



Discipline Scholars Network

Final Report 2013

Lead institution: University of Tasmania

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<disciplinestandards.pbworks.com>

Network summary

Objective

The Discipline Scholars Network sought to establish an expert panel of leading academics contributing to standards-related policy in learning and teaching, and facilitate engagement of discipline communities as the standards policy developed.

The objective of the network has been to maintain and support an expert panel of leading academics who were appointed by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council as Discipline Scholars. The grant enabled the Scholars to continue to contribute to standards-related policy and practice developments through the coordination and synthesis of diverse disciplinary perspectives, and facilitated engagement of discipline communities.

The Network originally proposed to meet three times between September 2011 and September 2012, in order to review and report on progress achieved by institutions and professional bodies to advance the implementation of the agreed-upon learning outcome statements in curriculum design and assessment practices and assurance of their achievement. A further aim was to provide expert advice to the former Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [now the Department of Education] and to report to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, to the various Councils of Deans and Associate Deans on developments unfolding in the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project.

During the latter part of 2012, the Network asked the OLT to extend the duration of the grant, which, through a series of economies, was still in surplus. This was approved by the OLT and enabled the Discipline Scholar Network to further promote the academic standards agenda, especially in light of the work that was being carried out by the Higher Education Standards Panel [HESP] during 2012-2013. With the publication of the HESP's 'Draft Standards for Course Outcomes and Learning Outcomes' on 5 March, 2013, the Network turned its attention to focus on the preparation of a National Forum for senior academics and tertiary administrators engaged in quality assurance and standards-related compliance of learning and teaching in the sector. The forum was scheduled for August, 2013, and involved the preparation of a substantial portfolio of background material for the invited attendees.

Deliverables

The Network's activities culminated in two key deliverables:

1. A series of eight standards-related articles published in *Campus Review* during 2012 titled, 'Being TEQSA Ready', which outlined many of the issues confronting academic institutions as a national framework for Higher Education Learning Standards has been developed.
2. The National Learning Outcomes Standards Forum, 9 August 2013

This focused on issues emerging from the publication of the Draft Learning Standard (Coursework) by the Higher Education Standards Panel, and the implications of including a reference point regarding discipline-specific threshold learning outcomes (TLOs). Amongst many recommendations made, the following are highlighted for the OLT's consideration:

- Support for the facilitation of TLOs for all disciplines;

- Support for the development of benchmarking (auditing) of evidence from assessments;
- A need to assist academic development in assessment design; and
- Further assistance in harmonising discipline-specific TLOs and professional accreditation requirements.

A further deliverable was the development of a wiki containing various resources and key links to setting, applying, assessing and assuring discipline standards. The wiki can be found at: <disciplinestandards.pbworks.com>

Outcomes

The network's activities also significantly supported expanding the appetite, culture and capacity of the sector (and individual institutions) to focus on course (degree/program) planning, management and assurance of learning outcomes and standards. Achievement of course learning outcomes is an important aim, both to drive continuous improvement to equip students and graduates with the appropriate capabilities to contribute, and to provide convincing evidence of such capabilities to the national regulator, accreditation agencies and other stakeholders. A focus on students' achievement of course learning outcomes is also consistent with local and global trends since the traditional focus on students'/graduates' perceptions of course experiences has obvious limitations. Students will undoubtedly be the beneficiaries once this stronger focus on learning achievement and standards has been embedded into course planning, management and assurance activities.

Contribution to learning and teaching

Overview

The network's contributions to learning and teaching in higher education in the past two years are both direct and indirect with a matrix of engagement and outcomes that can be mapped across the range of members' disciplines, scaling from the national to the institutional and program level. This reflects the network's contribution to progressing the national standards agenda, through to directly assisting and mentoring disciplines to draft and map graduate learning outcomes, and to embed standards frameworks institutionally.

A commitment to extending and implementing the outcomes and latent potential of the ALTC-initiated Learning and Teaching Academic Standards (LTAS) project of 2010-2011 set the network's initial agenda and priorities. The prolonged flux associated with the formation of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA), the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP), and the regulatory framework itself, however, demanded a 'watching brief' role for the network and the need to extend its duration in order to deliver targeted outcomes. Consequently, the network has performed important consultation, communication and consolidation roles for the higher education sector, underpinned by OLT support.

National contributions

Throughout the shakedown of the new higher education regulatory environment during 2012, the network played a proactive, interpretive role with its members publishing eight articles in Campus Review via a series titled 'Being TEQSA Ready'. A full compilation of the articles is available on the network's Discipline Standards wiki, also used extensively for this purpose: <disciplinestandards.pbworks.com/w/file/70098293/Forum9Aug13_Pre-reading_CR_Series.pdf>

Behind the scenes, the network's activities were centred on consulting with the newly

formed entities TEQSA and HESP, and maintaining productive dialogue with the Australian Qualifications Framework Council (AQFC), Universities Australia (UA), Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Academic), and networks of Associate Deans (Learning and Teaching). During 2013 the network made two submissions in April and July in response to HESP's Calls for Comment, integral to the HESP review of the Higher Education Standards Framework.

Through this process, the network contributed to HESP's deliberations on the nature and standing of external reference points for the draft learning outcomes standard. Threshold learning outcomes (TLOs), such as those published upon conclusion of the LTAS project, were subsequently included in the draft standard.

The network's engagement with the work of HESP culminated in the National Learning Outcomes Standards Forum held on 9 August 2013 attended by over 100 senior academic leaders, with strong representation from private providers and national peak bodies. Contributing keynote addresses were Ms Suzi Hewlett (OLT), Professor Alan Robson (Chair, HESP), Mr Ian Hawke (Commissioner, TEQSA), and Professor Royce Sadler (University of Queensland). Discussions were structured around the following three key objectives:

- Objective 1: To explore the use of reference points for national learning outcomes standards
- Objective 2: To recommend transparent, defensible and efficient mechanisms for demonstrating student achievement of learning outcomes
- Objective 3: To identify the core issues surrounding the implementation of national standards for learning outcomes and course design.

The outcomes of the discussion are summarised in Forum Notes distributed to participants, dually serving as formal feedback for HESP's reference, available at: disciplinestandards.pbworks.com/w/file/70098283/2013_DS_Standards_Forum_9Aug_Notes.pdf

The Forum also served as a catalyst for consolidating and summarising the significant array of standards projects, both underway and completed, by the higher education sector under the aegis of the OLT. The comprehensive listing compiled by the OLT is available at: www.olt.gov.au/system/files/resources/OLT_summaries_National_Learning_Outcomes_Standards_Forum_2013.pdf

Discipline-focused contributions

The extensive ongoing engagement of the Discipline Scholars in parallel standards projects within **disciplines** has positioned the network as a vehicle for cross-fertilisation of learning and teaching enhancement initiatives. These include the Harmonisation in Health project spanning 26 sub-disciplines; the assessment-focused projects driven by Australian Business Deans Council Collaborative Scholar and network member, Associate Professor Mark Freeman; and other discipline-driven projects originating with ALTC support such as Defining Your Discipline co-led by Professor Roger Hadgraft, in partnership with Engineering Australia.

The network actively identified, and sought guidance from intersecting ALTC/OLT-funded projects and Fellowships including Assessing and Assuring Graduate Learning Outcomes (AAGLO); the Teaching and Learning Standards Project; the OLT Strategic Priority Project, Assuring Learning; and Professor Beverly Oliver's work on assuring graduate capabilities. This engagement informed both the network's direction and concurrent projects in which the Discipline Scholars were involved, including the OLT-funded, discipline-based networks such as those in business, chemistry, creative arts and education.

This diffusion of learning and teaching enhancement approaches also occurred as a result of network members being invited to share **cross-disciplinary** insights via the disciplinary and institutional fora staged by their Discipline Scholar and Australian Learning and Teaching Fellow (ALTF) colleagues. This constituted a productive widening of existing disciplinary networks. Building on relationships developed during the LTAS project, network members have also addressed councils of deans across disciplines as an effective way of transferring one discipline's experience and advances to others. Associate Professor Mark Freeman, for example, addressed the deans councils of science, nursing and midwifery, and ICT, in addition to working closely with his own business discipline's deans council.

Institution-focused contributions

Similarly, the Discipline Scholars drew upon **institutional** learning and teaching initiatives to develop the network's collective capability, and guide members' subsequent work in their own institutions. Senior academic leaders from QUT, RMIT and UTAS were invited to address the network, for example, and elaborated on their respective institutional projects such as LTAS@UTAS, which is establishing course level learning outcomes for all degree programs. Curriculum renewal and mapping also featured in the University of Queensland's 'JourneyMaker' curriculum design tools demonstrated to the network by member, Professor Ian Cameron.

Factors contributing to productive networking

Overview

The contributions to learning and teaching presented, and the achievements of the network set out below arising from productive networking, are attributable to the following key factors:

- The extension, strengthening and interweaving of existing networks within discipline and provider communities;
- The cohesiveness and commitment of network members derived from the momentum gained by the LTAS project of 2010-2011;
- The identification and engagement of key stakeholders through consultations, collaborative projects and associated fora;
- The maintenance of a diligent watching brief on the sector and interpreting developments for, and with discipline communities; and
- The deployment of a communications strategy that rendered the network tangible and accessible, and facilitated contact with members and access to relevant resources.

Achievements of the network

The network's most significant achievement was successful staging of the **National Learning Outcomes Standards Forum** in Melbourne on 9 August 2013, attended by over 100 senior academic leaders in higher education. The event enriched the national standards debate and offered participants pragmatic opportunities to work through implementation issues with peers. The Forum's program, objectives, speakers and summarised outcomes reflect the Discipline Scholars' extensive stakeholder consultations in the preceding two years and their service-orientation to the sector.

Also significant was the **integrative work** performed by the network to assist disciplines and other stakeholders to interpret and respond to the complex relationships between professional accreditation requirements, the AQF, and the TLOs relative to the HESPF Draft Learning Outcomes Standard. This work manifested through network members' submissions

to HESP and their input into the fora of, for example, the ALTF and deans councils. Establishing the **Discipline Standards wiki** and publishing the **Campus Review series** in 2012 were early deliverables of the network, and key mechanisms in communicating this integration work to the sector.

A further achievement on the part of network members was in **consolidating, contextualising and articulating frameworks** for setting, applying and assuring standards with their discipline communities. Resources developed to this end, such as the good practice guides for law commissioned by Professor Sally Kift, <disciplinestandards.pbworks.com/w/page/52746378/Law>, provided a model informing the work of other network members for disciplines, in the case of the *Good Practice Guide for Science TLO1*, and within institutions in the case of the *LTAS@UTAS Guide to Course Learning Outcomes*.

There is potential for a subset of network members to progress this practice guide approach to learning outcomes, pending a selection process, through the application developed for the dedicated OLT-funded project.

Successful networking methods

Critical to the productive networking of the Discipline Scholars were the existing discipline networks nurtured during the LTAS project of 2010-2011 and network members' own cohesiveness as a team with a common purpose. Extending, strengthening and interweaving the discipline networks was therefore foundational to the network's activities and achievements. Invaluable continuity was also provided by the contributions to, and mentoring of the network by Professor Emeritus Christine Ewan who led the LTAS project for the ALTC.

As stated, network members were proactive in identifying stakeholders and fostering positive dialogues, for example, through inviting members of the HESP Executive to network meetings, and availing themselves for briefings with other bodies. Underpinning this process was recognition that network members fulfil multiple roles resulting in multiple memberships in stakeholder networks such as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) community, the ALTF, private provider groups, and relevant international bodies. This enabled individual members to act as envoys, establish links and extend invitations on the network's behalf.

Network members also arranged for senior academic leaders of their respective institutions to address the network integral to hosting the face-to-face network meetings. Embedding the network's activities within members' institutions was therefore a means of maximising opportunities for informed input, and expenditure of the network's own resources. Supporting interactions around this meeting schedule were teleconferences, email, and the Discipline Standards wiki, as well as crossover meetings of members in other fora.

Recommended methods

We recommend the following networking methods:

1. Establish a relatively small core network responsible for the delivery of outcomes (the Discipline Scholars Network comprised 14 members supported by a part-time Project Officer). The network size allowed for agile responses to developments in the sector and the ability to mobilise in the delivery of outcomes. Appointment of an executive within the core team is ideally needed to most effectively plan and coordinate the network's efforts.
2. In delivering large-scale, complex outcomes (such as the National Standards Forum), organise into working groups for logistics, and to identify and negotiate with relevant stakeholders efficiently, with coordinating oversight by the executive.
3. Explicitly map members' multiple memberships in overlapping stakeholder networks and

- projects, and identify opportunities conducive to network activities and deliverables.
4. Devise a communications strategy that renders the network tangible, accessible and able to provide frequent updates. One effective strategy among several was the Discipline Standards wiki, maintained by all core network members. This served as the 'shopfront' for the network, connecting users with relevant resources and projects, and facilitating contact with network members. It was also a valuable reference for use within presentations and members' speaking engagements.

Barriers to productive networking

The most significant challenge experienced by the network was its coincidence with a period of protracted uncertainty in the national regulation of higher education, and the subsequent establishment periods of both TEQSA and HESP. As mentioned, it was necessary for the network to request an extension in order to deliver its targeted outcomes, which were in turn difficult to target optimally toward the sector and stakeholder groups during this time of flux. Changes instated by the AQFC during the network's duration also presented challenges and demanded clarification, but reinforced the value of the network facilitating debates within the sector.

The network worked willingly in the face of this uncertainty, performing its watching brief as noted, and proactively consulting with key bodies so that it was well-positioned to respond as the new regulatory framework took shape. Network members worked productively with their discipline communities throughout this period in a pre-emptive manner that saw disciplines and institutions somewhat better prepared to respond to the Higher Education Standards Framework as it was revised and progressively amended.

A further challenge to networking arose from the requirement imposed upon three key stakeholder groups – Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Academic), Associate/Assistant Deans (Learning and Teaching) and Program Leaders – to achieve AQF compliance by January 2015. Understandably diverted, it was difficult to engage people in these roles in the manner anticipated originally. Within discipline communities, several network members have worked to support colleagues tasked with this compliance.

More broadly, members of the network are senior scholars and leaders such that network participation comprised one demand among myriad others. Members' varying availability was therefore a key factor in the operation of the network. This was resolved by the formation of organic sub-groups, determined by availability, throughout the network's duration in order to deliver various outcomes. Co-convening and co-hosting events, and actively seeking to address stakeholders within their pre-established fora was another method for managing members' limited availability at times. Once again, the wiki served an important internal means of summarising and updating members on the network's own progress.

What the network offers

Having achieved its targeted deliverables and operated for the intended duration, the network offers a legacy of outcomes, both embedded and in the form of practical tools for future standards work. Offered most recently, for example, is a summary of the state of learning outcomes standards implementation emanating from the National Forum in August 2013:

<disciplinestandards.pbworks.com/w/file/70098283/2013_DS_Standards_Forum_9Aug_Notes.pdf>

Consolidating and progressing the earlier LTAS project outcomes, the network's members have contributed to the establishment of **TLO and CLO frameworks**, and the implementation of **measures for assuring learning**, now embedded within institutions, professional bodies, and programs. These have been documented in many cases, and persist as models for other providers in the sector. While not comprising direct outputs of the network, members have reported examples of this implementation work via publications, including:

Hay, I. (2012). Over the threshold – setting minimum learning outcomes (benchmarks) for undergraduate geography majors in Australian universities. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 36(4), 481-498.

Holmes, J. (Forthcoming). Meeting standards in the new higher education framework in Australia. In S. Harrison (Ed.), *Assessment in music: Policy and practice*. Springer.

O'Keefe, M. & Henderson, A. (In press). Sharing learning outcomes across health disciplines. In K. Bin Abdulrahman, R. Harden & S.S. Mennin (Eds.), *The international handbook of medical education: What works*. Oxford: Routledge.

O'Keefe, M., Henderson, A. & Pitt, R. (2013). Identifying common learning outcomes for health: Celebrating diversity and maximising benefit from regulatory necessity. *Medical Teacher*, 35(11), 970.

Also persisting are the **transferable processes** honed by network members through assisting disciplines to define, implement and assure learning outcomes. This includes the identification of disciplinary stakeholders, the engagement of peak bodies and formation of reference groups, workshop methods for drafting learning outcomes relative to the AQF and professional accreditation competencies, and approaches for gaining endorsement. This capability-building remains in progress as the network winds down its formal operation.

Further practical guidance, as previously highlighted, remains publicly available on the Discipline Standards wiki: <disciplinestandards.pbworks.com>