

Future shock

The view from the top

It's become a truism that Australian higher education nowadays is in a state of perpetual change. The next round of changes to research and teaching funding, however, will permanently alter the face of the sector. We asked five of Australia's most prominent Vice-Chancellors to anticipate the future face of higher education, and NTEU's Carolyn Allport responds.

Which standards?

Ian Chubb

It is time to give serious attention to the standards of Australian higher education – what we mean by them, how they vary across levels and fields of education, how we know how the quality of performance relates to them, how performance standards differ among institutions, and how we communicate effectively the range of achievements to students, employers and the community.

I am referring to the need to focus on student achievement standards, and not only on teaching process standards. In doing so, it is necessary to attend to the minimum acceptable standards for the award of a degree and to the full range of student achievements above the minimum across the system. The former is necessary to safeguard the reputation of Australian higher education qualifications, given that the system is only as strong as its weakest link. The latter is important in signalling the diversity within the system, including its performance peaks, and how institutions might differentiate themselves from one another.

Harvard President Derek Bok suggests the need to set higher educational standards in higher education while

acknowledging that little is known about the standards being achieved:

Has the quality of teaching improved? More important, are students learning more than they did in 1950?...The answer to these questions is that we do not know.¹

My focus is on the standards of Australian degrees. My hunch is that the best of today's Bachelor degree graduates have superior knowledge, understandings and skills than the equivalent of my generation. I am simply amazed at the capabilities of young people today, and their ability to balance dynamically a range of responsibilities and cope with challenges that former students did not face. But Bok is right, that's just a hunch, and I can't demonstrate its validity. Perhaps there are different trade-offs of depth for breadth, perhaps less reflective time, than in the past. I do not know. Nor do I know how the averages compare, whether average performance is adequate or even meaningful, and how wide is the variance between the bottom performance rated satisfactory and the top rated excellent. Also the difference in qualitative terms between

Bachelors and Masters Degrees can be confusing. As for the Doctorate, there is ambiguity about what it represents.

Degree standards depend ultimately on the evaluation and reporting of student knowledge, skills and achievement or performance. Academic standards are defined and safeguarded by individual academic staff through their exercise of judgement in assessing and grading the students they teach.² Degree standards are arbitrary in the sense that they are taken as stable reference points, but they are not absolute or immutable or purely objective; they are determined subjectively and they require periodic review and revision. The conventional practice in setting intellectual standards has relied on the internal exercise of academic judgement. This approach now faces two difficulties: first, external stakeholders, who are demanding greater transparency, find internal processes inaccessible and arcane; second 'the informal conversations that once guided notions of standards within disciplines have been eroded by pressures on academic work, the changing nature of disciplinary bases, and the sheer diversity and complexity of the current system.'³

In their thoughtful submission to the Government's 2002 Higher Education Review, Craig McInnis and Richard James noted that 'the higher education system currently lacks adequate and explicit mechanisms for knowing about the standards of degrees.' They reported that moderation processes are almost non-existent and the involvement of external examiners is confined to postgraduate education. Staff, they suggested, 'often have difficulty explaining how they know about the standards of their degrees and are unable to point with confidence to formal processes for monitoring standards, particularly against external reference points.'⁴

In 2002 more than half of 2000 Australian academics surveyed believed that 'academic standards required for graduation have decreased' over the past decade, with 18 per cent believing standards had 'decreased greatly'. About 40 per cent thought the giving of high grades had increased, and 25 per cent thought this was a change for the worse. About half the respondents thought quality assurance procedures had increased, but '40 per cent thought it was a change for the worse; only 25 per cent thought it was a change for the better.'⁵

Standards are also on the agenda because of the changes brought about by a larger and more diverse student body in terms of backgrounds, abilities and engagement in university life, together with a wider dispersal of graduates in the labour market and employer expectations regarding generic graduate capabilities. Changes in modes of delivery along with growth of new providers, including diploma mills, and liberalisation of trade in education services, have given rise to concerns about the need to protect students from sub-standard providers issuing qualifications of no use for employment or further study. Questions about the standards of Australian degrees have

arisen too in the context of budgetary pressures, low student admission scores, allegations of soft marking and instances of student plagiarism, along with changes in the academic work environment, including increased casualisation of teaching appointments. In the absence of information to the contrary, the impressions of some become widely accepted fact. The Prime Minister has recently been advised that 'the quality of our university degrees is declining.'⁶ Employer groups are importunate in asserting that graduates lack necessary skills.⁷

Within the sector there are concerns that significant differences among institutions in terms of performance are being disguised by current reporting practices, and that metrics used for allocating resources are having a levelling-down consequence. The current process compliance approach to quality assurance is a case in point. AUQA does not consider standards across institutions or fields of study. Additionally, the Research Training Scheme and the Institutional Grants Scheme lack direct measures of quality. The Learning & Teaching Performance Fund is allocated via regression equations that neutralise the effect of student characteristics in order to isolate the institutional effect on student progression and completion. The resultant formula discounts for student intake quality and assumes parity of educational outcomes across institutions. The current national policy framework reflects a view of the system as one that is or should be uniform:

Australia places great emphasis on ensuring that all higher education awards offered by non-university private providers are of an equivalent standard to the Australian university sector.⁸

There are promising signs that diversity is gaining increasing recognition as a policy objective. The Federal Minister has noted that as a result of a 'relentless pursuit of sameness, we miss some of the great heights of our international competitors.'⁹ The Minister has shown interest in Australian universities developing a template for a 'Diploma Supplement' along the lines developed by the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and now incorporated in the Bologna Process. It is conceivable that over time the diploma supplement will evolve in a form that reports learning outcomes, as well as descriptors of learning experiences. The Government is encouraging AUQA to shift from its preoccupation with process and focus on educational and research outcomes, with the next round of AUQA audits to focus on benchmarking of standards. There is now also a detailed Opposition policy framework for Higher Education, Research & Innovation. Labor's approach involves a more rigorous approach to academic standards to meet the expectations of students, employers and the broad community:

Students deserve the confidence that they will receive a quality education and that their degree will be recognised, in Australia and overseas, as a credible qualification. Employers are entitled to expect the highest standards when they hire Australian graduates... The community needs to be assured that every graduate meets at least the

minimum acceptable standard of performance identified for a higher education qualification, and to know how well we excel above that minimum.¹⁰

This apparent bipartisanship is shaping up in the context of several international convergences. The June 2006 meeting of OECD Education Ministers agreed on the need for reform of higher education, including 'a clearer focus on learning outcomes'. The OECD is exploring for higher education a set of learning outcomes measures along the lines of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) for schooling in the fields of mathematics, science, reading and problem solving. Such an exercise will not be straightforward, and it could be perverse. At best it may yield little more than an instrument for measuring generic skills akin to the Graduate Skills Assessment tool developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research in 1999 but which has had little use subsequently.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England, in association with the research funding councils, has issued guidelines for 'threshold standards' for postgraduate research degree programs to address concerns raised in reviews of research policy and performance.¹¹ HEFCE has also issued guidelines on quality and standards in higher education, with new data collection and reporting obligations, including reporting the findings of external examiners at program or subject level.¹²

Another development is that of the US Commission on Higher Education which reported in August 2006 to Education Secretary, Margaret Spellings.¹³ The Commission reported that 'many students never complete'... 'many who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing and thinking skills we expect of graduates' and 'unacceptable numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need'. That report may be peripheral to the Australian debate, but it has opened up debate by recommending a greater focus on student learning and development of a more outcomes-based accreditation system:

Higher education institutions should measure student learning using quality-assessment data from instruments such as, for example, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, and the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress, which is designed to assess general education outcomes for undergraduates in order to improve the quality of instruction and learning.

So, there is a momentum on standards internationally as well as domestically, which we would be foolish to ignore. The shape of new 'accountability requirements' could well be what we do not wish for if we do not engage and try to direct efforts in sensible directions.

In Australia, Labor proposes monitoring academic standards across the system, using established peer review processes, standards-referenced assessment and grade descriptors. The approach would involve student work being evaluated by groups of scholarly peers from different academic fields. Labor has targeted initially for 'education standards reviews'

the fields of teacher education, nurse education and business studies. It is envisaged that the reviews would establish 'the minimum acceptable standards of student achievement for the award of different levels of higher education qualifications in each field' and identify 'the range of standards of performance across institutions.' Examples of student work at Pass and higher grades would be published.

Labor's approach is similar to that proposed by James & McNinnis¹⁴ and Anderson¹⁵. It draws theoretically from the work of Sadler¹⁶ and operationally from the experience of the NSW Board of Studies.¹⁷ It reflects the view, supported by research, that experienced examiners can identify borderline grade performances with considerable accuracy,¹⁸ and that students benefit from clearly defined statements of expectations and good feedback.¹⁹ In general it involves groups of academics formed around a common field of study interests taking responsibility for setting and monitoring standards – formalising the informal dialogue to reach consensus on learning outcomes, minimum levels of achievement, and what constitutes excellence. Labor's approach also involves a central Higher Education Quality Agency with considerable powers, and the details of its operation would require considerable attention if it is pursued.

It is necessary for us to engage in this debate about the assessment and reporting of degree standards, and it is important that we are clear about the principles that should underpin the development of a standards-referenced approach. I would offer the following principles for consideration:

- Standards and quality are best guaranteed through rigorous peer review that is undertaken as close as possible to the point of delivery.
- Responsibility for establishing and monitoring standards should remain primarily with the academic community.
- Compliance can be established through existing processes of professional accreditation and collaborative review, international input, benchmarking, and sharing of teaching materials and good practices.
- Procedures 'should encourage differences compatible with the national goals, and the judgements that will need to be made should recognise all diversity including diversity in outcomes'.²⁰
- Moderation must have regard to institutional mission differences.
- The process must not stifle diversity and innovation; it is not about standardisation.²¹
- The process should not impose excessive accountability cost burdens (a more rigorous approach to quality evaluation could sit alongside reduced control over inputs and process).

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References and endnotes

1. Bok, D. (2006), *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*. Princeton, New Jersey. Princeton University Press.
2. James, R., McInnis, C. & Devlin, C. (2002) *Assessing Learning in Australian Universities*, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.
3. James, R., McInnis, C. and Devlin, M. (2002) 'Options for a national process to articulate and monitor academic standards across Australian universities', Submission 11, *Backing Australia's Future*, <http://www.backingaustraliasfuture.gov.au>
4. *ibid.*
5. Anderson, D. (2002), 'An Academic Standards Agency: a submission to the higher education review', *Backing Australia's Future*, http://www.backingaustraliasfuture.gov.au/submissions/issues_sub/pdf/1363.pdf#search
6. Working Group on Asia Report to PMSEIC, June 2006, p. 27.
7. See for instance Business Council of Australia, (March 2006), *New Concepts in Innovation: The Keys to Growing Australia*.
8. http://www.des.wa.gov.au/pages/higher_ed_quality_standards.php
9. Bishop, J. (24 July 2006), Speech at the Curtin Institute Public Policy Forum <http://www.dest.gov.au/Ministers/Media/Bishop/2006/07/B0010240706.asp>
10. Macklin, J. (2006), *Australia's Universities: Building our Future in the World*, A White Paper on Higher Education, Research and Innovation.
11. Higher Education Funding Council for England (2004), *Postgraduate research degree programmes – minimum standards and funding*, Circular Letter 18/2004 The minimum standards are expressed in terms of teaching process indicators such as for student admission – normally at least a 2(i) degree in relevant field or Masters qualification; for research environment – minimum RAE rating of 3a; 70% submission rate within 4 years; for supervision by teams of at least 2 supervisors, mandatory training of supervisors.
12. Higher Education Funding Council for England (2003), *Information on quality and standards in higher education, final guidance*, 2003/51
13. *A Test of Leadership, Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, A Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, September 2006.
14. James, R., McInnis, C. and Devlin, M. (2002) *op. cit.*
15. Anderson, D. (2002), 'An Academic Standards Agency: a submission to the higher education review', *Backing Australia's Future*, http://www.backingaustraliasfuture.gov.au/submissions/issues_sub/pdf/1363.pdf#search. Anderson proposed that Departments in each university would retain examination scripts and other assessment materials on either side of the pass-fail line and from other critical points in the distribution of results. An Academic Standards Agency would set guidelines for numbers of scripts to be retained, select fields annually for audit and establish panels. Panels would determine their assessment criteria, sample from the scripts and produce reports, comparing their results with those of the departments, and including examples of work representing intellectual standards across the entire range, not only the minimum acceptable standard of performance.
16. Sadler, D. R. (1987), 'Specifying and Promulgating Achievement Standards', *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 13, No. 2. 191- 209. Sadler identifies features of standards-referenced assessment that overcome deficiencies of norm-referenced and criterion-referenced approaches, using both verbal descriptors and exemplars that are compatible with teachers' exercise of professional judgement.
17. <http://arc.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/> (Assessment Resource Centre)
18. Christie, T. & Forrest, G.M. (1981), *Defining Public Examination Standards*, Schools Council Research Studies. Macmillan. London.
19. Rust, C. (2002), 'The impact of assessment on student learning', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, Vol. 3 (2) 145-158.
20. Higher Education Council, (1992) *Higher Education, Achieving Quality*, National Board of Employment, Education and Training. AGPS Canberra. Page 78.
21. Neither the Deming model of process control that underpins the quality assurance movement, nor the specifications and design procedures of Standards Australia to ensure goods and services consistently perform in the way they are intended.

Esteem powered learning

Glyn Davis

~~'The Dawkins era is over,' Commonwealth Education Minister Julie Bishop told a Perth audience in late July 2007. Just a few days earlier, Labor's new higher education white paper had put the same point less bluntly, ruling out a return to the central planning and public funding levels of the late 1980s Dawkins' reforms as neither possible nor desirable.~~

~~This turning point in Australian higher education is not – or at least not yet – being driven by a decisive legislative change; the rapid abandonment of the old in favour of the new that we~~

~~have seen before. It is as much the accidental result of policy as its intended outcome, and we have been moving toward it in an unsystematic manner for a long time.~~

~~In hindsight, the two changes that did most to set universities on their current path were the opening of the commercial international student market in the late 1980s, which created an opportunity to recruit full-fee students, and the abandonment of adequate grant indexation in the mid-1990s, which created a need to recruit full-fee students. It is these fees that~~