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Dr David Woodhouse
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3 July 2009

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'David'.

Dear Dr Woodhouse,

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission on the Discussion Paper "*Setting and Monitoring Academic Standards for Australian Higher Education*".

Please find attached the response from the Queensland University of Technology.

Please contact me should you require any further information.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Vi McLean'.

Professor Vi McLean, AM
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Teaching Quality)

Queensland University of Technology Submission

Setting and Monitoring Academic Standards in Australian Higher Education

July 2009

Introduction

Clearly, the current public discourse about Australian higher education is focused on 'standards' and Australian universities and higher education agencies such as AUQA must engage with it. However, the discourse is ill-defined and ill-informed, so one is never quite sure what the actual problem is that this attention to 'standards' is meant to address. It would be a valuable first step to engage directly with those fuelling the public interest in 'the standards issue', to be sure we understand precisely what the problem is that we are meant to be fixing.

This paper identifies inconsistency in judging student achievement levels across universities as 'the problem', and then describes a highly ambitious approach to addressing that specific issue. Whether this particular dimension of 'the problem with standards' is indeed the heart of the matter, or whether other aspects of university standards might more usefully be addressed is less certain. (For example, on p12, it is seen as 'vital' to ensure consistency across tasks, because "variations in task severity will register as variations in student achievement, regardless of actual competence". Is the equivalence of a grade of 6 or 7 on a single subject, across the nation's universities, a problem of such national import that it requires as a matter of urgency, a whole new approach to university quality assurance?

The discussion paper's attempt to stimulate a "new emphasis on student achievement" is commendable and it has identified several useful ideas for maintaining rigorous academic standards. We support the notion that such work must be "lodged firmly within the traditions of: peer review, collegiality, pre-eminence of disciplines, autonomy of institutions, and alignment with the cultural context" (p.19). All Australian universities share a desire to be the highest quality institutions possible, given their particular circumstances, so a collegial approach that supports universities to improve their own quality systems is still the best approach.

However, this paper is not particularly erudite in its understanding of learning and pedagogy in universities or its recognition of the ways in which the knowledge base of degree programs needs to be rapidly changing to stay current. One might wonder *why* it is that "no other country is as advanced as the proposals in this paper" (p16). We would question whether the ideas about learning in the paper constitute 'advanced' thinking. For example, on p13, an example assumes that pedagogy might well be driven by a popular textbook selection. Surely, we should be emphasising the importance of deep curricular and pedagogical design approaches, rather than taking as a given, an example of quite poor pedagogical practice that could well have been drawn from any point in the last 100 years!) A university education should be providing the ability to navigate environments where knowledge is uncertain, provisional, contingent and revisable. And such abilities are not readily accessible through the testing approaches being advocated in the discussion paper.

Ironically, the paper both recognizes the complexity of learning and at the same time advocates a simplistic standardised measurement of generic attributes and discipline-specific 'standards' as the preferred way forward. We fear this paper will not advance the cause of improved curricular design nor enhance the rigor of universities' practices in quality assuring student learning outcomes.

On learning...

Learning is not a commodity that can be unambiguously measured by volume or weight. It is a complex phenomenon that presents many possibilities for measurement, but no one 'right' approach. We need to continuously remind ourselves that every measurement approach will carry a particular price. We can measure a few dimensions and clearly need to, given the demands of the societies we serve and our own need of data for the purpose of improving learning environments, but every form of measurement will be less than perfect. Every form will create some distortion in the image of learning that is produced. A league table of learning is unlikely to satisfy the critics of university quality, yet its pursuit carries the risk of unanticipated distortions in other aspects of the quality of university learning and teaching.

As professional educators, let's not get swept away by the rhetoric of psychometricians, or fall for the temptation to look for simple answers to complex problems. Let's be scrupulous about the promises we make about how greater standardization will improve the quality of life and learning for Australian students, universities and society at large. Resources for improving university teaching and learning are scarce and they would be better directed where they can make the most difference- to the front line of teaching and learning. We cannot afford to invest them in the development and ongoing management of standardization tools that have little likelihood of adding real value.

On learning environment indicators and learning outcomes indicators...

Process indicators that document the characteristics of students and the quality of the learning environment are both necessary and useful as we strive to make ongoing improvements in learning, *and* we concur with the discussion paper authors that alone, they are not sufficient. However, we find the hasty dismissal of the term 'learning outcome' in Section 1 of the paper, to be both premature and pejorative. No term in the English language exists in a pure form. It could be argued with equal vigour that there are multiple meanings for the term 'Standards'. Indeed, the 'cultural baggage' (of uniformity, compliance, and unproductive comparisons) that is associated with 'Standards' makes it particularly inappropriate in this context. Rightfully, we should be concerned with learning outcomes. Standardization is not what we are here for.

Measures of learning outcomes are essential as we evaluate the quality of our programs and as we warrant that our graduates indeed have the knowledge, skills and dispositions that the written curriculum documents as desirable in all graduates.

We agree that at the level of individual degree curriculum:

- There should be a requirement for every degree to have clearly delineated learning outcomes that reflect the codified knowledge base of the field or discipline, the accreditation requirements of the relevant professional organizations and the opinions of professional practitioners and employers. These external voices are particularly important in ensuring that degrees are responsive to ongoing change in professions and to checking the rigor of the university's internal quality assurance systems.
- As the paper acknowledges, almost all universities now have generic attributes that they claim, apply to all graduates. Although these attributes generally are being addressed as the curriculum design is being put on paper, thus far, little progress appears to have been made in systematically assessing them. We agree that more systematic assessment is needed, in the interests of program evaluation. But generic attributes should not be seen as separate entities from discipline-specific learning outcomes. The two need to intersect in meaningful ways. As Scouffis (2004,3) notes:

‘...students develop graduate attributes most effectively when opportunities for acquiring those attributes are integrated into their courses, as opposed to “bolted on” to their courses.

There needs to be a holistic, manageable set of degree-specific learning outcomes that integrates information from *all* of these source materials. They need to capture both what is shared with similar degrees around the world and the characteristics that make this degree in this university, at this time, unique. Disciplinary commonalities are only one part of the mix that makes up the desired learning outcomes for a degree.

- Secondly, there needs to be a strong and deliberate curriculum design that ensures students have systematic opportunities to master the desired learning outcomes. The importance of serendipitous learning is not disputed, but there should be nothing serendipitous about this plan for learning. As Hicks (2007) notes in his paper titled *‘Curriculum in Higher Education in Australia – Hello?’* higher education has paid little attention to curriculum design. It needs to, if the quality of student learning is to be improved in Australian universities.
- Assessment is a critical component of the curriculum design. Universities should be held accountable for having well documented systems that track the development of clearly stated desired learning outcomes throughout the duration of a course.
- Assessment tasks are probably the most powerful learning devices we can provide. Assessment should be more for learning, than for sorting, yet this goes unacknowledged throughout this discussion paper. Assessment is seen only as a device for determining achievement levels after the learning is over, not as a critical pedagogical strategy that can influence the learning outcome itself.
- The paper provides an extremely limited perspective on the nature and challenges of assessment in higher education. It overplays the importance of standardized tests and underplays the need for multiple data sources in reaching judgments both about the individual students' learning progress and the quality of the degree program. There need to be concrete and valid means for aggregating data on student learning outcomes at the degree level, to better evaluate degree quality, as distinct from individual student

achievement. Such aggregations might include authentic assessments by members of the profession in internship settings, assessed portfolios of collected student work, or comprehensive capstone projects, that could be embedded in particular final semester units or be freestanding.

Research conducted for the American Association of Colleges and Universities by Hart Research Associates (April 2009) found 72% of member institutions were already assessing learning outcomes across the curriculum, and another 24% reported they were planning to do so. But they were using many different assessment strategies: 36% employed assessments based on a sample of students; 24% used departmental assessment tools for general education learning outcomes, and another 17% assessed the entire population of students. Rubrics, capstone projects, embedded assessments and surveys were part of this mix. Only 16% made use of standardized national tests specific to their discipline.

We do not agree that at the level of individual degrees:

- there needs to be *standardized* learning outcomes, *standardized* measures of learning outcomes, or *standardized* levels of achievement. Compliance is not an effective motivator for academics, though some would argue compliance avoidance is! What will improve the system is a tougher set of requirements for strong curriculum design and more rigorous assessment of learning outcomes.
- that the value-adding represented by standardization would be sufficient to justify the enormous time and effort required to produce it. The EU Tuning Project has been engaged in this challenge across 47 countries for a number of years. In their experience, devising a set of discipline-specific learning outcomes typically takes at least two years of meetings, drafts and redrafts (Personal conversation at EU-Australia Policy Dialogue, Melbourne, March 2009). In the EU, it has been a costly exercise for organizations, and the task is still far from complete. Further, the common disciplinary learning outcomes that we have seen emerge from this project thus far, are so generic, it is not clear that they represent an advance on what was there in the first place. Whether these common sets of disciplinary learning outcomes will deliver quality improvements in learning and teaching across the EU remains to be seen.
- national standardization of learning outcomes assessment is necessary, given that many professional organizations, either state or national, already have required sets of learning outcomes, with which degrees must comply, if their graduates are to be professionally registered. Duplicating the effort by another agency, in these professional specialist areas, would be extremely wasteful of scarce resources.

In disciplines where there are no professional registration requirements, an impetus for the academics in the discipline to get together and create a shared set of learning outcomes could be quite useful. Similarly, a requirement for periodic rigorous review of all courses could be helpful.

Learning outcomes need to be rigorously assessed at the whole of course level and the exercise of figuring out how best to do this, in itself can be a rich professional development opportunity for academics. This form of pedagogical conversation enriches and stimulates the learning environment for the staff as well as the students. To remove this possibility from the teaching team and insert instead, a compliance exercise with a given set of national standards which in all likelihood, were developed by unknown others, in faraway places, will be a huge learning opportunity missed.

The resources that will be consumed in developing a single set of standards and compliance activities could be much better used to provide professional development for academics in curriculum design and to encourage universities to develop more rigorous quality assurance systems for courses, including external inputs to curriculum design, enhanced external review, and better course performance monitoring.

Conclusion

The overall quality of the Australian higher education system could be improved if universities designed their curricula to address specific learning outcomes, rigorously assessed those learning outcomes and used that data to speak to program quality. Particularly in disciplines where professional accreditation is not required, academic teams could benefit from the experience of debating learning outcomes with each other. Frameworks and guidelines to help course teams undertake this conceptual curricular and pedagogical work could be very useful to the sector.

Strengthened requirements for curriculum design and course quality assurance requirements that ensured all courses underwent periodic external review, including the tracking of learning outcomes assessment, also could be useful to the sector.

More focused audits of universities' own course QA systems would seem a sensible approach. As has happened with Cycle 1 and 2 AUQA audits, the self-study component provides a hugely valuable learning opportunity for universities. With the prospect of a pending AUQA audit, attention is focused on the adequacy of the university's own policy base and operations; things are noticed which otherwise would have remained invisible.

The most productive approach to 'improving the standards' of Australian degrees will not arise from public comparisons on simplistic measures of some unique dimension of disciplinary learning. It will come from a judicious mix of heightened expectation supported by enhanced guidelines and resource materials, and the prospect of periodic audits on the quality of learning outcomes assessment that incorporate external perspectives.

If, despite these misgivings, the direction outlined in the discussion paper is to be pursued, it would be sensible to begin with a pilot program in one or two disciplines which do not have professional accreditation, to see whether meaningful national standards can even be enunciated. Only then, and only if they are found to be adding sufficient value, should we begin to contemplate how they might best be assessed and adopted.

References

Hart Research Associates (2009), *Learning and Assessment: Trends in Undergraduate Education*, Association of American Colleges and Universities. April.

Hicks, Owen (2007) *Curriculum in higher education in Australia- Hello?*, Carrick Institute for learning and Teaching in Higher Education, Australia (ohicks@iinet.au)

Scoufis, M. (2004). *First Contact: The Challenge of Integrating Graduate Attributes From First Year, Proceedings of the First Year Forum 2003*, retrieved 9 June 2009 from http://www.ltu.unsw.edu.au/content/userDocs/fye_book_2003.pdf