

Supported by



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## **'Assuring the quality of achievement standards and their valid assessment in Australian Higher Education'**

### **Fellowship context**

'Australia benefits greatly from a national and international reputation for high academic standards and high quality universities, courses and graduates. When questions are raised about academic standards they are often associated with assessment. For most students, assessment requirements define the curriculum. Assessment is a potent strategic tool for educators with which to spell out the learning that will be rewarded and to guide students into effective approaches to study. Equally, however, poorly designed assessment has the potential to hinder learning or stifle curriculum innovation'. (James, McInnis and Devlin: 'Assessing Learning in Australian Universities', pgs 1 & 7)

Extensive work has been undertaken in earlier Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT)/Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) projects and fellowships on assessment in Australian higher education.

One group of projects has given focus to establishing guiding principles for enhancing assessment practices, the effective use of assessment to improve learning in and after courses and better alignment between assessment, learning and teaching, along with the inclusion of additional dimensions like global citizenship in assessment and the optimum ways in which to assess graduate attributes. A second group of projects has concentrated on cross-institutional mechanisms for assuring reliable marking, including a range of moderation schemes, electronic marking and feedback systems, and strategies for assuring academic integrity. A third cluster has developed and tested new assessment tools. A fourth group has explored capacity development for staff and students.

All of these important initiatives have concentrated predominantly on **how** assessment might best be carried out. That is, they are mainly concerned with the processes of assessment and its support.

Much less work has been undertaken to explore whether the outcomes set down for university learning and assessment are, in the first place, relevant and desirable, that is to determine **what** assessment in

different fields of education should be giving focus to in the context of the rapidly changing needs of the 21st century; or to determine whose voice and what reference-points should be given most/least attention when seeking to ensure that the capabilities and competencies to be developed by our students are what is needed for productive professional performance and societal participation in the new, highly volatile context.

As was found in the international OLT *Turnaround Leadership for Sustainability in Higher Education* study, and in studies of successful early career graduates in nine professions, there is now a need for graduates not just to be 'work ready' – that is to possess the skills and knowledge necessary for competent performance of set tasks in set ways in their chosen profession or discipline, but to be 'work ready *plus*' – that is also to be sustainability literate, change implementation savvy, inventive, able to manage in situations of uncertainty and conflict, to be adept at working productively with diversity, adaptable and resilient, capable of contingent, diagnostic, strategic and divergent thinking and to have a clear, considered position on the tacit assumptions driving the 21st century development agenda – assumptions like growth is good, consumption is happiness, ICT is always the answer and globalisation is great.

Valid assessment tools, aligning teaching with assessment, assisting students to understand how assessment works, assuring academic integrity are, therefore, necessary but not sufficient for Australia to assure the academic standards of its higher education programmes – what is just as important is to ensure that the capabilities and competencies being so carefully developed and assessed are the ones that really count.

In other words, to assure standards, we need to give balanced attention to assuring both the **fitness for** purpose of assessment and its **fitness of** purpose. Australia's current Prime Minister, the Hon Tony Abbott MP alluded to this latter dimension in his address to the 2013 Universities Australia Conference:

*"Universities should be challenging places because intellectual growth depends upon meeting difficulties and dealing with them... They are the principal source of the organisational and technical understandings that our scientists, innovators, business people, healers, guardians, jurists, teachers, philanthropists and administrators all rely on for their work... They impart knowledge but their mission is to discover and deepen it... It's the cast of mind that students should acquire: the concern to listen to all reasonable points of view, the delight in coming to greater understanding, the reluctance to conclude that any question is ever finally settled, the respect for both fact and opinion and an understanding of the difference between them that should characterise a university graduate"* [\[Address to UA Conference 2013\]](#)

This issue of sorting out and validating the capabilities to be developed by our higher education students is important for another reason: It is higher education that forges each generation of leaders. 94% of Forbes' top 50 of the world's most powerful people have a degree. Yet only 7% of the world is reported to attend college or university. (Although participation rates in the first world are much higher – between 20-40%).

Furthermore, as the team who produced the March 2013 position paper: '[An Avalanche is coming: higher education and the revolution ahead](#)' note:

"The fundamental question in *An Avalanche is Coming* is whether a university education is a good preparation for working life and citizenship in the 21st century (pg 1)... Given the state of the global economy, tensions in international relations, massive gaps between wealth and poverty, the deepening threat of climate change and the ubiquity of weapons of mass destruction, our contention is that we need a generation better educated, in the broadest and most profound sense of that word, than ever before (pg 3)... The models of higher education that marched triumphantly across the globe in the second half of the 20th century are broken (pg 5)... thanks to the inadequacy of outcome measures for universities... (and where) input measures tend to be seen as proxies for quality. (pg 13)" .

Australia's Higher Education Standards Panel, starting with its sector discussion paper in March 2013 is, like equivalent agencies around the world now, giving emphasis not just to the standard of the inputs to higher education (curriculum, teaching, support, facilities and administration) but to the quality and focus of its outcomes and its impact, in particular to the quality of its graduates, and to the validity and reliability of their assessment.

In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency in its code of practice on safeguarding academic standards and quality requires that:

'Institutions publicise and implement principles and procedures for, and processes of, assessment that are explicit, valid and reliable'. (And that) ... the process commence with deciding against relevant evidence, tests of relevance and appropriate reference points, including the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies what the intended learning outcomes should be .. (beyond) what (students) are able to do when they start the course; followed by ensuring that how development of these is assessed is valid (fit for purpose) and that marking scales, moderation, boards of examiners and training are used to assure reliability, fairness and assessment integrity. (Section 6, Precept 2)

The OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project has also brought increased (albeit contestable) focus on assuring the validity and comparability of key learning outcomes in specific professions.

Parallel attention is now being given to the quality of graduates in developing countries. For example Sir John Daniel, former president of the Commonwealth of Learning, observes in his introduction to the national handbook for India on [Quality Assurance in Higher Education](#):

'Many countries are debating whether their tertiary education systems are indeed fit for use, in the sense of providing the education and training that students and society need.... For India today, quality in higher education is a key priority. And this must be achieved keeping in mind the issues of relevance, costs, equity and international standards.'

And it is around this currently 'hot' national and international issue of assuring the 'fitness **of** purpose' of our achievement standards, outcomes and their valid assessment in Australian higher education, that the Senior Fellowship turns.

## **Fellowship focus**

In seeking to address this issue, the Fellowship builds directly on the methodology, outcomes and recommendations of the OLT-funded inter-university moderation project: [\*A sector-wide model for assuring final year subject and program achievement standards through inter-university moderation\*](#) and addresses the recommendation in that study that:

“The Office for Learning and Teaching create a one to two year secondment position for an expert in assessment and calibration as a National Assessment Quality and Standards Fellow/Advisor to:

- a. assist the higher education sector to establish the policy and practice frameworks to embed inter-institutional peer review of teaching and learning standards, and
- b. identify and disseminate the most effective assessment practices identified through peer review in each professional or disciplinary area”.

The Senior Fellowship programme has a particular focus on ensuring that the outcomes of higher education remain relevant to the rapidly changing needs of the 21st century.

## **Fellowship approach & plan of activities**

The Senior Fellowship programme will pilot, refine and implement an institutional capacity building strategy born from the outcomes of the abovementioned project. It has the following stages:

August and September, 2014: Initial, extensive piloting of the strategy with a focus on user-centred design will take place at the University of Western Sydney (UWS).

During October and November, 2014: On-site benchmarking with partner universities and systems in Asia and the Pacific, North America, the U.K. and Europe will take place.

In December, 2014: The strategy will be refined in the light of the UWS pilot and the results of the international benchmarking with the Senior Fellowship’s national reference group .

In January and February, 2015: Further refinement and enhancement of the model will be undertaken with national and international partners via a series of teleconferences and, from this, the program for state-based workshops will be finalized.

From March to September 2015: Implementation of the capacity building workshops with Associate Deans and Directors (Learning and Teaching), and Programme Directors, or their equivalent, from Australian higher education institutions across all states and territories will take place. These capacity-building programs will adopt a ‘train-the-trainer’ model and will involve:

1. Testing and enhancing the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) and internationally-endorsed UWS Learning and Teaching quality and standards framework for sector use as a helpful way to locate the processes of peer validation of assessment outcomes in different Fields of Education as part of a more comprehensive approach to assuring the quality of learning and teaching in Australian higher education.
2. Reviewing and developing with a wider audience each higher education institution’s capacity to act on the implications for action of:

- i. the key findings from the inter-university peer moderation project; and
- ii. a consolidated picture of the key findings of all other OLT assessment projects to date.

3. Determining, through the use of the proven peer-review methodology developed in the inter-university moderation project, the range and weight to be given to a wide selection of reference points that may be used to validate the relevance of 21st century graduate achievement standards and learning outcomes in different fields of education and disciplines (potentially relevant reference points identified so far include professional accreditation standards, when available; the requirements of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF); each University's desired graduate attributes; data from surveys of employer needs and successful early career graduates; the input from course advisory committees; the OLT Learning and Teaching Academic Standards (LTAS) threshold learning outcome standards; and the UK subject benchmarks).
4. Reviewing and enhancing a professional capability framework validated in an earlier series of successful earlier career graduate studies in nine professions.
5. Critically appraising the proposal that Australian higher education institutions should now intentionally be developing graduates how are not just 'work ready' but 'work ready plus'.
6. Reviewing the extent to which a sample of current assessment tasks provided by participants are validly assessing the capabilities that count (i.e. confirming that they are 'fit for purpose').
7. Reviewing and supporting the roles of A/Dean and Program Head (or their equivalent) as key leaders of change in the area, using the specific findings for each role from the ALTC/OLT *Learning Leaders in Times of Change* and *Turnaround Leadership for Sustainability in Higher Education* projects.
8. Identifying how best to use peer networks and inter-university review processes for sustaining the outcomes of the fellowship and the ALTC/OLT projects that have informed it.

The Senior Fellowship programme will culminate with a national conference in October 2015, which will cover the collective learning and key implications that have emerged of the fellowship.

## Outcomes & deliverables

The Senior Fellowship will deliver:

1. A summary report for wide dissemination nationally and internationally on the key outcomes of its capacity-development programme, organised around the activities identified above.
2. An internationally-validated framework for understanding and tracking how higher education institutions can confirm the validity of their achievement standards and ways of assessing them in different fields of education.
3. A clear profile of the key areas of focus, performance indicators and capabilities necessary for effective change leadership and implementation in this area with particular focus on the role of

A/Deans (learning & Teaching) and Programme Head/Director, benchmarked against the earlier ALTC/OLT Learning Leaders findings.

4. An identified set of core dilemmas and challenges that accompany leadership in this area and suggestions from experienced Learning & Teaching leaders on how they can be most productively addressed.
5. A tested set of policy guidelines for embedding the outcomes of the earlier inter-university moderation of assessment standards into core quality assurance processes for assessment in Australia's higher education institutions.
6. A user-tested learning system for building the capability of staff in setting achievement standards, designing valid assessment, using OLT resources for the area and engaging others with the implementation of these strategies within and beyond their institution. This will include a set of workshop guidelines and resources based on the Fellowship's outcomes.
7. A set of national and international presentations, papers and publications on key findings and recommendations, including at HERDSA and a possible event associated with the 2015 Universities Australia conference.
8. International recognition of the work of OLT in this area using our well-established links with networks like the International Association of Universities (IAU) and national agencies like the Canadian Quality Network of Universities and the Canadian Institutional Research and Planning Association, Ako Aotearoa and the Academic Audit Unit in NZ, the Higher Education Academy and the Quality Assurance Agency in the UK, the Higher Education Leadership Academy (AKEPT) in Malaysia, key universities in the U.S.A., the South African Association for Institutional Research and the Copernicus Alliance of Universities in Europe.
9. Stronger international support and information-sharing networks for the area, using a common framework and set of indicators for effective practice in validating and assuring the quality of assessment in post-secondary and higher education, supported by a jointly developed Fellowship outcomes website.
10. A tested methodology for replication both within and beyond Australia, including in the range of developing countries which are also giving focus to this area in their emerging higher education systems.

### **Emeritus Professor Geoff Scott**

Geoff Scott is Emeritus Professor of Higher Education and Sustainability at the University of Western Sydney (UWS), Australia. From 2004-12 he was Pro Vice-Chancellor (Quality) and then Executive Director of Sustainability at UWS. He has been co-chair of the Sustainable Futures Leadership Academy and helped establish RCE-Greater Western Sydney. Geoff is author, with Canada's Michael Fullan, of the widely used book *Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education*. He has recently completed an international project on *Turnaround Leadership for Sustainability in Higher Education* with Daniella Tilbury, Leith Sharp and Liz Deane and a project with Kerri-Lee Krause and senior colleagues from 11 Australian universities on *Inter-university moderation and the assurance of higher education subject and program achievement standards*. In 2008 he led the Australian Learning and Teaching Council study of *Learning Leaders in Times of Change* with colleagues from the Australian Council for Educational Research. In 2010 he led the national survey of sustainability in the curriculum of Australia's universities. He is a former member of the board of directors of the Australian Council for Educational Research, a Fellow of the Australian College of Education, a member of TEQSA's register of Experts, a higher education auditor in many countries and an adviser to a wide range of higher education institutions within and beyond Australia. In 2007, he was the recipient of the Australian Higher Education Quality Award.