Australian Government

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

TEQSA

TEQSA Guidance Note: Course Approval, Design and Delivery

Overview

The Provider Course Accreditation Standards (CAS) apply to all higher education providers.

Providers with self-accrediting authority accredit their own courses and in doing so, their corporate and academic governing bodies ensure that the courses meet the Standards before they are offered, and without reference to TEQSA. The corporate and academic governing bodies of other providers are responsible for ensuring that course proposals meet the Standards before they are sent to TEQSA for accreditation.

TEQSA will validate the effectiveness of each provider's overall course approval processes and decisions at the time of registration or renewal of registration. The extent to which a provider can achieve and maintain academic quality will in large measure depend on the robustness of its course approval processes.

This Note provides guidance on how providers might demonstrate that they meet selected Standards relating to course approval, as well as those relating to course design and delivery, with a particular emphasis on issues that in TEQSA's experience recur relatively often in applications for course accreditation from providers without self-accrediting authority.

Points of Guidance

Course approval processes

Course approval processes (as well as structures) vary between providers and the Threshold Standards do not prescribe particular processes.

However there are a number of common features of successful processes that contribute to good decision-making and build confidence in the decision-making process, some of which are prescribed in the Standards. TEQSA will seek evidence that these are in place and operating effectively:

▸ **Policy and Procedures Framework.** A course approval framework will reflect the scale of the provider's higher education operations and its course delivery models. TEQSA would expect to find policies and procedures in place for the development, review and approval of a provider's new and existing courses of study. The framework would outline the relevant policies, procedures and forms, including: course documentation; the criteria for approval of course proposals; the stages of course development; and the relevant staff and committees with course development and course review responsibilities.

▸ **Path of approval.** In smaller providers, after approval by the relevant academic manager, proposals are likely to be put straight to the academic governing body. In larger providers that are sub-divided into faculties or other academic units, scrutiny will usually be undertaken by faculty or department boards composed of academics in the broad field of

education, before the consideration by the main academic governing body. All these bodies should receive the same course documentation as detailed above.

- **Allocation of responsibilities.** The responsible academic manager, and department or faculty (if applicable) should be clearly identified. The proponent should either have experience in course design (as well as in the relevant discipline), or should have access to course design expertise.

- **External input.** External advisors should provide active input into each course proposal, usually through a course advisory committee or equivalent. A Course Advisory Committee can have either an ongoing function or be created by the academic governing body to oversee development of a specific course proposal. The membership of a committee should include representation from the relevant industry or profession and senior external academic(s) with current knowledge of the discipline. The more responsive the provider is to this input, and the more evident this is in the minutes of committee deliberations, the more likely the course will meet the Threshold Standards and meet student and employer needs.

- **Course review.** TEQSA would expect to find provision for a cycle of periodic review following approval of a course, and evidence of active implementation in the case of existing courses. This is discussed in detail in TEQSA's Guidance Note on Quality Assurance. The cycle of review should ensure that the course is updated whenever required, and should provide for a major course review in the period leading up to the next reaccreditation of the course, whether the final decisions is made by TEQSA or by the provider itself if it has self-accrediting authority. The major review should consider all available information about the performance of the course and all the latest information about developments in the discipline and the requirements of employers. Course review reports are important evidence on the effectiveness of the review process in the case of existing courses.

- **Active scrutiny and response.** Whatever the path of approval, the course approval process should ensure that all proposals are subjected to rigorous scrutiny. It should be evident through minutes of meetings and reports that members of governing bodies and course advisory committees have been active in giving input. The minutes should also record actions arising, to be pursued by the course proponents or management.

Desirable features of a course proposal or application

Course design and documentation

TEQSA would expect to see evidence of the following features in a course proposal submitted for approval to the academic governing body and/or to TEQSA:

- A coherent course structure, demonstrating:
    - coverage of the relevant skills, knowledge and application is at the appropriate depth and breadth needed to achieve the course outcomes;
    - more introductory features are covered in earlier stages of a course, and an appropriate sequence of units leads towards achievement of more advanced features in later stages; and
    - systematic organization of course elements.

- A comprehensive and current set of course specifications, including outlines for each unit.

- The course documentation includes a coherent set of appropriate learning outcomes for the course as a whole (and each nested course), consistent with the AQF level of the course, and specified learning outcomes for each unit. The unit learning outcomes should align with the course learning outcomes and the AQF level specifications.

- For the avoidance of doubt, TEQSA does not expect to see every course learning outcome covered in every unit, but students should be able to achieve each course learning outcome over the range of units in the course. Other key features of the course design, including delivery methods, assessment and student workload are clearly specified in the unit outlines and are appropriate.

- Pathways into and out of the course to further study or employment are outlined, including access to professional accreditation, and the course should prepare students for appropriate graduate outcomes including further study and/or employment.

- Where the course is delivered via a third party, there is a written agreement specifying the obligations of each party and putting in place robust quality assurance controls, enabling the registered higher education provider to take responsibility for the quality of the course (legally binding agreements are strongly recommended).

Related issues

Course Accreditation Standard 1.3 requires that the course of study is drawn from a substantial, coherent and current body of knowledge and scholarship in one or more disciplines, such as those listed in the Australian Bureau of Statistics Australian Standard Classification of Education. TEQSA will test whether the body of knowledge as presented in the course outlines is coherent, substantial and current, through assessing the course structure, topics and the lists of references in each unit. These should include references dated within the last five years published by recognized scholarly publishers and peer-reviewed journals.

Course Accreditation Standard 1.4 provides for a course that is based on an emerging field, where the body of knowledge may be less substantial than in an established field. In these circumstances, the course should draw on the scholarly literature in established fields relevant to the course outcomes in order to ensure that the total body of knowledge presented in the course is balanced and sufficiently substantial. In these circumstances, and also where a course is interdisciplinary in nature, the course learning outcomes and structure should provide for integration of the different fields. The coherence of such a course should be evident in the course documentation despite its origins in multiple bodies of knowledge.

In addition to the wider scholarly literature (which can include, for example, commentary, synthesis and integration of knowledge), course documentation should also include references that discuss, outline or report research findings that are relevant to the field, as appropriate to the course level and field. In considering whether references are research-related, TEQSA will have regard to the definitions of research and research outputs contained in the Australian Research Council's Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Submission Guidelines.

Course documentation should also include references that discuss, outline or refer to relevant theoretical frameworks, as appropriate to the nature of the discipline (bearing in mind that some disciplines are more applied in nature or may not have a dominant theoretical framework).

Where course proposals are submitted for accreditation to TEQSA, TEQSA will specify a minimum set of evidence that is required. Further evidence will be required in some cases based on a risk assessment, but not in all cases. Please refer to the relevant process guides, available from the TEQSA website.

Course Accreditation Standard 1.2 requires course designers to take account of external standards other than the Threshold Standards. Where the course is designed to provide entry into a profession, TEQSA would expect to see that the course has been accredited by the relevant professional association(s) or board(s) (in the case of an existing course) or that the applicant has entered into discussions with them with a view to applying for professional accreditation, The course should address the specifications in the professional standards so that graduates will be eligible for entry into the professional association or registration by the board.

Where there are published discipline standards such as the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Statements developed by the former Australian Learning and Teaching Council, these should also be addressed as reference points.

The broad features of the course, including admission standards and content, should be benchmarked against similar courses at other registered higher education providers.

The provider should seek advice and input from external experts in the relevant academic field and profession. TEQSA will seek evidence that this input (either in the form of minutes of a course advisory committee and/or commissioned written reports) has been carefully considered and, as appropriate, acted upon.

Course resourcing

In the case of a new course, especially in a new field, or one offered by a new provider, TEQSA would expect detailed plans to be available for the deployment of resources needed to achieve the learning outcomes for the projected numbers of students, including teaching resources and support resources (including library/information resources, course support material, physical and/or virtual learning spaces and any specialist facilities that may be required such as laboratories and equipment).

In the case of an existing course, TEQSA would expect to see evidence of existing resources being maintained and provision being made for any additional resources that might be needed either because of increased student numbers, or any new course features.

All course resourcing should be appropriate to the nature of the discipline and the course level.

Academic staff

The Course Accreditation Standards (CAS 4.1, 4.2 and 5.2) require that a course is taught and assessed by academic staff with sufficient qualifications and experience.

Provision should be made for academic leadership and adequate academic staffing for each course, either through existing staff resources or through a plan to appoint staff with the required level of qualifications and experience (which must be at least one Qualifications

Standards level higher than the course or with equivalent professional experience). Evidence may include position descriptions for positions that are planned to be filled before commencement. For further detail, please refer to TEQSA's Guidance Note on Professional Equivalence and Academic Leadership.

Admission criteria

TEQSA would expect to find that admission criteria have been benchmarked with those of similar courses at other providers. The admission criteria should ensure that students admitted to the course have adequate prior knowledge and skills to undertake the course successfully.

Where advanced standing is given for prior study, the provider should ensure that each student follows a course of study that leads to achievement of the learning outcomes, despite their different starting points. Where students who do not have recent experience of academic study are admitted to a course (especially in the case of a Masters degree), TEQSA would expect that sufficient academic support is available to ensure that they can adapt to academic study successfully. They may also need to be admitted in the first instance to a lower degree in a nested sequence (e.g. Graduate Certificate in the case of a Masters degree).

Assessment

In accordance with CAS 5.1, course documentation should outline a range of assessment tasks that test each student's achievement of the overall course learning outcomes as well as the learning outcomes of each unit. In a nested course, providers need to show TEQSA how assessment tests achievement of the learning outcomes of each course by the point of potential exit. This is further discussed in TEQSA's Guidance Note on Nested Qualifications.

TEQSA would also expect to see a systematic framework within which assessments are marked and timely feedback is provided to students, in accordance with CAS 5.4. There should be defined arrangements for the management of assessment for each course and unit in each semester, designed to ensure that grading is consistent and that grading standards are consistent with those at other providers. Well-established methods to bring this about include internal and external moderation of assessment and benchmarking assessment results against those of other providers offering similar courses.

Well-established good practice in assessments also includes the use of a mix of different types of assessment, including some formative assessment tasks in addition to summative assessment.

Course review

In accordance with CAS 6.1, there should be evidence of a cycle of periodic course and unit reviews, taking into account input from external advisors in the form of regular reports considered and acted upon by the academic governance body and by management (see TEQSA's Guidance Note on Academic Quality Assurance).

An effective internal cycle of course and unit review should include consideration of trends in student results, based on systematic collection of data about student progress rates, grade distribution, attrition rates and completion rates, as required by CAS 5.4, together with related

student survey results and other relevant feedback from students and stakeholders such as employers. The reasons for any variations in trends from expectations should be explored and action taken where necessary to bring about improvements in course design or delivery.

As required by CAS 5.6, the provider should be able to demonstrate that progression and completion rates are within an acceptable range, especially when benchmarked against rates for similar fields of education at other providers.

TEQSA's Differentiated Assessment Approach

TEQSA uses a differentiated process to assess applications for course accreditation and re-accreditation from providers that do not have authority to accredit their courses. Applications classified as low-risk will be assessed against a sub-set of the course accreditation standards, and reduced evidence requirements will apply. Conversely the scope and assessment requirements will be increased where the risk is higher ('Core+' model). TEQSA will consider the following factors in forming a view about the level of risk involved in a particular case:

▸ identified risks, including at the field of education or course level, using existing data obtained through HEIMS and TEQSA's annual Provider Information Request

▸ applications for new courses that represent a new disciplinary area or a different AQF level than existing courses delivered by the provider

▸ verified effectiveness of quality assurance systems in combination with known student outcomes and prior history of applications to TEQSA.

Expedited course assessment

TEQSA will undertake an expedited process where the evidence demonstrates that the provider's own course review and approval process has been effective. In particular, TEQSA will be unlikely to appoint external experts to review applications for renewal of course accreditation in such circumstances, especially where:

1. Academics of equivalent standing to those on TEQSA's register of external experts have signed reports confirming that the course (as presented to TEQSA) meets all the relevant standards (case manager can advise on the format of these reports)

<div align="center">AND/OR</div>

2. Academics of equivalent standing to those on TEQSA's register of external experts are members of the Course Advisory Committee (or equivalent) and where:

   • The academic members have given active input into the deliberations of the Committee (as evidenced in minutes of meetings)

   • The academic members have 'signed off' on the final course proposal that has been submitted to TEQSA

In all cases, the academic governing body needs to have approved the proposal and ensured that all relevant issues have been addressed, as evidenced in the minutes of the relevant meeting.

Resources

Other relevant references

The **Office for Learning and Teaching's Resource Library** contains a collection of higher education learning and teaching materials flowing from projects funded by the Australian Government, including those from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. See <http://www.olt.gov.au/resources/good-practice>.

TEQSA Guidance Note on Academic Governance

TEQSA Guidance Note on Academic Quality Assurance

TEQSA Guidance Note on Corporate Governance

TEQSA Guidance Note on Nested Qualifications

TEQSA Guidance Note on Professional Equivalence

TEQSA's 'Core +' model for course accreditation' (TEQSA Consultation paper March 2015)

TEQSA Application Guides for:

- Course accreditation
- Renewal of course accreditation
- Self-accrediting authority.

Assessing and Assuring Graduate Learning Outcomes Project publications:

http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/projects/aaglo/summaries.htm

Assuring Graduate Capabilities (Office for Teaching and Learning project) website: http://boliver.ning.com/

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2012), *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*. Chapter B1: Programme design, development and approval

TEQSA Contact

For further information about or discussion of *course accreditation* please contact your case manager in the first instance.