Who sets the standards in higher education?

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Overview

• A conceptual overview of what a standard is
• Background to standards in Australian higher education
• The Higher Education Standards Framework
• The setting of Teaching and Learning standards
• The control and autonomy of standards
Conceptual problems with standards

- A lack of precision in the use of language – standards are implicit, tacit and abstract
- Little consensus of what types of standards are important
- Little consensus about what levels standards should be set – minimum, normative or high
- Little consensus of how the standards or their levels should be measured
- Standards dynamically shift over time
- Standards, much like quality is a relative concept
- Who has the authority to determine standards
- The terminology, types and levels of standards have different cultural and linguistic meanings in other countries
Quality

• Quality in reference to a person. Circa 1300
• The degree of *excellence* possessed by the thing. Circa 1398
• The characteristics or qualities that determine something. Circa 1398
• The relative *standard* of something. Circa 1630
• Quality as *excellent* or superior. Circa 1665
• Quality used as a compound word, e.g. quality air. Circa 1701
• A recognized level of general *excellence*. Circa 1803
• Quality control. Circa 1917
• Quality assurance. Circa 1940
Standards

- A military or navel ensign. Circa 1154
- Exemplar of unit of weight or measure. Circa 1429
- Legal rate of intrinsic value for coins. Circa 1463
- Some definite degree of any *quality*. Circa 1477
- A *criterion*. Circa 1563
- The Kings standard. Circa 1588
- A thing serving as a recognized example or principle to which others conform or should conform or by which accuracy or *quality* of others are judged. Circa 1622
- A recognized or specified level of *excellence*. Circa 1711
- Having the prescribed or normal degree of *quality*. Circa 1807
Standards in higher education

• “a definite level of excellence or attainment or the recognised measure of what is adequate for some purpose, established by authority, custom or consensus” (Sadler, 1987)
• “institutions set standards, students achieve them” (Brennan et al, 1996)
• “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)
• “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)
• “an agreed specification or other criterion used as a rule, guideline, or definition of a level of performance or achievement” (AUQA, 2010)
Three separate but related debates

• We need to distinguish between the:
  – setting of standards
  – monitoring of standards
  – achievement of standards
  – assessment of those achievements

• There is a highly dependent but complex relationship on each activity

• The fact that settings are opaque makes measuring achievement hard.
Setting of standards

Different types of standards

Different level of standards

Monitoring of standards

Assessment of standards

(What are the criteria and processes used to monitor and assess)

Achievement against those standards

Input, process, output

Minimum, ideal, high

Performance over time

Value-add
Recent Australian milestones

- February 2008 – ALTC project on academic standards commenced
- April 2008 – ATN group of Universities on Benchmarking academic standards
- December 2008 – The Bradley Review and proposed establishment of TEQSA
- May 2009 – AUQA discussion paper on academic standards
- August 2009 – Australia’s involvement with the AHELO project
- March 2011 – TEQSA legislated
- June 2011 – discussion paper on teaching and learning standards
- July 2011 – TEQSA commenced
Where are the reference points?

A standard requires reference points (a threshold against which to make judgments of achievement)

– Should they be internal or external to the university?
– Should they be with a similar institutions?
– Should they be based on national standards?
– Should they be based on international standards?
– Should they be flexible to allow for different institutional missions?
– What criteria or indicators best demonstrate standards?
• TEQSA will....

• “evaluate the performance of institutions and programs and establish objective and comparative benchmarks of quality and performance” ..........

• “establish minimum standards for registration and accreditation, as well as academic standards” ...........

• “discipline communities will own and take responsibility for implementing academic standards within the academic traditions of collegiality, peer review, pre-eminence of disciplines and, importantly, academic autonomy” (DEEWR, 2009)

• TEQSA is an “independent body with powers to regulate university and non-university higher education providers, monitor quality and set standards” (DEEWR, 2011).
Higher Education Standards Framework

- Provider Registration Standards
  - Provider Category Standards
  - Provide Course Accreditation Standards
- Qualification Standards
- Information Standards
- Research Standards
- Teaching and Learning Standards
Teaching & learning standards

Settings

Internal:
- Graduate attributes
- Academic Board
- Student feedback benchmarks
- Student staff ratios
- Teacher expectations (implicit & tacit)
- Appointment of teachers
- Teaching & assessment processes

External:
- TEQSA’s T & L standards
- ALTC Benchmark statements
- Industry expectations
- International benchmarks

External peer review (Go8)
External moderation / examination
National benchmarks (ATN)
Teaching and Learning Standards

June 2011 discussion paper

• Teaching standards – aspects of institutional provision or educational delivery commonly accepted to have an effect on the quality of student learning. These include curriculum design, the quality of teaching, student learning support, and the supporting infrastructure.

• Learning standards – the nature and levels of student attainment – what students and graduates know and can do required for graduation. These may also be expressed as learning outcomes or competencies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential indictors</th>
<th>Input standards</th>
<th>Process standards</th>
<th>Output standards</th>
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</table>
| **Teaching and learning standards** | • Teaching staff numbers  
  • Teaching qualifications  
  • Staff-student ratios  
  • Contact hours  
  • Library books | • Feedback on teaching  
  • Teaching processes  
  • Accreditation processes  
  • Quality assurance processes  
  • Assessment policies & processes  
  • Student engagement  
  • Retention and attrition | • The value–add (what a student has learnt)  
  • The achievements (skills, knowledge and capabilities of students)  
  • Employment success  
  • Generic skills  
  • Course completions  
  • Learning outcomes  
  • English language capability |
| **Admission standards** | • Entry scores  
  • English Language  
  • Student diversity  
  • Demand / selectivity | • Admission processes | |
Control and autonomy

“The debate on standards is also a debate about power, control and autonomy in higher education” (Brennan et al, 1996)

“the search to improve fit-for-purpose is constantly overshadowed by ‘top-down’ pressures for homogeneity of criteria and a stratification of results” (Teichler, 2001)
Conclusions

• The setting of standards needs to be clearly distinguished from the achievement, monitoring and assessment of standards.
• Different standards needs to be treated in different ways and there needs to be greater precision in our language to support this.
• Teaching and learning standards can be more explicit (using precise descriptions of minimum thresholds) but there is little evidence to suggest that this will drive improvement – it will simply manage risk.