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COMMENTS ON SETTING AND MONITORING ACADEMIC STANDARDS FOR AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION†

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Introduction

The fostering of a debate on academic standards is very timely, particularly as the Australian Qualifications Framework Council is encouraging discussion on the levels of the various awards in Australian senior secondary and post-secondary awards. The AQF study is related to the AUQA discussion paper when one considers the growing numbers who

- graduate from a non-self-accrediting institution undergraduate program into a self-accrediting institution post-graduate degree, on the one hand, and
- from a vocational education and training program to a higher education award on the other hand,

or a mixture of both. These progressions result in discussion of credit transfer, comparability of programs, advanced standing, recognition of prior learning and recognition of prior experience.

More specifically, AUQA needs to respond to Gavin Moodie's claims in *The Australian* (November 19, 2008) in a piece entitled "Don't Let Masters Slip Down":

"All Australian universities extensively breach the Australian Qualifications Framework. That's not news, as universities mostly ignore the framework. But it demonstrates a systemic failure of quality assurance and the lack of national maintenance of standards in higher education. ... The Australian Universities Quality Agency has consistently declined to assess the standard of Australian degrees or even the relative standards of the Australian higher education system, although this is one of its objects. However, the agency claims to assess

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universities' compliance with the national protocols for higher education approval processes, including compliance with the AQF. Some of its reports occasionally comment on a university's compliance with the AQF ... [this] contrasts with the approach of state and territory higher education accrediting bodies, which are much more vigilant and consistent in applying the AQF. The state bodies accredit non self-accrediting higher education institutions, most of which are private ... which puts them at a clear disadvantage vis-a-vis the self-accrediting but non-complying universities.”

While acknowledging that Gavin Moodie does not appear to be a friend of AUQA (see *The Australian*, June 10, 2009), private providers would *prima facie* agree with this as a perception. The extent to which these perceptions are valid or true is a separate issue, but it is not uncommon for senior university representatives, such as Registrars or Deans, to contact Non-Self-Accrediting Institutions when a graduate from an NSAI applies to a university for enrolment in a postgraduate program and ask

- are your bachelor degrees accredited?
- if so, by whom?

These questions probably arise from ignorance of the AQF or the MCEETYA Protocols which govern or guide higher education in Australia or the legal restriction on the use of the word “degree” in all Australian jurisdictions. In these situations, “standards” are a separate, but not unrelated, issue!

Dichotomies

There are several dichotomies which can be readily confused when discussing and what they mean in practice. Though AUQA in particular has sought to clarify these over the years, many have not yet penetrated to staff room debate and discussion. Common rooms constitute a vast constituency which needs to be convinced before decisions become informed. For instance,

- fitness *for* purpose, and
- fitness *of* purpose.

Can there be quality if the compliance is merely “good enough”? If measures of “quality” become mandatory, either through legal fiat or moral persuasion, does this not push up the compliance bar? This puts extra pressure on private providers who cannot entertain the proportion of operating debt which public universities are able to sustain despite State auditing.

Another point of concern is with changes such

- syllabus changes (for example, the growth of discrete mathematics in many undergraduate courses), and
- curriculum changes (as in the growth of post-graduate and problem-based medical education).

Both of these make both quantitative and qualitative comparisons difficult between institutions which offer vocational education for similar courses and within institutions between different cohorts. Even two arts degrees, both claiming to be “liberal arts”, can quite deliberately have entirely different learning outcomes

Even the word “standard” can be ambiguous. Since the document under discussion refers to

- standards as *levels* of achievement (p.16), and
- standards as agreed *specification* for a level of performance (AUQA Audit Manual, Version 4.1, p.101).

The two are not necessarily the same. Matching a level of achievement to a standard so that the assessment is both

- fair to the student (who is not an experienced professional), and
- faithful to the standards of the field,

is never trivial, even in apparently objective disciplines such as mathematics.

Triangulation

Furthermore, one can encounter academics who regard a high failure rate as *ipso facto* indicating high standards without reference to student admission criteria or the quality of the teaching. Others will use the notion of a high proportion of high distinctions as a measure, on its own, of high quality teaching. Still others consider their scoring of student performance as error free: just attend any assessment or examination review committee meeting!

This is where triangulation as used in the AUQA audits can be of immense help in measuring and comparing levels of standards and levels of achievement. In particular, we believe that triangulation (p.12) can moderate standards from three points of view:

- registration and/or licensing by professional bodies;
- feedback from graduates;
- external examiners (p.13).

For a country, such as Australia, that has self-accrediting institutions, the comparatively rare use of external examiners (apart from honours theses and research higher degrees) is viewed by some other countries as a curious anomaly at best. While no one is going to worry whether a Master’s degree from Motorola University is accredited or not, self-accrediting of courses by universities in the bottom quartile of ranking of Australian universities can be seen as sometimes self-serving the institutions and short-changing the students.

Alternatives to external examining that have been suggested include both generic and specific examinations for graduates. A danger in this is that there would be a temptation to prepare graduates for these examinations rather than have the generic skills develop as part of the educational process. The introduction of secondary testamurs at the University of New South Wales is a recognition of the increasing attention by institutions to the so-called “soft skills”.

The testing of specific skills within a particular degree has two aspects:

- on the one hand, there is usually a core of knowledge, skills and attitudes, without which a person cannot be considered ready to be, or worthy of being, inducted into a particular profession or craft;

- on the other hand, since many institutions try to occupy a competitive exclusive niche in a given discipline there would be widespread variation in the specific skills even the best graduates would have acquired in their undergraduate degrees.

Other alternatives might include the generic aptitude-type skills which one finds in the Graduate Record Examinations in the USA. For instance, in the quantitative methods section of the GRE the emphasis is on knowing how to “mathematicise” (try simpler and similar cases, guess shrewdly and test your guess) rather than on the ability to shove symbols around. The Mathematical Olympiads have similar types of questions, but there are not a lot of people around who can readily construct them, so perhaps external examination of final semester courses might be an easier and less expensive option.

Where there are no gate-keeping professional bodies for particular degrees, perhaps AUQA now and TEQSA later could have this type of role, or mentor bodies, such as the Design Institute of Australia, which seek such a role.