SUBMISSION

Discussion paper: Making and assessing claims of scholarship and scholarly activity

14 DECEMBER 2020

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN), in collaboration with The University of Newcastle, welcomes the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper 'Making and assessing claims of scholarship and scholarly activity' published by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA).

ATN is the peak body representing Australia's five most innovative and enterprising universities: Curtin University, Deakin University, RMIT University, University of South Australia, and University of Technology Sydney. Together, we are home to over 265,000 university students. The University of Newcastle is also an important community institution in the regional gateway city of Newcastle. References to ATN below should be read as representing all six universities.

Question 1: Is the above approach to classification of activities as scholarship appropriate? If not, why not and what amendments would you propose?

On balance, the approach of activities as specified by Boyer (and related and similar models) is well understood and has been utilised in part to inform institutional and disciplinary practices. The use of this typology (or subsequent revisions) is largely appropriate.

Given that a diverse range of well-founded scholarship practices is key to a diverse and robust higher education system, it is important that the approach allows for alternative (but comparable) typologies of scholarship. For example, reflective practice can be important for both staff and students. Professional reflective practice is particularly important when practitioners and industry professionals are involved in teaching, supervising, mentoring and assessing students. This type of industry engaged learning is going to become a particular focus due to initiatives such as the National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF).

The approach specifies that scholarly activities must be linked to academics' disciplinary fields. It emphasises that "...disciplinary scholarship is an essential component of scholarship that yields benefits for teaching and learning" and that "...academic staff need to engage with disciplinary scholarship to achieve the intended outputs and outcomes." ATN supports this approach – situating scholarship in a disciplinary-specific context reinforces the extension and creation of new and innovative knowledge in the discipline.

ATN universities have a good disciplinary alignment between teaching and research, which would strengthen claims of research-led curricular credibility against this principle. However, we also need to be mindful that scholarship is a much broader endeavour than research. Likewise, there is strong scholarly activity in teaching (i.e. teaching and learning councils, communities of practice, engagement with dissemination activities at institutional, national and international meetings, and research publications).

The paper notes that scholarly activity and outcomes need to be evidenced. ATN would recommend clarifying this to note that scholarly activity contributes to individual and institutional scholarly activity even if there is currently no evidence available of linked outcomes. This is important to ensure that activities that are difficult to link to a demonstrable outcome and activities that have a longer lead time before a demonstrable outcome are recognised.

A key example is reading the scholarly literature or reflecting on professional practice, which meet the definition of scholarly activity but may be difficult or impractical to link to a demonstrable outcome. These are important activities and should be not be discouraged and disincentivised because it is difficult to measure an outcome.

Question 2: Is the proposed approach of linking scholarly activity to intended outputs and/or outcomes relevant to the HES Framework reasonable? If not, why not and what amendments would you propose?

Noting the feedback to Question 1, it is appropriate to expect that most activities claimed as 'scholarly' should be undertaken in pursuit of better outcomes.

However, there needs to be an acknowledgement and understanding of the difficulties posed in establishing a demonstrable and unequivocal link between this activity and these outcomes. It is important that shorter-term outcomes (e.g. relevance of course studied in the Graduate Outcomes Survey) not be inadvertently prioritised over potentially more meaningful, longer-term outcomes (e.g. adaptability of skills over a career).

Providers would need to focus on identifying processes within curriculum development, and find ways to evidence and disseminate their alignment with scholarly activity (as those data are not uniformly collected). An agreed framework is needed to recognise the progress of the activity and strength of outcomes, which may include categories such as:

•   Completed to maintain currency in the discipline

•   Intervention or initiative in planning or under review

•   Intervention or initiative under trial

•   Surrogate outcomes available (uncontrolled trial)

•   Experimental outcomes available (controlled trial)

•   Evidence of non-peer-reviewed dissemination available

•   Evidence of peer-reviewed dissemination available

•   Reflective practice

•   Continuous improvement

The broader definition of scholarship is advantageous, and could be a good model for teaching academic staff to remain proficient with current disciplinary research and disseminate findings amongst communities of practice and for peer review, and for more research focused staff to consider and evidence how their research activities provide demonstrable outcomes on curriculum.

For teaching and learning, communities of practice and peer-to-peer discussions are particularly important. National networks of practice, including university groupings and disciplinary associations, are important avenues for these activities. It is difficult to measure the value of the scholarship of learning and teaching against conventional publication metrics.

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Question 3: Is it appropriate to distinguish various forms of external engagement from 'scholarship' as identified under Principles 1 and 2? If not, why not and what amendments would you propose?

The dual approach to define scholarship by nature and effect is appropriate and clear, notwithstanding the caveats noted above.

As noted above, it is important to recognise that professional reflective practice can be scholarly, particularly for industry professionals who are actively involved in practice and teaching. This can be both internal and external to the university, as professional practice is often required for course accreditation. This should not be seen as isolated from or unrelated to scholarship as it is integral to ensuring a quality system.

Serving on accreditation panels is an additional example of external engagement that would be useful to count as scholarly activity.

Question 4: Is it workable for providers to be able to demonstrate their planning, monitoring and involvement in scholarship in the aggregate as proposed? If not, why not and what amendments would you propose?

This is the most difficult principle to reconcile with current structures and processes for monitoring and review in most institutions, especially in the absence of clear benchmarks for this type of activity.

Reporting on scholarly activity influencing teaching activities would require monitoring and assessment of such activities, such as the changes to the curriculum and course content. Such activity has traditionally been the domain of academics within the standards and expectations set by the university. It is important that academics are still trusted and given appropriate academic independence and licence to make these kinds of changes, given their standing and experience.

Similarly, researchers conduct their activities with appropriate independence and licence afforded by their standing within the research community and via established peer review mechanisms. Research metrics are collated by researchers via well-established mechanisms that are appropriate for their discipline.

The discussion paper notes the importance of the impact of scholarly activity beyond individual practice. It is a concern that aggregate data collections may fail to recognise the full range of this activity. For example, good teaching practice is often recognised through teaching awards and peer-to-peer networks which may not be captured in aggregate data.

There is also a concern that this new process may shift the burden of reporting to individual academic staff members to collect data, or self-report data. Given the aim of aligning Commonwealth funding for teaching with the actual cost of teaching, for example, there is little margin to support such activities.

The need to integrate data across organisational boundaries (e.g. research offices, learning and teaching units, and academic faculties and schools) may make reporting against both principles 1 and 2 challenging in many institutions and require significant investment.

Aggregating and reporting scholarship of activities of all teaching staff may have unintended consequences of smoothing data, and masking excellence and gaps.

For example, it is not clear where the balance of evidence required for individuals versus teaching teams lies. As teaching becomes more sophisticated and specialised, teaching teams are increasingly including a range of specialists with a range of scholarly practice and expertise (e.g. first year specialists, educational technology experts).

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One such model that may assist in this process is the Australian Council of Deans of Science Curriculum Evaluation and Research framework for STEM (CER-STEM). See here for more details:

http://www.acds-tlcc.edu.au/cer-stem/.

Scholarship is also intrinsic to the self-accreditation of courses through effective review and quality improvement. The regulatory system should avoid creating parallel requirements for evidence of scholarship which duplicate the effort and data already collected.

Question 5: Are there any potential issues you foresee with the application of Principle 5 by TEQSA?

and

Question 6: Are there specific types of scholarship inputs and outputs within each provider type that should be considered as integral requirements to ensure that the reputation of the sector is upheld?

Using a 'provider type' approach may lead to a one-size-fits-all model and common denominator approach that see an overall diminution in quality. It is important for the sector as a whole that all providers meet principle 1 and 2, but there can be an allowance for differences in scope reflecting their contexts.

This is especially true with aspects of institutional culture within principle 4, which should still be evident and evidenced for sector-wide quality of learning and teaching. The differences in approaches as a consequence of the nature of provider should not compromise the nature and extent of scholarship.

ATN would welcome the opportunity to provide further information on any of the points raised in our brief submission, if requested. We look forward to more opportunities to engage with TEQSA on improving the practice and recognition of scholarship.

Yours sincerely,

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