

## **Response by the Discipline Scholars Network to the Higher Education Standards Panel's Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes**

We write to express our appreciation for the invitation to respond to the Higher Education Standards Panel's Seventh Communiqué on the Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes. We would like to take the opportunity to make the following relatively brief comments on the draft standards for Course Design (Coursework) and Learning Outcomes (Coursework).

Since completing the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project in 2010-2011, which led to the publication of Threshold Learning Outcome statements and guidelines for the disciplines listed below, the Discipline Scholars have continued to liaise with discipline communities and the peak bodies in order to further consolidate the work undertaken, and to pursue a variety of strategies to assist the higher education sector to develop and embed discipline-specific course learning outcomes across Australia. The LTAS academic standards have been endorsed by peak bodies, both professional and academic (including the Deans' Councils), as essential guidance for the disciplines in Australia's emergent regulatory environment. The disciplines that have achieved nationally endorsed learning outcomes for undergraduate and some postgraduate degrees include:

- [Architecture](#)
- [Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities](#)
- [Building and Construction](#)
- [Business, Management and Economics](#)
- [Creative and Performing Arts](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Engineering and ICT](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Law](#)
- [Science](#)

Subsequently, further work has also been carried out to develop standards in fields including Political Science, Sociology, Theology, Marketing, Economics, Biology, Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics, and Journalism and Communication. Many of these projects have been facilitated by the Discipline Scholars. In addition to developing standards, further work has been done to use them including the development of good practice guides, harmonisation with professional body standards, revisions to taught curriculum and assessment of student learning outcomes.

The Discipline Scholars commends the Panel for the extensive consultation process undertaken across the higher education sector that has led to the current draft for Course Design and Learning Outcomes. We would also like to thank the Higher Education Standards Panel for the multiple opportunities we have had to meet with panel members. Following on from this, the Discipline Scholars are delighted that the Panel has referenced the work that has already been done in the various disciplines to provide contextually situated learning outcomes for the higher education sector.

The Discipline Scholars welcome the approach to revising the format and style of the standards as described in the *Call for Comment (Number 1, March 2013)* paper. The development of clear and succinct standards is a formidable and complex task and we applaud the result.

Limiting the standards to a small number of discrete and accessible statements will enhance understanding of their intent and encourage more authentic application across the sector and this draft has achieved this.

The Discipline Scholars welcome and strongly endorse the inclusion of Reference Points.

In commending the documents from the holistic perspective, we would like to take the opportunity to make several specific comments and suggestions on the draft Learning Outcomes [Coursework] and Course Design (Coursework) Standards and related Reference Points.

### **Learning Outcomes (Coursework)**

1. The learning outcomes to be achieved on completion of a course of study are specified for each course of study.

**We suggest the addition of the following:**

**'and are publically accessible in a current version.'**

**We suggest that Standard 5 then becomes redundant.**

2. The learning outcomes for each course of study are consistent with the qualification awarded, are comparable with those for courses of study that lead to the same or a similar qualification in Australia and are informed by international comparators.

**We suggest that 'international comparators' should therefore be listed as a fourth Reference Point below.**

3. The learning outcomes for each course of study are informed by:
  - a. the mastery of specific disciplinary and/or multidisciplinary knowledge and skills that characterise the field of study
  - b. the generic skills and attributes required of graduates
  - c. the application of generic skills and attributes in the context of the field of study including the communication skills required, and
  - d. the requirements of employment related to the field of study.
4. The relationship between the overall learning outcomes for each course of study and the learning outcomes for units that contribute to the course of study is demonstrable.

- ~~5. The specified learning outcomes for each course of study are available to the staff and students who are involved and are publically accessible in a current version.~~

**See notes to Standard 1.**

6. The assessment of student learning, whether at unit level, course level, or in combination, encompasses all specified learning outcomes for each course of study.

**The wording of this statement is ambiguous since it could be taken to imply that all of the specified course level learning outcomes must be met at the individual unit level within the course. We understand that this is not the intention of the HESP.**

7. Learning outcomes for each course of study and the methods for assessment of those outcomes are informed by periodic reviews (at least every 5 years), which take account of external reference points that are relevant to the course of study.

We suggest that, in order to maintain a more logical order, that this point be reordered as Standard 9 because, like Standard 10, it similarly relates to quality assurance.

8. Methods of assessment are consistent with the types of learning outcomes being assessed and are capable of validly and reliably confirming that specified learning outcomes are achieved.
9. The grades awarded to students reflect the level of their attainment.
10. The grading of students' achievement of learning outcomes for selected units within courses of study is referenced periodically (at least every 5 years) against the grading of students' achievement in comparable units or courses in other Australian institutions.

This wording could have the perverse outcome of driving towards mediocrity. Benchmarking must drive towards excellence, so comparisons must be made to national or global best practice.

### Reference Points

- i. *Australian Qualifications Framework (January 2013)*.
- ii. Learning outcomes statements developed for the field of study by Office for Learning and Teaching discipline communities or other disciplinary or professional bodies.

We recommend replacing “or other disciplinary or professional bodies” with “or by other disciplinary or professional communities and bodies”.

- iii. The requirements for professional accreditation of the course of study and registration of graduates ~~where applicable~~.

We suggest that the phrase ‘where applicable’ is redundant.

Given the extensive work that is being undertaken internationally to establish higher education learning standards, we suggest that the Panel could consider including a fourth reference point identifying ‘international comparators’.

### Course Design (Coursework)

1. The provider utilises defined processes for designing and assuring the quality of the design of each course of study and the qualifications to which it leads.
2. Processes for course design are approved and overseen by the provider's peak academic governing body.
3. Course design encompasses the rationale for the course of study, course structure, modes of delivery, learning outcomes, methods of assessment, entry requirements and pathways, programmed student workload, articulation arrangements, exit pathways, pathways to further study and any compulsory requirements for completion and that these features of all courses of study are documented and publically accessible in a current version.

We suggest that, for clarity, ‘course’ be inserted before ‘learning outcomes’ ( .... modes of delivery, course learning outcomes, methods of assessment, entry requirements and pathways, ....)

4. The nature and scope of the course and the expectations for student learning are consistent with the qualification to be awarded. ~~and informed by the Australian Qualifications Framework.~~
5. ~~The content of e~~The curriculum for each course of study:
  - 5.1. is drawn from current knowledge and scholarship in relevant academic disciplines
  - 5.2. includes study of the underlying theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the academic disciplines and the field of study, and
  - 5.3. encompasses relevant emerging concepts that are informed by recent scholarship, current research findings and advances in practice (where practice is applicable to the field of study).

**We suggest that ‘content of ...’ be replaced in the opening phrase with ‘curriculum for ...’.**

6. Each course of study is designed to enable equivalent student learning outcomes regardless of a student’s place or mode of study.
7. The peak academic governing body of the provider oversees periodic (at least every 5 years) review and improvement of the design of each course of study.

**We suggest the panel consider completing the sentence with ‘to be awarded’ in order to avoid the inconsistency of having the AQF as part of the standard, and as a separate reference point.**

### Reference Points

- i. *Australian Qualifications Framework (January 2013)*.

**For continuity purposes we suggest that ‘Current version’ replace the date.**

- ii. The requirements for professional accreditation of the course of study and registration of graduates ~~where applicable~~.

**We suggest the removal of ‘where applicable’.**

### Concluding comments

We note the Panel’s acknowledgement of the importance of disciplinary-developed learning standards as useful reference points. In that vein we strongly encourage processes of wide disciplinary engagement in developing and assessing learning standards. The widespread involvement and support of peak disciplinary bodies, professional organisations and other academic and community bodies, in setting discipline standards supports their validity as reference points for curriculum development and for assessment.<sup>1</sup>

The work on setting discipline-specific learning standards is available at the following website:

<http://disciplinestandards.pbworks.com/w/page/52657697/FrontPage>.

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<sup>1</sup> For the ALTC *Learning and Teaching Academic Standards* project this widespread engagement and peak body support is documented in the *Final Report* [2010]  
[http://www.olt.gov.au/system/files/altc\\_standards.finalreport.pdf](http://www.olt.gov.au/system/files/altc_standards.finalreport.pdf)

This website also includes a range of other resources and gateways to the continuing work that is being undertaken by the disciplines to promote and enhance disciplinary standards in Australia.

The HESP might wish to consider whether further clarification/guidance may be required regarding the nature and extent of evidence envisaged so that higher education providers can satisfy the requirements of these standards.

Once again, we are extremely grateful for having the opportunity to make this response to the Higher Education Standards Panel.

Professor Ian Cameron  
Associate Professor Mark Freeman  
Professor Roger Hadgraft  
Professor Iain Hay  
Professor Greg Heath  
Professor Amanda Henderson  
Professor Jonathan Holmes  
Professor Susan Jones  
Professor Sally Kift  
Professor Sid Newman  
Professor Maree O'Keefe  
Professor Susan Savage  
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