17 February 2012

Andrew Taylor
Branch Manager
Policy and Analysis Branch
Higher Education Group
Department of Industry, Innovation, Sciences, Research and Tertiary Education

By email: AGHE@deewr.gov.au

RE: Submission on discussion paper on the Assessment of Generic Skills.

Dear Mr Taylor,

The ‘Assessment and Assurance of Graduate Learning Outcomes’ (AAGLO) is a national teaching development project funded by DEEWR’s Office for Learning and Teaching. It will complete its work and report in 2012.

The AAGLO project team represents academics from three Australian Universities, all of whom have internationally recognised research reputations in the assessment of generic skills. The project team welcomes the opportunity to make this submission in response to the discussion paper on the Assessment of Generic Skills, released for comment on 9 December 2011. The Discussion Paper acknowledges that the weight of evidence is against the development of a standardised test of generic skills, but continues to propose developing such a test, apparently based solely on the justification that the proposed test developers have convinced another higher education sector to do so. The OECD exploration of the value and feasibility of implementing such a test still requires more data collection and analysis. At this stage, there is insufficient evidence for Australia to follow this particular path. Australia is a world leader in higher education research and should be setting its own agenda in this regard. The project team submits the following points for consideration:

1. The CLA is not suited to the purpose for which it is proposed to be used in this discussion paper. This point has been made repeatedly in other university submissions. The question of the credibility and validity of measures of graduate learning outcomes must be considered. What is credible to employers, students and academic communities is authentic contextual assessment that is conducted over time. This equates to the need to use in-course – cumulative discipline-based assessment coupled with rich and authentic capstone assessment, where appropriate, that involves professions and external experts in decision-making. This is the focus of much of the work that has emerged in the wake of the first round of discussions about discipline assessment standards.

2. Generic skills tests such as the CLA fail to explain institutional impact on student learning outcomes. There is no evidence that stand-alone tests of generic skills of the sort proposed in the paper, meaningfully discriminate between the contributions of different higher education providers to the development of graduates’ generic skills. The proposal to develop the CLA to do this is not supported by any credible research evidence that institutional comparisons can be meaningful made on the basis of the CLA alone.

3. Generic skills tests are not valued by key stakeholders. The consultations to date, as well as the Australian university sector’s previous experiences in relation to ACER’s Graduate Skills Assessment underline the fact that the outputs of such measurement tools have little credibility with students, employers or university staff. If the measure is not credible to the key stakeholders for which it is being designed, then it is not helpful.

4. The stated purpose for developing an ‘Australian version of the CLA’ described in the Discussion Paper is one which is not supported by the developers of the CLA. The CLA is intended to support academic communities in designing complex assessment tasks which foster the development of graduate attributes. It is not intended to be used to establish league tables or differentiate between providers in the way proposed. While the intention may not be the establishment of league tables as such, the school experience has demonstrated media enthusiasm for using publically available information to do just this.

5. Current research on graduate learning outcomes argues consistently and strongly for the integration within discipline knowledge of the sorts of outcomes described in generic skills statements. The CLA was designed to be used to support exactly this integration. It was not designed to be used as a stand-alone measure. Educational outcomes demonstrated by graduates from disciplinary degrees can no longer be described in terms of content plus generic skills. Curriculum design has moved on from this outmoded way of thinking about knowledge and learning, however the proposed development of stand-alone tests of generic skills ignores this and would in fact encourage a return to outdated design of university curricula where disciplines taught students to regurgitate lists of facts, rather than teaching the ability to think using those facts, and to solve problems using those facts, and to communicate those facts.

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6. A viable alternative to a separate, standardised measure of generic skills is to instead ensure that discipline-based assessment of student learning addresses contemporary understandings of higher education knowledge and learning. The AAGLO project has collected evidence that many disciplines have developed valid and reliable assessments of student learning that provide credible demonstrations of achievement of the sorts of graduate learning outcomes that are relevant to multiple stakeholders. Rather than allocate resources to developing a test that will have little credibility to the important stakeholders (for example employers place little or no faith in such measures but do trust authentic work-based assessments) resources should instead be allocated to facilitating the development of better discipline capstone and cumulative assessments and the accompanying processes for assuring the standards applied in these assessments.

7. No matter how laudable the espoused intentions in introducing standardised assessment of generic skills, they will be associated with unintended and undesirable outcomes. Written decontextualised assessment tasks are capable of generating evidence of only particular types of student outcomes. High-stakes assessment relying solely on this type of approach risks a narrowing of the curriculum through test-driven redirection of teaching effort and resources into these areas. Also, considerable resources are associated with test development and administration – the marking of complex tasks such as CLA performance tasks cannot be fully automated as for multiple choice components. At a time of global financial downturn and government pressure to reduce debt, scarce resources would be better deployed in the professional development of academic staff than in test implementation.

In closing we would like to thank you for this opportunity to provide a submission on the proposal. We would also be delighted to contribute to any further stakeholder consultations organised by the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.

Yours sincerely,

A/Professor Simon Barrie
(on behalf of the AAGLO Project Team)
Dr Clair Hughes
Professor Geoffrey Crisp

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