

National Learning Outcomes Standards Forum

ParkRoyal Melbourne Airport - 9 August 2013

Forum objectives

- To identify the core issues surrounding the implementation of national standards for learning outcomes and course design
- To explore the use of reference points for national learning outcomes standards
- To recommend transparent, defensible and efficient mechanisms for demonstrating student achievement of learning outcomes

Forum background reading

Implementing the relevant Standards and Reference Points in relation to designing and assessing learning outcomes for coursework degrees is an evolving responsibility for higher education provider and discipline leaders. The purpose of this Forum is to support education providers in this task, the Standards Panel in its review, and ultimately the national regulator, primarily in relation to the application of standards to course learning outcomes. This document provides background information to support forum delegates' participation.

Australian higher education context

The Australian higher education regulatory context has been in transition since changes were first flagged in the 2008 Bradley Review. In May 2009 the Australian Government announced the formal plans. In July 2011 the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) was established, superseding the AUQA's quality assurance function and with a wider scope. Currently, the sector is participating in the first national quality assessment around the theme of third party arrangements. The second thematic assessment on English proficiency entry and exit standards is timetabled for 2014.

TEQSA's regulatory role was established with three principles (regulatory necessity, risk and proportionality) and five standards domains (Provider Standards, Qualifications Standards, Teaching and Learning Standards, Research Standards and Information Standards). Detailed provisions around the Threshold Standards, collectively the Provider Standards and Qualification Standards, were legislated in the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) Act (2011) and built on the previous National Protocols.

Further work on the Non-Threshold Standards was initiated with a discussion paper around the Teaching and Learning Standards in June 2011.¹ It included a discussion of the options for operationalising external assessment of course learning outcomes.² An invitational summit in July 2011 provided an opportunity for discussion.

TEQSA's role formally expanded to registering and regulating the entire Australian higher education sector in January 2012. A single national regulator and an open register has facilitated a clearer picture of the sector - more than 40 self accrediting institutions (mostly universities including the first specialised university) and a further 130 providers without self-accrediting status. Not only is the standards approach new to the sector but it explicitly draws attention to outcomes as well as inputs and processes, and to some new areas explicitly covered in the Threshold Standards which all providers, including self-accrediting institutions, must address.

¹ "Developing a Framework for Teaching and Learning Standards in Australian Higher Education and the Role of TEQSA", available <http://www.hestandards.gov.au/sites/default/files/TeachingLearningDiscussionPaper.pdf>

² While 61 submissions responded to the call for comment, it was not until September 2012 when the Higher Education Standards Panel had been established and begun its work that the sector was provided with feedback. Communique 3 is available at <http://www.hestandards.gov.au/sites/default/files/CommuniqueNumber3-HEStandards.pdf>

Quality assurance of coursework learning outcomes in the current Threshold Standards

One new element of the Threshold Standards relates to course learning outcomes. Previous indicators such as course retention, progression and experience (including satisfaction) are necessary but insufficient. To supplement this data, all providers need to provide evidence of their reference to:

- External standards and requirements such as published discipline standards, professional accreditation and comparable standards at other higher education providers when designing course learning outcomes (Provider Course Accreditation Standards paragraph 1.1)
- Learning outcomes against those standards intended to be achieved and benchmarked against outcomes of similar accredited courses offered by other higher education providers (Provider Course Accreditation Standards paragraph 5.5).

With few disciplinary exceptions³, providers have traditionally directed only limited attention to the evidencing achievement of course learning outcomes and benchmarking these externally. As providers transition to the new context TEQSA has a substantial task in devising valid approaches to evaluating this evidence, particularly in regard to these particular Threshold Standards.

Transition to coursework learning outcomes Standards and Reference Points

Since 2012 the Higher Education Standards Framework itself has been under review by the Higher Education Standards Panel. Following substantial consultation with the sector, in March 2013 the Panel released the first sample of draft Standards, namely those relating to course design and course learning outcomes for coursework degrees. This coincided with their first discussion paper which provided further information distinguishing the role of *Standards and Reference Points*. Three reference points for *Learning Outcomes (Coursework) Standards* were suggested (as below).

Reference Points

- i. *Australian Qualifications Framework (January 2013).*
- ii. Learning outcomes statements developed for the field of study by Office for Learning and Teaching discipline communities or other disciplinary or professional bodies.
- iii. The requirements for professional accreditation of the course of study and registration of graduates where applicable.

Following 72 submissions, the Panel clarified the definition and role of reference points.⁴

Significant codes or frameworks that the Higher Education Standards Panel judges to be of relevance to providers in considering how particular standards may be met or demonstrated.

- Reference Points are an important adjunct to the Higher Education Standards but are not themselves standards statements
- Generally, the items listed as Reference Points are developed and maintained by peak national bodies and agencies
- The Higher Education Standards Panel does not intend to create or maintain the items listed as Reference Points

³ For example, business schools accredited with Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

⁴ Submissions available <http://www.hestandards.gov.au/engagement/call-comment-number-1>. Communique 8 available <http://www.hestandards.gov.au/sites/default/files/CommuniqueNumber8-HEStandards.pdf>.

Meanwhile, important theoretical and empirical research on learning outcomes and standards has been underway. In the UK, the Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange (ASKe) played an important role in this agenda. Early work included the six tenets around a manifesto for change (Price, Rust & Carroll, 2008), including how disciplinary communities might collaborate to support the learning outcomes standards agenda.⁵

"Assessment is largely dependent upon professional judgement and confidence in such judgement requires the establishment of appropriate forums for the development and sharing of standards within and between disciplinary and professional communities." (Tenet 6)

In Australia considerable work has been underway since the move to a standards-based approach was flagged. Important theoretical work, notably that of Professor Royce Sadler,⁶ has been complemented by grants, fellowships, networks and commissioned projects. While the bulk of the latter has been funded by the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) and its predecessor bodies, various peak bodies and groups have also funded collaborative work.⁷

A significant corpus of practical work was commissioned by DEEWR for 2010-11 and devised and implemented by the ALTC Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project discipline scholars. Led by project director Professor Christine Ewan, Discipline Scholars facilitated their respective disciplinary communities to collaboratively develop statements of threshold learning outcomes (TLOs). By 2011 eleven demonstration disciplines had published TLOs and other disciplines were en route to doing so. Since then a considerable number of standards-related projects have been undertaken successfully. In addition to setting discipline standards, other work has focused on assisting disciplines to apply discipline standards (e.g. law good practice guides), capturing the extent that discipline standards have been aligned in curriculum (e.g. history) or efforts to harmonize TLOs with professional accreditation systems (e.g. health). A smaller amount of work has focussed on external assessment and benchmarking of learning outcomes. One notable example relies on implicit standards (i.e. multiple disciplines using moderation of final year subjects). Another cues assessors to explicit standards (i.e. accounting discipline TLOs) and uses calibration events before small randomly drawn samples are double-blind peer reviewed.⁸ A third contains benchmarking to assessment of knowledge learning outcomes and uses a standardised test (i.e. medicine discipline).

In addition to a good practice report prepared by Oliver (2011), several useful discussion papers have been produced for the sector, notably those by Krause, Barrie & Scott (2011) and Deane & Krause (2012). The OLT will commission a further good practice report in 2013 to capture all the work completed and underway across the standards landscape and recommend future development priorities to the OLT and the sector.

⁵ Rust (2009) was an example of such a forum for sharing of assessments within a disciplinary community that emerged from this Manifesto and the ASKe community.

⁶ For example, Sadler (2013).

⁷ For example, the Australian Business Deans Council funded the marketing discipline to collaboratively set TLOs bachelor and coursework masters degrees and seed funded the accounting discipline to externally assess achievement of TLOs. The Group of Eight has established a system for external verification of course learning outcomes and standards. One notable international example is the OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes project.

⁸ See Deane & Krause (2012) for a summary.

Forum questions

In light of this background, providers have various challenges to address. Examples include:

- Do you feel that a framework or code would be useful to you in the design (and assessment) of learning outcomes? What aspects of such a code would be most useful?
- When designing (and assessing) learning outcomes for a particular course, what qualities of a particular reference point make it useful, significant and relevant?
- How and where can appropriate reference points be found for disciplines without nationally agreed learning outcomes?
- How might professional standards and course learning outcomes be best integrated/harmonised?
- What evidence can we use to demonstrate that students have achieved the defined learning outcomes of a course to an acceptable level? How can that evidence be gathered and collated efficiently?
- What are the unique challenges facing non self-accrediting providers?

Optimising forum discussion

To assist forum delegates to productively discuss these and other questions, Appendix A provides a preliminary categorisation of completed work and that underway:⁹

- Setting learning outcome standards
- Applying learning outcome standards
- Assessing learning outcomes and standards
- Evidencing learning outcomes and standards.

This taxonomy has guided the development of the forum program.

References

- Deane, L. & Krause, K. (2012) Towards a Learning Standards Framework. [Online: www.uws.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/398620/Learning_Stds_Framewk_Final_Dec_2012.pdf]
- Higher Education Standards Panel (2013), Communique 8 – May 2013. [Online: <http://www.hestandards.gov.au/engagement>]
- Krause, K., Barrie, S. & Scott, G. (2011) Mapping Learning and Teaching Standards in Australian Higher Education: An Issues and Options Paper. [Online: www.uws.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/402854/TL_Stds_Issues_Paper.pdf]
- Oliver, B. (2011) Good Practice Report - Assuring Graduate Outcomes. [Online: <http://www.olt.gov.au/>]
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- Rust, C.(2009) Assessment standards: A potential role for Subject Networks', *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, 8(1),124-28.
- Sadler, D.R. (2013) Assuring academic achievement standards: from moderation to calibration, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20:1, 5-19.

⁹ Please note that this list is non-exhaustive and merely indicative. The taxonomy has been used also to categorise the standards work in business on the Discipline Scholars wiki: disciplinestandards.pbworks.com/w/page/52714718/Business%2C%20Management%20and%20Economics

Appendix A

Aspect	Title of Project Initiative
Setting	<p>Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project (Architecture)</p> <p>Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project (Accounting)</p> <p>Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project (Building)</p> <p>Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project (Creative & performing arts)</p> <p>Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project (Engineering and ICT)</p> <p>Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project (Geography)</p> <p>Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project (Health, medicine and veterinary science)</p> <p>Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project (History)</p> <p>Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project (Law)</p> <p>Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project (Masters in Education))</p> <p>Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project (Science)</p> <p>Discipline network in Chemistry</p> <p>Discipline network in Biology (VIBEnet)</p> <p>Discipline network in Biomedical Sciences</p> <p>Discipline network in Mathematics (CUBEnet),</p> <p>Discipline network in Physics</p> <p>Discipline network in Pharmacy</p> <p>Curriculum renewal and interprofessional health education: establishing capabilities, outcomes and standards PP10-1741</p> <p>Threshold Learning Outcomes in Australian Theological Education</p> <p>Threshold learning outcomes Juris Doctor</p> <p>Threshold learning outcomes for sociology</p> <p>National standards for psychological literacy and global citizenship</p> <p>Academic standards for marketing in the Australian higher education context</p> <p>Politics and international relations discipline standards</p> <p>Embedding and benchmarking core knowledge and skills as the foundation for learning standards in the undergraduate economics curriculum</p>
Applying	<p>Good practice guides for Bachelor of Laws threshold learning outcomes</p> <p>Good practice guides for Science Threshold Learning Outcomes</p> <p>Hunters and gatherers: strategies for curriculum mapping and data collection for assuring learning. SP10-186</p> <p>After standards: Engaging and embedding history's standards using international best practice to inform curriculum renewal PP10-1812</p> <p>Curriculum renewal and interprofessional health education: establishing capabilities, outcomes and standards PP10-1741</p> <p>Harmonising higher education and professional quality assurance processes for the assessment of learning outcomes in health SP10-1856</p> <p>Navigating a pathway between the academic standards and a framework for authentic, collaborative, outcomes-focused thinking in Engineering Education</p> <p>Capstone courses in undergraduate business degrees: better course design, better learning activities, better assessment PP10-1646</p> <p>Discipline network in Law</p> <p>National Network in Science and Maths, SaMnet</p> <p>Curriculum renewal in legal education: Capstone Experiences PP9-1374</p> <p>Benchmarking archaeology degrees at Australian universities PP6-53</p> <p>Facilitating staff and student engagement with graduate attribute development, assessment and standards in Business faculties PP7-332</p> <p>LTAS@UTAS</p>

Assessing	<p>Quality verification system (Group of Eight)</p> <p>A sector-wide model for assuring final year subjects and program achievement standards through inter-university moderation (SP10-1843)</p> <p>Hunters and gatherers: strategies for curriculum mapping and data collection for assuring learning. SP10-186</p> <p>Assuring graduate capabilities: evidencing levels of achievement for graduate employability</p> <p>Achievement Matters: External Peer Review of Accounting Learning Standards ID11-1913</p> <p>After standards: Engaging and embedding history's standards using international best practice to inform curriculum renewal PP10-1812</p> <p>Developing the foundation for a national assessment of medical student learning outcomes SP10-1869</p> <p>Improving graduate employability by implementing subject benchmarks</p> <p>Benchmarking clinical learning in speech pathology to support assessment, discipline standards, teaching innovation and student learning PP6-26</p> <p>Establishing infrastructure and collaborative processes for cross-institutional benchmarking of student clinical performance in speech pathology PP8-955</p> <p>Assessment of Physiotherapy Practice PP6-28</p> <p>The development of an undergraduate nursing competencies assessment tool for use across Australian universities CG7-523</p> <p>Assessment of higher education learning outcomes (OECD)</p>
Evidencing	<p>Harmonising higher education and professional quality assurance processes for the assessment of learning outcomes in health SP10-1856</p> <p>Teaching standards framework project</p>