Assuring Learning and Teaching Standards through Inter-Institutional Peer Review and Moderation: Final Report of the Project

A sector-wide model for assuring final year subject and program achievement standards through inter-university moderation 2014

Kerri-Lee Krause, Geoff Scott, Kate Aubin, Heather Alexander, Tom Angelo, Stuart Campbell, Martin Carroll, Elizabeth Deane, Duncan Nulty, Pip Pattison, Belinda Probert, Judyth Sachs, Ian Solomonides, Suzi Vaughan

www.uws.edu.au/latstandards
We recognise and endorse the important link between teaching and learning standards and the need to treat them together in any discussion of a standards framework. However while a Teaching Standards Framework has been proposed by a range of groups, no similar framework exists for assuring the quality of achievement standards in university learning. We endorse the view that approaches to assuring and demonstrating learning outcomes standards need to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate sector diversity, yet they also need to be defensible, robust, scaleable and sustainable.

The value of expert peer review in the discipline is widely endorsed, as is the need to ensure that any framework takes account of existing, validated, institutional quality and standards frameworks in order to streamline reporting and monitoring demands.

**8.1 Moving forward**

In this section some options for moving forward in the area of assuring subject and program achievement standards are identified. These proposals represent a starting point only, and further comments and suggestions are encouraged. The options listed here are not mutually exclusive. They are designed to foster practical actions that may be taken up by a range of stakeholder groups and have been highlighted in the feedback sessions on the project’s outcomes.

A suggested option for progressing the development of learning standards in particular, includes the development of a tiered framework for monitoring, assuring and reporting on learning standards that recognises many of the initiatives already in place. This tiered framework could include:

1. **Discipline/department level** peer review and moderation within and across universities, conducted in a staged manner across disciplines and over time with reporting available on institutional websites.
   
   Tier 1 assumes that higher education providers have existing unit/subject level moderation systems in place that are integral to their quality assurance and assessment processes.

2. **Institution-level monitoring and reporting** using whole-of-institution mechanisms to assure learning standards, along with a report against criteria and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):
   
   This may also include reporting on:
   
   a. the outcomes of benchmarking as part of the Provider Standards compliance process;
   
   b. how institutions are addressing specific Quality Assurance (QA) areas such as English proficiency standards and assessing graduate capabilities.

   Agreed institutional performance indicators could be integrated into the Compacts process. Benchmarking partner institutions may report on the outcomes of collective initiatives (e.g., the outcomes of the Go8 QVS initiative, or the outcomes of the Learning and Teaching Standards Peer Review and Moderation work, currently being piloted among 11 universities).

3. **National-level monitoring and reporting** on institutional performance based on a streamlined reporting mechanism that draws on Tier 1 and 2 outcomes.
   
   This would need to accommodate a range of models and approaches. The focus would be on ensuring that institutions are able to report that they have a range of models in place for monitoring and assuring learning standards, working over time.

Figure I (Section 3.6.1) represents one approach to designing a purpose-driven framework for assuring learning standards.
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• **Level 1**: (Department and unit level) focuses on assuring learning standards through the use of moderation and calibration activities among marking teams (e.g., among teams of sessional staff at the unit level) prior to marking, and during or after marking moderation activities. This should take place every time a unit is offered.
  
  Purpose: to assure validity and reliability of assessment practices through ongoing calibration of markers at the unit/subject level.

• **Level 2**: External checks take place on a cyclical basis as a way to benchmark learning and teaching standards. Meeting the requirements of accreditation and professional bodies may be included in Level 2.
  
  Purpose: to benchmark processes and outcomes and to address external accreditation requirements.

• **Level 3**: Involves inter-university peer review and verification of grades and standards using an external assessor approach. The identity of the external assessor is known, no effort is made to engage in blind peer review and graded assessment items are shared for verification purposes (i.e., the external assessor either agrees or disagrees with the grade allocated).
  
  Purpose: to verify learning standards across institutions by agreeing/disagreeing with grades allocated to final year assessment items.

• **Level 4**: Involves blind peer review where two external peer reviewers receive de-identified unit materials and ungraded assessment items (i.e., the identity of the institution and the unit is not divulged). The two reviewers grade assessment items using criteria provided by the home institution. Feedback and graded items are returned to the home institution via a third party (Project Officer). The home institution receives feedback from two partners to inform practice. The identity of partners may be divulged by mutual agreement to enable further discussion.
  
  Purpose: to provide ‘arm’s length’ assurance of learning standards across institutions through blind peer review and grading of final year assessment items.

• Discipline-based approaches to calibrating academic staff continue (e.g., the Achievement Matters Project).
  
  Purpose: to calibrate academic staff across institutions, using external course-level reference points such as discipline standards.

Further options for the sector to pursue include:

• Identify and share institutional examples of where learning and teaching standards frameworks are being successfully developed and implemented (see section 4.3.1 for an example). This section provides a case study example to which other universities may add. Existing institutional frameworks such as these may be a useful starting point for guiding the development of learning and teaching standards in particular areas e.g., teaching standards may be developed in the areas of learning design, delivery and support; learning standards may involve a focus on one or more of the following: validated peer review of student outcomes, outcomes of objective tests, employer feedback, graduate feedback, to name a few.

• Develop a suite of sample program and subject/unit achievement standards statements. One example is that proposed in the TEQSA Discussion paper (2011) (see p.18) where a teaching standard statement in the category of “provision for student diversity” is proposed. In order to progress this, the definition and dimensions of learning standards would need to be identified, along with consideration of the range of ways in which learning standards might be expressed.
• Articulate the suite of reference points that can be used in various combinations and weights depending on the field of education concerned to validate program, subject or unit achievement standards. One under-utilised reference point is data from studies of the top ranking capabilities and competencies of graduates identified by their employers, colleagues and clients as performing successfully in the first three to five years of professional or disciplinary practice (see Scott, 2013). A wide range of other potentially relevant reference points have been identified earlier in this Report.

• Review the relative merits and feasibility of existing peer review models (e.g., the Go8 QVS of Standards project and the Krause-Scott et al Learning and Teaching Standards Project on peer review and moderation of coursework) and their focus on assessment artefacts, i.e., actual samples of student work as authentic evidence of learning standards.

• Consider the role of discipline standards and threshold learning standards in building a comprehensive subject and program achievement standards framework.

• When addressing learning standards focus on defining and benchmarking what is considered to be a ‘pass grade’ in final year units.

8.2 Recommendations
Based on the findings and outcomes of this project, it is recommended that:

1. The Chair of Australia’s Higher Education (HE) Standards Panel advocate for the use of the project’s ‘blind’ peer review methodology as a means to efficiently monitor and objectively assure the quality and comparability of disciplinary learning and assessment standards across Australia’s HE system.

2. The Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) endorse the process tested in this study as an efficient and effective way in which to externally assure the assessment standards of Australian higher education at the disciplinary, subject and, over time, the institutional level; further, that this endorsement apply to both self-accrediting and non self-accrediting institutions of higher education.

3. The Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) create a position for a National Assessment Quality and Standards Fellow/Advisor to
   a. assist the HE sector to establish the policy and practice frameworks to embed inter-institutional peer review of teaching and learning standards and
   b. identify and disseminate the most effective assessment practices identified through peer review in each professional or disciplinary area.

4. Higher education providers collaborate with peak disciplinary and professional bodies, under the coordination of the proposed OLT Advisor/Fellow (see Recommendation 3) to ensure that academic staff develop skills in articulating and using the full range of reference points now available for the purpose of monitoring and assuring learning outcome standards and relevance.

5. Higher education providers ensure that their assessment policies and quality frameworks are reviewed to include requirements for regular inter-institutional peer review of standards for final year undergraduate units, including review of unit inputs and assessment; further that priority be given to ensuring that academic staff, including sessional staff, have appropriate professional development to normalise consensus moderation and calibration activities within academic departments.
6. Higher education providers review academic workload policies and role statements for academic staff with teaching, coordination and assessment responsibilities to reflect expectations regarding regular involvement in consensus moderation and calibration activities.

7. The project team liaise with the OLT and experts across the sector to discuss establishing a national resource bank of validated assessment items and strategies by discipline, based on positive ratings from peer reviewers involved in peer review activities across the sector, that could be used as a resource by academics.

8. Further investigation be undertaken to determine if the use of final year capstone units of study and assessment tasks are a valid and feasible way to evaluate graduating students’ capability to integrate and appropriately apply to real world problems what they have learned in individual units of study in their selected discipline or profession.