

Draft standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes: IRU response

The IRU welcomes the Higher Education Standards Panel's release for comment of two draft standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes.

The IRU's comments address the Panel's two requests for:

1. a response to its approach to drafting the standards; and
2. reactions to the specific standards proposed for Course Design and Learning Outcomes.

1. The Panel's approach to drafting the standards

The structure of the Standards of

- title,
- the particular Standards, each a sentence, only some with sub-level points, and
- reference Points

works.

The area for further clarity is the nature of the Reference Points.

The reference points include various documents that could be useful to a university or other HE provider and which provide points against which the provider, and regulator, could compare the approach of the provider.

The difficulty is that the examples used in the two draft standards pull together quite different types of documents. Under learning outcomes the Panel lists:

- the AQF, a formal Government document that providers are either required to meet (under the current Standards, open question for revised Standards) or are strongly expected to observe;
- OLT documents which reflect considered sector and discipline perspectives but which have no level of enforcement; and
- professional accreditation and registration requirements which range from legal requirements for graduates of a course to practice to advisory guides developed by those practicing a particular profession.

As presented the Reference Points could give a greater authority to some documents than would be suitable. To address this, the Panel should strengthen its definition of 'reference points' to highlight its words that they 'give guidance' but are not 'prescriptive', explicitly stating that an institution can be in disagreement with them.

The Standards should also explicitly support that universities and other providers may identify other relevant reference points which they use to guide and test their approach for areas covered in the Standards.

2. The two standards: Learning outcomes and Course Design

An effective set of standards will cover the major areas required to demonstrate that the Higher Education institution, and the qualifications which it issues, are suitable, without unnecessarily determining how the institution should operate and how those qualifications should be provided. This keeps the focus on the quality of the higher education provided, leaving to the Higher Education provider the challenge of determining how it will do so, permitting if not indeed encouraging, differences in approach and innovation in delivery.

Against that test:

- The Learning Outcomes standards read well and cover important points;
- the Course Design standards, are less precisely written, with the first two prescribing how an Provider should operate rather than the outcomes from its operations.

These summaries are expanded in the following comments on each Standard.

Learning Outcomes (Coursework)

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

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

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.

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue. The wording allows for reference to the Australian Qualification Framework to assess consistency with the qualification.

3. The learning outcomes for each course of study are informed by:

a. the mastery of specific disciplinary and/or interdisciplinary 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.

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

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.

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

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.

The standard is clear.

Learning outcomes should be known to staff and students, from that open access to the public allows for external parties to examine the outcomes expected. The Standard is also effectively repeated in Course Design Standard 3 which sets out many elements of a course to be publically available including Learning Outcomes.

As more standards become available the question may arise of whether each set should define that relevant material be publically available or a single Standard on openness to the public could replace all of them.

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 standard is clear and addresses an important issue. It is important to include the reference to ‘in combination’ to retain flexibility in how the learning outcomes are achieved over the period of the course of study.

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.

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue, however extending the review timeframe to include ‘at least every 5 to 7 years’ will add flexibility to the process and allow the possibility of alignment with professional accreditations if appropriate to minimise effort and duplication.

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.

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

9. The grades awarded to students reflect the level of their attainment.

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

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.

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue, however extending the review timeframe to include ‘at least every 5 to 7 years’ will add flexibility to the process and allow the possibility of alignment with professional accreditations if appropriate to minimise effort and duplication.

The inclusion of ‘for selected units’ is important to ensure a targeted consideration of the suitability of grading.

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.

The suggested amendments simplify the wording to allow easier grasp of a meaning.

The proposed Standard is explicitly requiring a process, not an outcome. Is it *necessary* to have a standard process, or just a useful thing?

2. Processes for course design are approved and overseen by the provider’s peak academic governing body.

With the amended wording the proposed Standard requires that the provider’s peak academic body be responsible for course design. That would permit various arrangements to achieve this including where the peak body uses subordinate bodies to undertake detailed assessment of courses.

The ‘peak academic body’ is taken to refer the Academic Board or Senate or similar body in each provider, which is usually distinct from the peak governing body. However, legally for many universities the University Council is formally the peak academic governing body, with the Board

subordinate to it. This may not matter since the delegation is consistent with the Standard as written. However if the Panel is intending to refer to the Academic Boards it may need to reword the Standard to make this explicit.

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.

The presentation is cumbersome combining two issues – what aspects are necessary parts of course design; and that the final product includes them in a way that can be publicly read. It would be better to address each distinctly, and potentially fore requirements for public access to information be brought together in a single Standard.

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.

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

5. The content of each course of study:

a. is drawn from current knowledge and scholarship in relevant academic disciplines

b. includes study of the underlying theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the academic disciplines and the field of study, and

c. 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).

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

6. Each course of study is designed to enable equivalent student learning outcomes regardless of a student's place or mode of study.

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

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.

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

9 April 2013