AAGLO Summary 1: The ALTC AAGLO project and the international standards agenda

The AAGLO Project

The ‘Assessing and Assuring Graduate Learning Outcomes’ (AAGLO) project has been funded through the Australian Learning and Teaching Council’s (ALTC) Strategic Priority Grant scheme to gather evidence about the type of assessment tasks and assurance processes that provide convincing evidence of student achievement of and progress towards graduate learning outcomes. AAGLO is one of a number of related ALTC projects and fellowships that reflect increasing international attention to the quality of student learning outcomes.

This shift of emphasis from teaching inputs to learning outcomes has been a characteristic of considerable international activity aimed at articulating discipline-specific statements of the learning outcomes university students should demonstrate by the time of graduation. Such statements vary according to the perspectives and purposes of their creators. Some reflect academic learning outcomes, some lean more towards employability, while others indicate transformational aspirations related to the development of democratic perspectives and global citizenship. Terminology around graduate learning outcomes is also diverse – ‘graduate attributes’, ‘graduate capabilities’, ‘competencies’ and ‘competences’ being the most common. Though the definitional distinctions among these terms have long been the focus of debate, for the purposes of this project, ‘graduate learning outcomes’ will address whatever a program, institution or discipline has articulated as the intended learning outcomes of a particular university experience.

Background

The articulation of graduate outcomes is not new and universities in Australia and elsewhere have for some time used these statements to construct, communicate and market institutional identity. Recent international movements however are driven to a certain extent by the desire to establish, enhance and assure academic standards, provide a basis for demonstrating their comparability within and between institutions and countries and to encourage and support increased student and staff mobility. Extensive, large-scale, consultative processes have been employed in the development and implementation of graduate learning outcomes that will serve these purposes in centres around the world (Harris 2009).

Over a decade ago the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) initiated a process whereby disciplinary communities developed statements of expected learning outcomes called Subject Benchmark Statements which vary in their level of detail and in the levels of award targeted. Resources have also been developed to guide the use of subject benchmark statements through processes which include a well-established system of external examiners.

Similarly, a European collaboration The Tuning Project - now referred to as a Process – was established and articulated in the 1999 Bologna Declaration as a strategy for increasing collaboration in higher education (the expression tuning chosen to convey the objective of harmonising rather than standardising higher education systems among participating countries). A key component of Tuning has also been the generation of external reference points - threshold-level learning outcomes and competences - by communities across disciplines such as history, chemistry, nursing and business. A subsequent activity in 2004 was the development of the Dublin Descriptors, broad statements of learning outcomes that distinguished among Bachelor, Master and Doctoral level awards in five areas of learning.

As a result of interest in the European Tuning Process, a Tuning Latin America Project was initiated in 2004 to encourage dialogue around teaching, learning and assessment in order to facilitate the exploration of points of agreement on qualifications within the region and to establish links with European systems.

Tuning USA, an initiative supported by the Lumina Foundation to highlight the process for establishing and demonstrating standards of academic achievement, is also related to Tuning Europe. The initial focus is on graduate learning outcomes in six disciplines (biology, physics, chemistry, history, education and graphic design) across four states (Indiana, Minnesota, Utah and Texas). The USA has also expanded the use of standardised instruments such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to assess graduate achievement.

Canada and areas of South-east Asia - Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Japan - have shown interest in monitoring these developments but as yet no specific processes have been put in place to replicate Tuning-type activity in these regions.

Since 2010 Australia’s participation in the international standards movement has been supported by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council’s (ALTC)
Learning and Teaching Academic Standards (LTAS) project. To date this project has facilitated discipline communities in the articulation of threshold learning outcomes in Architecture and Building; Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities; Business, Management and Economics; Creative and Performing Arts; Engineering and ICT; Health, Medicine and Veterinary Science; Law; and Science. The LTAS project has generated considerable activity both during and after the endorsement of completed threshold learning outcomes. Disciplines scholars have initiated follow-on projects, frequently as collaborative efforts with discipline deans, and the ALTC has also generated further activity through its grants and fellowships schemes.

Developments in the assessment and assurance of graduate learning outcomes

This point-in-time overview summarises the current state of activity in an area with heavy exposure to the influences of constantly evolving movements in policies and procedures related to quality assurance. To date the main take-up of graduate learning outcomes has been for purposes of program development and approval. There is now evidence of increased attention to the collection of convincing assessment evidence that students have achieved them.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is conducting an AHELO (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes) project to investigate options for the direct assessment of student achievement that are applicable across different types of institutions, countries and languages. The initial focus of AHELO is a feasibility study of the suitability of assessment instruments developed for the disciplines of economics and engineering. In addition, the USA-developed CLA instrument is being adapted and trialled for application to the testing of generic skills.

In Australia a new regulatory body, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) has now been established. TEQSA’s approach to the incorporation of graduate learning outcomes in undertaking its responsibilities will involve the work of the soon to be established Standards Panel. However, whatever approach is taken will undoubtedly have some level of impact on institutional practices in the sector. In anticipation of future directions some institutions have already taken the initiative in demonstrating capacity for taking responsibility for self-regulation in maintaining academic standards.

Issues and concerns

Unsurprisingly, as with any significant educational innovation on this scale, some concerns have been associated with the standards movement. There has also been criticism of the approach based on the experiences of other educational sectors where the introduction of ‘standards’ has generated considerable bureaucracy with little evidence of improvement in student learning experiences.

Other concerns include the possibility of standardisation of program curriculum and erosion of standards as a consequence of the implementation of threshold learning outcomes. Doubts have been expressed regarding the adequacy of traditional forms of assessment or standardised tests for the assessment of complex learning outcomes. Criticism of some forms of standardised testing has included the influence on results of a large number of uncontrolled factors such as institutional entry requirements, student motivation and a capacity to produce league tables with their potential for misinterpretation and misuse. The assumption that decontextualised standardised testing provides valid evidence of achievement of generic graduate learning outcomes is also open to challenge.

The AAGLO Project

The AAGLO project will investigate issues in the assessment and assurance of graduate learning outcomes and provide evidence-based options for practice. The analysis of assessment tasks and processes collected across a range of disciplines in national and international contexts will identify effective practice and make it accessible across the sector in the form of principles and examples.

AAGLO outcomes will be developed through an extensive consultation process incorporating the views and experience of a wide range of key stakeholders. The project team will also invite collaboration with teams from completed or current projects in related areas.

You are invited to contact the project manager if you would like to contribute information or opinion to the AAGLO project or to register your interest in being included in planned project consultation activities.

Key references


AHELO (OECD)

http://www.oecd.org/document/22/0,3746,en_2649_35961291,40624662_1_1_1_1_00.html#What_is_ahelo

Tuning Europe http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu

Tuning Latin America http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuninalg/index.php?id=0&option=content&task=view&id=168&Itemid=196&lang=en

Tuning USA. http://www.luminafoundation.org/?s=tuning

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