Universities Australia and Professions Australia

Joint Statement of Principles for Professional Accreditation
9 March 2016

Preamble

Professions Australia and Universities Australia, and the members of each, place a high priority on pursuing initiatives to enhance quality within the professions and to increase the contribution the professions make to the broader community. While recognising that the overall professional accreditation process is a wider public good, Universities Australia and Professions Australia acknowledge that the immediate beneficiaries of robust professional accreditation processes are students and professionals.

The members of Professions Australia continue to work in partnership with the universities and the higher education sector in Australia and in some instances more broadly through their course accreditation activities to ensure quality in professional education as the key foundation to entry to practise as a professional in Australia.

Australian universities' academic self-accreditation processes are regulated and assured against the Higher Education Standards Framework[1] by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)[2]. It is recognised that a complementary approach is necessary to harmonise the separate academic and professional accreditation processes and avoid duplication of effort.

In this context, the accreditation processes of both the government regulator through TEQSA and the professional accreditation bodies are undertaken in a way that accords with the general principles of proportionality, risk, necessity and shared responsibility.

Scope

This document provides principles for the accreditation of university courses by professional accreditation bodies. Out of scope is the accreditation of courses offered by non-university education providers and higher education providers outside of Australia.

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[1] Higher Education Standards Framework, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency - www.teqsa.gov.au/higher-education-standards-framework
[2] www.TEQSA.gov.au

Definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following definitions are used:

Professional accreditation of university courses of study is intended to ensure that a course of study meets essential criteria in the training and education of its students in the relevant professional discipline, and that graduates from that discipline achieve the professional competencies and learning outcomes necessary for entry into the relevant level of professional practice.

Professional accreditation can be either regulated or non-regulated. Governments, on behalf of the public, regulate some professions where they wish to assure public safety and designate authority for bodies to accredit professions. In unregulated professions, professional associations may establish an accreditation function as part of their wider professional services and operations.

Professional accreditation bodies act as evaluators of university courses of study with the goal of professional accreditation of those courses.

Academic accreditation refers to the evaluation of a course of study (either by TEQSA or by a self-accrediting provider such as a University) against course requirements specified in the Higher Education Standards Framework. Both the current Higher Education Standards Framework and the final revisions to that Framework proposed to the Commonwealth Minister for Education by the Higher Education Standards Panel[3] in December 2014 include specific standards and requirements for academic governance, course design and delivery, staffing, facilities and infrastructure, learning resources and educational support and, in particular, require that staffing and resourcing for courses are sufficient to ensure that students achieve course learning outcomes.

Universities, as self-accrediting institutions, must demonstrate to TEQSA that they have robust academic quality assurance processes for course academic accreditation. TEQSA has issued a 'Guidance Note' that sets out the regulator's interpretation of the Standards Framework as it relates to academic quality assurance[4].

University course means a course of study that leads to an Australian higher education award offered or conferred by an Australian university[5].

Professional accreditation standard(s) means the published key accreditation criteria used by the relevant professional accreditation body to evaluate a university course for professional accreditation purposes.

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[3] Refer https://education.gov.au/final-proposed-higher-education-standards-framework
[4] www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/GNAcademicQualityAssurance.pdf.
[5] Refer Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011

Professional accreditation processes means the published processes and/or procedures by which the professional accreditation standards are evaluated, with the aim of reaching a conclusion about whether a university course meets the minimum standards set by the relevant professional accreditation body.

Objectives of this Statement

This Statement is designed to:

- provide jointly agreed principles for the professional accreditation of Australian university courses that prepare students for entry into the relevant level of professional practice in a specific professional discipline;

- encourage national consistency of the professional accreditation standards and processes at the discipline level, including between states/territories and professional accreditation panels, and consistency at the level of principle in a discipline's requirements;

- be widely applicable and inclusive to reflect the diversity in the educational design, delivery, quality processes and institutional structures that exist within the higher education sector and to reflect the different context and quality processes of the professional associations and professional accreditation bodies;

- ensure that professional accreditation processes operate in a transparent, accountable, efficient, effective and fair way.

Professional Accreditation Context and Purpose

Professional accreditation of Australian university courses serves several purposes, including:

- serving a public good through which stakeholders – the public, students, graduates, employers, higher education institutions, government, professional associations and professional accreditation bodies – can be assured that graduates of an Australian university course meet the criteria and standards for entry into the relevant level of professional practice in a specific professional discipline;

- providing an independent quality assurance process for registration under government legislation and/or membership of a professional association that a university course meets the criteria and standards for entry into the relevant level of professional practice in a specific professional discipline;

- encouraging adherence to a code of ethics or behaviours for the professional discipline;

- aiding student and graduate mobility both within Australia and overseas, including potentially improving ease of access to further study or employment in Australia and overseas.

Basic Principles for Professional Accreditation

The professional accreditation standards and processes will vary in detail between professional disciplines but ideally should be underpinned by the following guiding principles and characteristics within three core areas of focus:

- professional accreditation standards;
- professional accreditation processes; and
- stakeholder engagement.

The basic principles applicable to each area of focus are set out below.

Professional accreditation standards should

- focus on professional competencies and learning outcomes at graduation;

- develop criteria for professional accreditation that meet relevant Australian and international benchmarks and are demonstrably based on available research and evidence;

- take due and realistic account of the wider higher education environment, including the demands made by other external agencies on universities, limitations in available resourcing and diverse institutional circumstances;

- be cognisant of and distinguish between the respective requirements of the TEQSA – responsible for monitoring adherence to the Higher Education Standards Framework – and professional accreditation bodies – responsible for professional accreditation – and should not lead to duplication of effort or process;

- engage stakeholders, including universities, in the development and review of professional accreditation standards and relevant guidelines and processes;

- be published, together with the accreditation processes to be used by the professional accreditation body; and

- be reviewed regularly.

Professional accreditation processes should

- recognise that universities are academically self-accrediting and have wider roles in learning and teaching, scholarship, research and community engagement;

- consider resources, processes, policies and practices where appropriate;

- base the evaluation of university courses on the published professional accreditation standards;

- be transparent, consistent and predictable to stakeholders, including universities and students;

- be informed by an understanding of the distinct and complementary roles of professional accreditation bodies and universities which have responsibility for academic accreditation;

- clearly define scope and activities of accreditation panels;

- implement procedures for identifying, recording and managing perceived or actual conflicts of interest in the professional accreditation process, including those pertaining to the membership of accreditation panels;

- have effective complaints and appeals processes relating to the accreditation process and decisions by professional accreditation bodies; and

- minimise the cost of professional accreditation on universities, for example by being prepared to share and accept information from complementary accreditation processes.

Stakeholder engagement is enabled by professional accreditation through

- engaging stakeholders, including students, governments, education providers, industry, the profession and consumers/community in the work of the professional accreditation body beyond the direct development of professional accreditation standards;

- working towards such approaches for disciplines that do not have consistent national professional accreditation processes;

- working towards the development of a complementary approach to course accreditation between universities and professional accreditation bodies; and

- working to resolve overlaps between different accrediting bodies in the same field.

Roles and Responsibilities of Professions Australia and Universities Australia

Universities Australia and Professions Australia with their respective members work in partnership to ensure the maintenance of standards in professional education. They share a responsibility to develop complementary approaches to course accreditation as well as the alignment of professional standards and the learning outcomes requirements of the Higher Education Standards Framework.

Roles and Responsibilities of Universities Australia

The members of Universities Australia are responsible for the academic accreditation of their university courses. This includes:

- compliance with the Higher Education Standards Framework and TEQSA regulatory processes;

- designing, accrediting and setting final curricula for courses through rigorous internal processes, based on defensible benchmarks, evidence and research;

- setting and measuring course learning outcomes and the standard of attainment; and

- allocating resourcing and deciding staffing profiles for courses to ensure that students achieve course learning outcomes, including the appropriate levels of staff and reporting and management lines.

The members of Universities Australia are responsible for working with those members of Professions Australia who are accreditation bodies in the professional accreditation of their courses by

- recognising the role of professional accreditation bodies in accreditation of university courses;

- providing relevant information and evidence against the standards for professional accreditation; and

- disclosing substantial changes that affect their professional accreditation to the relevant professional accreditation body.

Roles and Responsibilities of Professions Australia

The members of Professions Australia who are accreditation bodies are responsible for the accreditation of the university courses that aim to achieve the professional competencies and learning outcomes necessary for entry into the relevant level of the profession. This includes:

- establishing the standards required for professional accreditation and the registration of graduates, based on defensible benchmarks, evidence and research;

- accrediting university courses by applying professional accreditation processes fairly and transparently against published professional accreditation standards;

- ensuring that the members of professional accreditation panels are appropriately skilled, trained, supported and effectively identify and manage any perceived or actual conflicts of interest;

- recognising their broader international obligation to align with international professional accreditation standards as appropriate for their professional discipline;

- recognising and supporting a diversity of university approaches in meeting professional accreditation standards and avoiding prescribing resources, processes, policies and practices; and

- recognising that university courses prepare students for entry into the relevant level of the profession and that ongoing professional education will ensue post graduation.

Joint Responsibilities of Professions Australia and Universities Australia

The members of Universities Australia and Professions Australia are both responsible for:

- acknowledging that the achievement of quality graduate outcomes is the central purpose of professional accreditation and that each party is working genuinely towards this goal;

- promoting continuous improvement in the quality of university education and professional training to respond to evolving community needs and the needs of professional practice;

- co-operating in the process and keeping each other informed of changes in discipline pedagogy, professional practice experience and other matters that could impact on the professional competencies required of graduates or the manner in which they are educated;

- promoting ongoing open communication and dialogue about professional accreditation standards, graduate competencies and attainment.

- proactively identifying and communicating quality issues with graduate competencies and outcomes;

- using research and evidence to evaluate graduate outcomes and attainment and, where systematic evidence may suggest unsatisfactory outcomes, to work collaboratively towards their improvement;

- investigating specific university practices, processes and policies where there is sufficient evidence to substantiate a claim of unsatisfactory graduate outcomes and attainment.

Endorsement

Professions Australia and Universities Australia, having sought the input and concurrence of their respective members, endorse and support this Statement of Principles for Professional Accreditation.

Both organisations intend to regularly review and update this Statement, at least every five years.

Signed:

Professor Barney Glover   Mr Michael Catchpole

Chair   President

Universities Australia   Professions Australia

Date: 9 March 2016   Date: 9 March 2016