



6 July 2009

Dr David Woodhouse
Executive Director
Australian Universities Quality Agency
Level 10
123 Lonsdale Street
Melbourne Victoria 3000

Dear David

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your May 2009 discussion paper, "Setting and Monitoring Academic Standards for Australian Higher Education". The University of New South Wales (UNSW) supports neither the thrust nor the details of the paper.

One of the limitations of the document is that it fails to describe where we are, where we want to be and what the gap is. The starting point for the paper is the frequent reference to "in Australia there are frequent accusations in the media of 'dumbing down'". One would have hoped that a better justification could have been developed for proposals which, if implemented, would divert substantial resources away from teaching and learning into compliance. Improving student staff ratios is a far better route to improved quality than the proposals. There is also an apparent failure to acknowledge that degrees which lead to professional qualifications are already subject to extensive evaluation by respected bodies such as the Australian Medical Council (AMC). Furthermore the paper seems to propose that the way standards will be achieved is by standardisation. UNSW has a long track record in academic rigour but at the same time asserts the right of degree programs in different universities to have different emphases. Once again a body such as the AMC has recognised the need to judge medical curricula by the criteria set by the individual medical school rather than by some inflexible standard. Without this approach it is hard to see how we could have achieved the diversity of approaches in the Australian University system, ranging from 4 year graduate entry to 6 year undergraduate programs.

I refer you to the University of Western Australia submission, with which we agree entirely and would restate one of their objections, "The emphasis within the paper upon intra-disciplinary consideration of standards on a national basis in our view is cumbersome, and would be excessively costly in respect of both time and resources".

The philosophical dogma that lies behind objectives such as "publicly demonstrating the integrity of grades in course" is simplistic. The reality is that the breadth and depth of the anatomy curriculum in a medical degree is greater than in a nursing degree. If a nursing student

demonstrates perfect performance in their anatomy course, it seems totally appropriate that their grades represent this, rather than AUQA (or its successor) impose some gold standard for Anatomy, which would (for no benefit to anyone) attempt to calibrate anatomy across all health disciplines. Either nursing students who know all that they need to know would receive a fail grade for anatomy or some medical students who know far less than they need to know would receive passing grades.

Our suggestion is that the discussion paper will not benefit from modification. Its approaches are flawed and it needs to be totally rewritten.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'R' followed by a horizontal line.

Professor Richard Henry AM
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)