The United States Lumina “Degree Qualifications Profile” (DQP) has much in common with the “Australian Qualifications Framework” (AQF) in that both aim to establish specific learning expectations for graduates receiving particular degrees. This (33 page) occasional paper will therefore be of interest to coordinators and administrators with responsibilities for AQF implementation in Australian universities and other educational institutions.


Click here to view the webinar recording (29 March, 2013) of Peter Ewell and Carol Geary Schneider of The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) and Implications for Assessment and here for the webinar PowerPoint presentation.

Abstract (Peter Ewell)

The Lumina Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP): Implications for Assessment

In January 2011, the Lumina Foundation published its Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) to challenge faculty and academic leaders in the U.S. to think deeply and concretely about aligning expectations for student learning outcomes across higher education. Since then, the DQP has kindled extensive discussions about what the postsecondary degrees granted by American colleges and universities really mean with respect to what graduates know and can do. But the text of the DQP itself provides only limited guidance to stakeholders with respect to assessment.

In order to render the Profile’s potential real, institutions and their faculties will need to develop consistent and systematic ways to gather evidence that the competencies that the DQP describes are actually being mastered at the levels claimed. In this paper, I explore some of what needs to be done in this area and provide a few tools and techniques (some of which are already in widespread use) that may help us move forward. In offering them, I invite faculties at all our colleges and universities to carefully examine what the DQP asks us to do in designing more aligned and integrated approaches to teaching, learning, and determining student competence—as well as to actively experiment with these ideas and techniques with their colleagues.(p. 5)

Why the DQP? . . . 6

The DQP includes:

- proposed competencies in five areas (Specialised Knowledge, Broad Integrative Knowledge, Intellectual Skills, Applied Learning, and Civic Learning)
- three degree levels—associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s
- a reliance on action verbs to describe competencies and progression (e.g. from “describe” or “present” to “construct” or “explain” to “create” or “assess”)
Some Assessment Implications . . . 7
The DQP requires that all graduates demonstrate mastery of all five competencies. Assessment is therefore of key importance and needs to take the “form of progressively more challenging exercises, performances and assignments for demonstrating student mastery at multiple points” (p. 8).

Curricular Mapping . . . 9
Curriculum mapping is an essential prerequisite to coherent program design including systematic assessment practice. Curriculum maps range in complexity from simple two-dimensional matrices representing courses and competencies with cell entries indicating assessment tasks to quite complex interactive, electronic formats. The paper lists examples of practices at a number of institutions.

Competency Requires Action . . . 12
Demonstrations of competency require a product to be generated – a research paper, oral presentation, dance performance, translation of a text, engineering design – rather than to merely identify a ‘correct’ answer as in the case of multiple choice tests. By implication, assessment task descriptions must be explicit in informing students of the type of learning to be demonstrated in their responses.

Assignment Templates and Rubrics . . . 13
The design of tasks that elicit appropriate student responses is challenging for academics with little experience in assessment. Several institutions have addressed this issue through the provision of assessment templates requiring information regarding task elements such as:

- The central task that must be undertaken as well as the DQP domain and degree level in which it is located.
- How the required task should be undertaken and the results communicated.
- How extensive or evidential the response should be. (p. 14)

Seven examples of assessment task descriptions that meet these specifications are provided, two of which are reproduced below:

Suppose a new form of energy was developed that would emit no carbon, gases, or other pollutants. Critics of the development contend that within a month of its deployment, the earth’s rotation would slow from 24 to 26 hours per day. To guard against this and other consequences an Environmental Impact Statement must be prepared. In the space below, outline the chapters and subchapters of such a Statement. [Bachelor’s level, Applied Learning, integration, 30-minute examination question] (p. 14).

The student is given a walking route map of the Lower East Side of New York City. Students are asked to walk the route and complete the following assignment within at least two weeks. Prepare a series of short statements about what you see, the connections of what you see to the social and political history of the area, and your own analyses of the successes and failures of attempted changes. Specifically,

a) Identify the structure that most clearly illustrates the concept of “invasion and succession,” and present hypotheses about the dominant activities/responsibilities of those who used the structure at each phase. Describe who used the structure, in what sequence, and how.
b) Illustrate the effects of the Tenement Laws of the late 19th century through citations of specific structures and their forms. As you do so, identify the origins and stimuli of these laws. (p. 16)

c) Identify the structures and physical conditions toward which the Public Health Laws of the late 19th century are directed. Provide evidence that these conditions were either eradicated or still exist. For those that still exist, analyze and present the conflicting powers or interests that will affect the extent to which they can be addressed. [Bachelor’s level, Civic Learning, integration, class project assignment] (p. 16)

It is recommended that rubrics (guides for making judgements about student work) closely reflect the assessment requirements described in task descriptions. The difficulty in constructing effective rubrics is acknowledged as is the need for professional development.

Navigating the Curriculum . . . 17

The development of key competencies (or graduate learning outcomes in the Australian context) requires intentional, cumulative, whole-of-program curriculum design. An intentional approach requires careful attention to course sequencing and relationships and the identification of where specific outcomes are required, taught and assessed. Curriculum mapping can be undertaken either retrospectively or, where there is an opportunity, prospectively and is a way of providing students with information about expectations at different program stages which in turn enhances student learning.

Documentation . . . 18

Documentation of student progress towards or demonstration of program outcomes requires complex documentation that is best achieved through electronic forms of record-keeping. Examples include eLumen, TracDat, WEAVE, On-Line, LiveText, TrueOutcomes and Tk20.

Benchmarking and Comparison . . . 19

The DQP comprises a set of national reference points against which multiple institutions may benchmark learning outcomes. The reliability of results may be boosted through:

- Multiple, third-party raters
- Cross-rating
- Multi-institutional rating.

Conclusion . . . 21

The paper concludes that the shift to the collaborative program design and ownership it advocates will require a cultural change as this approach is far more systematic and intentional than is currently the case in many American universities. However this approach also builds in accountability and reveals patterns of strength and weakness that inform enhancement of curriculum and teaching across the levels of a program.

Afterword . . . 23 (Carol Geary Schneider)

In her afterward, Schneider commends Ewell’s views expressed in the occasional paper but expresses reservations that the essay may be “a bit too logical, systematic and reasoned for this fraught and overburdened moment in higher education history” (23). Her reservations are based on:

- that the DQP faces an uphill battle in promoting more intentional learning and richer forms of demonstrated student achievement
- the reluctance of a growing number of influential leaders to acknowledge the DQP’s role as a beacon for transformative change
- a tradition of ‘siloed units’ that is inconsistent with the provision of an integrative student educational experience
• fears that DQP implementation will incorporate standardised testing that is inconsistent with the intent and demands of complex and non-routine learning outcomes and related concerns regarding their potential for institutional rankings
• the temptation to make DQP palatable to busy academics by adopting an incremental or fragmented approach but which ultimately erodes the intentional and integrative form of learning it was intended to promote.

Geary concludes that the DQP is a “bold effort to help higher education move beyond credit hours and beyond the fragmented learning too many students experience to intentionally preparing students to integrate and apply their learning to unscripted problems and responsibilities. ……an experiment more likely to take root if integrative, reflective, and collaborative dialogue and learning become central themes in the next phase of this very important educational experiment”. (p.29)

References

The paper provides 16 references.

This series of briefs on assessment topics has been prepared by the UQ Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI) for UQ teaching academics. “UQ ASSESSMENT BRIEFS” of journal articles, book chapters, reviews, websites, reports etc are distributed to Faculty and School Teaching and Learning Chairs in a form designed to encourage wider distribution.

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