The Commonwealth of Learning

Scholarship, regulation and the common pursuit of knowledge

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To what extent do higher education regulators and quality agencies need to assess the level of scholarship in universities and other higher education providers? To answer this question, we need to address the following issues: What is scholarship and why does it need to be upheld? Does it feature in higher education quality standards and codes, and how would an agency go about assessing the level of scholarship? Scholarship is an essential dimension of a higher education learning environment based upon the educational theory of constructivism. Constructivism leads us to a concept of higher education based on the common pursuit of knowledge through inquiry. If the prime role of teachers is to stimulate and support student learning through inquiry, then it follows that they must be continually engaged in inquiry themselves. Agencies can take a risk-based approach to testing the level of scholarship in higher education providers, which will not normally be necessary for low-risk providers.

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Introduction

Universities and colleges have been inextricably linked with scholarship since they began in the late medieval and early modern period. They evolved from groups of scholars who banded together to offer their services to students in a more organised context. The level of organisation has increased over the centuries, until 21st century universities became large corporations with professional management and tens of thousands of students.

Most governments invest large amounts of public money in higher education through grants and subsidies, and so they seek ways of holding the universities and colleges accountable. Research grant agencies often mount periodic assessments of the research they have been funding, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the United Kingdom and the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) framework.

To what extent do other higher education quality agencies assess the level of scholarship in universities and colleges, and to what extent is this necessary? To answer this question, we need to address the following issues:

1. What is scholarship?
2. Why does it need to be upheld?
3. Does it feature in higher education quality standards and codes?
4. How would an agency go about assessing the level of scholarship at a university or a college?

What is scholarship?

Scholarship in the early modern period consisted almost exclusively of the intensive study of texts. Knowledge was based on the authoritative texts passed down from antiquity, and scholarly activities consisted of clarifying those texts, copying them, and then interpreting them for the contemporary context.

In his British Academy lecture, 'The life of learning', the renowned historian of this period, Keith Thomas, recounted how Protestant and Catholic scholars produced opposing accounts of church history to justify their respective religions,

and Biblical scholarship had profound political implications. Scholars also sought instruction on all topics from the works of the ancient authors of Greece and Rome, which 'were believed to contain the foundations of human knowledge' (Thomas, 2001).

Around the same period, others started to pioneer a new approach to the accumulation of knowledge through systematic direct observation of the natural world. This approach was first codified in Francis Bacon's *Novum Organon* (1620), in which he maintained audaciously: 'my aim is to open up a new road for the intellect to follow, a road the ancients didn't know and didn't try'. His proposed method was to accumulate 'instances' that confirm a hypothesis as widely as possible, and to rule out conflicting instances as irrelevant. He proposed actively searching for instances that would confirm a hypothesis if observed, such as observations that would confirm that the earth revolves around the sun rather than vice versa (Bacon, 1620, Book 2, #36).

This developed into the experimental method based on confirming hypotheses based on pre-determined tests, including pre-determined processes of research and outcomes specified in advance that have to be achieved to confirm the hypothesis. The experimental model proved to be so successful in uncovering reliable knowledge about the natural world and in devising new technologies that it become the dominant mode of knowledge discovery, tending to overshadow the older forms of scholarly endeavour.

In scientific discovery, propositions should be tested, and as Popper (1963) maintained, should be formulated in such a way that it is *possible* for them to be tested, and therefore to be 'falsified'. It is not enough to accumulate confirming instances as Bacon maintained, but the scientist must set a test which has a binary outcome – a result which either confirms or refutes the proposition. This leads to a higher standard of proof compared to non-scientific disciplines, which brings to mind the distinction in law between the criminal standard (proof beyond reasonable doubt) and the civil standard – proof on the balance of probabilities.

The Carnegie Foundation (USA) realised that the devaluing of other forms of knowledge work had gone too far, which led to the publication of the most famous work on scholarship, Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990). Boyer revalued other forms of scholarly work through proposing a typology of four forms of scholarship:

1. Discovery – conducting original research that leads to the addition of new knowledge
2. Integration – the synthesis of existing knowledge across topics and disciplines
3. Application – applying existing knowledge to solve problems
4. Teaching and Learning – the systematic study of teaching and learning processes.

The traditional study of texts and artefacts from the past has continued and become more sophisticated over time. But the critique and analysis of a work of literature or art does not fit easily into this typology as it does not extend across disciplines or topics, required in Boyer's conceptualisation of the scholarship of synthesis, nor indeed does their creation.

Boyer's own field was audiology and speech pathology, so it is understandable that his framework was not so accommodating for the humanities and the arts. It is more suitable for forms of propositional knowledge, and least suitable to sheer invention.

To select an example closer to home, Tomlinson (1984) maintained that Shakespeare's history plays were not aligned either with the conservative viewpoint of monarchs or with the radical opposition to the established order posed by rebels but were intrinsically multivocal. While elements in the plays were persuasively characterised in the paper in such a way as to support this view, there is no test of validity that can be applied and so it is not falsifiable. To my knowledge it has not been falsified in nearly 40 years, so at least we can say it has stood the test of time!

There is a need to find a more evident place within scholarship for work that brings new insights into the existing body of knowledge and creates works of art that break new ground. These forms of scholarly activity are more suited to disciplines in the creative arts and humanities than the scientific model of objective testing and falsifiability.

Boyer's second category could be reconceptualised as 'Analysis', to accommodate analysis both across and within boundaries that brings new insights.

However, the Australian Research Council defines research as spanning both categories:

> the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way to generate new concepts, methodologies, inventions and understandings. This could include the synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative. (ARC, 2017)

This builds on a definition in the OECD's *Frascati Manual:*

> Research and experimental development (R&D) comprise creative and systematic work undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge – including knowledge of humankind, culture and society – and to devise new applications of available knowledge. (OECD, 2015 2.5)

The OECD goes on to observe that 'R&D is always aimed at new findings, based on original concepts (and their interpretation) or hypotheses' (2.6). It lists some tests of whether an activity meets the definition (2.7). It must be novel; creative; uncertain; systematic; and transferable and/or reproducible. Some of these are attributes of the research process rather than outputs.

They fit all the forms of advancement of knowledge discussed, with the exception perhaps of the last attribute: transferable and/or reproducible. Neither the processes by which creative artists arrive at their creative works or performances nor many of the works themselves are easily reproducible, unless we count mass production of books and records. However, any creative work can be disseminated, one way or another, and can form a precedent for a new direction taken up by other artists.

To accommodate creative works and innovation better, Boyer's first category could be reconceptualised as research and innovation. The overall title of 'Discovery' implies there are existing territories or phenomena out there which are not yet known but need to be discovered or uncovered. This is compatible with the basic definition of research as the creation of new knowledge, but not so much the creation of an artefact which never existed before, which could be a notable work of art but could also be a new technology that never existed before. Conceptualising this form of scholarship as research and innovation would relieve pressure on artists to emulate the methodologies of the natural or social sciences to justify their place within the academy and would give free rein to agencies to become research and innovation agencies. Artistic creation belongs under the heading of 'innovation' more fittingly than under 'research' or 'discovery'.

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Fortunately, Beethoven did not have to justify the Eroica Symphony as research, but it undoubtedly represents the highest form of artistic innovation, that changed the course of symphonic music. A creative composer or writer operating within the academy works within a different context compared to those outside. While the creative process and output might be essentially the same, they will bring an expanded knowledge of these to their teaching, compared with colleagues who have not ventured into creative development.

The contemporary definitions of research sidestep the issues relating to proof and justification discussed above, and could accommodate scholarly papers (such as this one) that support their contentions with arguments and evidence but do not aspire to the criminal or scientific standards of proof.

Boyer's 'Application' sounds close to the Frascati Manual's definition of Experimental Development (2.9): 'systematic work, drawing on knowledge gained from research and practical experience and producing additional knowledge, which is directed to producing new products or processes or to improving existing products or processes'. Whereas Boyer wrote of applications to professional activities such as 'medical diagnosis, serving clients in psychotherapy, shaping public policy, creating an architectural design, or working with the public schools' (Boyer 1990, p. 22), the Frascati manual is more focussed on developing innovation in a business and industrial context. But the underlying concept of using knowledge derived from research to solve problems is essentially similar.

So, we can see that the contemporary scope of the term 'research and development' has expanded to include three out of the four categories of scholarship in Boyer, thus colonising most of the territory. We can reformulate all of these as 'research, innovation and development'.

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is a useful category, taking in the great expansion of knowledge about strategies that enhance student learning.

The Higher Education Academy published a literature review on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), which observed that: 'There is a degree of perplexity as to what SoTL actually means, both in the minds of academics; and in the field of research' (Fanghanel *et al.*, 2015, p. 9).

At one end of the spectrum, SoTL consists of the scholarship of discovery as applied to teaching and learning, in other words traditional publications on this subject based on formal research. Formal research into how students learn and what strategies teachers can use to support and promote student learning forms a major part of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, distinguished by the production of papers in research journals recording the 'new knowledge' that is being added to the knowledge base.

However, a case can also be made out for including many traditional collegial activities related to teaching within the ambit of the scholarship of teaching and learning, including the sharing of knowledge within communities of practice, deliberations within academic governing bodies about course design and all aspects of practices undertaken to shape and develop optimal learning environments, regardless of whether they lead to publication, but so long as they are part of a collegial conversation with colleagues. Many of these activities yield insights that can improve teaching, and therefore student learning. Even the systematic study of a field or topic undertaken in preparation for teaching and course design can be considered a form of scholarship.

> These studies point to a need to maintain the concept of a 'big tent' ..., and to foster diversity in the way SoTL is practised to accommodate newcomers in a highly diversified sector. Diversification has generated the concept of *contextualised scholarship* – that is, knowledge production/co-production based on the premise of solving problems in the field of prac-

> tice and the wider social and global context ... – so a kind of conflation of SoTL with the scholarship of application. (Fanghanel *et al.*, 2015, p. 16)

These diverse activities can be clarified through the typology used in Kern *et al.* (2015), who arrange various activities pertaining to the scholarship of teaching and learning within quadrants along two axes: private v. public, and systematic v. informal. Traditional scholarly publications fall into only one of these quadrants, and the other quadrants constitute essentially types of 'scholarly teaching', including presentations, portfolios and course development.

The contributors to Hutchings (1998) explain how a course (or subject) portfolio can be seen as a scholarly report of an investigation into the evolution of the course, into the extent to which its design enabled students to achieve the intended learning outcomes, and how it could be modified to improve outcomes.

Schön (1995) maintained that the scholarship of teaching could be seen as a kind of action research. Scholars needed to go beyond the conventions of technical experimental design and pursue forms of inquiry based on reflective practice – both practice in the professional disciplines and their practice as teachers.

This is all the more important in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which many providers were forced to transfer all teaching and assessment to online modes. This was an emergency response which met the objectives of enabling students to continue their course without face-to-face interaction, but more sophisticated approaches to teaching and assessing online will be needed to be developed as online education is expected to continue as a higher proportion of the delivery mix into the future. Students reported through surveys that there was a decline in their opportunities to interact with academic staff and supporting staff to find ways to maintain interaction online will be an important focus for the scholarship of teaching and learning going forward (TEQSA, 2020a).

The larger the tent, the more difficult it is to make any meaningful distinction between scholarship and academic teaching itself. Some of the activities in Kern's non-research quadrants amount to 'preparation for teaching', so that it becomes difficult to imagine any form of academic teaching that did not include these activities.

Scholarly teaching is one of the few spaces left for forms of scholarship beyond the augmented domain of research (including research into learning and teaching). We can also include dissemination of knowledge to professional networks, through activities such as the development of new standards and publications in professional journals containing commentary on new developments. Including active engagement with the professions can counter any impression that 'scholarship' is an arcane activity carried out in the cloistered environment of academe but not relevant to the real world of business and industry.

So, a new typology of scholarship could contain only two categories:

- research, innovation and development
- dissemination, through
  - scholarly teaching
  - professional development outreach.

However, typology and sorting scholarly activities into categories have their limitations.

In a further Carnegie Foundation report, *Scholarship Assessed,* Glassick *et al.* (1997) propose six standards that any academic work must meet to be considered scholarly: clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective presentation, and reflective critique (p. 36).

These attributes cut through a lot of the discussion of typology to show what many of the types have in common but are somewhat oriented towards process as opposed to purpose.

What is the conceptual unity that draws all these forms of scholarly activity together and illuminates their purpose?

The common purpose that runs through all forms of scholarship is: systematic inquiry, innovation and the advancement of knowledge. Contemporary scholars extend the boundaries of knowledge within a wide collegial environment.

This environment can be seen as the 'Commonwealth of Learning' referred to originally by John Locke (1690) in the 'Epistle to the Reader' of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding.* This formulation in turn is akin to the concept of 'The Republic of Letters' and indicates a self-organising community of scholars that engages in a running high-level conversation across time and space to advance knowledge.

Why does scholarship need to be upheld?

Innovation and the advancement of knowledge have value in themselves and bring manifold benefits to society. Both can take place outside the academy, including within research institutes and commercial companies that have research arms, whose scientists may publish scholarly papers on generic topics that are not commercial in confidence or originate patents on topics that are.

So, universities and other teaching institutions by no means have a monopoly on either innovation or the advancement of knowledge.

Scholarship has a vital role in forming the distinctive learning environments of higher education, as referred to by Probert (2014), at the very beginning of her discussion paper on 'Why scholarship matters in higher education'. In the higher education learning environment, knowledge cannot be conceptualised as fixed and 'given' but is constantly

developing. Teachers need to be aware of these constantly extending boundaries of knowledge and to be introducing their students to the latest developments.

Paul Ramsden referred to 'a vision of higher education as an engaged partnership between students and providers' (Ramsden, 2008, p. 8,). He goes on to observe that: 'There is abundant evidence that the most effective higher education environments are ones in which students are diligently involved as part of a community of learners' (p. 16).

One of the implications of these two observations is that learning is a communal endeavour in which both teachers and learners must actively participate. The learning environment is designed and operated by teachers who are also learners, who are perpetual students. Teachers need to constantly refresh and extend their knowledge before sharing it with students.

We can go further by considering the nature of learning. Constructivism is a dominant paradigm of learning in higher education. Both teachers and students are engaged in a process of active inquiry. Knowledge must be continually constructed or reconstructed in the terms understood by each individual: 'In other words, students learn by fitting new information together with what they already know' and extending their mental models. The role of teachers is to support and facilitate this process of constructing knowledge through dialogue with students (Bada, 2015). The river of knowledge is never the same when you return to it to teach the same unit again.

So, constructivism leads us to a concept of higher education based essentially in the common pursuit of knowledge through inquiry, in short – scholarship.

If the prime role of teachers is to stimulate and support student learning through inquiry, then it follows that they must be continually engaged in inquiry themselves. They too need to build and rebuild their understanding of a given topic or field in the common pursuit. If their knowledge remains fixed and does not develop over time, they will not be able to support student inquiry.

Accordingly, it is almost impossible to be an effective higher education teacher without engaging in continual scholarship, and it would be impossible to build a higher education learning environment without teachers maintaining a constant level of scholarly activity.

The higher education provider must develop as an advanced learning community, in which both teachers and students are continually learning.

The place of scholarship in higher education standards and codes

If scholarship is an essential attribute of higher education, then we would expect it to feature in the standards that are set for providers of higher education to achieve, and this can be observed easily in the Anglophone countries.

These standards characteristically focus on the learning and teaching environment, on the components or building blocks of that environment and on the level of scholarly activities of academic staff.

The New England Commission of Higher Education's *Standards for Accreditation* (2021) include many references to scholarship. They assume that the institution's purposes include 'scholarship, research, and public service' (1.3), so these activities are considered necessary in and of themselves. They also assume that 'through their scholarly pursuits, all faculty are current in the theory, knowledge, skills, and pedagogy of their discipline or profession' (6.11).

The 2012 edition of the UK *Quality Code for Higher Education* (QAA, 2012) contained many references to scholarship. Its Chapter on Teaching and Learning started from a general expectation that 'every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner' (p. 8). A key indicator of good practice was that: 'Learning and teaching practices are informed by reflection, evaluation of professional practice, and subject-specific and educational scholarship' (Indicator 3, p. 13). Echoing Boyer, it went on to declare: 'Scholarship may include conventional research (discovery of new knowledge), innovative application or integration of existing knowledge, for example in professional practice, or the study of learning and teaching processes and practices' (p. 14). In appointing and developing staff, providers should consider the extent of their understanding of disciplinary scholarship and teaching and learning scholarship (p. 15).

In the light of the restructuring of the UK quality assurance system and the transition of QAA to a membership-based voluntary participation model, the text of the Quality Code was extensively revised and stripped down to the fundamentals of teaching and learning. Consequently, supporting functions such as scholarship no longer feature in the Code itself. However, the advice on appointing and developing staff reappears in non-mandatory 'Advice and Guidance' (QAA, 2018).

The new regulatory body, the Office for Students (2018), has a regulatory framework document that contains requirements for providers who seek degree awarding powers, which must provide evidence that all staff have:

> Understanding of current research and advanced scholarship in their discipline and that such knowledge and understanding directly inform and enhance their teaching. Also, active engagement with research and/or advanced scholarship to a level commensurate with the level and subject of the qualifications being offered. (Criterion C1.1)

Finally, Australia's *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021*, (Australian Government, 2021) includes within the fundamental requirements of all providers that their 'academic and teaching staff are active in scholarship

that informs their teaching' (B1.1.3). And the Section on Staffing requires teaching staff and their managers to have 'knowledge of contemporary developments in the discipline or field, which is informed by continuing scholarship or research or advances in practice (A3.2.3a).

The UK and Australian standards are largely based around the concept of 'scholarly teaching', and do not include scholarship as an end in itself, as the New England standards do.

Assessing levels of scholarship

How do agencies go about assessing whether the academic staff of a provider (or of a prospective provider that applies to be admitted into the higher education space) are engaging sufficiently in scholarship? Quality assurance agencies can leave the qualitative evaluation of scholarly outputs that fall under the broad heading of 'research' to the research agencies.

This is because their main interest is in assuring the quality of student learning outcomes, and their standards and codes direct them towards assessing scholarly input into teaching. As we have seen, this is a fundamental requirement in threshold standards.

However, all types of scholarly activities should be considered, and the importance of research outputs is higher when assessing requirements that go beyond the threshold, such as the Australian category standards for registration as a university. These specifically require levels of research activity across a number of broad fields, requirements which are due to be progressively increased as a result of the new HESF in force from 2021.

Agencies can take a risk-based approach to evaluating evidence of scholarly teaching. Paradoxically, it is practical to commence with lists of publications which will mainly fall into the category of research (including research into teaching and learning) without the application to teaching being evident. But these lists can extend beyond peer-reviewed research to other forms of publications, such as professional journals and commissioned research.

Agencies can also have regard to the reference lists in the unit outlines or guides for the courses offered by the provider to ascertain, for example: do they include the most relevant and recent publications? Lists of publications and references provide some *prima facie* evidence that staff members are both engaging in their own scholarship and engaging students in consideration of current scholarship by others.

Most providers will be compiling this evidence for annual reports on scholarship, so it is likely to be readily available without placing an additional burden on them to demonstrate compliance. Direct evidence of scholarly input into day-to-day teaching is more difficult to obtain. When the level of scholarly activity is not sufficiently evident on the basis of publication lists, agencies may need to go further and require some additional evidence of how a sample of selected staff members are drawing on other scholarly activities to inform their teaching. This might include evidence about their active participation in communities of practice relating to learning and teaching, literature reviews in preparation for course design and so on.

They might also be called upon to show how a sample of staff members were contributing to their professions. But to be considered scholarship, this should go beyond routine professional practice to show how the staff members are applying their academic knowledge to advance the profession. Preparing routine tax returns for individual taxpayers is professional practice, and there is value in lecturers in accounting continuing to practise their profession. However, the examples given above of contributing to the development of new professional standards or writing in the professional journal are more appropriate for inclusion in a report on scholarly activities.

Prospective providers cannot be expected to hire a full complement of staff before approval to operate is given, which makes it difficult for the agency to assess their level of scholarly activity. On the other hand, applicants can approach prospective staff members and secure their agreement to be included in a list of staff members lined up for employment if approval is granted, and these can provide their resumés including lists of publications.

And the agency can seek evidence on paper about the applicant's commitment to supporting scholarship, for example by committing funds for scholarly professional development in the budget or by adopting a policy framework for the promotion of scholarship. The agency will want to know whether there is an (existing or planned) program of professional development that includes scholarly activities such as those communities of practice. To what extent is scholarship integrated into a provider's reward and recognition framework, including recruitment, promotion and performance review policies?

Many of these issues are discussed in the guidance note on scholarship issued by Australia's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, and a recent discussion paper seeking input into whether the scope of activities classed as scholarly activities should be widened (TEQSA, 2018 & TEQSA, 2020b).

Overall, an agency can take a progressive approach to assessing the level of scholarly activity in a provider. In the case of the lower risk providers, it may not need to go beyond the traditional annual report on scholarship mainly listing research and development publications (including patents), but, if necessary, can seek out examples of the advancement of a profession or scholarly teaching

To what extent should agencies go beyond assessing the mere prevalence of scholarship within a provider to evaluate the quality of the scholarship? In the case of the scholarship

of discovery, they can rely on the elaborate systems of peer review operated by academic journals, and the further layer of qualitative review in national evaluation exercises such as the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). It would be a waste of public money to duplicate these. But in some cases (for example applicants for registration in one of Australia's university categories), this information will not be available as they are not yet eligible to participate. The agency can then simulate the evaluation methodologies of the research agencies, using experienced assessors who have served on the national exercises. Peer reviewers can also be used if necessary to evaluate non-research forms of scholarship.

Conclusion

So, providers and prospective providers need to be ready to show how they will create an environment conducive to scholarly activity, and operational providers need to be able to show that staff are in fact active in scholarship that informs their teaching.

And scholarship must not only be done, it must be seen to be done. It must be evident to the outside observer, including quality agencies, that each provider is an active learning community engaged in the common pursuit of knowledge through inquiry, and the advancement and dissemination of knowledge.

Academic work is essentially exploratory. The contemporary scholar cannot rest with received knowledge but must continually strive to go beyond, or as Tennyson put it, in his immortal poem 'Ulysses':

> To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
> Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

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