

Australian Teaching and Learning Council
Graduate Professional Entry Courses in Accounting and Law
Evaluation Team Final Report
August 2011

1. Introduction

We are pleased to provide the final report from the evaluation team of the ALTC Graduate Professional Entry Courses in Accounting and Law project. The project commenced in 2009 comprising a project team of members from RMIT, QUT and Curtin University. The following is a brief evaluation report on the achievement of the project against its original objectives.

2. Background

The background within the higher education sector over the last two years has been one of systemic change. The completion of the Bradley review has provided a framework for a number of reforms of the higher education sector, this has included amongst other things the redevelopment of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), the progression of a Standards based approach to higher education and the consideration and development towards a national and risk based approach to the regulation of higher education, through the advent of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency.

One of the key activities which has impacted on this project has been the AQF discussions around the masters program or AQF levels 8 and 9, and the consequent development of the AQF level 9 Masters Degree (Extended) category.

3. Objective

The objective of this project was to explore whether a Masters level degree that meets the requirements for entry into a profession applies different academic standards to those applied in an undergraduate degree that also meets the same professional entry requirements, and to then describe what those different standards are. This exploration was limited to masters programs in both Accounting and Law.

4. Evaluation Methodology

The Evaluation Team has met with the project leader and the Melbourne based members of the project team for this project on four occasions over the life of the project. The initial meeting was at project inception and involved a meeting with the full project team. The second meeting involved a project update meeting with the Project Leader and the third meeting was held in February 2011 with the full project team. The final meeting reviewed the draft of the Report.

The Evaluation Team has asked for, and received regular electronic updates over the course of the project and has had ongoing discussions with the project team leader, regarding project progress as the methodology of the project has developed in response to the findings.

It should be noted that the Evaluation Team membership was amended in light of the unavailability of one representative, and the Evaluation Team consists of two members Ms Jennifer Labourne and Dr Karen Treloar.

5. Discussion

The Evaluation Team has been supported by the project team, through regular briefings over the life of the project. The Evaluation Team has been impressed by the Project Team's ability to adapt the methodology, given the complications in the data collection phase of the project, which has enabled the project team to continue to collate a meaningful dataset, and to meet its major project milestones.

The Evaluation Team has reviewed all reports which have been progressively produced by the project team. We have engaged in extensive consultations with the Team Leader regarding elements of the project as it has developed. In particular, we were involved in the key discussion around the sampling of industry associations, and the further communication of the project findings to the broader education community. Broadly, the Evaluation Team believes that this project has been managed in a professional manner.

There was an enormous difference in the way each university handled course development of masters programs and their varied use of graduate attributes, capabilities, learning outcomes and so on. Originally information was to be gathered via a written survey. After piloting the questionnaire, it was found that the results were difficult to compare due to the different university approaches. As well, in drafting the questionnaire around the AQF, it was discovered there was a problem with participants being unable to articulate in writing how they addressed the AQF. As a result it was decided to proceed to interviews with course leaders and specific unit coordinators, bypassing the initial written survey.

In addition, the ALTC project on Academic Standards along with the AQF review has helped raise the profile of the work that was undertaken and the relevance of academic standards, but many of those approached for interviews were wary of providing data on the masters programs in their particular institutions. There was initial reluctance for involvement with this project with many participants which was turned around through perseverance by the project team. The above developments enabled the project team to better articulate the impact of the research, and the issues, the backdrop of current debates and developments regarding educational standards in the Australian Higher Education sector fortuitously made discussion more accessible and hence more clearly understood and this helped secure stakeholder engagement.

6. Findings

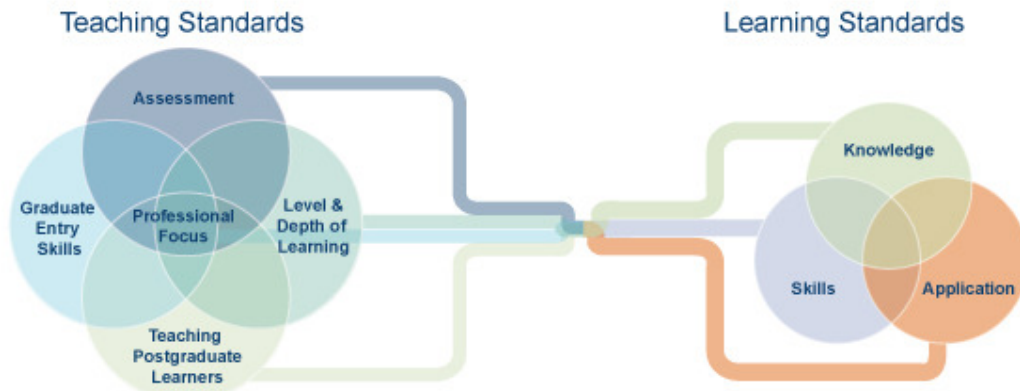
The Evaluation Team believes that the report's findings have answered the objective:

To explore whether a Masters level degree that meets the requirements for entry into a profession applies different academic standards to those applied in an undergraduate degree that also meets the same professional entry requirements, and to then describe what those different standards are.

It has also provided evidence of the direct relevance in the current debates around the Australian Qualifications Framework and that the project provides an evidence based approach to the exploration of some of these issues. In particular the Evaluation Team is encouraging the Project Team to discuss and disseminate the results of this project widely within the Higher Education sector to further develop discussion around professional masters programs.

In addition the evaluation team actively recommends a learning continuum for conduct of masters degree courses as outlined in the diagram below. This learning continuum has been supported by the findings of this study and also the findings of the international body of work which has been extensively reviewed as part of this project.

Academic Standards for Professional Entry Masters



The evaluation team supports the reports core assumptions about the quality assurance of coursework masters:

- That the coursework in masters courses ought to be conducted at a clearly advanced level in terms of the knowledge, skills and understanding required;
- That the goals of coursework in masters courses should reflect the broader goals of university education, in particular, fostering intellectual values which transcend the boundaries of any particular branch of learning and any particular vocation, and achieving balance between the transmission of theoretical perspectives, practical skills, knowledge, and where relevant, professional values;
- That the structure, process and delivery of education in these courses should be based on recognition of the special nature of adult learning;
- That quality assurance mechanisms ought to provide for formal consultations with students and the relevant professional bodies;
- That graduate students have needs and aspirations which can usefully be distinguished from those of undergraduate or postgraduate research students;
- That the life and work experiences graduate students bring with them should be recognised and used to enrich learning environments.
- Provides a model that is of value to other academics that may be planning similar projects to understand standards on different levels of course or to understand how to build courses for students with different entry skills gained from prior educational and life experiences.

7. Review of the Research Methodology

The Evaluation Team was apprised of the research which involved 7 overlapping phases:

- Phase 1 Initiation and project management
- Phase 2 Literature review
- Phase 3 Interview/data collection

- Phase 4 Data analysis
- Phase 5 Model development and testing
- Phase 6 Reporting
- Phase 7 Disseminating and evaluation

8. Conclusion

The Evaluation Team is of the opinion that this project has met all of its milestones and that the projects findings are important to the development of academic standards to Higher Education in the Australian and International Framework. We commend the report to the Council.



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