

The Neglected Role of a Neglected Body

Academic Boards' Role in Assuring 'Equivalent' Standards

Gavin Moodie

Right now Australian universities are unable to verify that their degrees meet internationally accepted standards. This role ought to have been the responsibility of academic boards.

MCEETYA'S NATIONAL PROTOCOLS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION APPROVAL PROCESSES

Almost all Australian universities are established under their own Act of Parliament, but since 30 June 2001 their administering governments have discharged their responsibilities for higher education in accordance with the national protocols for higher education approval processes. These protocols were adopted by the meeting of the State, Territory and federal ministers, MCEETYA – the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA 2000).

Protocol 1 of MCEETYA's national protocols for higher education approval processes is the criteria and processes for recognising universities. These are the full criteria for recognising universities.

Criteria

2.14 An Australian university will demonstrate the following features:

- authorisation by law to award higher education qualifications across a range of fields and to set standards for those qualifications which are equivalent to Australian and international standards;
- teaching and learning that engage with advanced knowledge and inquiry;
- a culture of sustained scholarship extending from that which informs inquiry and basic teaching and learning, to the creation of new knowledge through research, and original creative endeavour;
- commitment of teachers, researchers, course designers and assessors to free inquiry and the systematic advancement of knowledge; and
- governance, procedural rules, organisation, admission pol-

icies, financial arrangements and quality assurance processes, which are underpinned by the values and goals outlined above, and which are sufficient to ensure the integrity of the institution's academic programs; and

- sufficient financial and other resources to enable the institution's program to be delivered and sustained into the future.

2.15 These broad criteria should be supported by more elaborated criteria. (MCEETYA 2000)

It is significant that the national criteria for recognising universities refer to the standards of qualifications, not the quality of institutions or of their graduates. Quality has a connotation of variability, that there is a continuum of quality from high to low. Quality also sometimes has a connotation of relativism. All institutions are committed to being of an appropriate quality. Most Australian universities aspire to achieve the highest quality in their academic activities. Even the universities or campuses that don't aspire to be of the highest quality nonetheless are committed to meeting the level of quality that they have specified for themselves. There is much strength in the argument that within obvious limits universities should specify their own aspirations for the quality of their activities and that they should be free to advance them in their own way.

But the position is quite different with the standard of university graduates. Employers and the general community rely on the award of a degree as certifying at least a level of competence, but hopefully also a level of skill and a body of knowledge. By conferring a bachelor of commerce upon a student an Australian university is certifying that the graduate is of, at least, the similar standard to other commerce graduates in the same year, that they are of a similar standard to the university's

previous commerce graduates, and that they are of a similar or higher standard to business and commerce graduates of other Australian universities. The university is also certifying that the commerce graduate is of a similar standard to an arts or science graduate, although currently it may not be possible to specify standards between disciplines as precisely as standards within disciplines.

'Standard' is therefore different to 'quality' in being generally understood to relate to some external or publicly verifiable reference. While one understands different levels of standard, again at least popular use has the notion of a single, minimum standard, one talks of raising or lowering 'the' standard as if there were a bar or hurdle to be cleared. James and colleagues (James et al 2002, p. 2) 'use "standards" to refer to the nature and levels of learning outcomes that students are expected to demonstrate in their university studies'.

CURRENT METHODS FOR SETTING STANDARDS

When asked to demonstrate that they 'set standards for [their higher education qualifications] which are equivalent to Australian and international standards', Australian universities typically refer to a range of measures:

- their staff have qualifications of similar standard to other Australian and international universities;
- their subject and program proposals are scrutinised by peers in curriculum approval committees of departments, faculties and academic board;
- their programs are reviewed regularly by peers outside the university;
- their syllabuses and reading lists are of similar standard to those of other (Australian) universities;
- they compare standards at national and perhaps international meetings in their fields; and
- their graduates are readily accepted by employers and into research higher degree programs at other Australian and international universities.

Many universities also refer to the accreditation of their programs by vocational bodies or registration boards, but this is an inadequate assurance of academic standards. First, vocational accreditation covers only about half the universities' graduates – generally not covered are graduates of the big areas of arts, education (outside Queensland), the liberal sciences and graduates in business other than accounting. Secondly, external accreditation is directed to assuring vocational competence, not academic standard. Thirdly, external accreditation itself is of variable thoroughness and quality. And finally universities surely don't want to cede the maintenance of academic standards to vocational bodies or registration boards.

A few departments in a few universities can report that other universities' staff sit on their program advisory committees and a few can even report some informal moderation,

typically that a sample of scripts in some final year subjects are assessed by colleagues in other universities. But the practice is sketchy and Richard James and colleagues (James et al 2002, p. 2) observed correctly in their submission to the Crossroads review that at present Australia 'lacks adequate and explicit mechanisms for knowing about the standards of degrees'. They elaborated:

Staff 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. Moderation processes are almost non-existent and the involvement of external examiners is confined to postgraduate level. This is not to suggest staff lack confidence in the overall academic standards reached by the majority of students, but the processes by which standards are defined and monitored are uneven and rarely explicit. By and large, academic standards are a matter of professional trust, underpinned by governance processes that guarantee academic autonomy, and internal systems for course approval. These are generally inaccessible and sometimes arcane from the perspective of external stakeholders. (James et al 2002, p. 2)

In the next sections I argue that this is an unacceptable position for Australian higher education: it does not meet the expectations of the Australian Universities Quality Agency and it does not displace the numerous informal indications of variable standards.

REPORTS OF THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES QUALITY AGENCY

The Australian Universities Quality Agency explicitly does not aim to examine universities' standards. Its audits are 'a systematic and independent examination to determine whether activities and related results comply with planned arrangements and whether these arrangements are implemented effectively and are suitable to achieve objectives' (Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA 2002, p. 17, quoting from *The Australian/New Zealand Standard*, 1994). As it says in its overview of each university's audit, the agency 'bases its audits on each organisation's own objectives, together with the MCEETYA national protocols for higher education approval processes' (AUQA 2003a, p. 1). The agency's audits are relative in this sense:

As each auditee will have systems that are relevant to its own objectives and character, the actual procedures used and the way they are implemented will vary from auditee to auditee. Amid this variety, AUQA's anchor point for drawing conclusions on quality is always the objectives of the auditee, together with any externally set objectives. For institutions such external objectives include those

set out in the Act or Regulation under which the institution is recognised, other relevant legislation, and the MCEETYA Protocols (DETYA, 2000; see also Chapter 3). Accreditation agency objectives include the MCEETYA Protocols and various other legislated requirements. (AUQA 2002, p. 17)

Thus, the quality agency does not audit the standard of universities' graduates. Furthermore, as the agency makes clear in many of its reports and most emphatically in its report of its audit of Macquarie University (page 5), it relies heavily on universities' primary self-evaluation. This in turn relies on the operation of universities' own quality assurance processes and the bodies responsible for them. Universities' senior academic deliberative bodies, which I shall refer to generically as academic boards, are of course central to universities' quality assurance, as the agency makes clear repeatedly. Of the 17 reports of university audits on the agency's web site at the time I prepared this paper, academic boards feature prominently in 15 reports and perfunctorily if at all in only 2 reports (of the Australian Catholic University and Macquarie University).

The various roles the agency described for academic boards are to be the third key governance entity with the governing body and the vice chancellor (UWA, p 9), the university's academic leader (Newcastle, p 14), to conduct university-wide discussions of broad internal and external educational issues (Ballarat, p 23; Queensland, p 16), oversee academic activities across the university (Adelaide, p 15), assure that appropriate academic standards are maintained (Adelaide, p 9; Notre Dame, pp 8, 27), assure the equivalence of academic standards at different sites (Notre Dame, p 8; Swinburne, pp 7, 18), have primary responsibility for academic quality assurance (Canberra, p 14; Swinburne, p 7), monitor systematically the implementation of academic policies (Curtin, p 16), approve all programs (Griffith, p 15; Swinburne, p 7), conduct regular reviews of programs (Ballarat, p 27; Griffith, p 15; James Cook, p 19), and participate in the executive's decision-making through its chair (Southern Cross, p 20).

In his review of the University of Adelaide's council committees in 2002, David Penington (2002) found that the university's academic board had become weak by the mid 1990s. While the university had accepted Penington's recommendations, these had not been implemented by the time of the quality agency's visit and consequently the agency commented extensively on the role and activities of the university's academic board. It recommended (AUQA 2003b, p. 6), that 'the academic board... establish at the institutional level a com-

prehensive process by which it may assure itself that the university's undergraduate pass and honours degrees are of comparable standard in... content, scope and evaluation criteria with those of other Australian and overseas universities.' This seems to me to apply to universities generally, but as I argue below, I have not found evidence of any Australian university being able to establish that its undergraduate degrees are of similar standard to other Australian universities, let alone overseas universities. Indeed, were such an expectation

proposed surely universities would respond that their programs are very different, that they are not comparable and therefore it is in principle impossible to demonstrate that they are of a similar standard.

The quality agency further advised (AUQA 2003b, p. 16), that the mechanisms for assuring the quality of teaching and

learning should 'include the development and use of a core set of performance measures to monitor quality of learning and teaching at faculty and school levels; the maintenance of a rolling program of academic [program] reviews; establishing and monitoring guidelines [for] assessment; and ensuring the effective implementation of the university's student evaluation of learning and teaching policy'. The quality agency has reported that at least two universities did not have adequate processes for approving and reviewing programs, and Andrew Lister's review of Victoria University of Technology's academic policies, procedures and practices found that its program approval and review was also inadequate (Simpson 2004, p. 11).

Academic boards' weak or incomplete discharge of their role in assuring the standards of their universities' graduates leave their universities exposed in view of the numerous indications of variable standards both within and between institutions.

INDICATIONS OF VARIABLE STANDARDS

As Don Anderson has pointed out in a series of submissions (Anderson 2001, 2002), there are several indications that Australian graduates are not of a similar standard, even within institutions.

The Australian orthodoxy is that a baccalaureate degree should be a minimum duration of 3 years equivalent full-time. It is assumed that graduates of the 2-year associate degrees recently included in the Australian qualifications framework are of a lesser standard, at least in part because they have less time to acquire high-level skills in their shorter programs. By the same argument graduates of ordinary degrees that require a minimum of 4 or 5 years' equivalent full time study are of a

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higher standard since they have one or two thirds more time to develop higher skills.

Students have different tertiary entry scores, both within the same program and in different programs. Entry scores presumably reflect students' academic ability since they are used so heavily and extensively in universities' admission decisions. The natural and widespread conclusion is that programs with different minimum entry levels graduate students of different standard.

The PhD is the standard 'ticket' for employment as an academic in most disciplines in most universities. There is a minority but growing view that university teaching staff should (also) have a formal teaching qualification. Yet the little information we have about academic staffs' qualifications is that they vary greatly between disciplines and institutions. Also highly variable is the extent of undergraduate teaching done by sessional staff in each university and in each discipline, and how well sessional staff are prepared and supported in their teaching and assessment.

It is often said that the quality of higher education and presumably by inference the standard of its graduates is affected by the amount of resources invested in teaching-learning. Yet there are very considerable differences in the amount of resources invested in teaching undergraduates in each discipline and even in the same discipline in different universities. For example, in 2003 the student:teacher ratio for management, commerce was 27:1, over 1.7 times more than the student:teacher ratio for the natural and physical sciences of 16:1 (AVCC 2004). Some of those and other differences may be appropriately due to differences in the teaching-learning resources needed for each discipline, but that doesn't explain the very large differences in student:teacher ratios within the same academic organisational groups in different universities. In management and commerce, for example, Deakin, James Cook and Macquarie had student:teacher ratios almost double those at Flinders, La Trobe, VUT, UNE, Sydney, UWA and the University of Technology, Sydney. There are also very large differences in other disciplines which would suggest differences in standards if resources are thought to have any affect on standards.

Many, but it seems that not all universities, claim that engagement with research is an indispensable requirement for maintaining the quality of teaching. Yet there is very good information on the very considerable variation in the amount and quality of research done by institutions. National information on the research performance of departments isn't so good in Australia, but there is clearly considerable variation between departments within Australian institutions. The UK's research assessment exercise reports very considerable variation in the research performance of research units within institutions.

A final indication of the variability of the standard of Australian baccalaureate graduates is the variability of program

retention rates and subject pass rates. It is clear from national and internal studies that subject pass rates are highly variable between subjects - even subjects in the same program taken by the same students. Retention rates also are highly variable between programs and between institutions.

We don't know why pass and retention rates are so variable. The Department of Education, Science and Training's (DEST 2002a) bivariate regression of all the demographic and other information it collects on students explains only from 7% to 12% of variations in students' progress and retention rates. Sex, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, membership of equity group, home location, field of study, mode of study, type of attendance, tertiary entrance rank and their institution together explain at most only 12% of the variation in student progress and retention rates. How is the other 88% of the variation explained?

Our colleagues in economics and physics say that low pass and retention rates have nothing to do with low course experience questionnaire ratings but are explained by the greater rigour and higher standard of their subjects. They may be right. The point is that we don't know. The most recent systematic and comprehensive survey of the standard of Australian baccalaureates was the academic standards program established on the recommendation of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee sub-committee on academic standards chaired by Kwong Lee Dow (AVCC Sub-Committee on Academic Standards 1987). The vice-chancellors' committee's survey of the standard of honours degrees conducted from 1990 to 1994 (DEST 2002b, p. 30) found very considerable variation in the standard of honours degrees between disciplines, and within the same discipline between universities. This study is now very dated, which is surely telling in itself.

Following the review the vice-chancellors' committee adopted guidelines for good practice for fourth year honours programs which included:

2.9 Departments should work to ensure comparability of honours award grading within the same discipline across institutions by exchange of information and staff, and where appropriate, involvement of professional associations. Institutions should also seek to achieve greater comparability across their departments and across the whole university system. There should be regular reviews of all honours programs to provide on-going monitoring of the conduct and standards of honours programs. The use of external assessors or moderators appointed for a period of say, 3 years could assist in achieving greater comparability. (AVCC 1995, p. 2)

Some universities implement some and perhaps all of this guideline, but by no means all universities. There is therefore no reason to suspect that the variations in the standards of honours programs found by the vice-chancellors' committee

in the 1990s don't persist now and don't extend to undergraduate degrees. The Commonwealth was surely correct in its Crossroads discussion paper *Striving for Quality*:

- 87 There are two overarching concerns about Australia's existing approach to quality and standards:
- too much emphasis on institutional quality assurance and not enough on learning outcomes; and
 - lack of a systematic approach to articulating and monitoring standards. (DEST 2002b, p. 17)

OPTIONS FOR ASSURING SIMILAR STANDARDS

I consider options for assuring similar standards in decreasing order of plausibility but in increasing order of acceptability to teachers.

External involvement in assessment

The strongest assurance of similar standards is to separate teaching from assessment. This is the system for the senior secondary qualification in most jurisdictions in Australia and the UK where assessment and certification is the responsibility of State curriculum and assessment boards, not schools and not teachers. Separate assessment introduces other difficulties such as imposing a similarity if not uniformity of curriculum, and most universities would reject separate assessment on this ground alone. Interestingly, separate senior secondary assessment is not common in US states and so selective colleges rely on national aptitude tests to compare senior secondary students' academic achievement. A lesser but still strong form of external assessment is to involve external assessors. All Australian universities adopt this method to assure the similarity of the standard of their PhDs, although even these procedures are variable as Lawson and colleagues observed in a recent article in this journal (Lawson et al 2003), and some universities have somewhat lesser external involvement in the assessment of research masters and honours theses.

The weakest form of external involvement in assessment is to have what might be called visitations - external experts evaluating assessment standards in each institution. This has been the practice in England, but while it sounds comforting, it has lost credibility there because of suggestions that examiners appoint their mates as visitors and the observation that some visitations are perfunctory. Anderson (Anderson 2002, p. 1) recently proposed 'a system of external examining, includ-

ing discussion by examiners of standards and feedback to university departments, [which] would be an ideal means for giving universities an external reference on the intellectual and professional standards of their degrees'.

Anchor test

An alternative is to have institutions assess their students but compare standards by students' performance in a common test. The common test is said to 'anchor' each institution's standards. This is a weaker form of assuring the similarity of standards since the common test does not necessarily measure anything significant. There is also extensive literature and debate on the validity of various anchor tests and methods for applying them (Sadler 1992; Cooksey 1993; Masters 1988), and the difference in the performance of each sex in the ACT anchor test became controversial in the 1980s (Meredyith 1994). Nonetheless, anchor tests have wide acceptability in Queensland and the ACT where they are used to scale school assessment.

In its Crossroads discussion paper *Striving for Quality*, the Commonwealth invited comments on whether it should require students to sit the graduate skills assessment designed and managed by the Australian Council for Educational

Research as a condition of entry to and exit from higher education (DEST 2002b, p. 33). While the graduate skills assessment looks appropriate on its face, I haven't seen the evidence demonstrating that it measures anything relevant to higher education, or indeed anything at all outside performance on that test. Even were the test valid, I don't yet

see how the Commonwealth could realistically make it compulsory or even ensure that it is taken by enough graduates to reflect the performance of most graduates of most universities. However, if all those difficulties were overcome it would be useful as an anchor to institutions' internal assessment.

Consensus-building

James and colleagues (James et al 2002, pp. 3-5) propose what they call a standards network within each field of study, which would be a forum for continuing discussion and consensus-building on setting and monitoring broad standards within the Australian academic community. Such networks would be strengthened by having universities report annually the grade distributions of all subjects, the grade point averages of all students by program and the measures the university adopts to ensure that standards are similar between disciplines and institutions. This would not give a direct assurance of universities'

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assessment standards, but it would at least allow one to make a first judgement of the strength of the current assurances that there is no problem with university standards.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that such evidence as is available suggests that there is considerable variation in the standards of Australian university graduates and that the current measures for ensuring the similarity of standards are inadequate. The test of whether a measure is adequate to ensure the similarity of the standard of university degrees is whether universities would accept the measure to assure the similarity of the standards of senior secondary certificates. Universities' current processes for assuring the similarity of their baccalaureate standards are nowhere near meeting their own requirements for assuring the similarity of others' standards.

Universities in Queensland and the ACT require year 12 students to sit a common aptitude test, the results of which are used to scale schools' assessments. Universities in the other jurisdictions don't even have school assessment: year 12 students are required to sit external exams which are assessed by external examiners. Universities may find the likely variation in the standard of their graduates more acceptable than the alternatives such as those I have outlined, but I suggest that will be an increasingly difficult position to maintain.

The allegations of soft marking, plagiarism and the erosion of academic standards made over the past few years may not have had much substance, but they were damaging because of the lack of systematic evidence to refute them and because the indirect and opaque measures to protect academic standards seem inadequate in the face of clear and direct incentives to compromise standards.

Arguably student fees were peripheral to learning-teaching under the *Higher Education Funding Act 1988*. All universities charge fees for international students, all came to charge full fees for domestic postgraduate coursework students, and 22 out of 39 universities charged full fees for domestic undergraduate students. Yet the large majority of students were still charged fees set by the Commonwealth Government and so one could maintain that fees did not affect universities' core teaching.

But the position is different under the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*. Whatever decision on fees an individual university makes, it will be in an environment in which all universities set higher education contribution scheme charges for most students and in which most institutions will offer domestic students full fee-paying places in most programs. Stronger measures will be needed to convince students and the public that standards are being maintained where fees are pervasive, not peripheral to higher education.

While I have argued that it is in the national interest to establish the similarity of graduates' standards, many institutions also have a direct pragmatic interest in correcting the public's excessive reliance on reputation in deciding where to study and who to employ. Prospective students and employers do not, of course, assume that universities have similar standards. In the absence of any data they judge standards by institutions' reputations - which are strongly related to their age - and by cut-off scores, from which they infer quality of student intakes. It is therefore in the interests of the graduates of younger universities with less prestigious reputations and lower cut-off scores to have their graduates' standards verified publicly.

Senior academic deliberative bodies are central to maintaining standards and public confidence in universities because they stand outside management and are insulated from hierarchical control and tempting rewards. From the reports by professors Penington and Lister and the audit reports of the quality agency it seems that while having a feisty academic board may be a nuisance, having a torpid board is a disaster. Academic boards might start by collecting and analysing jurisdictions' elaborated criteria for recognising universities and any detailed criteria jurisdictions may have for evaluating universities' offering programs in Australia through other organisations.

I have argued that all universities should adopt the quality agency's recommendation to the University of Adelaide that its academic board establish a comprehensive process by which it may assure itself that the university's undergraduate pass and honours degrees are of similar standard in content, scope and evaluation criteria with those of other Australian and overseas universities.

I have further agreed with the quality agency that this should include the development and use of a core set of performance measures to monitor the quality of learning and teaching at faculty and school levels; the maintenance of a rolling program of academic program reviews; establishing and monitoring guidelines for assessment; and ensuring the effective implementation of the university's student evaluation of learning and teaching.

Because of the centrality of program approval and review to academic boards' role it would be useful for a national meeting of academic board chairs to develop a statement of the minimum criteria and processes for program approval and review. This would be a rudimentary start to what could usefully develop in time into benchmarking processes for approving and reviewing programs. This should be done nationally to achieve the consistency which has been central to my argument. But it would also strengthen the position of each board within their institution to argue for the implementation of arrangements adopted nationally. ■

Gavin Moodie is a graduate in philosophy and law from the University of Melbourne. He has worked as an administrator since 1975 in six Australian universities, mostly on the east coast. Gavin is currently principal policy adviser for Griffith University and is allowed to do a little casual tutoring by the law school.

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