

## **PIA AND NZ ACCREDITATION AND BENCHMARKING OF PLANNING COURSES IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND – AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SHARED BENEFITS FOR ALL?**

Paul McFARLAND  
Course Co-ordinator  
and Lecturer in Urban &  
Regional Planning  
Division of Geography &  
Planning  
University of New  
England  
Armidale, New South  
Wales, Australia  
Tel: (+64-2) 6773 2821  
E-mail:  
[pmcfarla@une.edu.au](mailto:pmcfarla@une.edu.au)

Wendy BECK  
Associate Professor  
Division of Archaeology  
and Palaeoanthropology  
University of New  
England  
Armidale, New South  
Wales, Australia  
Tel: (+64-2) 6773 3165  
E-mail:  
[wbeck@une.edu.au](mailto:wbeck@une.edu.au)

Robyn BARTEL  
Lecturer in Urban &  
Regional Planning  
Division of Geography &  
Planning  
University of New  
England  
Armidale, New South  
Wales, Australia  
Tel: (+64-2) 6773 2904  
E-mail:  
[rbartel@une.edu.au](mailto:rbartel@une.edu.au)

### **ABSTRACT**

A four-year undergraduate degree is the industry standard for an accredited planning degree in Australia and New Zealand. The respective professional bodies (PIA and NZPI) undertake accreditation and the current terms for this are framed broadly. Accreditation provides an external source of general guidance for articulating the general content and learning outcomes associated with a programme, but are not a specification of the detailed curriculum in the subject area. Discipline-level benchmarking, as has been carried out in the UK since 2002, achieves similar outcomes. Benchmarking, however, also offers other benefits, such as allowing programmes to be reviewed and evaluated within an overall framework; opening up discussion and debate about programme design and delivery; and, providing clear and transparent information to students and employers about subject areas and their particular focus and emphasis. Voluntary benchmarking of archaeology degrees has already taken place within Australian universities. The archaeology benchmarking project, involving 19 institutions and 6 professional associations, reports this process as resulting in better education and research programmes for now and into the future. This paper considers the current body of knowledge related to accreditation and benchmarking and examines if and how a benchmarking process could assist planning courses in Australia and New Zealand.

### **KEYWORDS**

Planning; higher-education; benchmarking; quality assurance;

## **INTRODUCTION**

Higher education in Australia and comparable countries has been undergoing something of a quiet pedagogical revolution, driven in the main by empirical evidence as to the efficacy of different teaching and learning approaches, but also by the increasing commodification of education and the massification of the tertiary sector, as well as by employer demand for quality graduates (Bartel, 2005; Huisman and Currie, 2004; Maiden, 2004; Toohey, 1999).

Sector-wide there has been increasing attention paid to the quality of teaching and learning offered by institutions. This has focused on staff as well as student performance, and on student experience, expectations and outcomes (Biggs, 2003; Entwistle, 1997; Ramsden, 2003). Areas which have attracted particular attention have been the professional development of academic staff (in-service teaching qualifications such as the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education); curriculum development and benchmarking of degree programmes; and the deployment of graduate surveys and student evaluations of staff, units and whole courses. The overall aim has been an improvement in student learning outcomes, both for the student's sake as well as prospective employer's, thus also enhancing job prospects for graduates, graduate employability and job satisfaction. Improvements have proven themselves to be achievable in student learning outcomes through curriculum and professional development as well as enrichment of the learning environment and support resources including e-learning (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2003).

The focus of this paper is on the potential for subject, or discipline, benchmarking in planning. The wider context of a changing tertiary sector is important to acknowledge however, especially the tension between the idea of a university as being an intentionally unique locale for the fostering of objective inquiry, somewhat divorced from everyday needs, and their economic role as service providers; as equipping students for career paths and providing employers with capable employees. For professional degree programmes such as planning this tension already has some history but this tension should be able to be resolved for the purposes of this paper if it is accepted that quality teaching and learning is a desirable goal justifiable on its own merits.

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA**

The quality of higher education has been the subject of discussion nationally and internationally for at least a decade. Examples include the establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2002, the introduction of the Australian Universities Quality Assurance Agency (AUQA) reviews in 2003, the 2006 Spellings inquiry into Higher Education in the United States and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) *Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes* project (AHELO). On-going movement towards quality assurance and measures of accountability and transparency in higher education locally also includes the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF), the 2008

Australian Government Review of Higher Education (“the Bradley Report”) and the AUQA discussion paper *Setting and Monitoring Academic Standards for Higher Education* (2009).

The current focus in major comparable education sectors for quality assurance in higher education is an explicit move towards subject benchmarking. Subject benchmarking has been undertaken in the UK, been recommended in the United States (Spellings, 2006) and by the OECD in the AHELO project (OECD, 2006). It has been recommended in Australia by AUQA and by the Bradley Report (Aust. Govt, 2008).

The Bradley Report advises that to date the methods most influential as measures of quality in higher education around the world have been ‘fitness for purpose’ and ‘excellence and standards’. Fitness for purpose are institutional specific statements about courses and programmes and the way these courses provide for particular learning and employment-based outcomes. In the absence of subject benchmarking, or other forms of external discipline reference points, the current forms of course accreditation have been largely self-regulatory and implicit (Hargreaves & Christou, 2002; Laugharne, 2002). Standards-based approaches describe the common features of courses or programmes expected of students from their university studies. The National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes require that courses accredited by the Australian Government must be comparable for each course of study in a field for each university where offered in Australia (Aust. Govt. 2008, p.128).

A submission to the 2002 Department of Higher, Science and Training (DEST) inquiry into Higher Education (James *et al.* 2002, p.2) stated:

The higher education system currently lacks adequate and explicit mechanisms 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. The traditional standards or ‘touchstones’ of the academy need to be more systematically articulated and disseminated.

The Bradley Report considers that current measures of quality fail to address these concerns, are insufficiently systematic or objective, and are more focussed on satisfying government funding requirements. Bradley advocates a system of subject benchmarking as a means to providing course-specific statements by which objective comparison could be made. Bradley advises that there have been some limited moves in Australia towards benchmarking. For example the Australian Technology Network is currently undertaking a project intended to develop generic benchmarking standards which could be used across institutions. However, according to the Bradley Report the future directions for a quality assurance framework for Australian universities will require the development of subject specific, rather than generic, standards

'reflecting the judgement of those who are expert in it' (Aust. Govt, 2008, p.133). Achievement of this would be by i) the development of directly comparable learning outcomes; and, ii) development of discipline specific standards for use in course design<sup>1</sup>. It was also recognised that specific standards) 'would need to have a clear relation to professional body standards in disciplines where these apply' (Ibid. p.134). The Bradley report recommends a move towards a subject-based quality system of a similar type to that adopted in the UK (Ibid, p.135).

## **SUBJECT BENCHMARKING**

In the UK, the QAA's role is to develop subject benchmarking of university courses across the UK. The second round of subject benchmarking commenced in 2007, with the *Subject Benchmarking Statement: Town and country planning* published in 2008 (QAA, 2008).

QAA describes subject benchmark statements as providing 'a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject or subject area. They also represent general statements about standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in terms of attributes and capabilities that those possessing such qualifications should have demonstrated' (QAA, 2007, p. ii).

Bradley and AUQA favour application of subject benchmarking to the bachelor's degree with honours (4-year equivalent) as used in the UK definition.

While being an important external source of reference for universities in developing subject area courses, subject benchmarking is not a specification of detailed curriculum development. Under the subject benchmarking system each institution is still free to develop its own course and curriculum in the manner it believes best achieves the subject area statements. QAA say that 'The intention is that the standards should be used as a means to assess particular student learning outcomes for which planning programmes have responsibility. In this regard, as the standards are generic rather than specific to particular areas of planning, they can be applied across a diverse range of programme requirements' (QAA 2007, p.6).

A key requirement in subject benchmarking is for the intended learning outcomes to be aligned with the expectations of professional and statutory regulatory bodies (Yorke, 2002). Given the difficulty of making comparisons in complex areas such as higher education assessment both Bradley (2006) and Yorke (2002) note that, professional accreditation standards alone are insufficient for the creation of effective benchmarking standards.

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<sup>1</sup> PIA's 'Education Policy for Recognition of Australian Planning Qualifications' is an industry-based example of this.

## **BENCHMARKING: BENEFITS AND POTENTIAL DISADVANTAGES**

Subject, or discipline, benchmarking has the potential to offer a number of benefits. Benchmarking is designed to generate improvements in teaching and learning, chiefly through curriculum development and better alignment of objectives with learning activities and assessment tasks. Through examining courses from a disciplinary perspective and in making the implicit explicit areas which may have escaped attention may be addressed, and strengths as well as weaknesses exposed. Benchmarking can facilitate the incorporation of what might be described as more traditionally intellectual concerns, and indeed assist their transformation into attributes valued by academy and profession alike. The process of formulating benchmarks itself thus also offers benefits, and through providing a structured opportunity for academics and professionals within a discipline to communicate on the nature of the discipline and of the profession, and come to an agreement on expectations for students, discipline regeneration and renewal may be achieved. The development of an agreed statement of learning outcomes for graduates can provide a discipline and profession with a stronger identity and vision as well as clearer expectations for students and employers. It can be used internally for quality assurance but also externally for promotion and advertising purposes.

Of course, there are some challenges posed by benchmarking. It may be anticipated that there will be fears that it is an assault on academic freedom, that it is biased towards the job market and will describe merely the lowest common denominator of planning programmes and enforce a sameness of curriculum, eliminating the highlights of variety. However such has not been the case for planning benchmarking in the UK, nor the experience of similar disciplines in Australia, such as Archaeology (Beck, 2009) . Rather, participants have discovered much of advantage in the process and suitable language has been employed to encompass the desired higher-level outcomes of undergraduate learning, as well as the desirability of flexibility and difference and a range of specific as well as generic skills have been able to be included.

There may be concerns that as subject benchmarking statements are composed of vague words and statements, the meaning of which are open to interpretation, and which may have limited utility for measurement and monitoring of substantive outcomes. Or alternatively that the statements will become hard rules administered in an inflexible fashion. Mike Laugharne, an Assistant Director at the Quality Assurance Agency indicates that as subject benchmarking is discipline specific and intended to be a “soft” information process that it ,may not achieve the contextual outcomes intended of the process, Subject benchmarking may nevertheless offer the following benefits:

- discipline-wide discussion, with self-critical reflection is facilitated;
- the process should be iterative and statements evolve over time;
- the process is not about establishing a set of standards for judging courses;

- it is a means to an end by facilitating academic debate about the meaning of embedded learning outcomes;
- by developing soft information the outcome does not inhibit or stifle, difference, diversity or innovation.

(Laugharne, 2002).

Laugharne also states explicitly:

Although some initial scepticism was expressed... the benchmarking groups have realised that the QAA brief was not a steer to produce lists of required learning outcomes (2002, p.135).

As well as providing an opportunity for disciplines and professional bodies to engage in active discussion on student learning and learning outcomes, subject benchmarking also provides the platform from which planning schools can discuss specific programme design, delivery and assessment (Hargreaves & Christou, 2002; Laugharne, 2002).

These points are expanded below in a brief discussion of Planning.

## **BENCHMARKING AND PLANNING COURSES**

Planning is not an historic discipline, nor is it taught in schools; it is a defined professional programme tied to a clear career path which presently enjoys excellent job prospects. As a professional programme it requires accreditation from the national body, the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) and something in NZ. Currently 17 institutions in Australia and 5 in New Zealand carry their national accreditation for their undergraduate programmes (several others offer postgraduate courses) (PIA, 2009; NZ PI, 2009 online).

Planning suffers from some invisibility in the wider community. Benchmarking would offer an additional profile to school leavers as well as assist in developing a broader career path and options for employment. The process of benchmarking would facilitate both academic and professional input and thus also be a useful test case, which could become a model, for further employer engagement, in planning and for other disciplines. Subject benchmarking provides an opportunity for reflection on practice and encourages 'deep thinking about the learning we are trying to promote through the programmes we provide' (Houghton, p.172).

It would be timely to access existing expertise to develop benchmarks. At this particular point in time it would also be of advantage to draw upon existing expertise within the discipline, before generational change exerts its influence. Academics within planning share with their colleagues in other disciplines and in the wider Australian population an ageing of the workforce. While younger academics have much to offer it would be a great shame to lose the opportunity to draw on the decades of experience in research and in teaching planning that is presently available. Benchmarks have also been recently developed in comparable environments, such as the UK, from which Australia and New Zealand may usefully draw comparisons, and strong professional

bodies in both countries with a highly representative membership. In Australia PIA is undertaking a review of the current course accreditation policy and undertaking a subject benchmarking exercise concurrently could achieve important synergies in outputs as well as efficiencies in terms of resourcing, consultation and engagement.

There are a number of documents that provide guidance for the development of subject benchmarking for Australian 4-year planning programmes, these include the QAA *Subject Benchmarking Statement: Town and Country Planning* (2008), PIA's *Education Policy for Recognition of Australian Planning Qualifications* (2005) and *By Degrees: Benchmarking archaeology degrees in Australian universities* (Beck & Clarke, 2009).

Drawing on the experiences from the *Benchmarking Archaeology* project, the overall time commitment from planning schools would not be significant, but it would require some commitment to the exercise from each institution and people committed to both the common purpose and to representing their institution in the development process.

## **CONCLUSION**

Given that both the Bradley report and the 2009 AQUA discussion paper advocate a system of subject benchmarking, it appears not a question of 'if' subject benchmarking will be adopted in the near future, but when. The nature of the system imposed may or may not be driven from the ground up so there is potentially considerable advantage in taking the initiative. Planning could wait for the system to be adopted and react at that time. Alternatively, by taking the lead from work undertaken already, including the experience gained from the benchmarking of archaeology degrees in Australian universities, planning could be proactive in undertaking its own benchmarking exercise, thereby controlling its own timetable, demonstrating leadership and be in a position to influence the overall design of the subject benchmarking system which may inevitably be imposed.

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