

The Development of Quality Programs in Higher Education

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Abstract

Developing quality programs in higher education, across international jurisdictions, is becoming more challenging as a variety of stakeholders demand greater input into curriculum development processes. These multiple stakeholders include professional bodies, governments, 'consumers' of higher education qualifications and institutional requirements themselves. This paper will examine what constitutes quality in program design and how integrating standards can drive quality program development. It will further describe a process to drive what the authors describe as both internal (within course/subject) and external (within program) alignment to intentionally design programs that meet both quality markers and the requirements of stakeholders.

Keywords: Quality course design; integrated standards; internal/external alignment; intentional design

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(NB: In preparing this paper, every attempt has been made to use internationally recognised terminology. At the authors' home institution in Australia, a "course" is a "program/qualification." Individual units are designated as "subjects," which equate in many institutions to "courses," "units," or "modules").

What Is Quality in Higher Education?

Discussions and debate about quality with regard to higher education have become commonplace across international jurisdictions over the last few decades. What is missing in these debates, however, is a consistent, agreed understanding or definition of exactly what constitutes a quality program, and how this quality can be measured.

UNESCO (2013) defines a quality program as one which could be seen to be “meeting the requirements of nationally agreed outcomes and performance/assessment criteria, thus facilitating both provisions and monitoring” (n.p.). In an early perspective on what comprises quality, Harvey and Green (1993) conceptualize quality into five categories: (1) as exceptional, (2) as perfection (or consistency), (3) as fitness for purpose, (4) as value for money or (5) as transformative.

What is clear however, is that there is a lack of consensus about quality (Kundu, 2016). Further, the “multiplicity of stakeholders involved in defining quality opens up the possibility of multiple and conflicting interpretations” (Ramirez, 2013, p. xx). Harvey and Green (2006), have a similar perspective, describing quality as a relative term, depending on the context of the user “not a different perspective on the same thing but different perspectives on different things with the same label.” (p. 10). With this concept so elusive in terms of clear definition, the authors can but agree with Kundu (2016), who described quality in higher education as a messy problem, with no clear framework and numerous variables that confound the problem.

How is Quality Measured in Higher Education Contexts?

Beginning in the 1980's, approaches within higher education began to evolve rapidly, frequently driven by "new public management" perspectives. Performance became the "buzz word" with measurements of outputs and performance becoming key considerations. Strategic planning became, and continues to be, a major focus of higher education as accountability discourses prevail. Olsson and Peters (2005) refer to this movement in describing how these outputs were deemed to be measurable through similar performance metrics to those used widely within the business world. Since that time, quality has been increasingly measured through frameworks and standards that set benchmark expectations to be "ticked off" to provide evidence of quality.

Within all of these metrics, and as described above, there are numerous stakeholders, each with a differing set of drivers, all hoping for quality educational outcomes. At the forefront of those invested are the students. Increasingly, the major driver for students is the attainment of a quality qualification that will prepare them for employment in their field of endeavour. Often, this qualification has significant requirements in terms of professional accreditation standards, dictated in most cases by professional bodies. Employers in particular fields have an interest in curriculum development. One of their drivers is having graduates from institutions who meet the needs of the workforce in the particular discipline area, whether or not the qualification is externally accredited. Further, employers are also demanding attributes beyond the discipline, with industry now recognising the need for well-rounded graduates who can cope with the demands of life and work. Teaching and non-teaching staff within higher education contexts also have an interest, as do governments and other funding agencies. Ultimately, the authors propose that there are a number of characteristics required in the design of quality curriculum offerings when developing qualification level programs,

regardless of how quality is measured. Quality in program design for higher education, we contend, occurs when the process is:

- intentional, i.e. where all aspects of the design are deliberately developed toward a known goal;
- collaborative, where a variety of stakeholders are engaged in the design process;
- iterative, where stakeholder feedback is used to refine and improve the program design.

Achievement of these characteristics in curriculum design is best attained when it is supported by both principles and policy. Examples of the sort of principles underpinning curriculum design work, more broadly, include that:

- Collaborative work forms the basis of program design and development activities. Program teams include representatives drawn from faculty, and a range of divisions, as well the relevant profession, and the student body to enable multiple perspectives to be incorporated into program design.
- Integrated course-level standards draw on institutional requirements in terms of Graduate Learning Outcomes/Graduate Attributes, the relevant qualifications framework in a given context, and relevant professional standards.

At the same time, institutional policy can be useful in directing the design and review of programs. While the argument can be made that policy dictates practice, there is significant evidence that this is not always the case, unless the policy is developed as a result of incorporating known and exhibited best practice in a field (Thomson, Auhl, Uys, Wood, & Woolley, 2019). Thus, in developing policy

applicable across an institution, it is important to first evaluate what is best practice in the field.

Multiple Sets of Standards: What Are Their Sources and Is the Focus on Quality or Compliance?

Wood, Auhl, & McCarthy, (2019) argue that the higher education sector “is replete with sets of standards or descriptors that offer defining criteria for measuring the quality of student learning and experience, teaching, administration and student achievement” (p. 2). While historically, the standards of performance from many professional fields were governed by the profession (e.g. various medical and allied health fields), part of the evolution of higher education is the utilisation of sets of standards, or generic skills, beyond the discipline. These sets are described by Bowden et al. (2000) as those life skills which allow graduates to act within society promoting the wider social good. At Charles Sturt University (CSU), these are termed the “Graduate Attributes,” which are embedded in courses through the Graduate Learning Outcomes. Governments, too, have developed standards and frameworks such as, in the Australian context, the Australian Qualification Framework (2013) and the Higher Education Standards Framework (2015). In doing so, the Australian context mirrors global developments in higher education.

What emerges, then, is a situation where providers of higher education are required to meet numerous requirements in the development of their curriculum offerings. Evidence of having met these multiple sets of requirements at a program level has frequently been done through course mapping exercises, in a post-hoc manner, after individual units have been developed. Ensuring “compliance” with multiple sets of

standards has frequently resulted in those responsible for developing programs using multiple documents to illustrate the results. In this approach, any deficiencies noted are often remedied, perhaps somewhat cynically, by adding a word or phrase to a unit description, adding an additional syllabus dot point or an additional learner outcome, without any change to the substance of the subject. In other words, description of the performance changes, but not necessarily the performance itself.

Ultimately, the question to be answered here is whether such approaches are really focussed on quality (however it is defined), or more about being seen to be compliant. Is there an approach that tracks educational substance in addition to mere compliance? We believe there is. What follows is an approach to curriculum design that the authors propose will help providers in the challenging process of meeting the needs and requirements of diverse stakeholders, while at the same time, using a consistent process to enhance the likelihood of a quality program.

Integrated Standards and Backward/Iterative Design

Using an integrated standards approach makes the unit of analysis the *program* as a whole, rather than focussing on the individual courses/units from which it is built. A backward design approach is what should be implemented (Wiggins, & McTighe, 1998), while also incorporating an iterative design approach requiring multiple stakeholder feedback in each phase of the design (Verstegen, Barnard & Pilot, 2006). This approach to assessment is designed to meet the requirements of these standards expressed as program level learning outcomes. Courses emerge as assessments are grouped. In existing programs, depending on the approach of a review or design (for example the degree of change that may be needed based on data derived from course analysis),

program outcomes are developed to reflect the knowledge and skills required to meet standards.

Keeping in mind the note concerning terminology at the beginning of this paper, Figure 1 shows the whole program design process, with Design Phase 1 being the relevant piece here. In this phase, varying standards are integrated to create a set of integrated standards, which are then used to develop program learning outcomes.

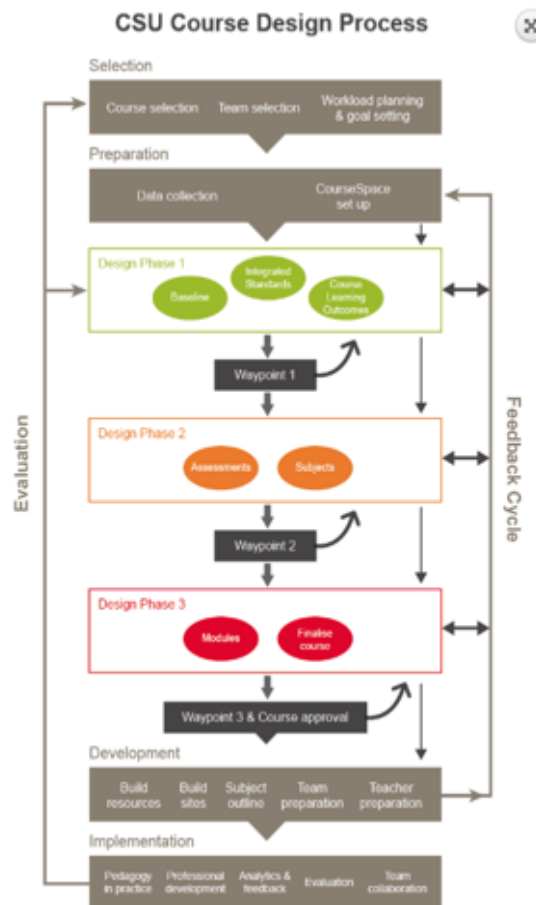


Figure 1. The Charles Sturt University course (program) design process

Integration of Standards

In developing a set of integrated standards for a particular program, a primary set of standards is used as the foundation. For programs externally accredited by professional bodies, the standards necessary for graduates to gain professional accreditation are identified as the *primary standards*. For non-accredited programs, program leaders determine what the primary standards should be. Those developed by program leaders may, for example, be based on a review of best practice in the field from literature, or may be based on standards in similar discipline areas. Secondary standards coming from (for example) internal institutional requirements, government requirements, or additional discipline requirements are integrated with the primary standard by processes called *matching*, *merging* or *adding*. This method is based on procedures originally conceptualised by Bain (2013) and represented here in Figure 2.

In applying the match/merge/add procedures, the following guidelines apply.

- For a match, the standards to be integrated sit together and complement each other. By meeting one of the standards, it is evident that the others integrated with it will also be met. There is a close similarity in the intent of the standards.
- For a merge, the wording of the primary standard will change to include elements of the original and elements of the secondary standard. This is done in a manner such that the original meaning is enhanced, and the common thread reinforced. A thoughtful blend of the texts from each is done so that the intent of each merged standard is maintained.
- On occasion, and for good reason, course teams may want to use a standard, or a criterion from a standard that may not be represented anywhere in the primary, nor effectively and easily matched or merged. In such a situation, the add step can be used so that standards and their criteria are included in the integrated

standards set For example, in the Australian context, a number of allied health programs include the SARRAH (Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health) competencies, recognising that graduates may practice in rural and remote areas of the country.

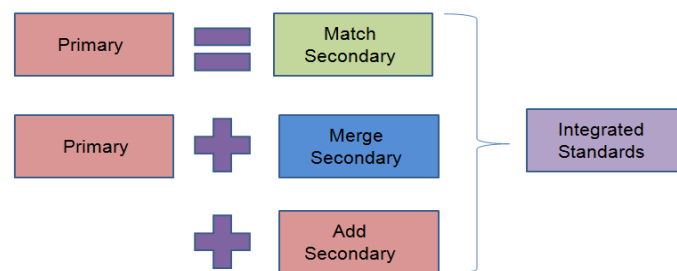


Figure 2. Matching, merging and adding to develop a set of integrated standards (Bain 2013)

Examples of Integrated Standards and Program Learning Outcomes

The examples below (Figure 3 & Figure 4) represent a number of integrated standards from a Master's degree in fraud and financial crime. The figures are extracted from a bespoke course design software tool, CourseSpace, developed by the institution to support the course design process. In each example, the section without shading represents one of the integrated standards for the program, the salmon color represents the primary standard, blue the institutions Graduate Learning Outcomes and the green, the external government requirements (dictated in this example by the Australian Qualification Framework requirements for a coursework based master's qualification). Applying the procedures described above develops the integrated standard, which then leads to the development of program learning outcomes.

Integrated Criterion	Fraud and Financial Crime Primary Standards	2015 Final GLOs 27	AQF Level Nine Masters Degree (Coursework)
Section 1 Discipline Knowledge			
Criterion 1.1 Ethically and professionally apply a specialised knowledge of financial crime, criminals, criminological theory and control techniques to meet the varying, and unique needs found across a range of different organisational stakeholders and international, regional, national, local and indigenous communities.	Primary imported from FFC 1.1 Apply a specialised knowledge of financial crime, criminals, criminological theory and control techniques to meet the varying, and unique needs found across a range of different organisational systems and settings.	Merged with GLO 1.1 PK Possess the knowledge and understanding of the discipline and the nature of professionalism required for the given profession or discipline in contemporary societies	Matched with AQF 1.1 Graduates of a Masters Degree (Coursework) will have a body of knowledge that includes the understanding of recent developments in a discipline and/or area of professional practice
		Merged with GLO 5.2 ES Critically reflect on, discuss and challenge the values intrinsic in the different practices in which they participate	Matched with AQF 2.1 Graduates of a Masters Degree (Coursework) will have cognitive skills to demonstrate mastery of theoretical knowledge and to reflect critically on theory and professional practice or scholarship
		Merged with GLO 7.3 IA Practice in ways that show a commitment to social justice and the processes of reconciliation through inclusive practices and citizenship	Matched with AQF 2.3 Graduates of a Masters Degree (Coursework) will have cognitive, technical and creative skills to generate and evaluate complex ideas and concepts at an abstract level
		Merged with GLO 8.3 GA Exhibit the qualities and behaviours consistent with professional values informed by global citizenship and work effectively and sensitively in trans-cultural contexts	Matched with AQF 3.1 Graduates of a Masters Degree (Coursework) will demonstrate the application of knowledge and skills with creativity and initiative to new situations in professional practice and/or for further learning

Figure 3. Example of the development of integrated standards

Criterion 1.2 Develop knowledge on the importance of professional and ethical standards of practice and a moral organisational culture on the incidences of financial crime and its control in the pursuit of professional conduct and accountable practice.	Primary imported from FFC 1.2 Will possess a specialised knowledge of the impact that professional and ethical standards of practice, and organisational culture has on the incidences of financial crime and its control	Merged with GLO 1.3 PA Exercise professionalism, initiative and judgement in decision making, actions and evaluation in professional practice at the level of a beginning practitioner or professional	Matched with AQF 1.1 Graduates of a Masters Degree (Coursework) will have a body of knowledge that includes the understanding of recent developments in a discipline and/or area of professional practice
		Merged with GLO 5.2 ES Critically reflect on, discuss and challenge the values intrinsic in the different practices in which they participate	Matched with AQF 2.1 Graduates of a Masters Degree (Coursework) will have cognitive skills to demonstrate mastery of theoretical knowledge and to reflect critically on theory and professional practice or scholarship
		Merged with GLO 8.2 GS Demonstrate the skills to appropriately interact and empathise with people from different cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds	Matched with AQF 2.2 Graduates of a Masters Degree (Coursework) will have cognitive, technical and creative skills to investigate, analyse and synthesise complex information, problems, concepts and theories and to apply established theories to different bodies of knowledge or practice
			Matched with AQF 2.3 Graduates of a Masters Degree (Coursework) will have cognitive, technical and creative skills to generate and evaluate complex ideas and concepts at an abstract level
			Matched with AQF 3.1 Graduates of a Masters Degree (Coursework) will demonstrate the application of knowledge and skills with creativity and initiative to new situations in professional practice and/or for further learning

Figure 4. Additional example of the development of integrated standards

Program level learning outcomes are then derived from the completed set of integrated standards for a particular degree. As shown in Figure 1, these program learning outcomes, and the evidence required to indicate students have attained them, are then used to inform the assessment program for individual units/courses within the program as a whole. For example, one of the program learning outcomes emerging from the integrated standards for the fraud and financial crime program is:

Evaluate knowledge of financial crime, criminals, criminological theory, and control techniques and formulate and apply effective strategies and approaches to respond to a range of needs of organisational, regional, national, international and Indigenous stakeholders.

The evidence that graduates have attained this outcome, consisting of knowledge, skills or artefacts, would include the following, which would then inform individual assessment items:

- Reflection on current and emerging threats to financial systems and how a specialist body of knowledge of criminological theory can guide improved understanding of how and why financial crimes occur.
- Integration of a complex body of knowledge of analytical frameworks and complex financial crime cases to create and transmit new knowledge of how financial crimes work to a specialist or non-specialist audience.

Implementation of the procedures described in this paper enhance quality programs by ensuring what the authors term external alignment. External alignment is defined as ensuring that all aspects of the assessment regime developed (hence the structure of individual units/courses) can be clearly connected to the program learning outcomes, and hence to the integrated standards guiding the development of the program. This also means that all unit/course level work can be tracked back to the primary standard set for the program such that, in often time poor and intense programs, each “bit” plays its role. Further application of the process described in Figure 1 also helps ensure internal alignment, where this is defined as the constructive alignment within a course/subject/module (Biggs, 1996; Biggs & Tang, 2014), ensuring that assessment and assessable criteria are clearly and intentionally connected to

course/subject/module learning outcomes, which are themselves the basis of intentionally designed teaching and learning activities.

This intentional design is defined as ensuring that the purpose for each aspect of both a program and a course are clear. This implies the following:

- Using an integrated standards approach facilitates the authentic inclusion of all required standards into the set of integrated standards that guide the program design.
- Assessments and courses have direct line of sight to the integrated standards, ensuring that each has a legitimate place within the program structure.
- This helps to ensure that programs are designed in a coherent fashion where the role of each course can be recognised for its contribution to the program as a whole.

In the context of our institution, as described earlier, the process of course design and/or review is supported by a bespoke software platform called CourseSpace. Figure 5 below captures the main menu of this platform and can be seen to be clearly connected to the stages of the process described in Figure 1.

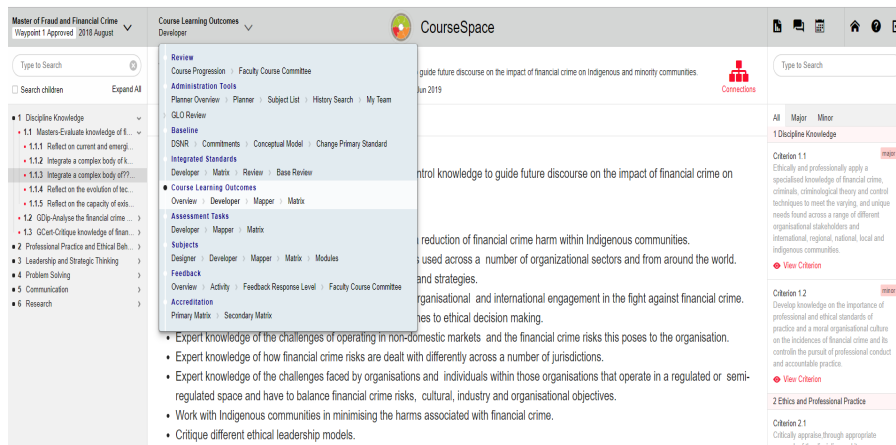


Figure 5. The main navigational menu for CourseSpace

Conclusion

The process of integrating standards involves an interrogation of the meaning and evidence of the standards which in turn supports a greater clarity for the curriculum designers. We argue that it is this greater clarity that support quality because there will be greater consistency in the interpretation of them across the program, a better fit between program level outcomes and assessment tasks (evidence of these outcomes) and, due to cohesion across the degree, greater potential for transformative learning for students.

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