

## 4.3 Definitions

The purpose of this section of the paper is not to settle upon specific definitions but rather to elucidate the different emphases associated with the varying use of basic terms, with a view to exploring the prospects for shared understandings of policy intent and possible areas of common ground.

Regrettably, there is little consistency, let alone consensus, over the meaning of even the most commonly used terms. Sometimes, the same term is used in relation to different factors, or different terms are used to describe similar factors; e.g. 'outputs' and 'outcomes' can be used interchangeably. At other times, different meanings derive from different contexts; 'competence' and 'employability' have different meanings in the European context than in the English or Australian contexts (Brockmann et al., 2008). And at times, definitions are constructed with a hint of sophistry and with a view to directing change according to the preferences of the defining agency; e.g. outcomes may be defined as 'direct' measures of achieved learning and contrasted with 'proxy' measures of graduate success such as employment and income consequences (Nusche, 2008), even though the direct measures are themselves proxies, such that we get 'primary' and 'secondary' proxies:

*"Outcomes of higher education are not limited to learning outcomes. Students can benefit from their HEI experience in many different ways, such as better social status, higher employment rates, civic engagement, opportunities to pursue further studies, or simply leading a more fulfilled life (Ewell, 2005). While such outcomes are related to learning, they should not be confused with the actual mastery of knowledge, abilities, and skills that result from students' engagement in HEI learning experiences (Ewell, 2005). Such long-term social and economic benefits of the HEI experience can serve as secondary proxies for learning outcomes, but they are not direct outcomes of learning"* (Nusche, 2008).

In a similar vein, Shavelson, one of the developers of the Collegiate Learning Assessment instrument, focuses on 'direct' rather than 'indirect' measures of learning, because the former relate to "actual learning as a relatively permanent change in observed behavior over a period of time" (Shavelson, 2010).

Some may regard quibbling over definitions as indulgent. But clarity of policy intent requires clarity of definition. Ambiguity in the use of terms may reflect complexity but it may also permit permissiveness and licence authoritarianism. The ambiguous use of basic terms relating to the accountability for quality agenda in higher education sets off alarm bells, but curiously they are not resonating. One wonders why.

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### 4.3.1 Inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes

In a background paper for the OECD's AHELO project, Nusche (2008) offers the following definitions:

*Inputs* are the financial, human and material resources used, such as funding and endowments, faculty and administration, buildings and equipment.

*Processes (or Activities)* are actions taken or work performed through which inputs are mobilized to produce specific outputs. Examples of higher education activities include curriculum design and teaching.

*Outputs* are anything that an institution or system produces, e.g. articles published, classes taught, educational material distributed, and degrees awarded.

Nusche does not include graduates in the category of outputs, although she does include 'degrees awarded' (by implication the people to whom they are awarded). If one regards graduates as outputs then outcomes may be seen as the benefits that graduates obtain from their achievement, whether employment, income, and wellbeing, as well as the contributions that graduates make to society. The question of how to classify graduates in an educational 'system' is complicated by the fact that students are inputs and co-producers, learning is an interactive experience, and graduates are people who, because they learn, cannot be neatly or normatively defined.

*Nusche treats outcomes separately, distinguishing between intent and actuality: "Outcomes describe what the student actually achieves as opposed to what the institution intends to teach" (Allan, 1996). She goes further to suggest that "Inputs, activities and outputs have little intrinsic value in terms of student learning. They are only the intermediate steps that may or may not lead to outcomes or benefits" (Nusche, 2008). But what accounts for learning in this view, or doesn't that matter? If learning is understood as an independent variable why bother with teaching? There is a basic flaw in the logic for understanding education. Nusche (2008) appears to confuse differences between actuality and intent, which result from inappropriate or ineffective processes, with differences between cause and effect.*

Given Nusche is setting the scene for testing direct learning outcomes across different contexts, it may be understandable that she narrows the scope through definitions in order to focus on student achievement. Thus, borrowing from the pioneers of the controversial model of 'outcomes-based education', and focusing on the summative rather than the formative purposes of assessment, Nusche takes a behaviourist approach, echoing Shavelson (2010): "In behavioural terms, learning outcomes have been defined as something that can be observed, demonstrated and measured" (Nusche, 2008):

*"Outcomes are clear, observable demonstrations of student learning that occur after a significant set of learning experiences... Typically, these demonstrations or performances reflect three things: (1) what the student knows; (2) what the student can actually do with what he or she knows; and (3) the student's confidence and motivation in carrying out the demonstration. A well-defined outcome will have clearly defined content or concepts and be demonstrated through a well-defined process beginning with a directive or request such as 'explain', 'organize', or 'produce'" (Spady & Marshall, 1994).*

By a different logic, one that acknowledges the complex interactions involved in learning but looks to a measurable end effect, a similarly reductionist approach has been adopted by AUQA in its 2009 discussion paper on measuring and monitoring academic standards. Here the argument is analogous to the cement mixer whose inner working are not readily observable, but the strength of the mix can be tested once poured:

*"A large number of important variables influence how well students achieve. These include: student backgrounds; students' knowledge and skills on entry to a course; the design of individual courses and degree programs; how much effort students make; institutional resourcing levels for teaching; and the quality of teaching. Gathering data about and evaluating these types of input and process variables is a very valuable exercise, particularly for each institution's own continuous improvement, but limiting the scope of quality assurance procedures strictly to these cannot substitute for a direct focus on achievement itself. Primarily, this is because the various inputs and processes interact in complex ways, and are not deterministic. An explicit focus on academic achievement, however, examines the net learning effect of all the variables operating together. It thus serves two purposes. It allows the attained level of achievement to be assessed and recorded (as grades on student transcripts, for instance), and it allows evaluation of how well the teaching and learning system is working" (Woodhouse & Stella, 2009).*

These approaches of Nusche (2008) and Woodhouse & Stella (2009) can be seen to share a positivist view which (falsely) represents social reality as existing objectively and independently of those whose action and work actually produces the conditions observed (Horkheimer, 1937). Additionally, they reduce the notion of learning to 'academic achievement'. The AUQA approach is particularly narrow, with its focus on cognitive achievement. Nusche takes a wider taxonomical approach, including cognitive and non-cognitive learning outcomes (see Box 35). Of particular note is her exposition of the possibilities for assessing generic skills independently of knowledge and learning contexts. Importantly, domain knowledge and domain-specific skills are not readily transferable.

### **Box 35. Cognitive and Non-cognitive learning outcomes**

#### **Cognitive outcomes**

##### **Knowledge outcomes**

*General content knowledge* refers to the knowledge of a certain core curriculum whose content is considered essential learning.

*Domain-specific, or subject-specific, knowledge* outcomes refer to acquired knowledge in a particular field, such as biology or literature. Assessments focusing on domain-specific knowledge outcomes are particularly useful to compare learning quality in a particular field across different institutions.

##### **Skills outcomes**

*Cognitive skills* are based on complex processes of thinking, such as verbal and quantitative reasoning, information processing, comprehension, analytic operations, critical thinking, problem-solving and evaluation of new ideas. There is some disagreement as to whether such thinking processes are generic (following general patterns) as opposed to being field-specific. Assessments aiming to compare learning outcomes across different courses often focus on generic skills outcomes.

*Generic skills.* The common characteristic of all generic skills outcomes is that they transcend disciplines. They are transferable between different subject areas and contextual situations. Such skills are not directly tied to particular courses. They relate to any and all disciplines and they allow students to be operational in a number of new contextual situations (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Generic skills outcomes can be assessed using tests that are based on application rather than on knowledge, thus focusing on students' ability to solve intellectual problems. Usually, students are asked to provide constructed answers that also give evidence of writing skills. Focusing on outcomes in terms of skills may allow comparing how well programmes and institutions with diverging missions and ways of teaching achieve to develop certain common skill dimensions in students. Yet, there are some doubts as to whether such outcomes can really be connected to the university experience.

*Domain-specific skills* are the thinking patterns used within a broad disciplinary domain, such as natural sciences or humanities. They are stated in terms of methods of enquiry, ways of evaluating evidence, and patterns of procedure necessary to confront new contextual situations in specific fields of study. They involve an understanding of how, why, and when certain knowledge applies. Domain-specific skills are not entirely transferable throughout subject areas.

#### **Non-cognitive outcomes**

Non-cognitive development refers to changes in beliefs or the development of certain values.

*Psychosocial development* includes aspects of self-development such as identity development and self-esteem, as well as relational developments such as students' relationships with people, institutions and conditions. Relational outcomes include interpersonal and intercultural skills, as well as autonomy and *Attitudes and values*. Nusche, 2008.

## Outcomes-based education (OBE)

OBE has many variants (e.g. *mastery learning*, *performance-based education*) but generally refers to a student-centred learning philosophy that focuses on measuring student performance (*outcomes*), in contrast with traditional education, which focuses on the resources (*inputs*) available to the student. OBE does not specify or require any particular style of teaching or learning. Instead, it requires that students demonstrate that they have learned the required skills and content. In practice, such as in secondary schools in Western Australia, OBE promotes curricula and assessment based on constructivist methods and discourages approaches based on direct instruction methods and preferencing of classic texts. However, the terminology can be used in a less extensive and prescriptive way. For example, the University of Western Australia has distilled its approach in the following way:

*“A Student Learning Outcomes approach focuses on student learning by:*

- 1. Using learning outcome statements to make explicit what the student is expected to be able to know, understand or do;*
- 2. Providing learning activities which will help the student to reach these outcomes;*
- 3. Assessing the extent to which the student meets these outcomes through the use of explicit assessment criteria”* (Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, UWA, 2009).

OBE is directed at improving student achievement and focuses, therefore, on formative assessment. Tensions arise when the approach is adopted for purposes of external accountability with its focus on summative assessment. As the OECD has noted, from the perspective of tertiary education systems as a whole, both the purposes of accountability and improvement are essential; “the difficulty lies in combining them in the design of a quality assurance framework and its implementation” (Santiago et al., 2008). A starting point in reconciling the dual purposes is to recognise that learning outcomes are more than test scores, and that the choice of proxy measures matter:

*“Accountability must be inferred from observing outcomes in any system where all actions cannot be observed directly. To do this ‘inferencing’ the performance measure is an indicator of the desired behavior, not the behavior itself. In business, there is a clear outcome measure (revenue or stock price) to guide business decisions and actions. You can’t manage a business if you can’t measure its outcome. In education, outcomes are many and debated. The outcome indicator—most often a multiple-choice achievement test, is but a proxy for the desired outcome. When this indicator becomes an end in itself, and it does in education, well-intentioned accountability may very well distort the system it was intended to improve”* (Shavelson, 2009).

Thus one can only find empty the approach of Nusche (2008) and Woodhouse & Stella (2009) in seeking to gauge the effectiveness of education only by reference to summative measures.

### 4.3.2 Quality, quality assurance, quality enhancement and quality evaluation

Quality is a subjective view of the properties that distinguish an object. Harvey & Green (1993) identified five sets of meanings attaching to quality in higher education (see Box 36). Of particular note is that the fitness-for-purpose criterion turns from a demand-side customer requirement to a supply-side provider mission. The key inference is that mission-related criteria for quality remain powerful in a student demand driven system. This point contrasts with the ill-considered view that fitness for purpose is a less relevant criterion in a diverse student driven system.

*...mission-related criteria for quality remain powerful in a student demand driven system.*

### Box 36. Definitions of quality in higher education

"The *exceptional* view [of quality] sees quality as something special. Traditionally, quality refers to something distinctive and élitist, and, in educational terms is linked to notions of excellence, of 'high quality' unattainable by most.

Quality as *perfection* sees quality as a consistent or flawless outcome. In a sense it 'democratises' the notion of quality and if consistency can be achieved then quality can be attained by all.

Quality as *fitness for purpose* sees quality in terms of fulfilling a customer's requirements, needs or desires. Theoretically, the customer specifies requirements. In education, fitness for purpose is usually based on the ability of an institution to fulfil its mission or a programme of study to fulfil its aims.

Quality as *value for money* sees quality in terms of return on investment. If the same outcome can be achieved at a lower cost, or a better outcome can be achieved at the same cost, then the 'customer' has a quality product or service. The growing tendency for governments to require accountability from higher education reflects a value-for-money approach. Increasingly students require value-for-money for the increasing cost to them of higher education.

Quality as *transformation* is a classic notion of quality that sees it in terms of change from one state to another. In educational terms, transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students or the development of new knowledge."

Harvey, 1995.

The following definitions of academic quality, quality assurance in higher education, and quality enhancement, are taken from the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2006):

#### Academic quality

Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them.

#### Quality assurance (QA)

Quality assurance refers to a range of review procedures designed to safeguard academic standards and promote learning opportunities for students of acceptable quality.

There are various interpretations of what exactly constitutes acceptable quality: e.g., an institution's provision should be "fit for purpose"; should make effective use of resources; should offer its stakeholders value for money; etc...but it is increasingly agreed that it is important to promote improvement of quality, not just to ensure that quality is maintained. This shifts the emphasis from quality assurance to quality enhancement.

#### Quality enhancement (QE)

Quality enhancement is taking deliberate steps to bring about continual improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students.

These are useful working definitions, and the policy intention to emphasise enhancement is compelling.

#### Educational quality evaluation

A rounded approach to the evaluation of higher education quality has been advanced by Scott (2008) in a research and analysis brief prepared for the 2008 review of Australian higher education (Scott, 2008). He defines quality with reference to judgements which can be made about the design, support, delivery, and impact of a program. Judgements of quality can be about:

1. the relevance and desirability (fitness-of-purpose), feasibility, and fitness-for-purpose of a learning program's design;
2. the support and infrastructure put in place to enable its delivery;
3. the implementation of the program, e.g. evidence that that the planned course and its support systems are being put into practice in the way intended and to the satisfaction of both the students and teaching staff involved;
4. the impact of the program, e.g. evidence of high quality performance on valid, reliably marked assessment items; positive performance on proxy measures of impact including employability, graduate salaries, employer satisfaction with graduates, successful further study, etc.

Scott's approach generates the range of information necessary for making balanced judgements. It locates 'impact' (effectiveness and benefit) in the context of program purpose. It contrasts with the view that impact can be meaningfully assessed without reference to the purpose and context of learning.

### 4.3.3 Qualifications and Qualifications Frameworks

#### Qualification

A broad descriptive definition of a qualification is offered by the OECD:

*"A qualification is achieved when a competent body determines that an individual has learned knowledge, skills and/or wider competences to specified standards. The standard of learning is confirmed by means of an assessment process or the successful completion of a course of study. Learning and assessment for a qualification can take place during a programme of study and/or workplace experience. A qualification confers official recognition of value in the labour market and in further education and training. A qualification can be a legal entitlement to practise a trade" (OECD, 2007).*

A narrower description is offered by Tuck (2007):

*"A qualification is a package of standards or units judged to be worthy of formal recognition in a certificate":*

*'Standards' in this context = "a set of information about outcomes of learning against which learners' performance can be judged in an assessment process".*

*'Units' in this context = "A coherent set of standards which form a short, unified program of learning".*

A deeper understanding of the role of qualifications is indicated by Keating (2008):

*"Qualifications have been designed to discriminate. They concentrate upon individuals and they testify to knowledge, skills, attributes and experiences that are not shared by all. They do have social attributes. However, the collective attributes are essentially communal where qualifications play the role of gatekeeper for entry into occupations or alumni".*

Qualifications thereby function as passports for learner mobility in labour markets and contexts for further learning.

#### Qualifications Framework

Considerable diversity in qualifications frameworks is reflected in the OECD's definition. It allows for a range of practices, and does not suggest that one form of practice is better or worse than another:

*"An instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved. This set of criteria may be implicit in the qualifications descriptors themselves or made explicit in the form of a set of level descriptors. The scope of frameworks may be*

*comprehensive of all learning achievement and pathways, or may be confined to a particular sector, for example initial education, adult education and training or an occupational area. Some frameworks may have more design elements and a tighter structure than others; some may have a legal basis whereas others represent a consensus of views of social partners. All qualifications frameworks, however, establish a basis for improving the quality, accessibility, linkages and public or labour market recognition of qualifications within a country and internationally” (OECD, 2006).*

This matter is discussed at 4.4 below.

#### 4.3.4 Standards

Of the thirty or so dictionary meanings of a ‘standard’, the following may be pertinent to the current discussion: anything taken by general consent as a basis of comparison; serving as a basis of value, comparison or judgement; an approved model for imitation; a measure to which others conform or by which the accuracy or quality of others is judged; a grade or level of achievement; a level of quality which is regarded as normal, adequate or acceptable; degree of excellence required for a particular purpose; a document specifying (inter)nationally agreed properties for manufactured goods etc.

Thus ‘standard’ can connote ‘normal’ (i.e. undistinguished), ‘acceptable’ (i.e. fit for purpose), ‘model’ (i.e. worthy of imitation) or, more neutrally, an agreed set of properties to be used for making comparisons. In its neutral sense, a standard is a criterion, and a set of standards comprise criteria or benchmarks for making comparative judgements, such as in assessing performance. Higher education standards, then, can be defined simply as ‘criteria for the assessment of capacity and performance’. However, much depends on who sets the standards, the criteria they select and the levels at which they set them (e.g. whether they are ‘minimum acceptable standards’ or ‘threshold standards, or ‘typical standards’ or ‘high standards’ or ‘aspirational standards’). Standards setting is contested ground, and the most contested area is that of academic standards.

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Academic standards can include curriculum standards, learning resource standards, pedagogical standards, assessment standards, and achievement standards. These different standards need to be integrated within an institutional context and purpose. If they are treated separately they can conflict:

*“It needs to be acknowledged that there is an important tension between pedagogical standards and achievement standards. The highest standards of pedagogy hold that the level of expected student academic achievement should be matched to the background and current level of knowledge of the particular students. Expecting an inappropriately high level of academic achievement for a group of students would not be regarded as good teaching practice and would not be judged as meeting a high standard of pedagogy. Thus, if one focused not on student academic achievement but on teaching as the focus of academic standards one would make very different assessment of academic quality” (Dearn, 2009).*

In Britain, the focus of higher education quality assurance is on standards of student achievement (learning): “Academic standards are a way of describing the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award (for example, a degree)” (QAA, 2006). Key questions, which are under present debate, include: who should set them, in what contexts, at what levels, and to what extent should they be common?

According to one view, standards are purpose-related, and can only be meaningfully set with reference to the nature and purpose of educational provision: standards are “criteria established by an educational institution to determine levels of student achievement” (education.com). This view reflects the necessary integration of student achievement standards and pedagogical standards at the institutional or program level (Dearn, 2009).

According to another view, academic achievement standards are necessarily based in disciplinary contexts and are essentially dynamic, and while they may be set externally to an educational institution they can only be determined by academic communities:

*“We use ‘standards’ to refer to the nature and levels of learning outcomes that students are expected to demonstrate in their university studies. This places the onus for setting and monitoring standards squarely with academics and academic communities within fields of study and disciplines. Standards are neither absolute nor timeless; standards are continually being re-defined and created as knowledge grows in existing fields and as new fields emerge” (James, McInnis & Devlin, 2002).*

Van Damme (2003) even goes so far as to suggest that there can be no fixed standards, since quality depends on its relationship to the internal purposes of a program or the external expectations of consumers and stakeholders (cited in Hämäläinen, 2003).

Yet another view sees academic achievement standards as fixed, once they have been pre-set by academics and other stakeholders:

*“An **academic achievement standard** is:*

- an agreed specification or other criterion,*
- used as a rule, guideline or definition,*
- of a level of performance or achievement.*

*This definition has two key features. First, a standard refers to a level that is preset and fixed. After that, it remains stable under use unless there are good reasons for resetting it. In higher education this would mean that the standards are not reset for each cohort of students, or for each assessment task. An academic standard is therefore a big-picture concept that stands somewhat apart from particular assessment tasks and student responses. Second, agreement on the specification must be by authority, custom, or consensus, as standards are not private matters dependent on individuals but collegial understandings shared among academics and other stakeholders” (Woodhouse & Stella, 2009).*

Are these different views reconcilable? Pre-set and ‘fixed’ standards may be applicable in relation to learning generic skills, which as discussed above, are regarded as being knowledge and context independent. They can be seen to be fixed in that they express criteria that need to be satisfied by an individual learner in order to ‘pass’ a course, irrespective of the performance of other students in a class at a particular time.

The concept of ‘standard’ as a pre-determined and fixed basis against which the capacity and performance of institutions, programs or graduates can be judged is useful in appreciating the difference between vernacular claims to ‘slippage in standards’ and demonstrable differences between institutional or individual performances with reference to set standards. But it is a complacent view. Performance may slip from time to time, relative to standards set previously, but new standards can be set by superior performance. To use a sports analogy—high-jumping—a standard will fall only if an official deliberately lowers the bar for some reason. Normally competitor performances keep the bar rising. Importantly, it is not the officials but the athletes who achieve the heights of performance and set the standards of excellence.

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A standard set as the basis for a national higher education system can be only the minimal acceptable quality permitted; it is the provider qualifying criterion, the foundation on which institutions can perform at the higher standards they set for themselves. The adjectives 'same' and 'common' can be applied validly with regard to this pre-set and fixed standard because it is prescribed for all as a minimum. An institution cannot be licensed if it cannot meet the prescribed conditions and continue to perform at least at the defined level of acceptability.

However, performance above the pre-set standard is not expected to be the same for all, because some will excel more than others (have a higher degree of quality) and in different ways for different purposes (exhibit different quality characteristics). In the case of individuals, as well as having different prior attainment and background circumstances, students have different purposes, some keen to pursue a special interests, some curious to taste the unfamiliar, some "developmental" and others "instrumental" in their orientation to learning (Brown, 2007). In the case of institutions, as well as having differences in physical and other circumstances, and differences in talent, universities (as one category of institutional types within which there is much diversity) have varying missions, some focused primarily on the preparation of graduates for professional employment, others focused more intensively on knowledge breakthroughs, perhaps with an interest in the development of rounded graduates.

For courses leading to entry to professional occupations, there may well be common areas for learning, and even common expectations of graduate capabilities. Similarities may be evident in the curriculum of cognate fields across different institutions. But common and similar coverage does not equate to sameness of provision, as there can be different orientations and methods chosen by different providers.

If we focus on 'standards-based education' as a derivative of criterion-referenced learning ('mastery learning') and assessment, standards can be understood as references which guide curriculum objectives, the design and organisation of learning experiences, and related forms of assessment. Standards-based education (see Box 37) is an outcome of the failed 'outcomes-based education' approach abandoned in the US in the 1990s and in Australia in the 2000s. It involves clear, measurable standards for all students and usually involves

- the creation of curriculum frameworks which outline specific knowledge or skills which students must acquire,
- an emphasis on criterion-referenced assessments which are aligned to the frameworks, and
- the imposition of some high-stakes tests, such as graduation examinations requiring a high standard of performance to receive a diploma (<http://en.academic.ru>).

### Box 37. Standards-based education (SBE) in Colorado

Standards-based education in Colorado is defined as an ongoing teaching/learning cycle that ensures all students learn and can demonstrate proficiency in their district's adopted content standards and associated benchmark concepts and skills. This teaching/learning cycle frequently measures student achievement through a variety of formats and assessments and ensures multiple opportunities for students to learn until they reach a proficient or advanced level of performance. *Regardless of content, course, level, identified outcomes or revisions in standards, this teaching/learning cycle remains constant.*

- A. Standards in all academic disciplines or content areas, along with benchmark information, concepts and skills, are identified and adopted at the district level.
- B. Essential benchmark information, concepts and skills expected for all students are identified and described. (These may also be called essential learnings, learning targets, power standards, objectives or grade-level expectations.)
- C. Essential benchmarks are articulated and aligned within and among grade levels and across the district to ensure there are no gaps or unnecessary overlaps in those expected learnings.

- D. Adopted curricula provide a scope and a sequence of essential benchmarks (sometimes called curriculum objectives or targets) that engage students in learning standards in all content areas.
- E. Curriculum guides (frameworks), maps, pacing guides and other curricular tools are produced at the district level to assist teachers to plan effective instruction that focuses on essential benchmark knowledge, concepts and skills.
- F. Descriptions of proficiency are created to describe the types and levels of performance expected for all essential benchmarks in all content areas and grade levels.
- G. Examples of proficient student work are created and distributed to teachers to provide models of learning and performance expectations for all essential benchmarks.
- H. Adopted or purchased instructional programs and materials are intentionally articulated and aligned with standards-based curricula.
- I. Standards and benchmarks are communicated effectively to students and parents. Students understand and can describe proficient performance for those concepts and skills.

Benson, 2008.

Externally-developed statements of standards can inform institutional decisions about curriculum design, teaching and assessment but they cannot determine them entirely. In criterion-referenced education, standards have to be integrated in the context of learning to fit the needs and abilities of learners. Similarly, the results of collegial discussion in the academy on expectations of learning outcomes in particular disciplines (e.g. Tuning, Subject Benchmark Statements, ALTC Benchmarks for teaching and learning quality assurance), may serve as helpful references for program design but they can be no more than references:

*“Collegial processes of debate about academic standards do not necessarily lead to totally common understandings about what the minimum or base expectations are; nor should they. They often quite validly lead to differences which result in innovation and progression for curriculum, assessment and value adding diversity of graduate outcomes” (ATN, 2009).*

***“Collegial processes of debate about academic standards do not necessarily lead to totally common understandings about what the minimum or base expectations are; nor should they.”***

On balance, externally-developed standards, beyond the threshold of acceptability for operational licensing, have a limited role, primarily as references against which internal decisions can be made about educational objectives, curriculum design and assessment:

*“Quality evaluation should not be exclusively focused on assessing institutions within a standardised and externally defined framework, but should see the capacity of institutions to stand out through innovation and individual and institutional creativity” (Teixeira, 2010).*

***So what is meant by “outcomes and standards-based arrangements” (Bradley et al., 2008) in respect of higher education in Australia?***

A working model of standards-based arrangements can be found in relation to the National Code relating to the provision of education services for international students. Providers must be registered on the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS) as a condition of their students being able to get a visa to study in Australia. CRICOS-registered providers must comply with 15 standards that ensure their quality of education and professionalism is of a sufficiently high standard to enrol international students. These education providers must demonstrate their compliance with the standards at the point of CRICOS registration and throughout their CRICOS registration period.

Each Standard in Part D is linked to the National Code 2007 Explanatory Guide. The 15 standards cover the following aspects of delivery of education to international students:

<b>Standard 1</b>	Marketing Information and Practices
<b>Standard 2</b>	Student Engagement Before Enrolment
<b>Standard 3</b>	Formalisation of Enrolment
<b>Standard 4</b>	Education Agents
<b>Standard 5</b>	Younger Overseas Students
<b>Standard 6</b>	Student Support Services
<b>Standard 7</b>	Transfer Between Registered Providers
<b>Standard 8</b>	Complaints and Appeals
<b>Standard 9</b>	Completion Within Expected Duration
<b>Standard 10</b>	Monitoring Course Progress
<b>Standard 11</b>	Monitoring Attendance
<b>Standard 12</b>	Course Credit
<b>Standard 13</b>	Deferment, Suspension or Cancellation of Study During Enrolment
<b>Standard 14</b>	Staff Capability, Educational Resources and Premises
<b>Standard 15</b>	Changes to Registered Providers' Ownership or Management

By way of illustration, Standard 14 ensures providers have suitable staff, educational resources and premises to educate overseas students. The provision of staff and services are to accord with existing quality assurance frameworks that apply to the course or, where none exist, providers must have appropriate policies and procedures of their own.

### Key requirements

- The staff of registered providers are suitably qualified or experienced in relation to the functions they perform for students.
- The educational resources of registered providers support the appropriate delivery of courses to students.
- The suitability of staffing, educational resources and provider premises will be determined in accordance with applicable quality assurance frameworks.
- If no quality framework applies to staffing resources, providers must have, and use, documented policies and processes for: recruitment, induction, performance assessment and ongoing development of staff who recruit or work with overseas students.
- If no quality framework applies to education resources, providers must have adequate resources to deliver the registered course to the students enrolled.
- The provider must notify the designated authority and enrolled students of any intention to relocate premises at least 20 working days before the relocation.

*The heavy use of qualifiers such as “sufficient”, “appropriate”, “reasonably available” in the statement of standards renders the process vulnerable to inconsistent judgements and reduces procedural fairness.*

### ■ *Is the National Code model what we can expect from TEQSA?*

As noted above (see 3.5.2), the Australian Government’s “Higher Education Standards Framework” comprises “provider registration standards”, “provider category standards”, “qualifications standards”, “information standards”, “teaching and learning standards” and “research standards”.

Provider registration standards can be expected to take the form of a document specifying properties that a provider must be able to demonstrate as a condition of obtaining a license to operate. The first draft of provider registration standards in 2009 specified 89 requirements under 9 categories (see Box 38). A problem with the draft, apart from its excessive requirements and the extensive reporting they demand, is that whereas some requirements are readily observable, many of them require interpretation, e.g. under 'management': "the provider maintains an internal culture of respect and trust, including respect for all employees, for students, for Indigenous Australians, for multiculturalism and pluralism and for learning". In what sense is that a standard? Whatever it is it is plainly inoperable, not least because a provider cannot know what it takes to comply. The heavy use of qualifiers such as "sufficient", "appropriate", "reasonably available" in the statement of standards renders the process vulnerable to inconsistent judgements and reduces procedural fairness.

### Box 38. First Draft Higher Education Provider Registration Standards and Requirements

1. **Legal status and standing:** The higher education [provider is reputable and is legally accountable for the higher education it offers.
2. **Financial viability and safeguards:** The provider has sufficient financial resources and financial management capacity to sustain the operation of the provider's higher education awards at an acceptable standard of quality, including the provider's awards offered through partnerships with other institutions within Australia or overseas.
3. **Primacy of academic quality and integrity:** The provider maintains academic quality and integrity.
4. **Governance:** The provider is well-governed in respect of its higher education activities.
5. **Management:** The provider is well-managed in respect of its higher education activities.
6. **Responsibilities to students:** The provider defines and meets its responsibilities to students, including the provision of information, support and equitable treatment.
7. **Human resources and professional development:** The provider engages and retains sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled personnel to ensure effective student learning and ensures its personnel are able to professionally develop their skills and knowledge.
8. **Physical resources and infrastructure:** The provider makes available sufficient physical and electronic resources and infrastructure to ensure the achievement of its higher education activities, including achievement by students of expected learning outcomes.
9. **Standards for programs:** The provider maintains appropriate academic standards in its higher education programs.

Source: DEEWR, 2010.

There are two projects being funded by the ALTC relating to teaching and learning standards. One is the 'Benchmarks for teaching and learning quality assurance' exercise discussed at 3.5.5 above. The other is the 'Teaching Standards Framework', outlined at 3.5.6 above, the design of which is based on a template developed by Macquarie University.

#### Macquarie University/ALTC Teaching Standards Framework project

Macquarie University has developed a teaching standards framework based on the view that "effective learning requires teaching built on:

- A university culture that is focused on enhancing the quality of student learning in professional, intellectual, social and ethical terms;

- Universities that are socially dynamic and student-centred (in both administration and teaching), with policies and practices that enhance their social inclusiveness and enrich university study as a total human experience;
- Governance that is transparent, accountable and responsive to student, community and government priorities;
- Policies and practices which facilitate excellence in learning and teaching outcomes through clear academic planning, explicit appointment criteria and career development practices;
- Appropriate resourcing;
- Teachers who are familiar with the latest developments in their disciplines; establish clear learning and teaching strategies and outcomes; are familiar with innovative thinking on learning and teaching, and are accessible and responsive to students, colleagues and the community” (Macquarie University, 2010a).

Macquarie defines teaching standards as “the criteria by which we assess the quality of learning and teaching performance and outcomes” (Macquarie University, 2010b). Its institutional level teaching standards framework considers ‘culture’, ‘governance’ and ‘practices’ along levels of achievement in relation to the criteria:

*“In general terms, ‘No’ indicates a failure to address the criterion; at ‘No But’ there is some manifest acknowledgement of the criterion and some intention of meeting it, but so far there has been no substantial progress towards that goal; at ‘Yes, But’, there has been an active attempt to meet the criterion, but without significant innovation or initiative; at ‘Yes’, institutions will be actively re-thinking what they do in light of the criterion, and innovating accordingly. There is provision to exceed ‘Yes’, where an institution will be pioneering new methods of learning and teaching that will contribute to a re-definition of the criterion” (Macquarie University, 2010b).*

By way of illustration under ‘practices’, in relation to the criterion “University funding models recognise and reward good teaching”, the following levels are described for self assessment purposes:

‘No’	Funding models do not recognise teaching excellence.
‘No, But’	Funding models recognise the importance of teaching excellence but do not provide adequate funding due to competing priorities
‘Yes, But’	The University allocates resources to support teaching excellence through its funding models, but they are targeted narrowly due to competing priorities
‘Yes’	The University funding model allocates appropriate resources to support teaching excellence across the institution.

### ■ *Why should Macquarie’s template be replicated across other universities?*

While it may be useful for performance improvement purposes for individual institutions voluntarily to benchmark their policies and practices, it is not self-evident that such an approach should be part of a national standards framework and as part of a regulatory mechanism. Indeed, standard practices in this area are inappropriate, as each institution should gear its teaching strategies to meet its particular objectives in relation to its students. Hence, it is curious that the project is being funded for the purpose of developing a framework which “would then be validated as a tool which could be used by government agencies such as TEQSA and for inter-institutional benchmarking” (Macquarie University, 2010a).

### **The ATN Academic Indicators**

Another guide to the possible evolution of “standards-based arrangements” for academic quality assurance is the suite of indicators being developed by the Australian Technology Network (ATN) group of (formerly capital-city polytechnics) universities. The ATN commissioned ACER (a major vendor of

testing instruments) to develop a draft set of 'academic standards', and the ensuing report offered a model which might "further distinguish ATN institutions as a consolidated network, and provide a foundation for network-wide and evidence-based planning, practice and review" (Coates, 2007a). The initiative is of some note because of the explicit reference to it in the Bradley report (Bradley being of the ATN stable), with the enjoinder that the ATN model should be replicated:

*"Work is already under way in the sector to start articulating academic standards in a more sophisticated way. For example, the Australian Technology Network group of universities has commenced a project on academic standards which could be used to benchmark across institutions. While this is an important initiative, what is needed is more rapid and systematic implementation of a coherent national framework that applies to all higher education providers"* (Bradley et al., 2008).

*The clear inference is that something along the lines of the ATN academic standards framework ought to be applied universally across the Australian higher education sector, and quickly.*

*The clear inference is that something along the lines of the ATN academic standards framework ought to be applied universally across the Australian higher education sector, and quickly. But why? And why the rush? And why model the Australian higher education sector on the aspirations of the ATN?*

It is one thing for a group of institutions to seek to differentiate themselves through a particular model of reporting on their capacity and performance, but it is quite another thing, indeed self-defeating as well as ingratiating, to impose that group's model on everyone else. Importantly, the proposed approach reflects a lack of regard for diversity and a complete lack of understanding of what drives innovation and quality in higher education. The Go8, for instance, would not wish to be limited by the horizons of the ATN. The Teaching and Learning Academic Standards Framework for the University of South Australia is at **Attachment C**. Is this indicative of the operational model to be imposed on all institutions? Why should it be assumed that its particular approach has merit? Or does it reflect the notion of a standard as merely 'acceptably normal'? Indeed its blunt approach to knowledge is well short of cutting edge. In Go8 universities, academic staff are appraised against disciplinary leaders internationally, and learning is informed by discovery well in advance of what appears in textbooks. But the University of South Australia is apparently satisfied with a much lower standard:

*"The University encourages academic staff to contribute to their discipline and be in touch with current research and scholarship, integrating into their teaching the knowledge and understanding they and others create through scholarly activity, including the creation of text books and other teaching resources"* (University of South Australia, 2009).

In any event, the ATN model is a long way from being operational, as indicated in the recommendations of the commissioned report (Coates, 2007a):

1. ATN institutions should adopt a consistent definition of 'academic standards as being 'levels of performance on key academic indicators of educational quality'.
2. ATN institutions should endorse the proposed ATN Academic Standards Model, which consists of a high-level indicator framework, a suite of measures to support these indicators, an approach for gathering data on each of these measures and a series of standards for indentifying performance.
3. ATN institutions should produce a succinct plain language summary that provides information to relevant stakeholder groups on the specification, measurement, monitoring and enhancement of academic standards. This could be prepared by individual institutions, or across the ATN as a whole.

4. ATN institutions should implement the ATN academic Standards model. This would involve operationalising the model, mapping data elements against defined measures and indicators, managing and analysing data, developing performance measures and reports, and establishing routines for benchmarking and improvement.
5. ATN institutions should develop their capacity to measure and hence assure general graduate capabilities including work readiness. To provide a foundation, a comparable set of graduate capabilities should be defined and embedded into learning and teaching. Assessments should be developed to measure graduates' capability, which may include routine assessments, feedback from employers, or an objective test.
6. ATN institutions should undertake a systematic and multifaceted review of student assessment and reporting. Such a review could develop ATN capacity to: monitor student input standards, produce validated assessment tasks, develop moderation processes to ensure the equivalence of learning standards, develop comparable curriculum standards, develop common reporting metrics, develop transparent statements of attainment and conduct routine analyses of student performance data.
7. ATN institutions should develop a systematic approach to monitoring and enhancing industry involvement in learning. Institutions might: highlight the important role that employers, industries and working professionals play in ensuring the quality of higher education; enhance the formative input provided by industry into educational design, delivery, assessment and review; strengthen or build relationships with professional bodies; and obtain more systematic forms of feedback from graduate employers.
8. ATN institutions should further develop their approach to documenting and developing educational resources. They should design and implement a systematic approach to the production of teaching portfolios and initiate the development of course portfolios.

Of particular note is the set of actions at recommendation 6 above, including equivalent learning standards, comparable curriculum standards and common reporting metrics. It is one thing for a group of five like-minded institutions to develop comparable approaches but quite another to require all institutions to comply with a single model.

Indeed it is inconceivable that a government in a contemporary democracy would contemplate such a latter-day Stalinist model. The ATN Academic Standards Model involves sets of measures to support three types of performance indicators: outcomes (see Box 39); process and context (see Box 40); and inputs (see Box 41). The development of data for comparable reporting and benchmarking on these measures can be seen as a significant improvement agenda for the ATN. But what has this to do with the role of a national regulator? As noted at 2.5.3 above, wide adoption of common templates tends to replicate sameness and reduce diversity.

*It is one thing for a group of five like-minded institutions to develop comparable approaches but quite another to require all institutions to comply with a single model.*

### Box 39. Measures to support outcome indicators

Level	Indicator	Measures	
Student	Graduation	Completion rates	Time to completion
	Graduate destinations	Labour-force participation rates	Further study participation rates
	Satisfaction	Graduate satisfaction data Student satisfaction data	Completion rates Student retention rates
	Learning outcomes	<b>Validated assessment results</b> <b>Student engagement data</b> Further study participation rates	Student success rates <b>Numeracy and literacy data</b>
	Graduate qualities	<b>Employer satisfaction data</b> Labour-force participation rates	<b>Graduate attribute assessments</b> Data on generic skills
	Work readiness	<b>Capstone program participation rates</b>	<b>Data on work readiness</b> <b>Data on employability skills</b>
Teacher	Teaching experience	Number of teaching awards Teaching quality data	<b>Teaching staff experience</b>
	Teaching resources	Teaching resource satisfaction data Library satisfaction data	ICT resource satisfaction data <b>Production of teaching resources</b>
Provider	Institutional growth	Number of partnerships and networks	Teaching and learning income
	Institutional reputation	Placement in institutional rankings Number of teaching awards International staff exchange rates	Course demand data International student exchange rates International student numbers
	Community engagement	<b>Size of alumni programs</b> Employer satisfaction data Equity group access and quality data	<b>Data on community engagement programs</b> <b>Service learning participation rates</b>

### Box 40. Measures to support process and context indicators

Level	Indicator	Measures	
Student	Student engagement	<b>Student engagement data</b> Completion rates	Retention rates
	Retention and progress	Retention rates Progress rates	Retention programs Learner support services
Teacher	Teaching processes	Teaching quality data Staff/student ratios Staff mentoring programs	<b>Sessional staff support programs</b> Teacher review processes Curriculum management processes Staff development programs
	Course management	Scheduling and timetabling management Industry involvement in course design Course viability and relevance Course development processes	Arrangements for course coordination Course approval processes Staff teaching load
Provider	Academic governance	Education policies	Management policies
	Academic management	Education plans and systems Management plans and systems	Learner support programs Systems for managing student experience
	Academic culture	Staff support services <b>Diversity of academic staff</b>	Education support programs <b>Plagiarism rates</b>
	Staff development	<b>Staff development participation data</b> <b>International staff exchange rates</b>	Teaching development grants Academic staff promotion rates
	Quality systems	Monitoring processes Enhancement activities Examination procedures	Staff mentoring programs Academic appeals processes

## Box 41. Measures to support input indicators

Level	Indicator	Measures	
Student	Entry levels	<b>Literacy and numeracy data</b> <b>Academic literacy</b>	Course demand and selectivity
	Entry pathways	Credit transfer arrangements Student selection processes Advanced standing arrangements Extent of financial supports	Demand from qualified regional students Diversity of entrance pathways Transfer and articulation arrangements
	Student diversity	<b>Incoming student characteristics</b> Number of exchange students International student numbers	Equity group access and participation Student exchange supports
Teacher	Staff characteristics	Academic staff in senior positions Staff teaching qualifications Academic staff with doctorates Staff international experience	Academic/administrative staff ratios Sessional teaching staff numbers Teaching staff experience
	University enculturation	University enculturation programs	Retention programs
	Educational resources	Teaching resources Teaching development grants	Library resources and services Learning innovation programs
	Course development	Financial status of courses Course accreditation processes Course development processes Course approval processes <b>Course coordination arrangements</b>	<b>Curriculum relevance</b> Course review processes <b>Industry involvement in course design</b> Teaching development grants
	Support systems	ICT resources and supports <b>Staff mentoring programs</b> <b>Sessional staff support programs</b> Staff development programs	Equity student support programs Student support services Disability support services Induction programs
Provider	Institutional characteristics	<b>Investment in learning infrastructure</b>	<b>Community outreach programs</b> Institutional ranking
	Institutional reputation	Course demand and selectivity Presentation at conferences International student numbers	Alumni programs Partnership and network arrangements Institutional rankings
	Institutional resources	Learning infrastructure Partnerships and networks Educational development programs Teaching staff experience	Library resources and services Teaching and learning income Teaching development grants
	Industry engagement	Course accreditation processes Course relevance Service learning programs Industry involvement in course design	Alumni programs Labour-force participation rates Course-integrated careers advice Industry partnerships and networks

### 4.3.5 Comparability or consistency?

There are now very wide differences in the input factors to higher education, including students and teachers whose interactions are the critical determinants of learning, and it would be unreasonable to expect flattening of those differences in the characteristics of graduates.

*“Any agreement to have a uniform system-wide set of standards for student academic achievement raises the issue of whose standards. It is unlikely that any institution would wish to lower its standards of student academic achievement which immediately raises the issue of the implications of imposing the same unrealistically high levels of academic achievement on all students in the sector in terms of equity and social inclusion” (Dearn, 2009).*

The greater diversity of the student mix, provider types and modes of teaching and learning requires more sophistication rather than more simplicity in the representation of the characteristics and contributions of higher education:

*“At a time when only a very small proportion of the population went to university, and the student population was broadly equivalent in terms of background and ability—and when degree courses were considerably more uniform in terms of their nature and intended outcomes than they are now—it was undoubtedly a reasonable expectation that the outcomes of degree courses should be broadly comparable, and that there should be mechanisms available to police this (hence, external examiners). Today, the environment is radically different. Nearly half of the young population now participate in higher education, the range of ability of those students is very wide, and the purpose, nature and intended outcomes of programmes all vary considerably. It makes little sense to seek comparability of outcomes, and indeed it would actually be wrong to do so. Given the extraordinarily high previous educational attainment of students attending, say, Oxford or Cambridge, the substantially greater resources devoted to them, the greater intensity of study that they undergo, and other factors, it would in fact be a surprise if the outcomes of students from those universities were no higher than those of students from other universities who have far lower prior attainment, resources devoted to them, and so on. But, self-evident as this might seem, there are actually no instruments available to demonstrate it.” (Brown, 2010a).*

*“It makes little sense to seek comparability of outcomes, and indeed it would actually be wrong to do so.”*

As noted at 3.2 above, the question of comparability or consistency of degree standards has been raised in Britain through the House of Commons, motivated primarily by a desire to remove discrimination against graduates of less prestigious institutions and to inform students of the worth of their degrees. A similar debate is in progress in the US (see Box 42), inspired by similar concerns and a need to improve the information available to employers.

#### **Box 42. Making Degrees Easier to Interpret**

“Suppose an employer advertises an entry-level position that requires advanced statistical knowledge. The employer narrows down the applicant pool to three finalists for the position: an Ivy League graduate, a graduate from a small public college, and a graduate from a for-profit university. All the candidates have bachelor’s degrees in statistics and all have roughly the same GPA’s, previous work experiences, and pleasant demeanors.

How can the employer possibly distinguish the values of the three finalists’ degrees? There is essentially no method to determine which of the three graduates have the knowledge and skills that match the advertised position. Grades and academic standards often vary so much by institution, department, and instructor that transcripts are written off as arbitrary and meaningless by those making hiring decisions. Outside fields with licensure exams like accounting and nursing, employers often hire workers based on connections, intuition, and the sometimes-misleading reputations of applicants’ alma maters. This system doesn’t allow labor markets to function efficiently. And it’s far from meritocratic for college graduates, especially the talented ones who attended less-selective schools and are disproportionately likely to be first-generation, low-income, or students of color.

To rectify this broken hiring system, academia and industry should form stronger partnerships to better determine which skills and knowledge students in various fields need to master. Some types of common and field-based assessments are needed to help employers match their jobs to graduates with complementary skills, even if the assessments are entirely voluntary for students. The traditional college transcript is simply too impenetrable for anyone outside—or inside—academia to comprehend.”

Hinton, F. (2010).

*By what means could qualitative differences in student learning be demonstrated amid great diversity?*

It has been suggested that the very quest for consistency in higher education standards is quixotic and fails to appreciate the diversity and dynamism of the field. A more customised approach is seen to be appropriate, where a higher education institution puts forward the objectives, learning opportunities and assessment strategies for its programs, reflecting its mission and validated by the relevant field and professional communities (see Box 43). One option for implementing a more customised approach is to develop the 'diploma supplement' as a fuller record of the learning experiences of students.

*One option for implementing a more customised approach is to develop the 'diploma supplement' as a fuller record of the learning experiences of students.*

### **Box 43. Comparability and consistency in British Higher Education**

"There is no mechanism to ensure consistent and meaningful comparability among institutions and subjects, and no mechanism I can envisage that could make it so. National examinations, which some have suggested, or individual degree standards overseen by a body such as QAA, would create a vast industry and an attendant bureaucracy and its inevitable failure would make the annual row over GCSEs and A Levels look very tame indeed. It would be much simpler to stop using these out of date classifications designed to meet the needs of another century, and provide individually focused information which actually tells the user something about the student and what he or she has learned. The 'one size fits all' scheme we now use is a travesty of fairness and consistency.

We seem in this country to have no capacity to think beyond monolithic hierarchies and, in trying to shoehorn very different purposes, clienteles, structures and people into a single narrow boot marked 'The only acceptable HE standards for the UK', we perhaps reduce our opportunities to innovate, develop and recognise a much more useful set of standards based on the particular characteristics of the students and programmes being offered.

Provided the standards are clearly stated and readily available, validated by the relevant subject and professional community as useful, valuable and appropriate, and form the basis for the assessment of students, then the variations between subjects and institutions should become a reason for celebration, not the sort of angst about irreconcilable differences."

Williams, P. (2010).

Even the search for threshold standards is seen to be a formidable challenge in a sector which continues to diversify:

*"I'd like to refer to what I've called Brown's Paradox (but I don't claim originality for it) which is that, as the system expands, the pressures of comparability increase but, by the same token, the ability to ensure it reduces. Indeed the major changes that have taken place over the last decade have produced an incredibly heterogeneous sector with far more types and structure of degree than in the past. And this looks set to continue. They make such threshold standards increasingly impossible to implement, at the same time as creating a situation which makes their absence felt, and I think that is the nub of the problem" (Brown, 2010b)*

Similarly, in the US there is a troubled view about the penchant of governments to seek simple comparisons of higher education outcomes based on scores on standardised tests, and the damage that approach can do to diversity:

*"Using common measures and standards to compare institutions that serve markedly different student populations (e.g., a highly selective, residential liberal arts college compared to an open-access*

*community college with predominantly part-time students, or a comprehensive public university serving a heterogeneous mix of students) results in lowered expectations for some types of institutions and unreasonable demands for others. If similar measures are used but “acceptable standards” are allowed to vary, an inherent message is conveyed that one type of mission is inherently superior to the other. The diversity of the US higher education landscape is often cited as one of its key strengths. Homogenous approaches to quality assessment and accountability work against that strength and create perverse incentives that undermine important societal goals” (Borden, 2010).*

The challenge of comparability is complicated by the range of expectations for it, and the associated confusion of policy intent:

*“Comparability means that the standards of learning aimed at and achieved by students in any two programmes leading to the same or a cognate award are genuinely equivalent. So it could mean, for example, that all students in one institution obtaining a bachelors degree in any subject are achieving the same standard, all students from several institutions obtaining a bachelors degree in any subject are achieving the same standard, and it could mean all students from several institutions obtaining a bachelors degree in the same subject are achieving the same standard. It could also refer to common standards in all elements of a programme, options as well as core, and it could mean common standards over time in different cohorts of a programme” (Brown, 2010a).*

In principle, consistency of degree standards would require commonality in each of following conditions:

- within all the components of a degree program (including options) within an institution;
- in the degree program followed over several years;
- in the standards aimed at and achieved in similar programs in the same subject in different institutions;
- in the standards aimed at and achieved in different subjects both within an institution and across the sector (Brown, 2010a).

To provide valid and reliable information about the comparative quality of programs and awards it would be necessary that:

- the programs would have to be comparable in terms of aims, structure, content, learning outcomes, delivery and support;
- similarly, the awards would have to involve comparable assessment methods, criteria and outcomes (marks or grades);
- the assessment judgements would have to be valid, reliable and consistent; and
- students pursuing the programs (and/or interested in pursuing the programs) would have to have comparable starting attainments, aspirations, motivations and learning objectives (Brown, 2007).

***“I believe that any real comparability now is infeasible, at least without a national curriculum and national examiners answerable to a national standards agency.”***

These conditions are neither likely nor desirable in a diverse and responsive system. Not only is the feasibility of consistency (‘strong comparability’ in British usage) dependent on a Napoleonic approach, of a national curriculum delivered regimentally, but it could also produce perverse outcomes:

*“...is strong comparability really desirable? Should a demonstrable persistently significant lack of comparability mean some exam boards, departments or even possibly institutions giving larger numbers of highly rated awards and others fewer? Would some courses have to teach less or to a*

*lower standard and vice versa? Should there be changes in resourcing levels and policies in ambitions, criteria, etc? A combination of some or all of these might put certain programmes, departments or even, dare I say, institutions, out of business. Who would decide these things assuming we were to get that far? I believe that any real comparability now is infeasible, at least without a national curriculum and national examiners answerable to a national standards agency” (Brown, 2010b).*

Curiously, in the British context, ‘comparability’ has come to have the peculiar meaning of ‘same’, ‘common’, ‘consistent’ and ‘equivalent’. Additionally, the terms are applied interchangeably to standards and performance. Such confusing use of terms is unhelpful for international discourse. It would better to distinguish between key terms, and to be clear about the policy purposes attached to each. Various definitions of the concepts being used in policy discussions, including for ‘learning outcomes’, have been explored. A set of working definitions for the wandering adjectives is offered in Box 44, with the underlined phrase being the preferred meaning for each adjective.

#### Box 44. Working definitions of key qualifiers

<b>Same</b>	<u>identical</u> ; uniform; unvarying;
<b>Common</b>	typical; occurring often; <u>shared by many</u> ; of the most familiar type;
<b>Similar</b>	<u>alike</u> ; resembling the same kind ;
<b>Equivalent</b>	equal in value, or importance or utility; <u>of commensurable worth</u> ;
<b>Consistent</b>	not contradictory; <u>constant to same principles</u> ; compatible;
<b>Comparable</b>	capable of being compared; <u>enabling estimated similarity or dissimilarity</u>

Sources: Australian Oxford and Macquarie dictionaries.

These adjectives may be qualifiers for either standards or performances, but they have very different implications according to what is being qualified. For instance, consistency is not sameness. Rather, it is constant adherence to a set of principles, on the part of a particular higher education provider. Thus, consistency cannot be norm referenced. Equivalence is about social value and recognition, despite difference. Comparable differs from same and common, in that it relates to dissimilarities as well as similarities.

These are not trivial nuances. They go to the heart of appreciating what is worthwhile and what can be demeaned by lack of that appreciation. They expose as vacuous any notion of consistent standards across a national system of higher education.

#### 4.3.6 Fitness for purpose, fitness of purpose, and a standards-based approach

*“fitness for purpose” is a definition of quality that allows institutions to define their purpose in their mission and objectives, so “quality” is demonstrated by achieving these. This definition allows variability in institutions, rather than forcing them to be clones of one another” (Woodhouse, 1999).*

*“Fitness for purpose approaches explicitly acknowledge diverse institutional missions and the differences in what they achieve. Standards-based approaches emphasise what institutions should have in common, especially in terms of the nature and level of learning outcomes that students are expected to demonstrate in their university studies” (James, McInnis & Devlin, 2002).*

The concept of quality as fitness for purpose differs from other notions of quality in fundamental ways, for it is based on the premise that if something does the job for which it is designed, then it is a quality product or service. That is, every product or service has the potential to fit its purpose and thus be a quality product or service:

*"The ultimate measure of perfection, 'zero defects,' may be excellent as a definition of quality but runs the fatal risk of being perfectly useless. If the product does not fit its purpose then its perfection is irrelevant" (Harvey & Green, 1993).*

As one of the five definitions of quality identified by Harvey and Green (1993), fitness for purpose is the most deceptive, "for it raises the issue of whose purpose and how is fitness assessed?" Fitness for purpose offers two alternative priorities for specifying purpose. The first puts the onus on the customer, while the second locates it on the provider:

*"Fitness for purpose sees quality as fulfilling a customer's requirements, needs or desires. Theoretically, the customer specifies requirements. In education, fitness for purpose is usually based on the ability of an institution to fulfil its mission or a programme of study to fulfil its aims" (Harvey & Green, 1993).*

Harvey & Green elaborate on the extent to which fitness for purpose is customer-specified, in the sense that a customer has requirements that become the specifications for the product, and the outcome meets those requirements:

*"Thus a quality product is one that conforms to customer determined specifications.*

*This approach provides a model for determining what the specification for a quality product or service should be. It is also developmental as it recognises that purposes may change over times thus requiring constant re-evaluation of the appropriateness of the specification" (Harvey & Green, 1993).*

However, they note that customer specification is an idealisation, and that in practice, customers rarely specify their individual requirements. In the general production of goods and services in mass markets, providers anticipate and assess what the customer is prepared to buy. In education there is the added complication of multiple customers and consumers who may not know what they want:

*"First, the notion of 'customer' is itself a tricky, indeed contentious, concept in education. Is the customer the service user (the students) or those who pay for the service (the government, the employers, parents)? Second, the customer, the student for example, is not always able, nor necessarily in a position to, specify what is required. Fitness for purpose, therefore, leaves open the question of who should define quality in education and how it should be assessed" (Harvey & Green, 1993).*

**...customers rarely specify their individual requirements.**

So with some circularity, 'fitness for purpose' in education moves from being driven by student requirement to being driven by institutional mission. The important corollary is that quality is a function of how well an educational institution fulfils its mission:

*"The tricky issue of determining who are the customers of higher education and what their requirements are can be avoided, to some extent, by returning the emphasis to the institution. Quality can then be defined in terms of the institution fulfilling stated objectives or mission" (Harvey & Green, 1993).*

However, there remains another problem. Defining quality only in terms of fitness for purpose has no referent other than what an institution claims to stand for: "a major weakness of the fitness for purpose concept is that it may seem to imply that "anything goes" in higher education so long as a purpose can be formulated for it" (Campbell and Rozsnyai, 2002). This tension can be addressed by locating fitness for purpose in the context of shared understandings (see Box 45). In this understanding of the complexities, fitness for purpose approaches to quality assurance can be complemented by references to external expectations, such as in the form of criteria for employability and indicative standards. The issue, as always, is the balance between similarity and dissimilarity of expectations, and the degree of discretion that providers are allowed in serving different needs as best they can.

### Box 45. Fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose

“Among the various criteria used in judging quality, we find the terms ‘fitness for purpose’ and ‘fitness of purpose’. The former, often used in quality assurance activities, means determining whether the academic strategies are suitable for achieving the declared aims of a programme. The latter means determining whether the aims of the programme are suitable or not. In the Tuning view, to develop true quality, ‘fitness for purpose’ has meaning only when the fitness of purpose itself is thoroughly established and demonstrated. As a consequence Tuning holds that quality in programme design and delivery means guaranteeing both “fitness for purpose” (i.e. suitability for achieving the declared aims of each programme ), and “fitness of purpose” (i.e. suitability of the aims of each programme: these should meet the expectations of students, academic staff, employers and the broader ones foreseen in the Bologna Process). Guaranteeing “fitness of purpose’ requires a strong connection with research and academic standards as well as a consideration of employability which is only implicit in the “fitness for purpose” definition”.

Source: Quality enhancement at programme level: The Tuning approach. Tuning Educational Structures in Europe. <http://www.tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=176>.

*Thus we return yet again to the basic question; whose standards? The major policy issues arising from this question are: Who should set standards for higher education? Should externally-set standards serve as references or guidelines for higher education institutions to use, inter alia, in setting their own standards? Or should the institutions focus on ways and means of meeting the externally-set standards?*

It may be argued that external standards leave institutions free to determine the ways and means of achieving desired outcomes. That is, the setting of standards as criteria for the assessment of effectiveness does not necessarily mean standardisation of what is taught and how it is taught, nor does it diminish institutional autonomy in respect of curriculum and pedagogy. However, the setting of academic standards is the fundamental expression of what a university stands for. To take away from a university the function of setting its educational goals is to deprive it of its reason for being. The university has its own standards of excellence to live up to. It also needs to be responsive to the expectations of others. In a plural system the university’s own expectations and those of the community it serves may not always align with standards set by a national regulator.