needs.

There is a growing and widespread interest in documenting what students learn, know and can do. Of course, universities have always seen developing learning as a core part of their mission. Discussions about higher education quality, however, have tended to focus on institution-level inputs or, in the last few decades, on teaching processes. The recent changes in emphasis reflect an explicit focus on students. Developing, monitoring and reporting academic achievement is increasingly seen as an institutional and even national responsibility.

A brief survey of relevant contexts

In Australia, AUQA has been evaluating quality for eight years, and in its second cycle of audits of universities, the nine MCEETYA ministers who own AUQA require the Agency to assess and report on the standards an institution is achieving: "AUQA should be able to recommend ...improvement (including at the subject or discipline level) to ensure that acceptable academic standards (based on ...minimum standards or other reasonable measures of graduate outcomes or success) are being met" (Wenn, 2006).

Recognising that the higher education system needs a framework to measure and report on standards, the AUQA Board established a Reference Group in 2007 which produced a Framework for Standards. This guided the Cycle 2 audits conducted in 2008 and has been reported by institutions as being helpful. AUQA selected the theme of 'standards' for its 2008 Australian Universities Quality Forum to stimulate further discussion of this topic. Then, in August 2008, AUQA appointed another Advisory Group to develop ways of measuring and reporting on standards of academic achievement. This Advisory Group has drafted the current document for public discussion. Its aim is to contribute to the higher education system's common understanding and description of standards of academic achievement.

A number of related pressures and activities across the higher education and government sectors have shaped this work. An increasing number of universities are working on ways of measuring and reporting on standards. Recent work commissioned by the ATN is consistent with the AUQA Framework (but more broadly based and operationally focused). The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) is facilitating disciplinary groups to specify criteria, and measures of performance against those criteria, that will permit national and international cross-referencing within and between disciplines. A new Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Council has been given a remit for revision of the AQF. The revised version can be expected to be more precise, providing greater possibility of addressing and achieving equivalence of qualifications between institutions, but taking advantage of this will require the sort of developments proposed in this paper.

Also in 2008, the Government accepted a recommendation on a common Australian Higher Education Graduation Statement (AHEGS). The current agreed form is limited by the data presently available on graduate achievement and does not set out aspirations for the information it might be desirable to publish. The AHEGS is modularised and expandable, however, and any enhancement in the ability to measure and report reliably on standards achieved would permit the production of a much more detailed Graduation Statement in the future.

In the last few decades Australian universities have delineated attributes which graduates will attain on completion of their studies. These are often articulated through the design of their courses of study. Any consideration of academic achievement standards should take account of achievement in these more general areas.

Issues of the measurement and reporting of standards are coming to the fore in other countries also. In the USA, the Spellings Commission recommended that accrediting agencies pay more attention to this. The USA Measuring Up (NCPPE, 2008) and related (eg Miller & Ewell, 2006) reports have for some years flagged the absence of information on student learning metrics, and the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA, 2009) has been developed to drive improvement in this area. In the UK, the head of the Quality Assurance Agency announced early in 2009 that the QAA would look at how to build on the work of external examiners to make more explicit and comparable statements about achievement standards. Internationally, the OECD's International Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project (OECD, 2009) is examining the feasibility of assessing and comparing graduate learning, including the value added during higher education, across nations, systems, languages and cultures. Australia is participating in this project.

At the end of 2008, the Report of the Review into Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008) was published, recommending to the Australian Government action on the AQF (Recommendation 24), increased attention to standards, and, most pertinently, the need to assess and compare learning outcomes. The purpose and intent of the AUQA 2008/9 Advisory Group are essentially what subsequently appeared as Recommendation 23 of this report, namely:

“That the Australian Government commission and appropriately fund work on the development of new quality assurance arrangements for higher education.... This would involve:

- a set of indicators and instruments to directly assess and compare learning outcomes; and
- a set of formal statements of academic standards by discipline along with processes for applying those standards.”

This document

This *Discussion Paper* outlines foundations of a national structure for academic standards in Australian higher education. It has been designed to enhance current institutional practices around the setting and monitoring of academic standards, giving particular regard to teaching and learning.

The document has been drafted by the Advisory Group whose members are listed at the end of the document. The focus and implications have been discussed with other institutional, industry and professional representatives.

Section 1: The nature of academic achievement standards

A focus on student achievement

Nationally and internationally, higher education institutions would like to be able to affirm that standards are both high, and being maintained. However, 'academic standards' is a broad term and has been used to apply to, among other things, academic programs and curriculum, teaching quality, rates of student progression through degree programs, and academic achievement (learning). In this paper, the focus is specifically on academic achievement standards. These refer to how much, intellectually and professionally, students have learned or acquired by the time they complete their higher education courses. Students carry forward a considerable part of this learning into life after graduation. In that sense, academic achievement standards could be viewed as a form of 'product' or personal capital. ('Outcome' is a less satisfactory term to use because of its many different interpretations in education.)

A large number of important variables influence how well students achieve. These include: student backgrounds; students' knowledge and skills on entry to a course; the design of individual courses and degree programs; how much effort students make; institutional resourcing levels for teaching; and the quality of teaching. Gathering data about and evaluating these types of input and process variables is a very valuable exercise, particularly for each institution's own continuous improvement, but limiting the scope of quality assurance procedures strictly to these cannot substitute for a direct focus on achievement itself. Primarily, this is because the various inputs and processes interact in complex ways, and are not deterministic. An explicit focus on academic achievement, however, examines the net learning effect of all the variables operating together. It thus serves two purposes. It allows the attained level of achievement to be assessed and recorded (as grades on student transcripts, for instance), and it allows evaluation of how well the teaching and learning system is working.

Despite frequently expressed concerns that academic achievement standards deserve critical attention, they have historically proved difficult to deal with. Partly, this is because many high-quality achievements can often be more easily recognised by experts than reduced to definition, description and codification. Indeed, attempts to pin down the standards in an explicit form (using words) can become bogged down by how the words should be interpreted, or by the formality of structured schemas. Provision should therefore be made for extensive use and interpretation of exemplars (Sadler, 1987). There is also some concern that external and independent focus on academic standards could be intrusive, potentially violating the principle of academic freedom and autonomy. On the other hand, unless academic achievement standards become a definite focus, the value of grades as 'warrants' of demonstrated intellectual and professional learning cannot be substantiated. Grades and grade point averages (GPAs) provide the standard currency for representing academic achievement, and many administrative and professional decisions depend substantially on them. Only if grades can be shown to be trustworthy can decisions based on them be sound.

A number of other benefits would flow from publicly demonstrating the integrity of grades in courses. Appraising student responses to assessment tasks against standards would mean that each student's work could be evaluated on its merits as the performance levels of other students have no influence on assessment decisions. As a result: students would have something concrete to aim for and serve as their learning goals; the contribution of institutional policies, processes and resource levels could be examined for their contributions to student learning; and the scene would

be set for working towards comparability of grades across courses and, to a considerable extent, across programs. Importantly, making progress on academic achievement standards could also demonstrate to lecturers the value of focussing on student achievement as the endpoint of the teaching-learning process.

A definition of academic achievement standards for Australian higher education

While central to the business of the academy, the term ‘academic standards’ has not been defined in ways that facilitate parsimonious and transparent use (James, 2003; Coates, 2007). Although comprehensive dictionaries recognise multiple meanings for ‘standard’, only some of these meanings are potentially relevant to assessing and grading student achievement. The following dictionary-style definition adopted in the first phase of this project serves the current purpose:

An academic achievement standard is:

- an agreed specification or other criterion,
- used as a rule, guideline or definition,
- of a level of performance or achievement.

This definition has two key features. First, a standard refers to a level that is preset and fixed. After that, it remains stable under use unless there are good reasons for resetting it. In higher education this would mean that the standards are not reset for each cohort of students, or for each assessment task. An academic standard is therefore a big-picture concept that stands somewhat apart from particular assessment tasks and student responses. Second, agreement on the specification must be by authority, custom, or consensus, as standards are not private matters dependent on individuals but collegial understandings shared among academics and other stakeholders. This project is intended to set out those understandings more clearly and explicitly.

In the context of assessment and grading in Australian higher education, this definition has not been implemented, either implicitly or explicitly, to any extent. Without reference to prespecified criteria, for instance, moderation (cross-marking) may achieve consistency among assessors but it does not get to the heart of the problem. Without appropriate conceptual or empirical grounding, the use of uniform grading/reporting nomenclature across subjects does not ensure comparability of achievement standards – indeed it may falsely mask diversity.

It is important to clarify what academic achievement standards are not. A number of dictionary meanings for ‘standard’ that could form part of a discussion on assessment and grading issues are inconsistent with the definition given above. As an example, consider the sentence: ‘There is concern in the academic community that standards are falling and seriously damaging the institution’s reputation’. Here, the word ‘standards’ refers to observed average levels of performance, which are apparently showing a downward trend. This type of ‘standard’ is simply the average or perceived general level of achievement. It is not a standard as defined above. A different meaning altogether applies when it is said that a particular academic ‘sets very high standards’, which presumably means that they are parsimonious in awarding high grades. They are ‘tough markers’ because they set high thresholds for their grade boundaries. These personal ‘standards’ also are outside the definition above, because the academic sets the levels unilaterally.

Section 2: Statements of generic and discipline-specific academic achievement

Specifying standards

It follows from the argument of the preceding section that the setting and monitoring of academic achievement standards requires ongoing collegial discussions and the building of shared understandings. These discussions presently take place within the higher education sector with varying degrees of formality and informality according to the institutions and the disciplinary communities involved. The major impediment, however, to advancing our knowledge of academic standards across the system in a more rigorous way is the absence of formal, agreed statements of standards. Collegial understandings need to be made explicit and a national process will be required to achieve this, operating within and across disciplines, and across institutions.

An important step in developing an effective national structure for measuring, monitoring and reporting on the standards of academic achievement is the definition of:

- **national statements of desired academic achievement; and**
- **levels/thresholds of achievement.**

Calibrating statements of academic achievement

Such statements would be the reference points against which academic achievement can be measured and compared across the sector, particularly within disciplines and fields of study. They may take the form of exemplars which map out different levels of academic achievement within a discipline. National statements of desired learning outcomes would, in effect, be the sector's formal definition of academic standards. Such standards would provide a basis for review, audit, monitoring and enhancement, and they would derive much of their value from having external points of reference. Making these standards explicit is therefore an essential initial step in providing for inter-institutional comparison and points of reference for academic standards.

Few if any statements of desired areas of academic achievement and levels of achievement currently exist. Universities have enumerated generic capabilities they expect their graduates to develop. Similarly, institutions have detailed lists of course or program-specific attributes or capabilities. Despite many commonalities in these statements there have been few attempts to synthesise or to benchmark these across institutions. Such mapping work has been undertaken elsewhere, however, such as in the UK Quality Assurance Agency Benchmark Statements (QAA, 2009) and the European Tuning Process (EC, 2009), but these do not go as far as specifying standards.

A national initiative to develop agreed statements of academic achievement for the Australian higher education sector will require a structured timeframe, careful coordination and appropriate resource allocation. The development of statements of academic achievement will require extensive consultation within national disciplinary communities and extensive consultation with the professions, industries and business communities that employ graduates. Appropriate international reference points would also need to be considered to ensure Australian statements match or exceed international expectations. It is highly important for these standards to be national or international in scope, although a few may be specific to Australia or individual institutions.

Two principal foci

There are two principal foci for the development work required to establish national statements of academic standards. First, statements of achievement of higher-order, higher-level skills, often

described as 'generic skills', would need to be developed. These are the skills and understandings that can be expected of all university graduates regardless of their course of study. The development of these statements would require considerable cross-university consultation at whole-of-university level. A starting point for this process is provided in the existing institutional statements of graduate attributes (Barrie, 2009).

Second, statements of discipline-specific academic achievement would also need to be developed. These are statements of the skills and understandings expected to be common to all graduates who complete kindred fields of study. Discipline-based statements would be central elements in the monitoring of academic standards, because discipline- (field-of-study-) specific achievement is a major aspect of higher education.

The development of statements of learning outcomes should not and need not stifle diversity and differentiation. All of these statements will be necessarily general, and this would help ensure that information about academic standards can be generalised across departments, faculties and institutions. Inevitably these statements of standards will not reflect the highly specialised character of some programs.

Specifying levels of academic achievement

The statements of learning outcomes need to be integrated with some description of levels of achievement. The notion of standards presented in this paper embodies both areas of learning and the level of learning. A national set of statements of academic achievement, such as proposed, will need to provide a framework for identifying varying levels of achievement. That is, it will be important for the processes around standards to measure gradations on a continuum of increasing performance. In particular, the statements should define acceptable and aspirational levels of performance.

A possible development process

A systematic national process for developing academic standards expressed as statements of achievement could be constructed along the lines below. As part of the process, it would be essential of course to develop policies and protocols for the ways in which statements of academic achievement could be used within institutions and the system overall.

1. The first stage would involve the development, through appropriate consultation with the higher education sector, of an agreed model for the documentation to be used to specify graduate outcomes and levels of achievement. Disciplines could define what in that field constitutes specified standards (eg acceptable, excellent and perhaps an agreed stage) as a basis of inter-disciplinary comparison. This standard model for the descriptions to be developed would ensure that the statements of academic achievement later created are appropriately consistent and comparable across disciplines and institutions.
2. In parallel, again through consultation, appropriate disciplinary or field-of-study clusters would need to be determined. This is a process of some complexity for it involves consideration of appropriate cluster size, coverage and alignment. It should draw on the ALTC's work with disciplines and cluster groups, and include consultation with relevant professional bodies, academies and discipline societies. Clearly not all programs of university study will fit neatly into any discipline typology that might be created. Notwithstanding this complexity, progress can be made in creating clusters in which there are high levels of similarity or coherence in expected learning outcomes. Various

epistemological, professional or historical dimensions for classification would need to be explored.

3. Having established field of study of disciplinary clusters, cluster leaders and working groups would need to be formed to lead consultation with the appropriate stakeholders for particular fields. These working groups would be charged with drafting statements and producing exemplars of discipline-specific learning at various levels, from an acceptable threshold through to excellent.
4. Once draft statements and exemplars of discipline-specific learning have been prepared, a round of meetings of cluster leaders would be necessary to ensure consistency of interpretation.
5. Once finalised through these iterative processes of consultation, the agreed national statements of academic achievement would require formal adoption, both by institutions and other relevant stakeholder groups and agencies.

If the process ultimately proves to be viable and useful, a large number of discipline clusters might be involved, but initially it would be prudent to test the proposal on a small number of volunteer disciplines (perhaps three or four) and then move to perhaps eight or ten that cover the range of disciplinary types. The initial studies would attempt to cover, by example, broad categories of disciplines, eg science/arts, professional/generic, that would in turn be broadly applicable to other, cognate disciplines.

Defining statements of academic achievement (the standards) via a process along the lines of the above is an essential first step in establishing the pre-conditions for the assessment and reporting of student learning in relation to these standards. Once such a structure has been created the foundation for sophisticated, evidence-based performance measurement, at institutional level or discipline level, would be established. It would be possible, for example, for institutions to set target performance levels for particular areas, in terms of what has been defined, from acceptable to aspirational.

The preceding discussion highlights the complexity of setting standards in the manner proposed. Such a process would require extensive review, analysis, modelling, consultation and documentation. It should be stressed, however, that until such a process is undertaken very little progress can be made towards a systematic understanding of the nature of academic standards across the sector.

The creation of national statements of academic achievement is a necessary but not sufficient condition for advancing understanding of academic standards. Statements of standards need to be accompanied by appropriate processes for validly and reliably assessing student learning against these standards. This is the subject of the next section.

Section 3: Measuring academic achievement

Grades and exemplars

There are techniques and practices in place for the measurement of student learning in Australian higher education, but placing increased emphasis on academic achievement standards creates an urgent need for further development in this area. Once mechanisms are in place for the more precise specification and description of academic standards, it will be necessary to have means for measurement of those standards. There are many good practices in place already, but new specifications will need new measures. Measures may be needed for acceptable thresholds, for the levels actually achieved, and for noting changes in performance (which may be linked to 'value-added').

Australian institutions can use a number of approaches to monitor the standards of their educational provision (Coates, 2007). A selection of approaches is presented here to stimulate thinking in this area and serve as a guide to practice. Some will need disciplinary development, while others (often referred to by use of the term 'generic') will require inter- or cross-disciplinary attention. Many (if not most) are already in use, although their use may not be widespread or applied in the most relevant areas.

- Improving the tasks and processes that are used to record and inform students' learning will involve robust review of assessment tasks to ensure that the instruments used to assess student achievement have broadly similar measurement characteristics. Achieving consistency across tasks is vital, because variations in task severity will register as variations in student achievement, regardless of actual competence. Such review could be undertaken as an ongoing process by disciplinary groups. Disciplinary groupings may also work together to prepare exemplars and schemas to facilitate reliable assessment against specified standards.
- Supplementary data from objective assessments could be used to underpin assessments of academic achievement. Such data can provide external points of reference which help calibrate standards in a local context and validate assessment processes and outcomes. Institutions and disciplines are increasingly undertaking objective tests of student capability – either of a generic or discipline-focused nature – to inform moderation and final grading. Similar triangulation may be obtained by drawing, where appropriate, on licensing examinations, consistent feedback from graduate employers or professional bodies, or other information about the performance of graduates. Such activities would need careful definition and need to be managed as part of the wider assessment of overall achievement.
- Most Australian institutions have developed general learning outcomes ('generic attributes'), in addition to the discipline-specific ones which are used to define students' experiences, and therefore achievement, at that institution. These attributes need to be measured and graded. In the absence of a rigorous assessment approach to such tasks, they are not likely to be valued by students. Introducing standardised and understood methods of assessing and grading these attributes, at the level of difficulty appropriate to the stage of the learning process, ensures that students better understand why they must learn particular things and also provides meaningful evidence to use as part of their future career activities. This will need inter-disciplinary attention, and also inter-institutional work.

- A standards-referenced system of moderation could be developed in a similar way to the UK external examiner system, with appropriate revisions and enhancements. This system has been seen to provide assurance that students are performing at an appropriate level. However, ensuring the comparability of assessment processes is not sufficient to ensure the assessment of achievement against specified standards. In the UK system, external examiners operate individually in relation to the institution, and not explicitly within the authority of the discipline. A rigorous moderation process would need moderators within a discipline to work together and to make reference to the specified standards in addition to grading processes and outcomes. It would probably also involve some benchmarking across institutions.
- Of course, while not emphasised in this paper, the quality of university education and the achievement of learning outcomes can also be judged in terms of the pathways that graduates take following graduation. Graduate destination has been used in this way in Australia since the 1970s via the Graduate Destination Survey (GCA, 2009; Coates & Edwards, 2009). While it does not provide direct information on academic achievement, it remains important to sustain in consideration of higher education attainment, providing as it does information on both employment rates and further study participation rates.

Implementing the assessment

Once national standards statements are in place, and assessment measures are developed in the ways outlined above, they could be implemented in the following ways:

- local assessment but to a clear framework of standardised expectations, with monitoring of compliance with the process expectations (light touch, no external inspection of student performance);
- local assessment but to a clear framework of standardised expectations, with moderation of student 'products' (slightly heavier touch, but still collegial within discipline communities and aligns well with the peer review culture of research);
- highly standardised assessment tasks, but locally administered and graded (which may challenge aspects of academic autonomy); or
- highly standardised assessment tasks, externally administered and graded ('graduate examination model').

While these alternatives suggest a continuum, it is likely that diverse approaches will be required. Certain institutions or fields may choose to adopt standardised tasks which align, for instance, with widely used first-year textbooks. In other instances, locally developed assessment tasks may be built with standardised expectations in mind. Academics may choose to integrate standard materials into selected aspects of their course to facilitate the kind of collegiate benchmarking that they undertake as part of their research activities. Different approaches may be required in 'professional' fields than in areas (eg some areas of the humanities) which are less directly vocational in focus.

A system-wide approach to development will be required. This will enhance the feasibility of implementation, the generalisability of the standards and measures, and the relevance to stakeholders beyond institutions. Implicit in this imperative is that links will be made between systems, more notably to related developments in the USA, Canada and Europe (including the UK).

The aim of developing practice in this area is to support teachers (and hence learners and institutions) to assess learning in ways that align with, and facilitate reporting against, specified academic achievement standards across the breadth of outcomes that should contribute to the learning of a 21st century graduate. As with scholarly research, building more structured methods in this area will empower academics by providing a transparent structure for their work. The shape of any development will hinge on precise specification of the achievement standards, interconnected within a course of study, and across the other courses within a discipline. That specification process may require certain forms of evidence not currently used and involve less familiar assessment methods, or it may emphasise the relevance and feasibility of a variety of approaches.

Section 4: Reporting standards of academic achievement

Essential to the success of using a standard to inform improvement plans is that the data is collectable, is monitored regularly, and is reported to the relevant stakeholders. It is important to consider what format reports should take, and how the process is to be managed. The approach to reporting will shape the nature of the exercise for institutions and the sector. Key stakeholders may include the University Council, the Academic Board or the Teaching and Learning Committee, teachers, and students. The final step in a standards framework is to extend the monitoring of the standard to include benchmarking of performance within the institution between discipline groups, or between institutions at the discipline and institutional levels. Doubtless, such benchmarking would grow organically in the same way it does for research activities.

It may be, for instance, that separate reports are prepared for discipline-specific academic achievement and achievement in the more general areas. Discipline-specific achievement will be addressed through the processes set out in Section 2, and be reported at the levels established through those processes. A standardised Grade Point Average (GPA) scale could be aligned to these levels, drawing on the GPAs already used by many institutions. Since different institutions employ different GPA scales, each institution could relate its scale to the standard one to compare levels of achievement across the sector and to evaluate student performance for admission to further study. The issue of the provision of separate reports could be addressed through the formatting of e-portfolios, since one rationale for e-portfolios is their capacity for being articulated to a variety of audiences.

The Australian Higher Education Graduation Statement (AHEGS) provides for the reporting of Graduates' Academic Achievements, including a 'Key to Grading'. This element of the AHEGS could be augmented to include information about the standards of academic achievement, at both a discipline level and at the level of a standardised GPA. Further, it might also include statements of the achievement of generic graduate attributes. This would be consistent with the general aims of this part of the AHEGS. Institutional reporting practices would need to be aligned with this form of reporting.

The term 'value added' has become increasingly popular in higher education over the last few years. The concept is appealing but, while several options exist for Australian institutions (Coates, 2009), calculating the net growth in achievement that is due to university study is not straightforward. One necessary condition for developing value-added estimates is the existence of valid and reliable measures of background and achievement. Extensive quantitative analysis (Marks & Coates, 2007; Coates, Friedman, Ball & Le, 2008) is also required to develop appropriate models for estimation. Enhancing the quality and analysis of achievement metrics, as proposed in this paper, is an important but not sufficient move towards understanding the value that Australian institutions add to their students.

While the considerations set out in this initial document are necessarily brief, valid and feasible approaches to reporting are vital to the success of a standards- and achievement-focused approach to continuous improvement and quality assurance. It is vital, for instance, that reporting respects the complexity and distinctiveness that is essential to innovation and learning while at the same time facilitating interpretations of the relative standing of achievement. It is essential that standards-based reporting of academic achievement is meaningful for learners, teachers, institutions and public stakeholders. As with most aspects of academic inquiry, such tensions are best managed by developing relevant, technically sophisticated and practical solutions.

Conclusion

The word 'standard' is used in many contexts to signify many things. In this paper, it is used in the sense of the level of achievement of students, on graduation or at other stages. Since assessment to ascertain level of performance is a central feature of educational activity, such standards gain a great deal of attention within academic activities. However, with frequent claims that 'standards are falling', and questions about how Australia compares internationally, it is apparent that our understanding and handling of 'standards' needs to become more robust and made more explicit for all stakeholders. Australian education features strongly internationally (including in export earnings) and we want to ensure Australia's reputation remains high – to protect 'Brand Australia' in export terms.

Australia's universities have been alert to this, and the last 30 years have seen attention to course assessments, student evaluations, destination surveys, external input and increased use of professional accreditation – in all, a strong 'client-orientation'. What is proposed here is an emphasis on academics taking an initiative within and across their disciplines.

No other country is as advanced as the proposals in this paper, but in many countries institutions are being urged to report more explicitly on achievement standards, and some countries already have a basis on which to build such reports. Hence there is some international work on which the proposals in this paper can draw.

Therefore, it is essential and urgent that the Australian higher education sector pay serious attention to new, system-wide ways of setting, measuring and reporting of standards of academic achievement. This conclusion does not imply in any way that Australia academic standards are low or that they are falling. Rather, the problem is the absence of objective grounds on which to draw firm conclusions about standards, and to substantiate claims of excellence. This is the matter that must be addressed.

We must start somewhere on this undertaking, and this paper suggests some ideas, pointing to some processes, structures and activities that would be necessary. The ideas set out in this paper are lodged firmly within the academic traditions of:

- peer review,
- collegiality,
- pre-eminence of disciplines,
- autonomy of institutions, and
- alignment with the cultural context.

This document is being issued for wide public discussion. Any responses should be made by 6 July 2009, addressed to:

Dr Antony Stella
Australian Universities Quality Agency
a.stella@auqa.edu.au,

and marked 'Response to discussion document on academic standards'. Respondents should state whether they are willing for their responses to be made public or not.

Responses can include comment on any aspect of the paper, including:

- the general argument;
- the definition of academic achievement standards;

- the proposed approach;
 - the balance between a disciplinary emphasis and generic outcomes;
- and may make alternative proposals.

AUQA's Advisory Group (see below) will analyse, collate and discuss the responses. This will involve further collaboration with the Australian Learning and Teaching Council and with any relevant processes established by the Australian Government in relation to the Review of Higher Education, or otherwise.

Action would need the provision of targeted funding, and wide collaboration, effected primarily through discipline groups such as councils of Deans, ALTC-supported groups and the relevant professional bodies.

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Attachment

This document has been prepared by the Australian Universities Quality Agency's Advisory Group on Academic Standards in Australian Higher Education. The Group represents key sector stakeholders and experts on academic standards:

- Dr David Woodhouse (Convener), Executive Director, AUQA
- Dr Hamish Coates, Principal Research Fellow, Australian Council for Educational Research
- Emeritus Professor Ruth Grant, Consultant
- Professor Jane den Hollander, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), Curtin University of Technology
- Associate Professor Peter Hutchings, Deputy Director of Programs and Networks, Australian Learning and Teaching Council
- Professor Richard James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne
- Professor Garry Marchant, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost, Bond University
- Professor Royce Sadler, Professor of Higher Education, Griffith University
- Dr Antony Stella, Audit Director, AUQA
- Ms Catherine Vandermark, Branch Manager, Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations