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International alignment of higher
education standards: the state of play

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Introduction

- So many standards, for so many higher education ‘objects’!
- Informal stocktake of progress on international alignment of various HE standards
- Qualifications recognition/credential evaluation a dominant driver
- Is alignment of other HE standards important?
 - Yes: because qualifications recognition relies on them
 - Yes: because may reduce barriers to internationalising higher education
 - But: diversity is inevitable, across HE systems
 - But: diversity is valuable, within and across HE systems: need to respect cultural, political, economic and faith-based variations in emphasis

Acknowledgement: Dr Kerri-Lee Harris, 2009 report for AUQA, ‘International trends in establishing the standards of academic achievement in higher education’



Definition of a standard:

- a best practice exemplar (to which all aspire)
- a normative characteristic (which all should achieve), OR
- an aspect (whose performance is to be evaluated).

Used ambiguously in practice as:

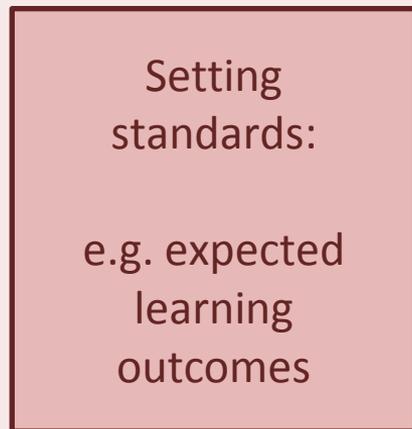
- the standards people are expected to achieve
- the standards people actually achieve (which may or may be calibrated to an expected standard)

Sykes and Plastrik (1993): 'a tool for rendering appropriately precise the making of judgements and decisions in a context of shared meanings and values'.

So, whenever some form of normative consensus coalesces around desired characteristics or expectations – we might expect to see a set of standards, rules or requirements..... Or changes to previously agreed standards



Standards as written



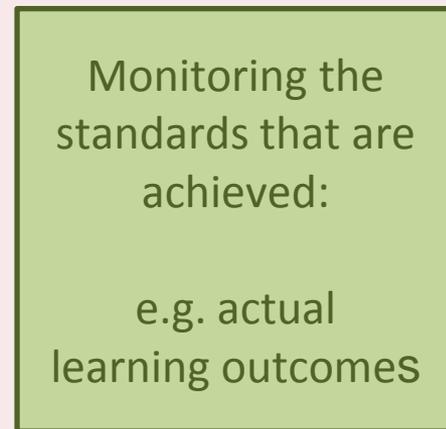
Content

Ingvarson and Rowe, 2007



Evidence

Standards as achieved



Assessment

qualification

Standards
recognised documentation

certification education undertaken
provider expected

learning higher academic grades arising
language awarded

training requirements course specified
application least

Standards
as achieved:
performance
and
assessment

Standards
as written

Words, words words.....

record all
correctly Code

curricular full transition cohorts results generic disciplines
Minister significant granted one area within except

December timely only issue Orientation any through
major level applicable progression Graduate skills

Practice conduct award units specific name

component statement degrees progress outp
Australian English student Graduation support M

Show me!

consistent outcomes including
either authorised discipline each

international students research

study Qualifications
Framework



What might alignment of HE standards look like across nations?

- Standards as written = comparable, familiar, readily translatable, mapped
- Standards as assessed = confidence that similar judgements would be made for similar evidence?

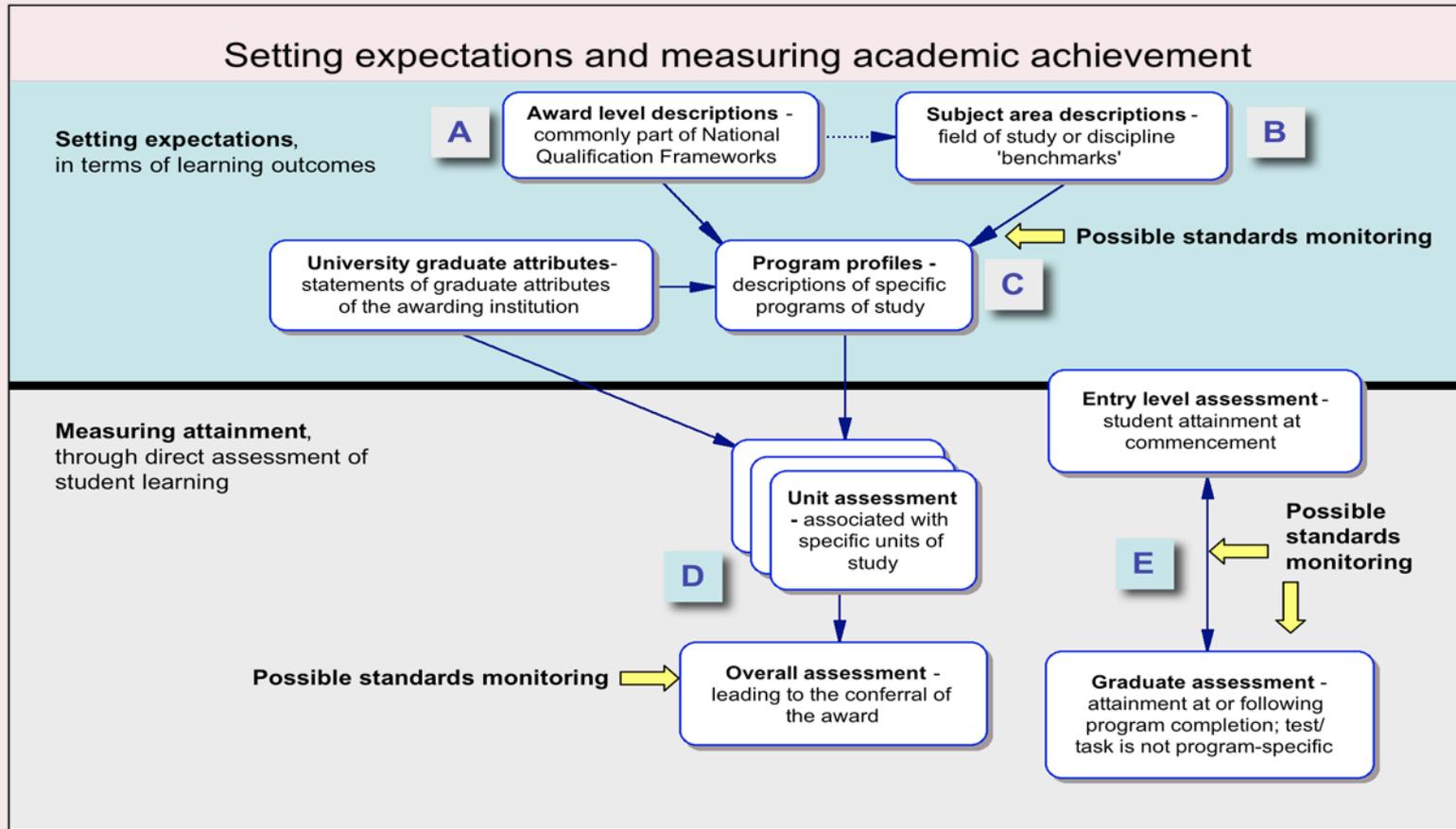
The concept of ‘substantial difference’ in qualifications recognition may be useful for the alignment of other forms of standards.... e.g.

“...substantial differences are those that may have a serious impact on the fitness of the qualification for the purpose for which the learner would like to use it. (*Developing attitudes to recognition: substantial differences in an age of globalisation, 2009*)

Source: ‘Understanding substantial difference’ presentation, Elizabeth Campbell-Dorning / AEI-NOOSR, 23 May 2013



Applied mainly at: Higher education standards for:	Institution level	Program level	People level (their performance or artefacts)
Institutional registration or accreditation (may include standards for hosting international students)	X	x	
External quality assurance (EQA) agencies	X		
Online or blended learning	x	X	
Qualifications - generic	x	X	X
Program accreditation (generic)	x	X	
Program accreditation (discipline-specific)		X	
Graduate discipline-specific learning outcomes		x	X
Graduate generic learning outcomes		x	X
Students' academic performance (grading)		x	X
Academic teaching			X
Conduct of research	X	X	X



Source: Harris, K.-L. (2009). International trends in establishing the standards of academic achievement in higher education: An independent report and analysis, p. 2



Institutional registration or accreditation: international alignment

Content of standards	Assessment of standards
Similar purposes: keep out baddies; sustainability; resources	Mostly national, but some work internationally, e.g. AAA, US regional accreditors, others
Strong family resemblances: can debate the structures; some countries set the bar quite high	Acceptance by some countries of another jurisdiction's assessment; some joint assessments
Differences in balance between inputs, processes and outputs	Slow progress towards formal acceptance or mutual recognition
Differences between initial registration and renewal	Processes for mutual recognition more or less mapped out
Overall: Potential for further alignment; maybe A and B grades?	Overall: Low - degree of confidence mostly depends on confidence in assessors; potential for alignment

Similar for program accreditation (generic)



External quality assurance agencies: international alignment

Content of standards	Assessment of standards
International by nature, e.g. INQAAHE, ENQA; may apply to institutions also	Some EQA agencies periodically assessed against international or regional guidelines
Some regional standards also, e.g. Chiba Principles	Incentive to be on registers of 'quality assured quality assurance agencies', e.g. EQAR, APQR
Not validated: may not be the best discriminators	
Emerging choice of EQA agencies promotes alignment	
Overall: Well aligned (but maybe not robust)	Overall: Potential for further alignment



Qualifications – generic: international alignment

Content of standards	Assessment of standards
National qualifications frameworks (NQFs)	Used in but not necessary for qualifications recognition or credential evaluation for comparative assessments
Regional frameworks well-developed, e.g. Europe, PQF	Component of program accreditation (generic), discipline-specific or generic learning outcomes assessment
Global referencing undertaken: translation and mapping developed	Qualifications recognition relies on qualitative and quantitative factors <ul style="list-style-type: none">– country (including EQA)– institution– qualification (Campbell-Dorning, 2013)
NQFs difficult to assess in isolation	
Overall: High and increasing alignment	Overall: Component of assessment of other standards



Program accreditation (discipline-specific): international alignment

Content of standards	Assessment of standards
Many professional bodies in many countries have their own standards	Some international assessments, e.g. AACSB, but mostly national
Some EQA agencies have developed their own discipline-specific program standards; some international mapping	International accreditation of programs well-developed in some professions, e.g. International Engineering Alliance
International mapping for professional areas such as engineering, accountancy, health professions;	Slow progress towards mutual recognition for many other professions, especially where context-dependent
Varying balances between inputs, processes and outcomes; competency-based or not; contextual differences	Processes for mutual recognition mapped
Overall: High alignment for certain disciplines; potential for others	Overall: High for specific professions; not yet aligned for others; potential for alignment



Graduate discipline-specific learning outcomes: international alignment

Content of standards	Assessment of standards
Frequent standards for graduates at institutional level	Largely institutional with some examples of national or international benchmarking
Much work at national level, e.g. subject benchmark statements, Tuning projects	AHELO project found it difficult in well-defined disciplines of civil engineering and economics
Related to discipline-specific program accreditation	
Overall: Some alignment, potential for more	Overall: Too difficult to align across many countries: may be selectively possible



Graduate generic skills/broad learning outcomes: international alignment

Content of standards	Assessment of standards
Broadly implied in NQFs and RQFs	Often embedded in assessment of students' work
Graduate qualities mostly identified at institutional level (see Bowman, 2010: Background paper for the AQF Council on generic skills)	Collegiate Learning Assessment or similar (ETS PP, CAAP) being adopted or adapted by institutions
Some mapping across countries	Trialled for AHELO
	There is more assessment than there are standards!
Overall: Not yet aligned	Overall: May be too difficult to align across many countries



Observations

Good potential for further **international alignment** of the content of HE standards:

- institutional registration
- program accreditation (generic)
- program accreditation (discipline-specific)
- maybe others, e.g. standards for academic teaching

Good potential for further **international alignment** of the assessment of HE standards:

- institutional registration
- external quality assurance agencies
- program accreditation (generic)
- program accreditation (discipline-specific)

← This may be the most effective use of funding



Possible areas for further development of standards in HE

- Assessment of student work
- Qualifications recognition or credential evaluation
- Recognition of prior learning, granting of credit (e.g. MOOC credits)
- Volume of learning / student workload (NQFs)
- Higher education systems (OECD benchmarking mooted)
- Others?

Thank you!