

**National Learning Outcomes Standards Forum
Friday, 9 August 2013**

Notes on the panel discussions conducted as part of the Forum.

Objective 1: To explore the use of reference points for national learning outcomes standards

- It is very helpful to hear that the AQF is good for assessing the level of a qualification. AQF is good because it provides some boundaries. However, AQF is only a reference point when it comes to course and curriculum design. Another issue is that it is too generic and there are issues with how TEQSA may interpret its use at the discipline level.
- There is a range of other external reference points we can use in designing courses (and avoid floundering with how the AQF applies).
 - The University's graduate attributes
 - Professional accreditation requirements, both local and international
 - Graduate Careers Council surveys employers on their top selection criteria by discipline group.
 - School accreditation systems (e.g. AACSB)
 - International discipline or subject benchmark statements, especially UK and European Tuning
 - Discipline standards or threshold learning outcomes (TLOs) developed specifically for the Australian context and integrate reference points above
- Limitations with some reference points
 - Too many external reference points, particularly professional accreditation systems, are input and not output focused.
 - Some professional accreditation associations overstep their authority and seek to tell us what to do.
 - Reference points can be misused. One example is where course teams simply 'cut & paste' discipline TLOs across, leading to a lack of diversity in the sector. Another misuse, observed in some professional disciplines, is for a department head to misapply or misquote professional accreditation standards to get a greater share of the teaching pie in a degree ("We need to do this/that or we will lose our accreditation and this degree is the most popular source of revenue for the faculty.")
- Some valuable 'external reference points' are intangible (in the sense of evidencing to TEQSA) but still very useful, for example an academic's experience at previous universities; a curriculum review body that includes external academics and practitioners; systematic surveys of own graduates. It would be a perverse consequence if these were not used.
- Disciplines without formally developed TLO's can
 - Borrow/adapt from related disciplines that do have them.

- Benchmark with a university in a different state that is already related (e.g. ATN); more systematically get.
- Formally develop their own via the relevant deans council. For example, the Australia Business Deans Council (ABDC) model appoints a Dean to lead the process and chair the reference group for a (sub)discipline, utilising OLT Network or other (discipline) funding to support a working party formed by EOI, who draft and consult versions until final sign off reference group and then endorsed by deans' council. Good to have a Discipline Scholar to mentor the process.
- Developing TLOs have forced people to think more about their course as if it was accredited (BSc and BA). We all thought we knew the standards. Helps to think about what they need to do to have pseudo--accreditation to the standards. But it is only when people start to engage with the standards and think about how to evidence the standards that we really think clearly about what we teach. It is particularly helpful when TLOs provide guidance on how to comply with AQF levels (e.g. Law). TLOs are a very useful reference point to keep course design on track but don't replace professional standards.
- Notes about reference points:
 - Not all reference points are of equal standing
 - Some reference points are not voluntary (e.g. professional accreditation)
 - The list of reference points should not be prescriptive or purport to be exhaustive
 - Strong support for international reference points
- Acceptance of a diversity/multiple reference points is useful.
- Problem of reference points becoming a 'minimal compliance' perspective rather than institutions driving to excellence in all aspects of curriculum design.
- English language standards and requirements are currently the least developed. These need to include broader communication skills e.g. spoken, written, comprehension, informal/formal. They are focused on international students rather than ESL domestic students.
- Private providers often feel too restricted by the AQF and focused on compliance, even if some points are not relevant. A broader framework would permit better course design.
- For the TLOs to be fully useful they need to align with professional registration requirements where these exist. [It should be noted here that **all** of the Threshold Learning Outcomes statements developed under the ALTC LTAS project have been carefully mapped against existing professional accreditation requirements.]
- Employers and other groups may have different 'standards' and may value

masters level qualifications in e.g. health disciplines over undergraduate level qualifications even though the graduate capabilities are the same as measured by professional accreditation and/or registration standards.

- Cultural change is needed to develop people (at all levels)'s capacity to engage - i.e. professionalization of teaching and learning in order to meet the goals of higher education. We are not yet providing enough tools for this.
- Reference points should be carefully contextualised.
- Dual or multiple program accreditations with differing standards or reference points can create significant issues for such accreditation activities
- Institution-specific reference points can permit differentiation in the graduate market place, e.g. emphasis on global citizenry.
- Concerns about locking reference points or standards to specific versions. Best to be non-specific in any expressed regulations around outcomes standards.
- When identifying reference points to be used within particular degree programs there should be attention given to ensuring that they square with the AQF requirements (as has been the case with the ALTC Learning Outcomes project).

Objective 2: To recommend transparent, defensible and efficient mechanisms for demonstrating student achievement of learning outcomes

- Given technology improvements it should be possible to more efficiently collect student assessment data that can be used for evidencing. Currently it is a real burden to collect and use in benchmarking. For many disciplines, the evidence can be collected electronically at the time of submission of the student work. For example, exam scripts, essays, reports of lab work and field work, copies of presentations.
- If external examiners used then they must be trained and mechanisms put in place to ensure that their judgements are calibrated. Conversations are crucial to shared means as words and rubrics just do not work. Practitioners should also participate in some of these conversations.
- Small random samples should be adequate to gauge achievement of learning standards. We do not need to audit/evaluate every unit every time it is taught. Maybe it could be done at the time of reviewing the whole degree program.
- Capstone tasks are a good way to have an intentional focus on integrative (high-stakes) assessments that evidence student achievement of program learning outcomes and standards.

- Evidence of student achievement should be via an Assessment 'basket'/ blueprinting (terminology differs with discipline groups): refers to suite of summative assessment, including observation, documentation etc..... ePortfolio approaches are also valuable.
- Assessors need to have access to good instruments with psychometric properties. Calibration is needed to assure quality of assessments.
- Discussion needs to take place regarding what are authentic assessments for different discipline groups (e.g. sociology versus accountancy).
- It is important that practitioners, e.g. clinicians understand learning outcome statements when making assessments.
- Good practice guides would be essential to "flesh out" the TLOs otherwise they are too general.
- Fieldwork or clinical practice requires an extra applied dimension to TLOs.
- The purpose for gathering evidence of student achievement should be clearly stated and understood.
- In thinking about how standards will be applied, there is a need to consider & differentiate between accountability (against standards) at the higher (regulatory) level versus implementation at faculty/discipline level.
- Discipline -level TLOs are indicators (i.e. observable), and have a different character from higher level standards – i.e. there is a *hierarchy*
- The overwhelming view of the panel during this discussion was that Universities should rely on disciplines having clearly defined graduate or course learning outcomes (taking account of national accreditation and national discipline bodies' recognition of standards) and that, where necessary, these should also take account of the work undertaken by cognate disciplines.
- The view was expressed that benchmarking with like institutions was the logical process to be undertaken in order to ensure that these threshold standards were achieved.
- Evidence that staff have participated/met requirements for conducting assessments should be embedded in some accreditation processes (e.g. AHPRA requirements)
- Multiple and diverse assessment forms will be essential in providing evidence of achievement against stated reference points/standards
- There can be dangers around quality of assessments used by sessional staff who are not fully embedded in, and accountable to the local academic community.

Objective 3: To identify the core issues surrounding the implementation of national standards for learning outcomes and course design

- OLT to facilitate establishing TLOs for all disciplines. This may entail catalysing the establishment of peak bodies.
- OLT & HESP need to raise the profile for assessment and that it is a problem needing to be addressed by universities.
- OLT & HESP need to support/fight for assessment PD, particularly those that involve collaborative conversations. A big stick will not work.
- OLT to fund work on the use of vivas as an alternative mode for assessing learning outcomes including TLO because students can sometimes more effectively demonstrate achievement in several TLOs.
- OLT to help develop benchmarking (auditing) of evidence from assessments. Workshops on appropriate assessments to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes. Peak bodies might help with benchmarking (but need to be efficient). Ask the OLT to dedicate resources to talk about auditing/benchmarking. So, explore strategies for addressing auditing at the discipline and institutional level.
- Universities need to put more resources and effort needs to go into assessment literacy and professional development right through a university (from Academic Board to unit coordinators and tutors). This is a major stumbling block but particularly for those disciplines with greater diversity in admitted students and less investment in it (e.g. nursing vs. medicine). Identified need to focus on staff development and need to build sector capability around good assessment design and practice (including whole-of-program design).
- There was recognition of Royce Sadler's comments about the limitations of competency statements; therefore recommendations focused on developing the skills of all staff to make accurate assessments, including relevant education, and opportunities for benchmarking.
- More work on integrating/harmonising needs to be undertaken to reduce the burden & cost of both course design and evidencing achievement of TLO – implication for OLT funding and TEQSA operations.
- Too many academics teach and assess in the manner they were taught and assessed. There is very low incentive to change that. Best to have a requirement for PD in performance agreement for all academics.
- The student work being calibrated needs to be the product of well-designed assessment.
- Reduce or stop outsourcing summative assessment to casual labour as this is our core business for managing standards. This is especially important at

those points in a degree where TLOs are meant to be achieved and evidenced.

- Scalable processes around calibration (sector-wide, across all disciplines) to ensure grade integrity at the program level. There is a real need to use the calibration process also to improve the quality of *whole-of-program* assessment design and implementation. Are we certain that the assessment tasks that are producing the calibration artefacts are valid and reliable?
- How the people who are “doing it” on the ground are involved in these discussions, practices, etc. Most of these discussions are at quite a high level.
- QA and QE are often done by different areas of the university – need to join these processes together. Use QA for QE and QE for QA.
- Need more discussion in the sector about graduate attributes to ensure we are not dragged into further attempts for CLA-type validation of their acquisition.
- Clarity is required regarding the education needed to perform professional work across the sphere of the discipline (i.e. the degree is not structured to just meet the needs of the dominant employers (‘big 4’) that in some disciplines employ the minority of graduates.

Well-designed and managed assessment processes that represent real world of work. Evidence that outcomes aggregated to program/degree requirements foster diversity and enable innovation.

- In some cases discipline contextualization is very important. E.g. “communication” takes on a different connotation in reporting in medicine to, say, journalism.
- Benchmarking TLOs to professional standards is an important way of linking course design to effective assessment of student achievement.
- Working out what effective peer review of learning outcomes would look like is important; it is more than just moderation or benchmarking.
- In some cases or professional disciplines “Threshold” is not good enough. The threshold standard is also the “excellence” standard.
- Employers and other groups may have different 'standards' and may value masters level qualifications in e.g. health disciplines over undergraduate level qualifications even though the graduate capabilities are the same as measured by professional accreditation and/or registration standards.
- However, the resource implications of this cannot be ignored. The sector needs both motivation and incentives to involve academics and institutions to engage in deep conversations.

- A need to raise the academic competence in dealing with assessment design.

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<http://www.olt.gov.au/resources/advanced?title=summary&authors=&ptitle=&year=2013&pid=&lead=All&discipline=All&restyle=All>

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The Discipline Scholars Network

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