

Aligning the distributed expertise model (DEM) and the Higher Education Standards (2015)

The new Higher Education Standards will be implemented on the 1st of January 2017 as the key regulatory instrument used by TEQSA to assess evidence that higher education institutions assure that each graduate has the appropriate levels of communication skills. A comparative analysis of the current Threshold Standards (2011) and the new instrument has been undertaken in relation to the articulation of graduate communication skills. While the Threshold Standards (2011) has specific standards dedicated to the support and assessment of English language proficiency, the new Standards do not explicitly articulate communication skills in this way. While some may consider this change downplaying the importance of communication skills, the new Standards can be seen as supporting the integration of communication skills as a core learning outcome rather than a separate and ancillary aspect of any program.

The analysis presented here suggests that while specific reference to communication skills is limited in the new Standards, the organisation of Domains emphasises that the demonstration of learning outcomes are integrated into broader institutional quality assurance practices governing appropriate admission, support, assessment and monitoring practices to the appropriate knowledge and skills including discipline-related and generic outcomes.

In part, the organisation of the new Standards supports the application of a distributed expertise model for ensuring that higher education institutions ensures that both domestic and international students successfully acquire the requisite communication skills upon graduation. This is achieved by integrating aspects of the current Threshold Standards, the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) framework and the AQF into the Higher Education Standards, which stipulates specific needs of international students as core institutional obligations aligned to all students.

Strategies to embed generic and disciplinary communication learning and development within the context of core teaching and assessment can therefore be understood as relevant to aspects of all Domains within the new Standards. Rather than be considered relevant to specific standards which are essentially peripheral to core teaching and learning activities including admission and student services; the development of graduate communication skills can be understood as an integrated learning outcome which requires a whole-of institution approach.

By adopting a structure aligned to the student lifecycle, the new Standards stimulate an approach to learning outcomes including communication skills that ensures:

- students have appropriate skills at admission,
- are supported throughout their studies,
- can be identified if further more targeted interventions are required,
- are assessed to allow demonstration of program specific learning outcomes;

- staff have the appropriate skills to develop the necessary skills required for each student to succeed;
- that institutions implement quality assurance processes that measure and ensure student learning outcomes; and
- academic leaders have oversight of student learning outcomes and the processes to ensure that graduates have achieved the intended graduate attributes.

Evidence that communication skills are assured across the institution and throughout the student lifecycle can be collected by adopting the Distributed Expertise Model (DEM). As detailed earlier in this report, the DEM involves a holistic, systematic and scaffolded approach to communication skills. This approach ensures that communication skills are not considered ‘someone else’s business’ or the responsibility of staff in discrete units that are vulnerable to the stresses of institutional budgets, re-structures or new management styles. Table 1 provides a mapping of the standards that apply to an institutional approach for the assurance of communication skills as a learning outcome (Table 2). By considering communication skills as core to all learning outcomes of higher education study, the new Standards promote a whole-of –institution approach that involves all staff involved in processes from admission, support, disciplinary teaching, leadership and management.

Table 1: Aligning the DEM to the Higher Education Standards (2015)

Distributed Expertise Principal	Relevant Higher Education Standard (2015)
Establish Threshold Standards	Admission Part A 1.1.1 Learning Outcomes and Assessment Part A: 1.4.1 & Part A 1.4.2
Identify Milestones	Orientation and Progression Part A 1.3.1 and 1.3.4. Learning Outcomes and Assessment Part A 1.4.3
Integrate Teaching and Learning Practices	Staffing Part A 3.2.1 & 3.2.2 & 3.2.3
Moderate Assessment	Learning Outcomes and Assessment Part A 1.4.3 & 1.4.4
Consolidate Evidence-Base	Academic Governance 6.3. & 6.3.2
Quality Assurance	Monitoring Review and Improvement 5.3.2 & 5.3.4 Academic Governance 6.3.2

Table 2: Selection of Higher Education Standards (2015) related to demonstrating graduate communication skills as a learning outcome

Domain	Standard ID	Standard
Admission	Part A 1.1.1	Admissions policies, requirements and procedures are documented, are applied fairly and consistently, and are designed to ensure that admitted students have the academic preparation and proficiency in English needed to participate in their intended study, and no known limitations that would be expected to impede their progression and completion.
Orientation and Progression	Part A 1.3.1	Successful transition into courses of study is achieved through orientation programs that are tailored to the needs of student cohorts and include specific consideration for international students adjusting to living and studying in Australia.
	Part A 1.3.3	Methods of assessment or monitoring that determine progress within or between units of study or in research training validly assess progress and, in the case of formative assessment, provide students with timely feedback that assists in their achievement of learning outcomes.
	Part A 1.3.4	Processes that identify students at risk of unsatisfactory progress and provide specific support are implemented across all courses of study.
Learning Outcomes and Assessment	Part A 1.4.1	The expected learning outcomes for each course of study are specified, consistent with the level and field of education of the qualification awarded, and informed by national and international comparators.
	Part A 1.4.2	The specified learning outcomes for each course of study encompass discipline-related and generic outcomes, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - specific knowledge and skills and their application that characterise the field(s) of education or disciplines involved - generic skills and their application in the context of the field(s) of education or disciplines involved - knowledge and skills required for employment and further study related to the course of study, including those required to be eligible to seek registration to practise where applicable, and - skills in independent and critical thinking suitable for life-long learning
	Part A 1.4.3	Methods of assessment are consistent with the learning outcomes being assessed, are capable of confirming that all specified learning outcomes are achieved and that grades awarded reflect the level of student attainment.
	Part A 1.4.4	On completion of a course of study, students have demonstrated the learning outcomes specified for the course of study, whether assessed at unit level, course level, or in combination.
Course Design	Part A 3.1.3	Teaching and learning activities are arranged to foster progressive and coherent achievement of expected learning outcomes throughout each course of study.
	Part A 3.1.4	Each course of study is designed to enable achievement of expected learning outcomes regardless of a student's place of study or the mode of delivery.
Staffing	Part A 3.2.1	The staffing complement for each course of study is sufficient to meet the educational, academic support and administrative needs of student cohorts undertaking the course.

