

Submission to Discussion Paper:

Setting and Monitoring Academic Standards for Australian Higher Education

General premise

The thesis of the discussion paper is that there is no current valid retort to assertions that “standards are falling”. Ergo, the higher education sector must develop specifications for the level of academic achievement of its graduates and that these levels must be standardised across all institutions. The paper then proposes an approach to setting such standards, measuring achievements and reporting the standards through a common GPA scale.

One question that is raised, at least in my mind, is whether such standards are absolute or relative. The proposed method for setting the standards would seem to lead to a relative outcome since they would be developed by a collegial approach which would lead to discipline dependence. Relative standards are hence subjective in nature and are diluted as a result. Is there an absolute standard for learning outcomes? Probably not.

The paper makes reference to building or protecting Brand Australia in international education as a rationale for the proposed endeavour. This is the same argument presented for the need to strengthen the Qualification Framework. I am inclined to think that the latter has greater impact on the brand.

Proposed process for setting levels of academic achievement

The proposed process is very ambitious in its scope and, consequently, would be a major call on the resources of the universities and the sector. I question the necessity of such a complex, time consuming process, and whether the results of such a process would provide other than incremental advancement over simpler methods.

I well recall the heroic efforts of panels to undertake a comprehensive benchmarking of discipline standards in the 1980’s in the pre Dawkins era. I think they operated under the auspices of the AVCC and the disciplines benchmarked were history and my own discipline, physics. This activity was discontinued rather quickly, presumably because of its onerous nature to produce marginally useful reports.

Given that the standards are relative measures, then one would think that benchmarking curriculum and assessment within disciplines across institutions would suffice. While there is a modicum of such benchmarking activity presently in the system, a more structured and systematic approach could be introduced.

For most of the “professional” disciplines, there already exist external reference points for standards in either registration boards or professional accreditation bodies. For some business areas, there is the opportunity to accredit with international organisations. The remaining disciplines, mainly in the humanities and sciences, have the quality of their graduates continually tested through their employability or research reputation.

In summary, I am of the opinion that there are simpler frameworks and methods available to quality assure academic standards and to reassure those within and without the higher education sector that these standards are appropriate.

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