

**International Leadership Colloquium
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The Pursuit of International Standards

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Preamble

The first two objectives for this Colloquium are to

- Offer an international overview of accreditation systems
- Show new trends on LO assessment

Clearly other contributors to this meeting cover the USA and Europe and Spanish-speaking and Arab areas, so I felt my role, especially as President of INQAAHE, is to make some global observations about quality, and then more specifically bring some information about developments in the Asia-Pacific region.

In 1991, Malcolm Frazer, then head of the UK's EQA for the non-university sector, declared that the coming decade would be the decade of QA. DW surprise – but so it proved. Eg INQAAHE 12 to >100 in the decade.

This growth did not come to a sudden halt at the end of the decade, of course, but continued (as JE said), eg INQAAHE now >200.

But, in 2000, at the end of that decade, I thought I could distinguish a different emerging emphasis, and suggested that the coming decade, from 2000, would be the decade of international quality – and so it has proved.

Note, first, that we can see two types of 'international issues':

- Intrinsically international, eg TNE, graduate mobility: i'nat co-operation essential
- Multiply national, eg LOs & standards (what the nation's graduates can do, and how well): i'nat co-operation advisable (eg AHELO)

And during this decade of international quality, we have seen many developments in relation to the first of these, eg:

- TNE/CBE – OECD/UNESCO guidelines
- QA of internationalisation / internationalisation of QA – role of the QA networks (circular – chicken and egg)
- Growth of QA networks – now overlapping, subnetworks, world is covered. INQAAHE initiative and network meetings
- This was the (first) decade of Bolgna.

In 1997, DW – presentation in Ireland on 'next 25 years in QA'. As we approached the beginning of the decade of international quality, I speculated on the ways in which this internationalisation might occur. No single one has proved to be uppermost, but almost all exist now:

- One international EQA (hasn't happened)

- Multiple international EQAs, eg EUA, IQPR, EQUIS
- Mutual recognition of agencies, eg Washington Accord, ECA, APQN objective, INQAAHE WG
- Collaboration b/w agencies, eg Oz/S Africa
- National agencies operating internationally, eg ABET, AACSB, RIBA

Though we are at the end of the decade, the international trend will continue as there are still many international / TN matters to address, eg:

- Cross-border recognition of complete or partial qualifications
- Credit transfer
- Ability in the language of instruction
- Admissions criteria generally
- Educational importers becoming exporters
- Proliferation of 'education hubs' (Singapore, Malaysia, etc.; 'whatever you don't have, you do have people!')
- Mobility – what happened to UMAP, UMIOR?

And, of course, the topic for today, one of the issues I'm called 'multiply national', namely LOs and standards.

1. Learning Outcomes and Accountability

As EQAs have been proliferating, those of us in the movement have given many talks beginning with a list of reasons for this. A major reason is the massification and globalisation of HE and its consequences. These consequences include increasing range of types of provider, increasing range of types of incoming students with diverse abilities, increase in the overall cost of HE and increased associated interest in knowing the money is well-spent, ie accountability.

EQAs have been created with a variety of different purposes and powers. At one end of the spectrum one could place EQAs that only audit at institutional level. The implication is that the institutions are well-trusted to set their own objectives, and to evaluate their own programs, and the accountability emphasis is low. At the other end of the spectrum are agencies that own and enforce a NQF and accredit institutions and their programs, with evaluations related to funding. The implication is that external detailed control and oversight is essential to the achievement of quality in the HE system, and the accountability emphasis is high. The last decade has seen a general increase world-wide in the accountability emphasis.

Hence there is increasing talk of and attention to:

- Graduate attributes, including discipline-specific and generic; and the consequent
- Learning outcomes; which may be
- Defined in qualification frameworks; and to
- Standards, ie the level at which the above have been achieved.

Note the many meanings of 'standard' and even in the restricted meaning of 'student academic achievement standards', there is a blurring of the distinction between

- Setting standards at threshold levels

- Setting standards at other levels
- Measuring standards achieved
- Ensuring standards are the same

These can all be seen in an academic context, such as general intellectual development or readiness for further study, including whether a graduate has achieved an adequate level to enter doctoral study. However, more frequently, learning outcomes and standards are related to job-readiness and employability (part of the new thinking needed about quality and QA).

2. Brief Context: USA, UK, Australia

2.1 USA

In the USA, we can observe the rise of the 'assessment movement' in the mid-1980s. This was/is aimed at gathering systematic evidence on student learning outcomes and collating it to provide information that will enable institutions to improve instruction (ie not merely to calibrate the individual student).

In 1989, the US Department of Education required accreditors to examine the quality of student learning, and the accrediting agencies in turn required institutions to document how they intended to establish learning goals, create an associated assessment process, and provide the resulting evidence of student academic achievement.

Nonetheless, progress has been slow and uneven. Carey (2008) reported that, 10 years after the above requirement, ie in 2000: "Students and taxpayers were spending hundreds of billions of dollars every year to educate the next generation of citizens and scholars. Yet one could find little evidence of how much those students were learning. No state could produce reliable comparable data to indicate where college learning was good, bad or somewhere in between".

And, another 10 years on many current institutional self-study and external accreditation reports still make similar remarks to 20 years ago, namely that the documents provided by institutions are weak in evidence of institutional quality as reflected in the achievement of students. (Ewell 2008)

Will institutions and agencies meet the challenge?

2.2 UK

In 1994, the British Secretary of State for Education said, in effect, that the then HEQC might be doing a good job on quality, but asked whether it knew what standards the institutions were achieving. This gave rise to the Graduate Standards Programme that took two and a half years and cost 2.5m pounds to reach the conclusion that standards are not immutable over time or place but "are ultimately a matter of judgement residing in the minds of those concerned with teaching, learning and assessment" (Brown 1997). Or again, it is "disciplinary communities who are the real guardians of academic standards" (Finch, 1997). In consequence, the HEQC and its successor the QAA convened discipline-based panels to create the '**subject benchmark statements**'.

A **subject benchmark statement** describes what can be expected of a graduate in terms of abilities, skills, understanding and competence in the subject. The UK also has a comprehensive system of external examiners which (despite defects) provides inter-institutional calibration.

This system gets close to an evaluation of comparative standards. Indeed, it was enough to deceive the writers of an Australian government discussion paper (Australian Government, 2008, p73) who remarked on the UK's work in assessing and reporting standards. However, the "QAA does not have standard learning outcomes for each course, but seeks broad comparability. There are no absolute standards, as this would be counter to diversity which is desired." (Williams, 2007). The QAA was criticised for this gap in a 2009 British parliamentary review, which recommended strengthening the powers of the QAA to address it.

2.3 Australia

Australia became concerned about the variability of degree outcomes across the country late in the 1980s. The AVCC created discipline-based Academic Standards Panels to review the honours (final year) program in the discipline in all 19 universities. These had good effect but the practice was aborted in the early 1990s when the increase in the number of universities made the approach impracticable.

Hence concerns continue to be expressed in Australia that institutions don't really know what standards their students are achieving. "There is no Australian university with any systematic means for knowing about its standards and how they might be changing" (Anderson, 2001) (cf. Carey, 2008, above). "There are presently few objective reference points for knowing the intellectual standards of Australian degrees" (James et al., 2002).

AUQA was created in 2000 to carry out quality audits. AUQA, aware of the UK experience, also began to ask institutions about standards, eg:

- How are standards determined and updated?
- What processes are in place to assure consistent implementation of the standards?
- How are outcomes monitored?
- How are standards compared nationally and internationally?
- What is the result of these comparisons of outcomes or content?

We found that few universities could answer this well. Common answers were:

- Examiners' meetings check grade distributions (ie they check internal consistency)
- Most of our courses have professional accreditation (ie we relinquish our responsibility for checking standards to external bodies)
- We are just starting on benchmarking (but with little to show for it)
- We have sample cross-marking by other institutions (only a couple of institutions were able to give this good answer)

Hence, the government has again turned its attention to standards, and AUQA (and nine other smaller accreditation bodies) are to become part of a new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) – note the word 'standards' in the title.

However, "the difficulty is defining academic standards precisely enough to protect students and the community against unacceptable lapses in standards, but not so tightly

[as to] to suppress innovative and diverse ways of teaching and assessing students. ... The only reliable way of ensuring that graduates have the necessary skills is to ensure that they follow the curriculum supported by the resources that are known to produce competent graduates. Without understanding the learning-teaching process fully it is not possible to define it only by its outputs.” (Moodie, 2010)

3. The Asian Dimension

The concern with standards and learning outcomes is widespread in Asia, also, for various reasons.

3.1 East Asia

Japan

In Japan, there has been an over-supply of HE places since 1995 in junior colleges and since 2002 in universities, leading “to the enrolment of students of steadily declining calibre and readiness”, but yet “in 2005, the completion rate of Japanese HE was 90%, the highest among OECD countries” (Yonezawa & Mori, 2009). Therefore “the Japanese government and universities have taken considerable steps to assure and improve the quality of university education and learning outcomes”. One government step was to introduce a system of certifying evaluation organisations for HEIs, but their performance has been too variable to be valuable.

The Japanese government is therefore keener than ever about learning outcomes as a means to escape the crisis of over-supply leading to further deterioration of academic achievement. In 2008, on the recommendation of the Central Council for Education, the government now requires HEIs to

- specify learning outcomes to be achieved,
- improve the quality of educational contents and methods so that students may achieve the outcomes, and
- implement assessment methods in line with the specified outcomes.

JUAA, one of the main QA agencies, does not set standards for learning outcomes, leaving it to each university to develop its own indicators. JUAA will, however, have to decide how to evaluate them (Hara, 2010).

“In a large economy like Japan, not all citizens are involved in the direct and globally standardised competition for academic achievement. There is a wide variety of local settings, and even the definition of quality of education and learning outcomes may differ.” (Yonezawa & Mori, 2009). In other words, we have to be careful to continue to leave space for the local and domestic, and not force everything to be international (or world-class!). (Cf. forestry courses in New Zealand.)

Japan, like Korea, is participating in AHELO, although this does not sit well with the highly diverse and hierarchical structure of Japanese HE (Yonezawa & Mori, 2009).

Korea

The Korean Council for University Evaluation (KCUE) was established in 1982 to evaluate / accredit at both institution and program level. Institutional accreditation is valid indefinitely, but program accreditation is cyclic. There are also professional programmatic accreditors

which may apply their standards more rigorously. In 2009, in response to the UNESCO / OECD Guidelines for Cross-Border QA in HE, the Korean government required all accreditors to obtain formal government approval. In obtaining this approval, KCUE is concentrating on institution-level evaluation.

Institutions have notional tests of academic achievement or graduate competence, but these are mostly a formal signal of completion, with no comparisons made across institutions. The greatest influence on graduate attributes is the business world, and the Federation of Korean Industries and the Korean Chamber of Commerce and Industry (among others) have published lists of expected attributes. Students take these requirements seriously and prepare hard for them (Kim, 2010).

Taiwan (similar issues to Japan)

Taiwanese universities have a high entrance rate (acceptance rate of 97% in 2008) and departmental specialisation. Most students follow the HE path with no concept of their career goals or understanding of active learning and knowledge acquisition. Furthermore, recent internal and external evaluations have emphasised inputs (resources, staff) rather than student performance. Then, in trying to remedy this, student learning outcomes were confused with student outcomes which are actually institutional performance measures (eg graduation rates, employment data, etc.) (Ho, 2009). Ho describes the use of e-portfolios to generate student engagement, and the achievement and recording of their learning goals.

However, the issue of what students learn in colleges and how it is measured continued to worry Taiwan society, with the public losing confidence in the quality of higher education. The guidelines of “Promoting Student Quality in Postsecondary Education Programs” introduced by the government in 2009 stated clearly that all programs and institutions are required to set up a series of core competences and to hold proficiency tests for all students in order to ensure the levels of the professional knowledge and skills students acquired in a job market. With student learning outcomes now a major concern in quality assurance of higher education in Taiwan, the main problem comes from the expectation about evidence of student learning outcomes that vary among the peer reviewers of the accrediting agencies (Hou, 2009).

Hong Kong

Hong Kong has a relatively recently established outcomes-based qualifications framework, so program development within institutions is progressively moving towards the measurement of learning outcomes. Institutions subject to external accreditation are required to specify program objectives and learning outcomes and show that the curriculum and assessment matches them (Lok, 2010). The autonomous institutions are being encouraged to move in the same direction and adopt an outcomes-based approach. While the QA process focuses on student learning, it does not involve the measurement of standards. The government periodically surveys employers to get a sense of the performance of university graduates in the workplace (Ko, 2010).

The Universities Grants Commission (UGC) has formed a Task Force on Outcome-based Approaches (OBA) in Student Learning to facilitate institutions' efforts to weave “outcomes” into the new curricula, encourage teaching staff to adopt OBA, foster collaboration and sharing of information among institutions, and organise promotional events. The curriculum revision under the new normative 4-year curriculum (which will commence in 2012) in Hong

Kong represents a good opportunity for adopting OBA. The UGC does not define learning outcomes and graduate attributes for the institutions but is helping institutions build OBA capacity through the provision of additional funds of over US\$10m to UGC-funded institutions. Institutions are required to report on the progress and effectiveness of efforts made in carrying out initiatives supported by the funding for promoting OBA (Ma, 2010).

Hong Kong requires overseas institutions operating in Hong Kong to be reviewed to ensure that their HK-offered program will be comparable with the one back home. This grants the program 'recognition' and registration, but not accreditation. Accreditation of overseas programs in HK requires a further check to see whether the HK-offered program is comparable with equivalent indigenous HK programs.

3.2 South Asia

Pakistan

In Pakistan, a set of 11 Institutional Performance Evaluation Standards were approved by the Higher Education Commission in April 2010 and are now being published for implementation. One of the standards, on curricula and academic programs, requires institutions to develop expected learning outcomes, design learning experiences that will provide opportunities for students to achieve these learning outcomes, and implement measures of student achievement of these outcomes. An emphasis in the selection of learning outcomes is whether they will fulfil the needs of society and the labour market (Batool et al., 2010).

India

In India, student learning outcome is a concept that is understood in the professional areas of studies. In general higher education, the term is used interchangeably with student achievement and often in the context of demonstrating standards of the higher education institutions, which is interpreted as institutional performance.

India has been discussing 'standards comparable nationally and internationally' for many years. With both the states and the central government having a role in education, ensuring nationally comparable standards among the institutions of the 37 states is a major task for the central government. The National Policy on Education 1986 and its Program of Action were instrumental in a number of initiatives towards achieving 'comparable standards' in higher education. Establishment of the national quality assurance agency (National Assessment and Accreditation Council, NAAC) was one such initiative.

One of the objectives of NAAC, established in 1994, is to 'grade institutions of higher education' for their quality and standards. To grade the institutions, NAAC uses seven criteria, one of which is about 'Student Support and Progression'. Addition of value to students and the community is one of the areas investigated by NAAC. When the institutions are assessed, the assessment panels consider the student progression data given by institutions, although this data is often not consistent nor nationally comparable. For aspects such as students' employability and skill development (competencies) the panels make a professional judgement based on their interaction with the graduates, parents, employers and other community stakeholders (Stella, 2002, 2010).

3.3 Pacific

New Zealand

The topics for the third cycle of audits (2003-06) of the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit were teaching quality, program delivery and the achievement of learning outcomes. The general findings in relation to the eight universities was that they were paying attention to graduate attributes, working on assessment practices, and developing international benchmarking partnerships.

Australia

Similar to the NZ experience in relation to benchmarking, in the first cycle of audits of Australian universities, 2002-07, the main finding in respect of benchmarking was that the institutions were just starting.

Australia requires its institutions offering programs overseas to ensure that they are comparable in standard with the same program offered in Australia.

The Australian Learning and Teaching Council is in the middle of a project to create threshold statements of academic achievement in a number of disciplines (not unlike the UK's subject benchmark statements, but intended to be precise enough to permit comparative judgements).

3.4 Summary

Learning outcomes and achievement standards are high on the agenda in Asia, but as elsewhere, effective work on addressing the issues is incipient or unco-ordinated. "Especially in highly developed East Asian Economies with strong bureaucracies, government policy settings and the actual needs of HEIs in the market are frequently incoherent" (Yonezawa & Mori, 2009). In this context, government intervention in quality and learning outcomes might actually be counter-productive as compliance by institutions with government requirements becomes a domestic power game.

4. Contribution of the Professions

In the early 1990s, it was often stated that the professional accreditors would be in the forefront of global developments in accreditation. The two reasons advanced were, firstly, that graduates were becoming increasingly internationally mobile, and the professional accreditors would therefore have a strong incentive to recognise each others' judgements (across borders); and secondly, that the desired graduate achievements or learning outcomes are the same in any country (engineering materials have the same strength, accounting numbers add to the same sum). The signing of the Washington Accord in engineering in 1989 gave impetus to this expectation.

Learning outcomes are particularly significant (or should be) in professional accreditation or licensure because the emphasis in these checks is on actual graduate knowledge and ability to practice the specific profession. If such professional recognition operates internationally, it can provide information on comparative standards between countries.

However, progress in international recognition in professional disciplines has slowed down, and the most impressive progress has been made in recent years by ECA in Europe with

mutual recognition between **general** accreditors. Some professional areas moving towards a global comparability are as follows.

4.1 International Union of Architects (UIA)

The UNESCO-UIA Validation System, which was created in 2002, recognised the Japanese System (JABEE) and the Korean system (KAAB – see above) in May 2009 for five-year periods. A Kazakh study program was validated for only three years with qualifications. The UNESCO-UIA Charter for Architectural Education, the UNESCO-UIA Validation System for Architectural Education is currently being revised for agreement by the UIA Assembly at its next meeting in Tokyo, Japan in September 2011 (Cox, 2010).

In 2006, the UIA together with the American institute of Architects (AIA) convened a meeting in Washington of representatives from countries that had a well established accreditation system for architecture at the professional level. There was sufficient interest and commonality to advance the idea of an international accord that recognises architectural qualifications. A year later, a meeting in Ottawa reviewed in detail the policies, criteria and procedures for accreditation across all participating jurisdictions. There was seen to be substantial equivalence, so, at a further meeting (in Canberra in 2008), an accord was signed (the 'Canberra Accord'). This echoes the Washington Accord for Engineering (Holden, 2010). All systems within the Canberra Accord are to be reviewed for compliance every six years, starting this year with the systems in Mexico and Korea (Henderson, 2010).

4.2 International Federation of Nurse Anesthetists (IFNA)

Education, practice and ethical standards were adopted by IFNA in the early 1990s, but remained as guidelines for 10 years. A few years ago, this was developed into an accreditation process which was tested on some pilot programs in 2008 and 2009. The international accreditation process was launched this month (June 2010) in The Hague.

4.3 International Registry of Counsellor Education Programs (IRCEP)

IRCEP was created in 2009 by the US Counselling association (CACREP) in response to the growing number of enquiries to CACREP about the recognition and/or accreditation of programs outside the USA. CACREP decides to facilitate a registration process, rather than accreditation, as there is such variety world-wide. Making any global specifications with adequate rigour would have made them of limited utility.

IRCEP will therefore develop standards relating to the scope of the counselling curriculum, approve programs that meet those standards, and promote excellence through networks of counsellor educators.

4.4 AACSB/ABET/EQUIS

AACSB and ABET are not themselves international networks or consortia, but do carry out accreditation in many countries. They are therefore mechanisms for international consistency and comparison.

AACSB accreditation requires the specification of learning goals and demonstration of their achievement for key general, management-specific, and/or appropriate discipline-specific

knowledge and skills that its students achieve in each undergraduate degree program. At the course or single-topic level, faculty members normally have very detailed learning goals. These standards do not focus on such detailed learning goals. AACSB accreditation is directed at program-level learning goals of a more general nature.

Other speakers in this Colloquium will more fully address this approach to learning outcomes.

[Nadia – global summit for medical practitioners – paediatrics]

[Rainer – in Europe, networks of universities developing joint programs]

4.5 Multi-national employers

AUQA has begun to work with multinational employers, as their employment of graduates from different countries for the same (or analogous) jobs gives them an excellent perspective for comparing the level of graduates in different countries. This work is at an early stage.

4.6 INQAAHE WG

In 2008, INQAAHE established a working group on professional accreditation to provide focused support to INQAAHE members who are professional accreditors. Its aim is to help professional and specialised accreditors with the challenges they are facing in globalising or in other international efforts. Challenges identified by participants in meetings held by the working group include:

- Global standards and how standards are influenced by cultural differences
- Balancing local and national autonomy with international expectations.
- High costs of an effective international evaluation system
- Language issues
- Why institutions or programs want accreditation from another country
- Relations between accreditors from different countries.
- International governance issues

This serves as a good summary of the issues relating to learning outcomes in the professional fields. Mutual recognition in general QA need only testify to the proper achievement of a level of academic ability. In a professional discipline, the specific curriculum and student achievement of specific competencies is essential. This is easier in less culturally dependent subjects, but the continued monitoring is likely to be expensive in any subject.

5. Conclusion

“Learning outcomes [the flavour of the month!] ... are damaging to education if seen as precise prescriptions that must be spelled out in detail before teaching can begin and which are objective and measurable devices suitable for monitoring educational practices. ... They give the impression of precision only because we unconsciously interpret them against a prior understanding of what is required. ... The meaning of the evaluative terms used to specify the quality of knowledge, understanding or analyses is always relative to a context and so cannot be used to specify absolutes.” (Hussey & Smith, 2002)

One peril in trying to achieve common standards in a subject area across institutions is that this needs objectivity, which quickly becomes synonymous with quantification, with professional judgement dismissed as impressionistic. However, a disciplinary “tradition depends on a community of scholars engaged in a common pursuit. The idea of an academic pursuit is scarcely intelligible without there being some sense of what it is to engage in it well or badly. Standards are therefore inherent in the very notion of a discipline. Objective assessment is possible in the light of a growing familiarity with examples of good practice” and with the judgements that are made about them (Standish, 2002).

Necessary requirements for an effective national structure for measuring, monitoring and reporting on the standards of academic achievement include the definition of:

- national statements of desired academic achievement, at least at threshold, and possibly also at other, levels;
- exemplars which show how these are to be interpreted, used and applied; and
- discipline groups to carry out the evaluations and make the judgements.

(Woodhouse & Stella, 2009)

National statements of desired learning outcomes would, in effect, be the sector’s formal definition of academic standards. Such standards would provide a basis for review, audit, monitoring and enhancement, and they would derive much of their value from being independently and externally defined. Making these standards explicit is therefore an essential initial step in judging achievement and providing for inter-institutional comparison.

BUT:

- it must be done at discipline level,
- it might only be possible within small groups of institutions, rather than at national or international level, and
- establishment and implementation of such a scheme will be expensive: has anyone considered the cost/benefits?

The next decade?

The end in 2010 of the decade of international quality does not mean that the international issues are solved and will go, but if I were to risk a prediction for the next decade, it will be **the decade of new models of QA** (cf JE’s comments yesterday).

People have long asked whether EQA makes a difference. I think we are increasingly able to answer yes to that, but it is as if the questioners are no longer interested. They quickly move on and ask:

- but is it too expensive? What’s the cost / benefit analysis of EQA? and
- even if you are doing things right, are you really doing the right things?

But as we look for new models of QA, remember that that is not the core issue. The core issue is how to ensure HE is good and gets better – and the second question is, does some formal EQA system have a role to play in this, and if so, what role, and what would such a system look like?

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