



ACDICT Newsletter update November 2015

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1. Science Meets Business

I attended the inaugural *Science Meets Business* - a separate report will follow.

2. HECQN

The Higher Education Compliance and Quality Network conference in Melbourne 4 & 5 November was well attended with delegates mainly university administrators, speakers mainly from policy and practice innovators. The conference was held at a Melbourne airport hotel, under quite audible mini-tornadoes. Keynote speakers were Alan Robson, Kwong Lee Dow, and the new TEQSA CEO Anthony McClaran.

There were four main areas of interest:

1. The newly tabled Higher Education Standards Framework
2. Experience with taking Threshold Learning Outcomes from disciplines into sub-disciplines and developing curriculum
3. Peer review and benchmarking
4. The rise in contract cheating

Copies of the program and presentation slides are at <<http://www.hes.edu.au/events/hecnq-forum/>>

1. Higher Education Standards Framework

The revised Framework was tabled in federal parliament and is expected to pass both houses. The full framework is available at <https://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/F2015L01639>

Full implementation is expected to be at the start of 2017. (Applications for new higher education providers have a transition period in 2016.)

The framework is available at <<https://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/F2015L01639>>

Lee Kwan Dow and Alan Robson gave responses to the framework and revisions: there is no need to be anxious about any striking differences from the previous framework, the political outlook is encouraging that there is increased understanding of higher education quality and regulation, stability is the outlook, and TEQSA as the regulatory body and the universities are relating well. The risk-based approach to regulation is well understood, is effective and is a world leader. The revisions have included better allowance for delivering education through modern technologies, and reduced administrative burden (an estimated saving of \$2.5M per institution is the claim).

The framework has 7 aspects. Many of the aspects at discipline level are compatible with and partly provided by ACS and EA accreditation of degree programs, apart from benchmarking.

1. student participation and assessment
2. learning environments
3. teaching
4. research and research training
5. institutional QA
6. governance and accountability
7. representation of information and information management



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The general tone of the framework continues to offer some regulatory protection to students in making decisions and having some financial protection rather than an open market. A sampling of issues:

- 1. student participation and assessment:** Robson believes that the “myth of the published ATAR cutoff” vs the actual admission standards may be exposed to scrutiny, in line with representing information. (“Accurate, relevant and timely information for students is publicly available... to enable informed decision making about educational offerings and experiences.”)
A sub-theme of the conference was the suggestion of greater student participation, not only in governance but in all levels of university decision making, engaging students from the general student body as well as class-level representation and student association representation - not only to provide a concerned stakeholder voice in decisions, but seen as developing the students’ own skills and capabilities, producing better graduates. This was raised by McClaran initially, on UK experience, and discussed by Sally Varnham [UTS]: the purpose of higher education being to produce leaders, thinkers, educators, citizens
<<http://www.hes.edu.au/assets/HECQN-2015/Sally-Varnham-HEQN-conference-Sally.pdf>>
- 3. teaching:** rising attrition rates, set against wider admission policies: high attrition seen as an unfair situation for students to incur debt if they are admitted to courses with little chance of success. This is an issue for private providers, but universities will also be under public scrutiny: attrition and progression rates are a reportable statistic that will be of public interest, and extremes and assumed lapses from public expectations will come to newspaper attention.

Comment: I note separately that in New Zealand these rates are now a KPI of institutions and funding is tied to them, with some risk of downward pressure on academic standards.

- 5. Institutional QA:** course approvals, accreditation, delivery, review. The Framework’s express need for universities to do regular, comparative review was noted by many speakers, at institution, discipline, and personal academic levels. In fields like ICT and Engineering the professional accreditation process provides a useful part of the necessary reviews: other fields are discovering the lack and working to catch up. *Comment: I note two issues for ICT*
 - (1) gaps: while accreditation is a part of the evidence of quality, the ACS accreditation goals are different (readiness for industry) from the university graduate outcomes and threshold learning outcomes. Accreditation does not provide for all discipline learning outcomes nor for any rigorous benchmarking of academic standards. The Deans of ACDICT should consider the extent to which ACS accreditation are sufficient for TEQSA review purposes, and how to fill the gaps individually and collectively.*
 - (2) administrative load: can we reuse the same documents for accreditation and other reviews? To do so would be cost-effective: but it means that we must keep university requirements for TEQSA sufficiently in line with accreditation processes (and vice versa). Deans may need to engage more deeply with the university development of requirements, and engage more with professional bodies accreditation policy and requirements..*
- 7. information** - the requirement is to be truthful in what is claimed, and more open in publishing information to the public, with the prospective and current students’ point of view in mind. The QILT tool is in its early days - opinions differed on whether this will grow to be useful as students learn to work it, or of little use.



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Institutional level information gathering and dissemination is indicated here, rather than a need for more data collection at the discipline level. The question was put: does truthfulness include reducing the use of slogans in our marketing of degrees and programs, and enable or provide better informed comparisons of different offerings.

Comment: this led me to notice several universities' standard slide formats in use at the conference, all branded, with slogans that would be hard to substantiate. This is perhaps an recurrent complaint: an old-fashioned motto also branded a university, and merely hid a slogan under the decent obscurity of a foreign language.

There were some related pleas to standardise the terminology around curriculum (course vs program, subject vs unit vs course, credit point value variations), and to revise occupational statistical categories (to include software engineering for example).

The value of the overwhelming trend to develop and apply standards and frameworks was contested. Dissenting voices included Belinda Probert and Pauline Ross - that what we are doing to improve quality is actually turning into managerialism, and instead we need to get the academic community engaged with quality in education; we want diversity but are working in a system that pushes towards uniformity; we do not have any measures of quality with plausibility, only ones which are deeply flawed. Despite the policies on educational quality it was argued that what is still important in academia is not education but research: in many places "teaching matters" is the public statement, but the underlying common belief that drives activities and actual career paths is that research and publication are what really matter. Teaching-only positions (increasing in number) have not provided alternative career pathways to promotion, but put academic careers at more risk of future management changes, giving limited tenure in practice compared to positions with research and teaching. Quite ordinary research performance is rewarded, only outstanding teaching performance is rewarded.

Comment: This plea did not lead to the barricades being stormed. Quality management will continue.

2. Taking TLOs from the broad discipline to sub-disciplines

This set of presentations was interesting in that the sub-disciplines in areas such as English, Sociology and (in some detail) Theology are each working to produce threshold learning outcomes for sub-disciplines, and turning these into practice to reform the design of curriculum from first year up.

Comment: The Threshold Learning Outcomes for Engineering and ICT were a combination, a superset of the accreditation graduate competencies. A similar move in ICT would lead us now to consider the TLOs specialisation or extension for ICT: should ICT as a field of study lead to a set of specialised TLOs that are distinct from engineering? should the difference between 3-year (typical ICT) and 4-year (typical engineering) programs be reflected in the TLOs? should a more specialised difference between our main sub-disciplines of computer science, software engineering, information systems, information technology be reflected in distinct discipline TLOs? Would this distinction be fruitful and enable stronger comparative and constructive curriculum links between those schools teaching the sub-disciplines?

The process in first year curriculum design in Sociology included analysing:

1. what do students need to know
2. what are the barriers to student learning
3. what are our teaching strategies to overcome (2) and achieve (1).



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Comment: *applicable everywhere.*

3. Peer review and benchmarking

It was noted that the OECD attempt to pilot an international test for standards of graduates AHELO has been abandoned after completing its trials. The reasons were not discussed deeply. To its critics, AHELO lost the diversity that can be expressed in learning outcomes. Diversity is both inevitable across education systems and desirable. AHELO in its pilot mechanical engineering based on multi-choice questions about knowledge and problem solving (a narrow range of aspects of “thinking like an engineer”), the results tending to lead to comparative ranking league tables, with no direct relationships to education that could indicate improvements in teaching or curriculum by making formative comparisons.

Robin King pointed out that language describes the content and direction of learning outcomes well, but not the calibration of the standards, hence the need for benchmarking as a process of comparisons. We need to have examples shown to us to calibrate the differences.

The roles of standards in education are

- best practice - exemplary
- normative - to be aspired to
- an aspect - for evaluation

[Jeannette Baird, Divine Word University, PNG

<<http://www.hes.edu.au/assets/HECQN-2015/Baird-2015-HECQN-Forum-Intl-alignment-of-stds.pdf>>]

Geoff Scott asked for our learning standards to be validated as well as verified: are we producing graduates to the right purpose (fitness of the purpose, not only fitness of the product for purpose). Asking graduates what they use and what they lacked in their university education is important. The relevant study for ICT is the Koppi and Fazhdy report; some other disciplines have their own studies. Evaluation should be against standards, not a form of standardisation.

Peer reviewing is intended for formative, self-improvement, not compliance. It involves [Booth]

- learning outcomes comparators
- grading comparators
- reliability of assessment
- support and engagement of course coordinators

Discussions of quality grow above the ground of the standards and compliance framework [Skrbis].

Experience with benchmarking

There were no reports on experience with the Group of 8 quality verification system QVS. Beyond the Go8, there was reported an example of a pilot project to do comparative benchmarking: EROS External Referencing of Standards. The group RMIT, QUT, Curtin, Wollongong is in the process of trialling comparative review of assessment, for a single subject in each of a small number of disciplines

<<http://www.hes.edu.au/assets/HECQN-2015/08.15-Bedford-and-Czech-External-Referencing-of-Standards-EROS-project-V3.pdf>>



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The experience so far is:

1. it's a lot of work to set up the administration processes, match academics to areas of expertise, extract and anonymise the samples of assessments (and transfer materials, chase up reviews on time etc)
2. they decided on \$600 honorarium to sweeten engagement of academics in doing reviews: thought unlikely to be sustainable in the long run, costs will need to be borne as business work as usual
3. monitoring the trial includes logging the administrative and academic effort required, results to be reported perhaps March 2016.

The speakers on EROS were the administrators, not the subject experts. It was not clarified whether ICT was included as a subject for review at any of these universities (*comments from ACDICT members at universities please?*)

Sara Booth is pressing ahead with the online tool to support Peer Colleges of Academics doing benchmarking reviews (which I plan to apply in ACDICT early in 2016), despite not getting the OLT extension grant funding: there is support from HEA to produce the tool, currently in prototype form.

Comment: should there be student involvement in the benchmarking process, or is it best retained as a peak academic judgement? Potential students, students, and graduates are stakeholders in the quality that is being improved by benchmarking.

The definition of the "bench" in benchmarking was stretched and held up to the light [Jane Fernandez]: we are not traders but educators, we inspire, transform, serve. Benchmarking is about raising quality, not measuring a commodity for sale.

4. The rise in Contract cheating

The Higher Education Framework standard 5.2.2 requires "Preventative action is taken to mitigate foreseeable risks to academic and research integrity including misrepresentation, fabrication, cheating, plagiarism and misuse of intellectual property, and to prevent recurrences of breaches."

External referencing should include evaluation of integrity procedures (*comment: which differ in requirements and effectiveness in ICT from other disciplines*).

The risk of academic integrity breaches is to the reputation of Australian universities; but covering up instances is ineffective and even counter-productive, as well as lacking integrity.

A large amount of concern about academic integrity was focussed on the perceived rise of contract cheating: Jon Yorke, Curtin.

<<http://www.hes.edu.au/assets/HECQN-2015/17.00-Contract-Cheating-and-Standards-HECQN-Melbourne-2015-v4.pdf>>

Contract cheating is a prime example of technological disruption, applied to the educational process. Instances have risen sharply this year. Contract prices are only a few hundred dollars, even for 3000 word essays (no examples of programming work were discussed.) The standard plagiarism detection methods are weak in the face of a unique work being contracted for and submitted, rather than duplicates in the same submission set. The provider of TurnItIn claims that (1) they are developing the



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use of artificial intelligence techniques (probably including stylistic analysis) and (2) their very large corpus of work from many universities, and the laziness of contractors, gives them the ability to find similar submissions in widely separated places, catching the use of contracted work.

In some universities contract cheating is treated as a more serious offence than that of plagiarism by copying from peers (treated as immediate academic misconduct, with possible expulsion, rather than counselling for first offence). But the offence of contracting may be hard to establish if only the contract, not the contracted work itself, is found. A successful defence was brought by a student who showed that it was very easy to create a fake identity to request contract work, and so held that the apparent identity of the cheat could not reliably be established to be the same as the student of that name.

Several ways that have been proposed to mitigate against contract cheating were mentioned, shown not to work well: in particular, setting assignments with short deadlines does not prevent a (higher priced) contract to complete the work in the short time. [Yorke] Part of the challenge is in doing reliable assessment at acceptably low cost.

- Face to face methods - *viva - expensive to do; cases of fraudulently assuming or faking an identity cheating are known*
- More examinations? (but...) - *academically undesirable as a measure of learning achievement, identity fraud*
- Linked test (a version on the above)
- Teamwork: *teams are knowledgeable, less likely to permit cheating by their members? not true in practice.*
- Refreshed assessment tasks – localize? - *fast response from contractors makes this ineffective.*
- Specific to an experience – individualize? - *personalisation is possible from contractors*
- Require personal reflection on task - *reflections can also be reused or adapted from previous years*
- Public space for assessment – blog, etc. - *contributions, appropriate timing, may be provided by a contractor*

In discussion the approach of making strong and loud commitments to academic integrity in all our teaching and assessment practices and interactions with students: openly address the issue, put in real resources, building better personal relationships with students was suggested as the answer, engaging students into the academic value set and making assessment personal rather than impersonal: not compliance but educational approaches. (Others thought that the learning and academic culture had changed too much, this horse had bolted.) We need to use a marketing blitz to counter the perceptions of ease of cheating; tear down the paper notices that offer the services, counter the social media.