

‘By Degrees’: the introduction of national benchmarking statements in a university department

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The growing momentum of the international standards movement demonstrates the higher education community’s reinvigorated interest in the articulation of the learning outcomes of university education. Agencies in different parts of the world have been charged with describing common frameworks and subject benchmarking statements to serve as points of reference for curriculum design and comparison of student outcomes. In Australia, a project intended to “coordinate discipline communities’ definition of academic standards” is being facilitated by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC 2010). This project is in its early stages and has yet to produce standards for any of the initial disciplines targeted. However, earlier discipline-based projects funded by the ALTC have produced similar outputs, one of which is ‘By Degrees’, a set of archaeology benchmarking statements (Beck & Clarke 2008). This paper reports the findings of an investigation into the effects of implementing these archaeology benchmarking statements in an Australian university. The investigation was a collaborative activity between the relevant school and the university’s academic development unit, in order to monitor existing activity and to explore ways of enhancing effectiveness. The study had a particular focus on assessment. The effects of the implementation were investigated through the collation and analysis of artefacts and through interviews with staff and students (the latter, however, are not reported in this paper). This allowed the identification of evidence of early success, and also of factors that contributed to the incorporation of the benchmarking statements into the practice of both staff and students.

Keywords: archaeology; benchmarking; standards

Theme: innovative assessment: opportunities and challenges

Introduction

The growing momentum of the international standards movement demonstrates the higher education community’s reinvigorated interest in the articulation of the learning outcomes of a university education. Agencies in different parts of the world have been charged with describing

common frameworks and subject benchmarking statements to serve as points of reference for curriculum design and the comparison of student outcomes (see, for example, Tuning Project 2004: The UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education: Lumina Foundation 2009). In Australia a project intended to “coordinate discipline communities’ definition of academic standards” is being facilitated by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC, 2010). This Australian project is in its early stages and so has yet to produce standards for any of the disciplines targeted in the initial stage of the development process. However, earlier disciplinary projects funded by the ALTC have produced similar outputs, one of which is ‘By Degrees’, a set of archaeology benchmarking statements (Beck & Clarke 2008).

This paper reports the findings of an investigation into the impact of the archaeology benchmarking statements when implemented in an Australian university. An academic who had generated much of the implementation impetus among his colleagues enlisted the collaboration of the university’s academic development unit to monitor existing activity, to maintain momentum and to explore ways of enhancing effectiveness. As with earlier activities relating to the implementation of externally referenced outcomes, a focus of this implementation had been a mapping exercise (Bath, Smith, Stein & Swann, 2004). However, recent studies (Barrie, Hughes & Smith 2010; Carroll, 2004) suggest that the assessment of student outcomes provides more convincing evidence of effective implementation. This paper will engage those with an interest in the national standards movement and its implications for the conference theme of “innovative assessment: opportunities and challenges”.

Methodology

Investigation of the implementation of By Degrees paid particular attention to assessment in this study which involved collation of implementation activities and canvassing the response and opinion of course coordinators in archaeology major and honours programs. In addition, course coordinators nominated tasks that offered students opportunities to demonstrate attainment of the benchmarking statements. Data gathering and interpretation therefore incorporated interviews with course academics, interpretation of artefacts (course profiles and other informational material) and analysis of individual assessment tasks. (The response of students is also being investigated but is not reported in this paper.)

Findings

The findings of this investigation were encouraging, in that they suggested that implementation was well underway. All academics demonstrated some level of familiarity with the benchmarking statements, could relate these to the courses they were coordinating and could nominate assessment tasks which offered students opportunities to demonstrate that they working towards their attainment. While coordinators reported that some modifications to curriculum, teaching and/or assessment had been prompted by the introduction of the benchmarking standards, in general, the process had proved a validation of existing practice with modifications consisting of changes in emphasis rather than the addition or removal of significant course material.

Factors contributing to implementation effectiveness included: internal leadership; program mapping; the translation of By Degrees into material that was easily accessible by students and

which could be used to guide individual program design; and the existence of engaging and authentic course assessment requirements. In addition, coordinators demonstrated familiarity with overall program structures and content which assisted them in addressing curriculum gaps and avoiding unnecessary duplication of material. The next steps planned for this study are interviews with students and staff with reference to student responses to specific assessment tasks to determine student's awareness of their relationship to the intended achievements described in the benchmarking statements.

Conclusions and implications for theory, practice and policy

The archaeology academic community is of a scale that facilitates collegiality at both institutional and national level, therefore any generalisations from these findings must be treated with caution when applied to other disciplines. The study does, however, suggest implications for the implementation of national threshold standards currently in development across a range of disciplines.

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