

# A CONSIDERATION OF QUALITY, STANDARDS AND COMPLIANCE

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## ABSTRACT

With the advent of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) there is an increased focus, at all levels in the university community, on the quality of teaching, learning and research. Quality itself is not well defined within the framework of TEQSA, the definition is however approximated by a set of minimum standards. This is problematic as there is scant evidence that threshold standards produce a high quality education. Often the good quality, and high standards, that are achieved within the university are due to the good quality, and high personal standards, of the staff. The appraisal of quality is therefore left to a number of stakeholders, within the university community, and with external course accreditation bodies. This means that individual unit coordinators, and members of the university community, have to amass a large collection of disparate material to create the body of evidence for compliance with standards, and to act as quality indicators. Managing this information can be very time consuming at the individual level. It is therefore essential that there be streamlined methods for enabling compliance and capturing and storing the evidence.

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As a unit co-ordinator it feels that we are surrounded by checks and balances on our work which itself is under continuous scrutiny from within and without the university. With the advent of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) everybody at every level in the university will be accountable for the quality of the teaching and research within a university. It is therefore timely to investigate the effect this intense interest has on the day-to-day workload of a unit co-ordinator. Firstly though it is important to define quality and discuss the relationship between quality and standards.

Quality appears to be one of those difficult to pin-down concepts. The Collins Australian Pocket Dictionary (1992) defines quality as a “degree or standard of excellence” but unlike temperature, in Kelvin, or pressure, in Pascals, there is no absolute scale to measure it by. We all make judgements about the quality of something, usually relative to something else, and “we all know good quality when we see it”, but when asked to define what quality is, people start to define by analogy. For example we might tell a student that a good quality piece of writing is like a fine red wine, it is a pleasure to read and leaves you feeling content and satisfied at the end. How would one explain how to achieve that to a student who is asking what they need to do to get a good grade?

This was the very problem that lecturer Phaedrus wrestled with in Robert M Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

if you can’t say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes it doesn’t exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist. What else are the grades based on? Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously some things are better than others -- but what’s the “betterness”? (Pirsig, 1974).

Also the definition of quality is a very contextual thing which depends on personal values and experience. If I had never been exposed to beautiful writing, logical argument and clear thinking then what I deem to be a high quality piece of work may not rank as high, on the quality scale, as a person who has had such an experience. Quality is also level dependant: what is good quality writing at a first year undergraduate level might be a very low quality piece of writing at a PhD level. By getting his students to judge one piece of writing against another Phaedrus was able to convince them that even though they could not define quality they knew what it was, and he was able to show them how to improve the quality of their own work

He singled out aspects of Quality such as unity, vividness, authority, economy, sensitivity, clarity, emphasis, flow, suspense, brilliance, precision, proportion, depth and so on; kept each of these as

poorly defined as Quality itself, but demonstrated them by the same class reading techniques (Pirsig, 1974).

This is the path that Phaedrus took to raise the quality of his students work. This was what we would now consider an example of “best practice” in teaching and learning and as far as he was concerned, “The whole Quality concept was beautiful. It worked. It was that mysterious, individual, internal goal of each creative person” (Pirsig, 1974).

As the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency will be directing our quest to provide students with a quality education we thought we would find out what they have to say about quality. If you go to their website and type in “quality” you find **no** results reported (accessed 20/06/2012). If you type in “standards” you get 8 results, links to further information

1. Higher Education Standards Panel
2. Information Standards
3. Research Standards
4. Provider Standards
5. Teaching and Learning Standards
6. Qualification Standards
7. Higher Education Threshold Standards
8. Higher Education Standards Framework (TEQSA, 2012)

How does the setting of standards translate to judging the quality of a university, course, unit offering, graduating student or the work of you and me? It appears that because of the difficulty of defining good quality we have moved to setting standards, in the hope that if enough of the basic standards are met, the whole will be greater than the sum of the parts, and out of meeting the basic standards will come good quality. We leave this as a statement of what we are doing, and the correctness or not of the underlying assumption as a discussion for the philosophers among you.

Another point of caution is that TEQSA specifies “Higher Education Threshold Standards” i.e. the *minimum standards*. This is then not a quest for high quality, it is in-effect, a risk management, minimum standards, quality assurance process. The following quotes come from *TEQSA’s DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING STANDARDS IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF TEQSA, MARCH 2011*, discussion paper

TEQSA’s regulatory role is concerned with agreed minimum levels within the standards framework...

The emerging focus upon standards as central to quality assurance signals a shift in emphasis for Australian higher education. Previously, approaches to quality have principally been conceived as ‘fitness for purpose’, and quality assurance has involved investigating the alignment between the established goals of an institution and the policies and processes in place for achieving these goals. Quality assurance, when framed in these terms, operates largely around internal reference points. In contrast, the concept of standards implies a greater emphasis on agreed, external points of reference in measuring and improving quality...

TEQSA is developing learning standards because there is consensus that Australia must be confident that all graduates meet national minimum levels of attainment appropriate for the field or discipline in which they have studied, and appropriate for the level of the award they are granted (DEEWA, 2011).

As the governing body, TEQSA is required to evaluate the quality of our institutions, but the method it chooses to do this is to require compliance with national teaching and learning standards.

TEQSA will be required to undertake evaluations of the quality of providers, provide information about the quality of higher education and provide independent advice on standards, quality and regulation. Developing an agreed approach to national teaching and learning standards is an essential step in achieving these functions (DEEWA, 2011).

It appears that without a direct chain of reason between quality and standards it will be necessary for TEQSA to lean heavily on the ability of other professional accrediting bodies to determine if a degree has good quality, while all of us, at all levels within the university, will need to collect a large body of evidence of compliance with the standards and benchmarking with other institutions.

What then constitutes evidence of compliance with standards? Back to the Collins Australian Pocket Dictionary (1992), a standard is “an accepted example of something against which others are judged or measured”. So firstly, as a body, we have to find good examples and then we have to judge what we are assessing, against those examples. This leads us to more questions. Who are these good-example-finding bodies of people? How do they go about finding the good examples that can be used as standards? What aspects of university life and work are being measured against these standards?

The last question is perhaps the easiest to answer. To a humble unit co-ordinator, who has spent time on several university committees, and has undertaken service as an Academic Chair it feels like everything is under continual assessment against one standard or another. Let us begin then with your own personal standards which come from experience, professional development, personal investment in the units that you teach, personal integrity and professionalism. How do others, who do not know you, check that your standards are good standards? What are your observables and what are they measured against? Such metrics as publications, grants, teaching awards, student surveys about your teaching and unit organisation, ad hoc student feedback, unit materials, your educational qualifications within your discipline, within education and within other areas, peer reviews and referee reports are all part of the “body of evidence” and they are measured against similar material obtained about your peers. It is therefore worthwhile keeping track of all this material for external quality assessment processes and particularly for promotional reasons.

Other things we measure against standards within a university fall into the following broad categories, physical facilities, administrative support facilities, teaching support facilities, educational process, ethics and safety. In many of these areas standards are maintained by university policies and there is much talk in university committees of compliance or non-compliance with one policy or another. These policies and procedures are formed and polished in university committees i.e. “the example finding bodies of people”, previously mentioned. The committees at Murdoch University that report to Academic Council include the: Academic Quality Audit Committee; Committee of University Entrance; Learning and Teaching Committee; Research Degree and Scholarship Committee and the Student Equity and Social Justice Committee (Murdoch University, 2012). This means that edicts from these committees, including anything they think is relevant from TEQSA, will percolate down through faculty and school based committees, and administrative systems that are trying to ensure compliance in everything from Graduate Attribute mapping of units and courses, to inclusion of information about plagiarism and collusion in unit guides.

Going in the other direction from schools and academics through various committees to Academic Council is information from: School Senior Management Boards; Board of Examiners; Plagiarism Investigators and Arbitrators and Ethics Committees. We find it truly amazing the amount of work done to ensure high quality and good standards within a university. All of this information flow can be considered as part of the “body of evidence” for compliance with the standards and perhaps even the quality of the university.

There are also external accrediting bodies that attempt to assess the quality of a degree. One such accrediting body is the Australian Institute of Physics. The following is taken from the AIP accreditation report for Murdoch University Physics October 2008

In examining the above courses for accreditation purposes, the accreditation panel considered the following factors:

- The general academic practices and standards of education at the institution.
- The objectives of the course and the methods adopted to achieve these objectives.
- The standards of admission to the course.
- The duration of the course.
- The breadth, depth and balance in the subjects involved and the intellectual effort and demands of the course.
- The extent and range of methods of assessment of student progress.
- The arrangements for practical training and experience as part of the course.
- The teaching staff conducting the course, their numbers, professional qualifications, experience and educational expertise.
- The accommodation and facilities available including equipment, libraries, laboratories, workshops etc.
- Previous examination papers and student responses.
- Examples of student laboratory notebooks.

- Examples of other written work submitted for appraisal by students.
- Evidence of a review and quality improvement process (AIP, 2008).

In all of this we find very little evidence of any of these bodies providing good examples that can be used as standards. It appears to me, that in many situations, it is left to the academics to provide the evidence of good quality within the university. While all this activity may highlight the value of good quality, it feels that much of the evidence for the good quality, and high standards, that are achieved within the university are because of the good quality, and high personal standards, of the staff. In other words most of them would have done it anyway.

A good example of standards having little effect on quality comes from a paper on “ISO 9000 registration's impact on sales and profitability: A longitudinal analysis of performance before and after accreditation” by Heras, Dick and Casadesus (2002). They tell of a study in which they compared the business performance of companies that were not ISO (International Standards Organisation) compliant to those that became compliant. They also compared the business performance of the compliant companies before and after certification. What they found was that “superior performance of certified firms is due to firms with superior performance having a greater propensity to pursue ISO 9000 registration” (Heras, Dick, & Casadesus, 2002). This “Illustrates the potential dangers in inferring that ISO 9000 certification leads to superior business performance... Certification is a major investment yet the findings show that inflated expectations of performance improvement after ISO 9000 accreditation may be unfounded.” (Heras, Dick, & Casadesús, 2002).

Supplying evidence for accreditation and standards setting bodies and ensuring compliance with policy, while following correct procedure, takes time. If these things are done inefficiently that time detracts from teaching and research. Forewarned is forearmed and if you know what evidence different bodies are likely to ask for, then, as that evidence becomes apparent, it can be filed appropriately to be produced at the required time. It would ease the load on individual academics if the bulk of the evidence could be collected and stored centrally in the university. Research information is already being collected in such archives as IRMA. For teaching, a streamlined content management system could blend learning management and course content management by holding not only unit materials, but also, databases of student surveys, ASELL benchmarking, and evidence of educational development. This would leave individual academics only their personal information to keep track of and they might choose to use Wikis or electronic portfolios to do this.

In a time poor environment judging the value of evidential information is important when prioritising what to collect and how much time to spend collecting it. One way of doing this would be to use something similar to Table 1 below, which indicates the type of evidence that could be collected in the left hand column, against the interested parties and shows directly, by the number and placement of ticks, the usefulness of each piece of evidence.

In conclusion, because of the difficulty in defining and systematising metrics for quality, the governing bodies have plumbed for compliance with minimum standards. This is a risk management approach to quality assurance and does not necessarily promote aspirations of high quality work from either staff or students. This does not mean that compliance with standards will reduce the quality of an institution or its students, because good quality staff will still do good quality work, and produce good quality students. The only problem with the new system is that there could be less time for teaching and research, because more time is being spent on compliance with standards, and sourcing evidence to demonstrate this compliance. It is therefore essential that there be streamlined methods for enabling compliance and for capturing and storing the evidence.

**Table 1: Evidence vs. Stakeholders who might be interested for compliance or accreditation purposes.**

	Students	Academics for teaching	Academics for research	Staff reviews	School reviews	University reviews	Employers	AIP	ALTC & similar bodies	TEQSA
<b>Graduate attributes</b>	y	y			y			y		
<b>Staff professional development</b>		y	y	y	y			y		
<b>Teaching surveys</b>		y	y	y						y
<b>Unit surveys (MOSS)</b>		y	y	y				y		y
<b>Alignment and matching of units</b>		y			y			y		y
<b>Consistent on-line format / interface</b>	y	y			y			y		
<b>Education research and reflection</b>	y	y	y	y	y			y	y	
<b>Benchmarking against other universities for educational and research purposes</b>		y	y	y	y	y			y	y
<b>ASELL (benchmarking)</b>	y	y	y		y	y		y	y	y
<b>Course aims and objectives</b>	y	y						y		
<b>Course structure integration</b>	y	y			y			y		
<b>Assessment aims and criteria</b>	y	y						y		y
<b>Evidence of review and quality improvement process</b>	y	y			y			y		
<b>Examples of a range of student work</b>	y	y			y			y		
<b>Unit materials and examination papers</b>	y	y						y		
<b>Information about facilities</b>		y						y		
<b>Up -to-date CV</b>				y	y			y		
<b>Historic database of grades</b>		y			y			y		
<b>Grades analysis</b>		y			y			y		
<b>AIP accreditation</b>	y				y	y	y	y		

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<sup>1</sup> This is the report that the AIP gave to Murdoch University at the end of the accreditation process for the Physics degree. A similar criteria list was given to the school in a generic letter before the accreditation process took place and then it was modified by the accreditation panel to best reflect their activity during the accreditation process