Setting standards in Australian higher education?

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Abstract

In view of recent legislation to introduce the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency in Australia, greater emphasis is being placed on the notion of standards in higher education. A standards-based audit or assessment implies that institutions need to demonstrate performance or achievement against a set of explicit thresholds. This article explores the question of whether these standards, as a set of demonstrable thresholds, will be set by institutions, by TEQSA or by some other means? How will these thresholds be determined and who has the authority to set them? The article concludes by suggesting the setting of external national standards may change the locus of power and control away from institutions.

Keywords: Academic standards, quality, TEQSA, higher education

The Context for Standards

Since publication of the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008), otherwise known as the Bradley Review, there has been increasing emphasis and debate in Australia on the notion of standards in higher education. The review states that, 'Australia must enhance its capacity to demonstrate outcomes and appropriate standards in higher education if it is to remain internationally competitive and implement a demand-driven funding model' (p.128). The review also recommended a need for clarification and agreed measurements of standards and for institutions to demonstrate their processes for setting, monitoring and maintaining standards. In essence, there was seen to be a need for institutions to explicitly demonstrate their standards for the sake of public accountability.

As a consequence of the Bradley Review, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) was legislated in March 2011 and established in July 2011. Despite significant documentation about the role of TEQSA and a supporting Higher Education Standards Framework, it is not completely clear how TEQSA will operate, or how it will differ from its predecessor, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). In fact, there have been conflicting statements on TEQSA's role in the setting, monitoring and assessment of higher education standards. Much of this

confusion can be attributed to the fact that the language surrounding standards is opaque and abstract. Terms like quality, standards, excellence and criteria overlap considerably and are often used without precise meaning (Thompson-Whiteside, 2011). There is also confusion and conflation between the setting, achievement, monitoring and assessment of standards and these activities need to be distinguished from each other. This article deals specifically with the setting of standards. It does not in any way deal with the achievement of standards, or the monitoring and assessment of standards. However, it is important to note that these activities are intrinsically related to each other in dynamic ways.

The focus for this article is largely on teaching and learning standards, although reference will be made to other standards. Initially, I intend to provide a conceptual understanding of standards within the context of higher education and highlight various ways in which settings are made through qualifications frameworks and thresholds statements of learning outcomes. I also intend to provide an overview of the new Higher Education Standards Framework in Australia, but will specifically expand on the teaching and learning standards component. Lastly, I will explore how the setting of standards, which have traditionally been determined by institutions and individual academic staff, is potentially creating tensions between the perceived control of government and the autonomy of institutions.

What Are Standards?

Despite regular commentary on standards in higher education, there is little consensus about what they are. Standards become even more opaque when we talk specifically about 'academic standards' because many of the activities concerning standards in the academic arena are based on implicit, tacit practices (James, 2003). Academic standards are largely unknown and intangible, especially to those outside of teaching and learning practice or outside of a particular discipline. As a result, employers' understanding of quality and standards differ considerably to standards within the university (Morley & Aynsley, 2007). In essence, an academic standard is an abstract, multidimensional concept, used and interpreted in a variety of ways by different stakeholders (Aelterman, 2006; Brennan et al., 1996; Coates, 2010; Crozier et al., 2006). The settings and judgments of a 'good' standard is largely bound in the context of what is being judged and who is judging it.

More recent research would suggest that academic standards are generally viewed in two ways. The first is a set of general principles or practices (which often require qualitative interpretation), and the second is a set of explicit thresholds (Thompson-Whiteside, 2011). These thresholds tend to describe expectations and are set as minimum and normative standards. These levels may be described qualitatively (such as statements about the expected learning outcomes) or quantitatively using various performance indicators (such as teaching and learning indicators).

While most higher education systems use a combination of principles and thresholds, Anglophone countries use standards as explicit thresholds more often. This derives linguistically from the 'King's standard' around the late 16th century in England as a way to determine fixed measurements of currency for trade. The fixed thresholds were determined by the ruling King as a means of judging the quantity and implicitly, the quality of currency. Soon after, other standards emerged such as gold standard (circa 1638), the standard foot (circa 1650) and standard silver (circa 1690).

The standards were authoritative benchmarks and recognised exemplars of quality. By the 18th century, the use of the term standard in the English language began to split depending on its context and combination with other words. For example, 'standard English' meant the normative expectations of how the language should be spoken, whereas 'English standard' was interpreted as the minimal acceptable level (McArthur, 1999). However, measuring the capability of English language was more difficult than quantitative measures of weight and therefore considered implicit, tacit and open to interpretation. The quality, integrity and reliability of judging these standards were largely based on the abilities and expertise of the people judging and the process by which it was being judged.

Today, the idea of definable, measurable thresholds has been translated into higher education policy. Sadler (1987) provides a well cited definition of standards in the context of higher education as 'a definite level of excellence or attainment or the recognised measure of what is adequate for some purpose, established by authority, custom or consensus' (p. 194). There are some important points to consider in this definition. Firstly, the level is described as definite, but how is it considered to be a level of excellence and/or adequate? Presumably, the level is excellent because 'authority, custom or consensus' has agreed on it, but on what basis has this determination been made? It is critical to understand who is actually considered authoritative in higher education, how consensus would be reached and between which stakeholders. Standards are likely to have different settings depending on the collection of stakeholders who set them. The second critical point to make regarding Sadler's definition is that it only deals with the *setting* of expected standards and does not in any way deal with the potentially more complex issue of measuring whether those standards have been achieved. The setting and achievement of standards are dynamically related activities but need to be dealt with separately. Typically, one person or a group of people set standards and these are then achieved by another person or group of people. Normally, but not always, those who set the standards are also involved in judging achievement against those standards. Furthermore, the processes for monitoring standards (typically done over time) and the processes for assessing the achievement of standards are separate but connected activities. This article exclusively deals with the setting of standards but the settings inherently relate to the other three activities.
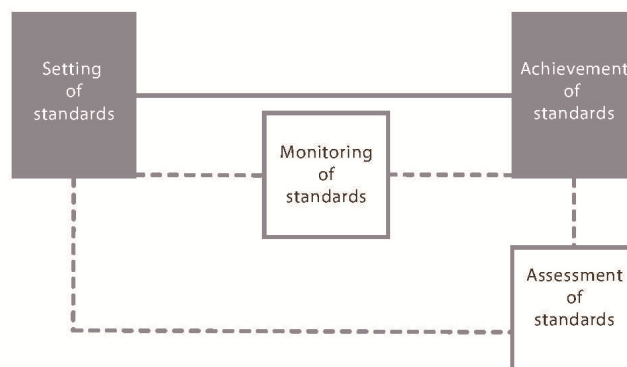

Figure 1. Four distinct activities within a standard.

Another definition of academic standards is one used for the Graduate Standards Program, developed by the Higher Education Quality Council in the UK (HEQC). Academic standards are defined as, 'explicit levels of academic attainment

which are used to describe and measure academic requirements and achievements of individual students and groups of students' (HEQC, 1997, p.10). This definition is more specific on its intent to set *and* measure student achievements. The Graduate Standards Program preceded a national inquiry from the United Kingdom (UK) government over concerns of falling standards, which ultimately led to the Dearing Report in 1997. The final report of the Graduate Standards Program recommended the creation of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), to replace the HEQC. The QAA sat within a quality framework built around four main elements: National Qualifications Frameworks, Subject Benchmark Statements, Program Specifications and the QAA Code of Practice. Subject Benchmark Statements are particularly important to the standards framework. These statements provide explicit descriptions about the expected graduate outcomes within a broad discipline. There are currently 56 discipline groups that have developed benchmark statements, which provide a fixed, authoritative reference point from which institutions can make informed judgments about the setting of their own standards and the achievement of their own graduates against those standards (Smith et al., 1999).

In Australia, the former Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) suggested that 'academic standards usually refer to student performance and levels of achievement on a particular piece of assessment, in a subject, or at the end of a degree' (DEST, 2002, p. 15). The focus here is not on the settings, but more on the assessment of students' performance and achievement. AUQA's definition of a standard was 'an agreed specification or other criterion used as a rule, guideline, or definition of a level of performance or achievement' (AUQA, 2010, p. 93). This definition focuses more on the setting of standards, but with intent to establish criteria by which assessment of performance or achievement can be made.

The development of subject benchmark statements in the UK clearly influenced the shift towards more explicit teaching and learning standards in Australia. In 2009, the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project was established by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) with the aim to develop threshold, learning outcomes over nine broad disciplines. For the purposes of this project, ALTC defined academic standards as 'learning outcomes described in terms of discipline-specific knowledge, discipline-specific skills including generic skills as applied in the discipline and discipline-specific capabilities' (ALTC, 2010, p. 1). Like the UK benchmark statements, the standards describe the minimum expectations of what a graduate should achieve. However, it is important to note that such statements would still require interpretation by institutions or external examiners.

Both the ALTC standards and the UK benchmark statements describe academic standards in terms of learning outcomes and therefore focus only on one type of standard—the expected achievements, skills and capabilities of students upon graduation. While the achievements of students are important, perhaps the most important standards to understand, it is necessary to recognise that other types of standards (such as teaching standards, English standards, entry standards and others) dynamically contribute to graduate achievements. In order to get clarity in the standards debate, it is important to specify different types of standards and how they might relate to each other.

The Higher Education Standards Framework

The implementation of the Australian Government's Higher Education Standards Framework proposes to address these different, interrelated standards. However, it is unclear at this stage how each of these standards are determined or set, at what level, or their relationship with each other. The Higher Education Standards Framework (DEEWR, 2011b) has five key elements:

- Provider Registration Standards
- Information Standards
- Qualification Standards
- Teaching and Learning Standards
- Research Standards

Subsumed within Provider Registration Standards is a sixth element called Provider Category Standards. It is not my intention here to go into the details of each standard, other than to say that the settings within each of these elements are largely opaque. Some standards are determined against a set of principles that are largely qualitative and require interpretation. Some standards are more quantitative, some are set as minimum standards or thresholds and some are implied as being set as normative standards. Some are contextually bound and aligned towards the missions and contexts of different institutions, some have national thresholds and others even contain reference to international standards (e.g., research standards).

While no institution in Australia would doubt the need for standards, there is uncertainty about the setting of standards and the development of criteria for making judgments against those standards. It is unclear, for example, whether the above standards will be determined at a national level by government (with or without consultation with institutions), developed by TEQSA, developed by institutions or a combination of each.

TEQSA's role in developing the Higher Education Standards Framework is also unclear and ambiguous. The government's response to the Bradley Review in a report titled *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (DEEWR, 2009) suggested that: 'TEQSA will…evaluate the performance of institutions and programs (p. 31)…and establish objective and comparative benchmarks of quality and performance'. It will '*establish minimum standards* [my emphasis] for registration and accreditation, as well as academic standards'. It then goes on to state that, 'discipline communities will own and take responsibility for implementing academic standards (working with professional bodies and other stakeholders where appropriate) within the academic traditions of collegiality, peer review, pre-eminence of disciplines and, importantly, academic autonomy' (pp. 31–32).

More recently, the Australian government declared that TEQSA is an 'independent body with powers to regulate university and non-university higher education providers, monitor quality and *set standards* [my emphasis]' (DEEWR, 2011c, para. 1).

Interpreting these statements would suggest that TEQSA aims to provide a set of national academic standards, which institutions are responsible for implementing, and then to evaluate institutions against those standards. Once again, the problem lies

in the lack of precision in the use of language. For example, it is now recognised and accepted that TEQSA will set, monitor and assess national Provider Registration Standards, which derive from the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes. However, the setting, monitoring and assessment of teaching and learning standards are less clear. The Australian Government recognise that it is perhaps the most difficult area to define (DEEWR, 2011a).

The Setting of Teaching and Learning Standards in Higher Education

If a standard is a fixed level of expected attainment from which comparisons and measurements are made, then two fundamental processes are required: setting the nature and level of the standard required and judging achievement against that level. While TEQSA clearly has a role in judging achievements against a set of thresholds, it is not yet clear who will set the standards or how they will be determined. Some standards (such as Provider Registration and Category Standards) are clearly developed and controlled by the government through TEQSA, but standards around teaching and learning are less certain. The newly established Office of Learning and Teaching within the government takes over part of ALTC's role but has little to do with the setting, monitoring or evaluation of teaching and learning standards. In 2011, the minister responsible for Higher Education established the Higher Education Standards Panel chaired by Professor Alan Robson with a clear role to advise on teaching and learning standards. However, it is unlikely that this panel will be able to set teaching and learning standards for every program in Australia.

John Brennan (as cited in Brennan et al., 1996) once summarised standards by stating 'standards are set by higher education and achieved by students' (p. 21). However, within this simple statement are complexities that hinge around the responsibilities and relationships between the institutions, their staff and students, as well as the precision of what is being judged, how and by whom. Given the autonomy of Australian universities, standards are typically set at different levels of the organisation, making reference to colleagues, peers, other institutions and external professional bodies. Standards are typically determined implicitly by a group of academic staff that shares the same disciplinary frameworks. As Pring (1992) notes:

> there is a dominant academic tradition which sees quality of intellectual endeavor (and the implicit standards of good and bad performance) to lie within specific traditions of disciplined enquiry. Such traditions are defined partly in terms of the relevant concepts, procedures, problems, and tests of validity. Thus, there *are* [Pring's emphasis] standards but these, though acknowledged in one's intellectual efforts, are more often than not unspoken. (p. 12)

However, the fact that standards are implicitly set within discipline groups makes it difficult for those outside of the discipline to understand them. Teaching and learning standards are set implicitly within the curriculum, the practice of teaching and the expectations of students. Staff with similar disciplinary knowledge interpret these standards and describe the disciplinary values and implicit expectations required of the students. It may be possible to see similar sets of values and standards within the same disciplines across different institutions but to those outside of the discipline group, standard setting is a subjective, tacit and opaque process.

The implicit nature of academic standards, particularly around teaching and learning activities, has prompted greater demands for transparency and accountability.

As a result we have seen the development of national and international qualification frameworks and the increased role of benchmarking across institutions and higher education systems. At the broadest level are the national and international qualification frameworks, which describe the minimum standards (expectations) for each qualification level. These describe qualifications as a set of broad learning objectives in categories such as: knowledge and understanding, applying knowledge and understanding, making judgments, communication and learning skills. In Australia, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) was introduced in 1995 and revised in July 2011. The AQF contains statements of broad learning outcomes for 10 integrated levels of qualification from school, vocational and higher education (AQFC, 2011).

Sitting below these broad national qualification frameworks are the discipline-specific statements of learning outcomes. Australia does not yet have a set of discipline-based standards and it is uncertain whether it will follow the UK system. Indeed, it is questionable whether the UK subject benchmark statements have made standards more explicit. The aim of the UK subject benchmark statements was to give greater 'confidence in the ability of higher education to regulate its standards' (Jackson, 1998, p. 139). In theory, by standardising and fixing an external reference point, the scope for institutions to set their own standards and the evaluation of student achievement against those standards is reduced. Here lies the crux of the problem. The relationship between the setting of national standards and institutional standards and achievements against those standards are not clear. The UK benchmark statements describe what graduates should be able to achieve, but do not show the *actual* standards set by departments or individual academic staff within different departments or institutions. Nor do they show the *actual* achievement of students against those standards. Benchmark statements provide consensual, broad, discipline expectations, but the individual institutions, departments and staff interpret those statements and set their own expectations against those guidelines. The students then interpret and aim to achieve those institutional expectations. Explicit statements of learning outcomes on their own do not necessarily make students' understanding of the standards any clearer (O'Donovan et al., 2008; Sadler, 2009). Summarising the effectiveness of the UK subject benchmark statements, Brown notes, 'the broad conclusion was that because of the extent to which academic standards depend on tacit knowledge and socialization into assessor groups, written definitions would have only a limited value' (2011, p. 67). Indeed, explicit national statements do not necessarily make the setting of standards at the institutional level any easier. As Jackson (1998) states:

> there is a logic inherent in standards-based quality assurance that makes the process of creating academic standards appear simple. The reality, which is revealed by attempts at greater explicitness and precision in defining the dimensions of standards, is that setting standards is a complex and sophisticated process requiring many variables to be measured, weighed and moderated within very different educational and training contexts. (p. 139)

The fact that benchmark statements are described as learning outcomes (which are by themselves narrow conceptions of competency) tends to raise tension between and within discipline groups (Brockmann et al., 2008). In Australia, AUQA's discussion paper on student achievement standards and the ALTC standards project initiated a debate about standardised national curricula, a drive towards conformity and a threat to institutional and/or disciplinary autonomy (Lane, 2009). The problem

for any standard is that if they are too precise (qualitatively or quantitatively) they will constrain institutions and if they are too broad they become ineffective. As noted by McTaggart (2009), 'common standards will either kill off innovation or be so vague as to fail to define practice' (p. 23).

The Control and Autonomy of Standards

It has been suggested that the debate on standards is also a debate about power, control and autonomy in higher education (Brennan et al., 1996). The desire for national standards has the potential to pull against standards set by individual institutions against their own unique missions and goals. Part of this is to gain a sense of control in a mass higher education sector and to manage risk across the system. As Teichler (2001) suggested, 'the search to improve fit-for-purpose is constantly overshadowed by "top-down" pressures for homogeneity of criteria and a stratification of results' (p. 5). There is a sense that whoever controls the criteria and setting of standards gains significant control. As a result, much of the controversy about standards relates to who owns the standards and the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders in achieving those standards. These tensions occur at four different levels: the first level is global, the second is national, the third is institutional and the fourth is departmental. Each level has different criteria and therefore the language games of power, control and autonomy are played out differently. The ownership of standards and the roles and responsibilities towards achieving each standard will be different at each level.

At a global level there is increased cooperation between quality regulators and indeed professional accreditation bodies. Whether intentional or not, these 'supra quality agencies' are asserting power through best practice and codes (Harvey, 2004). International professional accreditation is often seen as a symbol of global recognition and quality. Increasingly, global rankings and major international projects like the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development's (OECD) Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) will be used as a proxy for quality and therefore become a major reference point for comparison with national and institutional standards. It is important to note that the criteria for standards at an international level may not align with standards at a national or institutional level.

At a national level, many governments maintain control 'at distance' under the guise of quality assurance and quality audits (Marginson, 1997). As such, externally imposed quality audits are often seen to impinge on institutional autonomy and academic professionalism (Anderson, 2006; Newton, 2002). The response to AUQA's discussion paper on student achievement standards was partially around an assumption of imposed national curricula (Lane, 2009). The assumption was that national teaching and learning standards would force academic staff to lose control over what they teach. In response, the Australian academic community initiated a number of projects (largely sponsored through ALTC) aiming to define and ultimately measure standards. The aim was to 'reclaim the agenda' for standards and to gain sense of authority and control on the debate (Trounson, 2011). There is a sense that if the academic community does not begin to direct the setting, monitoring or assessment of standards, then the government may well simply prescribe something.

Tension between the control and autonomy of standards also occurs between individual academic staff, their departments and the university. There are several

instances, particularly in the area of assessment, where academic staff feel a loss of control over grades awarded to students. Reports have highlighted how grades have been altered, or the judgments of academic staff have been brought into question (Alderman, 2008; Newman, 2008). To mistrust academic judgments (in terms of assessment of student achievement against a set of standards) potentially implies that their settings are wrong, since judgments are made in reference to those settings. As highlighted earlier, the setting and assessment of standards are not detached phenomena. However, the fact that these settings are largely implicit and tacit makes it hard for either individual staff or institutions to criticise or indeed defend them.

Conclusion

The setting of standards in higher education is complex but standards are increasingly seen as demonstrable, measurable thresholds that are set with national-level criteria. Whether these standards are set at minimal, notional or a high level is debatable, but the fact that they are being set at a national level has the potential to impinge on the autonomy of institutions to set their own standards. While minimum, national standards may be necessary to manage risk for some aspects of the standards framework, other standards like teaching and learning standards require scope for flexibility. The complexities of teaching and learning and the number of variables that can play a part in these activities are such that national standards may restrict innovation and good practice. Academic staff need to individually and collectively, within their disciplines, have the autonomy to set and assess their own standards. Institutions and their central units that are given the task to set, promote, enhance and support quality, need to have flexibility in setting, monitoring and assessing teaching and learning standards that align more closely to institutional missions. This does not suggest there should be no process of external evaluation or level of accountability. Teaching and learning standards do require scrutiny against a set of external reference points, but there needs to be sufficient flexibility and operational interpretation.

The process of setting standards is largely about gaining consensus and control of the criteria used to determine the nature and level of a standard. However, it should also be recognised that standards shift over time. Academic standards and the expected achievements of students are not timeless. Aside from the development of new knowledge, standards shift because they are inherently connected to the political, economic and social fabric in which institutions operate. The people involved in setting and assessing standards constantly change and bring with them different expectations. Inevitably, the people involved in setting and assessing standards are critical and the diversity of stakeholders is part of ongoing tensions of authority, autonomy and power within higher education. Institutions and individual academic staff are, and should continue to be responsible for setting standards, but it is inevitable that there will be increased pressure and influence from external, national and international standards.

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