Standards in Higher Education

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Australia operates its Australian Qualifications Framework levels as a way of standardising qualifications across the Australian education and training system.

The policy framework of the AQF provides the structures required for Australian qualifications. Ostensibly, the aim is to warrant that qualifications are consistent and equivalent across the various education and training sectors (higher education, vocational education and training, and schools).

The AQF - in regard to degree level qualification - leaves large gaps in ensuring that qualifications are standardized meaningfully in their true equivalence.

By way of example

Is a degree in engineering from University A actually equivalent to an engineering degree from University B?

The degrees will have both met the required AQF standardization measures but - there will be those that claim that University A has higher entry standards and also better qualified teaching faculty. Others might claim that University B is more rigorous in its assessment approaches. It might also be argued that these universities offer slight differences in their courses, so no true equivalence can be claimed. Ultimately, it is usual that the university with the higher institutional ranking will claim the ‘higher status ground’.

But should it be this way?

If meeting the AQF or National Standards became the key measure for accepting the validity of graduate qualifications, then where a student studied would have far less consideration or relevance in determining any given graduates’ capacities

Licensed to operate

In many respects, degrees are licenses to operate (academically or professionally) and, by comparison, qualified airline pilots, bus drivers, train drivers and even car drivers are seldom measured according to quality perceptions based upon where they trained and studied.

When, if ever, have you needed to state the driving school or test centre you went to when you gained your driving license? Once you have achieved the required levels of competency and met the standard – you are licensed.

Agreed, there are some differences between technical competencies and academic competencies. Generally, most academic qualifications run lower risks of dire consequences than those related to the complex intellectual aspects of aircraft liner operation. However, our point is that the standards set are the gold standards of being judged as competent and knowledgeable.

Undergraduate Standards

Imagine, if you will, an environment in which all universities met the necessary standards and their graduates were all, nationally and internationally judged to have passed the required hurdles – without any posturing or pretention of one institution being superior to any other. At least for their Bachelor level qualifications.

These standards could strengthen the requirements for universities to provide teachers at the highest levels and demand specific competencies and outcomes for all graduates (which is what the AQF already seeks to do) but all of the requirements still need to be met upon a student graduating. A national exam would help standardize these qualifications further?

The degree award might be an Australian award delivered by any university, but the degree would be a federally certificated statement of competency and achievement.

Two major tensions

Our aim in suggesting this is to resolve two major tensions.

1. Around 90% of Australian students gain their qualifications from universities which are placed below the 200 level in global rankings. Employers often seek only those who come from iconic, higher ranked institutions. This is a disservice to those who have developed the skills and competencies necessary and have also invested in their own educations. It is also a waste of potential developed here in Australia.

2. A standardised national award could also allow pathways for those entering universities with lower entry scores. Not everyone has the same pathways or opportunities in accessing higher education. Institutions catering for students with lower entry scores would still have to ensure that their cohorts met the high national graduation standards. It would be up to them to add the extra value and make the difference in helping these students achieve. Such institutions would, perhaps, place much less emphasis upon research ranking and more upon student attainment than the higher ranked universities?

Yes. This would be unpopular in some quarters as for over two decades Australia's universities have tilted at the elite rankings windmill – with most failing to get an honorable mention.

Billions of dollars have been invested in the pursuit of rankings success and the main result of it all is that university executive salaries have blossomed with more than 300 executives earning more than their State Premiers but with their universities failing to all gain solid returns or even ranking successes (Caitlin Cassidy, The Guardian, 21st Nov 2024).

So, as food for thought, standardised degrees for undergraduates and decoupling of research investment from undergraduate achievement might help improve outcomes nationally - and also refocus universities on local student investment and program delivery.

Alternatively, you too might have a new model for change?

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