2013

Learning and Teaching Standards for English: Discussion Paper

AUHE Learning and Teaching Standards Working Group

This paper outlines a rationale for a project to articulate teaching and learning standards for the academic discipline of English in Australia, venturing to outline how the discipline would be defined and a preliminary model for the project.

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INTRODUCTION

AUHE LEARNING AND TEACHING STANDARDS WORKING GROUP

This working group was formed at the inaugural AUHE meeting in 2012 to consider the need for discipline-based learning and teaching standards for English Studies in Australian universities.

This need was defined in relation to:

- current external government requirements for benchmarking and standards established by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and Tertiary Education and Standards Agency (TEQSA);

- developing international pedagogical models of criterion-led assessment linked to threshold learning outcomes (TLOs), which articulate to agreed-upon discipline standards;

- current learning and teaching standards already established in university English programs in Australia, and by national and international disciplinary bodies in the UK, Canada, Europe and elsewhere;

- the formalization of discipline-based TLOs for some major disciplines in Australia (including History and Creative Arts), funded by the multi-disciplinary Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) *Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project* (2009-2011);

- an identified perception that disciplinary diversity can be mistaken for incoherence and that English as a discipline would benefit from clearly articulated aims and outcomes for its graduates.

The working group has been pursuing the possibility that AUHE auspice a discipline wide project to source, define and articulate discipline-based learning and teaching standards, in the form of TLOs, seeking input from all Australian university English programs.

RATIONALE FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING STANDARDS

DEFINITION OF 'STANDARDS'

A working definition of 'standards' for our purposes is that of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council from 2010:

> *learning outcomes described in terms of discipline-specific knowledge, discipline-specific skills including generic skills as applied in the discipline and the discipline-specific capabilities.[1]*

DEBATE

There is some debate in the relevant literature on the definition of 'standards'. The focus on standards has been driven by developments in higher education worldwide since the 1990s that seek to establish criteria by which performance can be measured and comparatively assessed in both the national and global 'marketplaces'.

Within many universities in Australia, this development has been experienced as a 'top-down' process, part of the increasing bureaucratisation of academic work: many academics regard the focus on 'Teaching and Learning Outcomes' as a compliance exercise driven by university management and government rather than something which they can meaningfully control and influence.

This development in higher education can be associated with **'outcomes-based education' (OBE).** OBE is 'an approach to education in which decisions about the curriculum are driven by outcomes the students should display by the end of the course'. Rather than emphasizing the structure and delivery of teaching where the result may be, to varying degrees, inconsequential, the emphasis is on a student's ability to effectively meet a set of pre-defined standards.[2] OBE advocate William Spauldy argued:

> *Outcome-based practitioners start by determining the knowledge, competencies, and qualities they want students to be able to demonstrate when they finish… Then, with these "exit outcomes in*

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[1] Australian Learning and Teaching Council, *Learning and Teaching Academic Standards – Progress Report* (Melbourne: Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010), 1.
[2] R.M. Harden, J.R Crosby & M.H. Davis, "Outcome-based education: Part 1—An introduction to outcome-based education", *Medical Teacher* 21.1 (1999): 8

> *mind", they deliberately design curriculums and instructional systems with the intent that all students will ultimately be able to demonstrate them successfully. OBE, therefore, is not a "program" but a way of designing, developing, delivering, and documenting instruction in terms of its goals and outcomes.[3]*

The obvious disadvantages to the outcomes-based education model include the possible imposition of constraints on student development and inhibition of learning by discovery.[4] Critic McKernan argues that 'to define education as a set of outcomes decided in advance of teaching and learning conflicts with the wonderful, unpredictable voyages of exploration that characterize learning through discovery and enquiry'.[5] In its favour, OBE mitigates for transparent, measurable and demonstrable evidence of student learning.

As Scott Thompson-Whiteside has argued, 'the process of setting standards is largely about gaining consensus and control of the criteria used to determine the nature and level of a standard'.[6] In principle, it is possible for members of disciplines as such to gain control of this process and to reach some agreement on standards that does not equate to standardisation nor quash diversity.

The committee has been encouraged by the explicit expectations of the ALTC Learning and Teaching Standards project, TEQSA and the AQF that "discipline communities will 'own' and take responsibility for implementing academic standards … within the academic traditions of collegiality, peer review, pre-eminence of disciplines and academic autonomy."[7]

Other academic disciplines in Australia, most notably History but also Creative and Performing Arts as a disciplinary grouping, have been active in attempting to establish such a consensus and driving the development of a standards model from the program and course level upwards.

International benchmarks for academic standards in English are available in award level descriptors or reference points, including from the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Subject Benchmark Statement for English, the Tuning Process in Europe http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/home.html and the USA http://tuningusa.org/About/What_is_Tuning.aspx, and with reference to the

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[3] William G. Spady, "Organizing for Results: The Basis of Authentic Restructuring and Reform", *Educational Leadership* 46.2 (1988): 5

[4] Margery H. Davis, "Outcome-Based Education", *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education,* 30.3 (2003): 229

[5] Qtd ibid., 229

[6] Scott Thompson-Whiteside, 'Setting Standard in Australian higher education?', *Journal of Institutional Research* 17:1 (2012), 27-38 (35).

[7] DEEWR, Transforming Australia's Higher Education System, 2009, 32.

endeavours of associations such as the Canadian Association of College and University Teachers of English.

In Australian contemporary practice, there is an attempt to maximize academic autonomy through an emphasis on minimal rather than total articulation, and by defining learning outcomes only, rather than the ways in which this learning is taught, learned and assessed.

Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) are thus defined as the "minimum learning outcomes in terms of discipline specific knowledge, discipline specific skills including generic skills as applied in the discipline and discipline specific capabilities that a graduate of any given discipline must have achieved".[8]

VALUE OF A STANDARDS MODEL FOR ENGLISH

The committee believes that the implementation of a standards model would be valuable to English for the following reasons:

- It would examine what, how and how well we teach, in a spirit of genuine enquiry, seeking unity between pedagogical aims and student learning. Do our students really learn what we set out to teach them?

- It would make English more visible to university management and government as a fundamental and vital Humanities discipline in both tertiary and secondary education in Australia.

- It would enable the discipline to communicate and defend the value of English to prospective and continuing students, the wider community, and the government in an environment in which the usefulness of an Arts/Humanities education is under question.

- It would align English in Australia with international benchmarks in the discipline and in other Humanities disciplines.

- Resistance to standardization can be enabled and threats to disciplinary, program and academic autonomy can be countered through the process of defining outcomes rather than curricula.

- It would facilitate examination and reflection on the state of the discipline and how it is taught in the future.

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[8] ALTC, Resources to Assist Discipline Communities to Define TLOs, 2011, 13.

VALUE OF A SECTOR-WIDE THRESHOLD LEARNING OUTCOMES (TLO) PROJECT

A project endorsed by AUHE and funded by the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) would enable the funded participation of all university English programs in Australia. The benefits of such a project extend beyond establishing discipline-based standards.

- English as a discipline would control the definition, articulation and use of standards, in an environment in which university management control of teaching is perceived to be increasing;

- It would enable and sustain a determining, active, or 'bottom-up' role for Australian English programs in the development of standards.

- It will facilitate national discussion of disciplinary learning, assessment modes and skills or knowledge outcomes.

- It would encourage interaction, dialogue, and collegiality across Australian universities, thereby strengthening disciplinary identity and cohesion.

- It would build links with non-academic stakeholders and with relevant people and institutions overseas.

- It would assist in capacity building through consolidating the role of a peak body for the discipline of English.

DEFINING THE DISCIPLINE

INTRODUCTION

Articulating the nature and extent of English as a discipline in Australian universities is a key early step in developing discipline-based models for learning and teaching. This serves a number of purposes:

- Defining the boundaries and focus of the discipline for all parties, to allow comprehensive coverage.

- Facilitating the involvement of related disciplines, particularly those with shared boundaries or interdisciplinary relationships.

- Clarifying the parameters of the proposed project for external parties in particular.

- Acting as an explicit set of reference points in the development of standards.

NATURE AND EXTENT OF ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

English studies engage in the analysis and study of literatures and texts from the Anglophone world. In addition to the study of literature and language in literature, the discipline can also incorporate 'comparative literature and literature in translation, drama, creative writing, film and the study of non-literary texts', including forms of popular culture, media and journalism, as the Subject Benchmark Statement for English drawn up for the UK's Quality Assurance Agency noted in 2007.[9]

Study in English enables us to come to grips with complex forms of meaning in variant circumstances. It underpins contemporary engagement with and production of highly developed and diverse forms of communication in all contexts, including aesthetic and ideological productions of meaning.

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[9] The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *Subject Benchmark Statement: English*. QAA: Mansfield, UK, 2007. p2. http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Subject-benchmark-statement-English.aspx
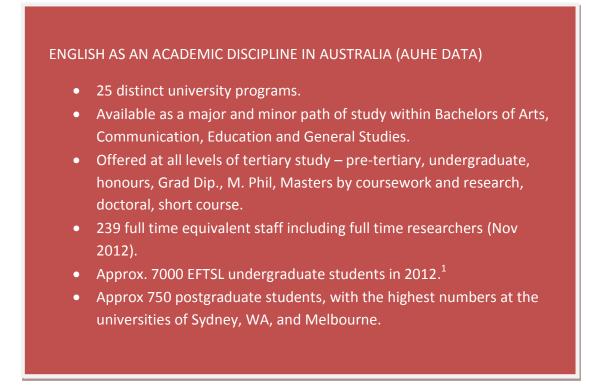
Diversity is a strength of English studies in Australian universities. Its intellectual range and scope indicate responsiveness to changes in the nature of texts, audiences, and forms of production and reception, and a further openness to inter and multi-disciplinary perspectives. At the same time, this diversity has meant continuing specialisation within and beyond the discipline in Australia, so that professional structures, associations and institutions now represent sub-disciplines and specialist areas well and actively. There have been few forums through which to articulate the overarching mission or role for English studies in Australia. The newly formed Australian University Heads of English (AUHE) association is a peak body, with representation from more than 6 sub-disciplinary associations as stake-holders in the discipline, and constituting a forum for representatives from university English programs across the higher education sector.

CURRENT EXTENT

Currently, English remains in high demand in Australian universities. It is offered as a major program of study within Bachelor and Postgraduate degrees by almost all Australian universities as well as other higher education providers.

No Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations data is available on how many EFTSL or actual students are enrolled in English in higher education in any given year. DEEWR statistics count 'Broad Areas of Study' only, in which English students count towards the two cohorts in Society and Culture and Creative Arts, as do students in any humanities or social sciences major.

Quantitative data gathered by AUHE questionnaires sent to all English Program Heads in 2012 allow approximate figures, rounded from reporting of either EFTSTL or actual students or both from programs surveyed.

ENGLISH AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE IN AUSTRALIA (AUHE DATA)

- 25 distinct university programs.
- Available as a major and minor path of study within Bachelors of Arts, Communication, Education and General Studies.
- Offered at all levels of tertiary study – pre-tertiary, undergraduate, honours, Grad Dip., M. Phil, Masters by coursework and research, doctoral, short course.
- 239 full time equivalent staff including full time researchers (Nov 2012).
- Approx. 7000 EFTSL undergraduate students in 2012.[1]
- Approx 750 postgraduate students, with the highest numbers at the universities of Sydney, WA, and Melbourne.

Course specialism within English programs [incomplete]:

Period	Genre	Category	Interdisciplinary
Medieval	Novel	Creative Writing	Media studies
Early Modern	Drama	Postcolonial	Film studies
18th Century	Film	Theory	Cultural studies
Romantic	Popular texts	National and regional literatures (Australian, American, etc)	Area studies (Australian Studies; Asian studies)
Victorian	Poetry	Women's writing	Gender Studies
Modernism	E-texts	Comparative/World	Performance Studies
20th Century	Life writing	'Classic' or 'great works'	Journalism
Contemporary	Creative non-fiction	Children's & YA literature	Sexuality Studies
		Indigenous	Communication Studies
		Literature in Translation	

BOUNDARIES OF THE DISCIPLINE

Diversity in English studies is a defining strength of the discipline. Interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary study is a prominent feature of scholarship and has been a feature of undergraduate education in some institutions for two decades or longer. As one of the oldest humanities disciplines, English is the originating field of study for a number of prominent younger disciplines or subdisciplines whose methods, objects of concern and pedagogical philosophies draw significantly from literary studies.

The Excellence in Research in Australia (ERA) uses a series of codes to define disciplinary boundaries. The lists below show that these boundaries do not map straightforwardly on to the structure of English as a discipline:

20 Language, Communication and Culture		19 Studies in Creative Arts and Writing	
2001	Communications and Media Studies	1902	Film, Television and Digital Media
2002	Cultural Studies	1903	Journalism and Professional Writing
2003	Language Studies	1904	Performing Arts and Creative Writing
2005	Literary Studies	1999	Other Studies in Creative Arts and Writing
2099	Other Language, Communication and Culture		

Key cognate or conjoined disciplines, or sub-disciplines for English include:

a. Cultural Studies

The emergence of cultural studies as a stand-alone discipline in the 1990s has meant a variegated disciplinary landscape in which Cultural studies may be conjoined with or separated from English programs:

Egs: UMelbourne and UWA conjoined; at UQ and Macquarie programs once together are now separate; UNSW and UTas have no distinct Cultural Studies programs; USyd and ANU conjoin cultural studies with gender studies, with literary studies in separate programs.

b. Film Studies

Similar institutional status to Cultural Studies, but more often taught within English programs as integrated content (eg Macquarie, UNSW Canberra) or in conjunction with Film Studies programs where they exist (USyd, UNSW, ANU, Deakin).

c. Creative Writing

A marked increase in the size, scope and status of Creative Writing courses is a feature of the last 10-15 years, making independent programs viable in some institutions in Australia, following international trends. The UK QAA report on English studies notes 'both the [recent] fertility of creative writing and its close and productive affinity with the study of English literature and language'.[10]

It is currently taught within English Programs in some universities (eg. USyd, Macquarie, ANU, UTas, Monash); as a separate program in others (Wollongong, Deakin); or in parallel programs with some co-teaching (UNSW, UMelbourne, LaTrobe).

Notably, Creative Writing was included within the disciplinary grouping or field of Creative and Performing Arts for the ALTC's Learning and Teaching Academic Standards (LTAS) Project in 2010.[11]

DEFINING THE DISCIPLINE FOR A 'TLO' PROJECT

This committee has concluded that, in line with established practice, a Learning and Teaching Outcomes (LTO) statement for English should **only cover programs of study that lead to the award of a BA with a major in the discipline of English or literary studies, however defined.** In order to delineate the pedagogical aims, contexts and methods at issue, the project should not cover other levels of qualification, for example honours degrees or masters degrees.

The AQF determines that graduates of a Bachelor's degree are expected to have attained: "Systematic and coherent body of knowledge, principles and concepts and higher order learning skills for further learning and professional employment."[12]

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[10] The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *Subject Benchmark Statement: English*. QAA: Mansfield, UK, 2007. P2. http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Subject-benchmark-statement-English.aspx p 7.

[11] *Creative and Performing Arts Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Statement,* ALTC Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project, Dec. 2010.

[12] AQF Council, Strengthening the AQF Consultation Paper, Sept 2009.

The project should not presume any single model or definition for a major, recognizing that higher education providers (HEPs) organise such in different ways.

The project should not presume any single nomenclature for degree structures within which majors are offered.

The committee concludes that:

A project to define learning and teaching standards for English should define the discipline as broadly as and inclusively as possible, considering Creative Writing, Film Studies and Cultural Studies and other disciplinary methods, texts, approaches and courses where appropriate and possible.

PROJECT MODELS

INTRODUCTION

The goal of the proposed project is the development of a set of specified learning and teaching standards in the form of Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) for the discipline of English, within the framework established by TEQSA and ALTC/OLT.

Models for developing considered disciplinary standards are readily available from the ALTC *Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project*, from both cognate and non-cognate disciplines in examples as included below, and in the ALTC's *Resources to Assist Discipline Communities to Define Threshold Learning Standards* (2011) document.

COGNATE DISCIPLINE: HISTORY

History has completed a process to research, define and measure TLOs for that discipline in Australia. With the support of the Australian History Association (AHA), the discipline undertook a three stage process, with three separate projects, funded in major part by the OLT. The committee met with project leaders A/Prof. Sean Brawley (UNSW) and Prof. Marnie Hughes Warrington (ANU) to discuss the process.

The first stage surveyed History students at secondary level, entry tertiary level, and after graduation. The surveys found that student understanding of the aims of History as a discipline did not significantly change from secondary education to tertiary graduate level, and that they differed notably from staff understanding. The conclusion was that learning outcomes at the tertiary level needed explication and consistency, to enable students to confirm what they had learnt.

The second phase was funded by the ALTC's Academic Learning and Teaching Standards Project (2009-2011), and set out to involve History's disciplinary community in discussing and then defining learning and teaching standards and finally TLOs for History. The project ran a series of funded workshops attached to History conferences over a two year period. Both international and domestic stakeholders, including academic teachers from every program, were included.

These discussions ended in the establishment of 8 discipline standards for the History discipline. [13]

Threshold Learning Outcomes for History

Upon completion of a bachelor degree with a major in History, graduates will be able to:

Knowledge

	1.	Demonstrate an understanding of at least one period or culture of the past.
	2.	Demonstrate an understanding of a variety of conceptual approaches to interpreting the past.
	3.	Show how History and historians shape the present and the future.

Research

	4.	Identify and interpret a wide variety of secondary and primary materials.
	5.	Examine historical issues by undertaking research according to the methodological and ethical conventions of the discipline.

Analysis

	6.	Analyse historical evidence, scholarship and changing representations of the past.

Communication

	7.	Construct an evidence-based argument or narrative in audio, digital, oral, visual or written form.

Reflection

	8.	Identify and reflect critically on the knowledge and skills developed in their study of History.

These TLOs may be achieved through a combination of individual and collaborative work.

The third phase, funded by the OLT, sought to test or measure the success of those TLOs as benchmarks of standards, by mapping the assessment tasks of every History program against the TLOs. Preliminary final reporting reveals that no program in the country produced all eight outcomes; it was acknowledged that standards cannot be 'retro-fitted' onto existing programs with their own individually designed learning outcomes. Ongoing discussion within the History disciplinary community seeks to refine and reduce the TLOs in response to the testing.

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[13] ALTC, *Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project: History,* 2010.

NON-COGNATE DISCIPLINE – ACCOUNTING

The Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project for Accounting differed from humanities projects in that there are well-defined forms of discipline accreditation for Accounting and engaged professional bodies. In that case, consideration of the external stakeholders was of high importance. A number of consultations took place nationally, allowing for the accounting community to share its views on academic standards for coursework Bachelor and Masters degrees with majors in Accounting.

Awareness of the project was raised by the Australian Business Deans' Council and 10 state based briefings drew stakeholders from employer, academic and/or professional accounting groups. A website for the project was established and regular emails were sent to members. The project comprised 649 participants by the end.

After the briefs with the industry and academy a first draft of the TLOs was drawn up by the working party. This was sent to project's Expert Advisory Group for input. The second draft was released and a series of national consultations took place for feedback. This entailed 20 Australian Business Deans Council-sponsored workshops with 361 people involved. Accounting academics, representatives of employers and professional bodies, as well as students participated. Further stakeholder feedback was gained through email and online surveys.

The working party used all available feedback to issue the third draft, which was further reviewed by the advisory group. The working party used this feedback for the fourth draft. In September and October 2010, the final version was endorsed by the advisory group and the Australian Business Deans Council. The Council also committed to a further follow-on project to evaluate the achievement of the accounting threshold learning outcomes.[14]

PRELIMINARY PROPOSAL FOR ENGLISH

In line with ALTC advice and international models, the committee proposes a project on this very preliminary outline:

Questions to be answered:

- What should every BA graduate with a major in English in Australia know and be able to do as a minimum?
- What can be expected of a graduate with a major in English in Australia?

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[14] ALTC, *Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project: Accounting,* 2010.

<u>Aim:</u>   Negotiate national agreement on 4-6 Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) for undergraduate majors in English in Australian universities.

<u>Project Sponsor:</u> Australian University Heads of English (AUHE)

<u>Teams:</u>

- Expert Advisory Group (3-6): AUHE Teaching and Learning Standards Working Group (Gillian Russell, Lyn McCredden, Nicole Moore)
- Discipline Reference Group (6-10): Expert teachers from the discipline, discipline leaders, representatives of key external stakeholders, representative of a cognate discipline, Deans of Humanities and Social Sciences representative, President of AUHE, eminent international advisory member/s.
- AUHE itself

<u>Activities:</u>

- Survey: pilot survey of first year English students' understanding of the aims of university English (possibly with OLT First Year project in 2014).
- Drafting of TLOs by EAG and DRG
- Workshops: 2/3 funded workshops with 2 representatives from each program (1 funded by the project, 1 by institutions) and external stakeholders including international, 'industry' and high school representatives, seeking discussion and formulation of TLOs.
- Broad consultation: circulation of formulated TLOs through university programs, professional associations and to other stakeholders.
- Confirmation of agreed discipline based TLOs.

<u>Reporting:</u> Regular newsletter reports to AUHE via website; annual reports to AUHE and to OLT as funding body; final report to AUHE and OLT.

<u>Endorsement:</u> By AUHE.

Possible further project to test or 'map' TLOs against assessment practices in Australian programs.

FUNDING

It is clear that the grant program of the federal Office of Learning and Teaching, funded to support 'change in higher education institutions for the enhancement of learning and teaching' is the primary source from which seek funding. The OLT's **Innovation and Development Program**, with a budget of $4 million, will open for applications again in late 2014.

Support from individual and member institutions, including scholarly associations besides AUHE, should also be sought, whether as cash or 'in-kind'.[15]

RECOMMENDATION

The committee asks that AUHE:

> Endorse an application to the Office of Teaching and Learning to fund a project seeking to articulate teaching and learning standards for the academic discipline of English in Australia.

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[15] The School of Humanities and Social Sciences at UNSW Canberra committed $3000 to support the activities of the committee through 2013.