Quality Assessment: English Language Proficiency

Terms of Reference

Updated April 2013
QUALITY ASSESSMENT: ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

1. Introduction

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) quality assessment of English Language Proficiency (ELP) is the second quality assessment to be undertaken by TEQSA as part of its quality assurance and quality enhancement responsibilities outlined in the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011 (TEQSA Act). (Statutory provisions that provide a basis for the commissioning of this quality assessment are detailed in Appendix A.)

The Association for Academic and Language Learning (AALL) Submission to Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency (2008) noted that it is widely acknowledged across the Australian tertiary education sector that many students are, to a large extent, unprepared for university study. This is evidenced by difficulties in meeting academic requirements such as critical analysis and essay writing and in communicating effectively in oral and written English. This is not only the case for international students but also local students of English and non-English speaking backgrounds, and mature age students.

With the introduction of the Higher Education Standards Framework there is now a set of Threshold Standards that apply to higher education providers and higher education courses. Requirements for registered higher education providers relating to students’ English language proficiency are embedded in the Course Accreditation Standards (referenced in section 3 below). The quality assessment will take as its starting point these requirements.

The overarching purpose of the quality assessment is to engage with the higher education sector in a stock-taking exercise to identify issues and challenges including, but not limited to, provider compliance with the Threshold Standards, and to make recommendations for enhancing students’ English language proficiency.

A range of reports, research and information about ELP already exists. These resources have informed the scope, purpose and methodology of the quality assessment. This quality assessment differs in the main from earlier studies on the topic in that they covered universities only, whereas this quality assessment will also cover other types of higher education providers. Furthermore, the quality assessment will be undertaken through the lens of the Threshold Standards that define the requirements for ELP.

2. Principles

The quality assessment will be underpinned by the following principles:

- Quality assessment reports will include research findings and may contain broad, as well as specific, advice and recommendations for the sector

- Providers will be required (under section 28 of the TEQSA Act) to participate in the assessment process and may be required to provide specific follow-up information relevant to the focus of the assessment

- TEQSA may undertake a follow-up assessment of the extent to which providers have actioned particular recommendations

- Quality assessments will not, in isolation, lead to TEQSA making a regulatory decision about a provider. Information obtained by TEQSA in the course of conducting the quality assessment may however point to issues that may require separate compliance action.

3. Scope

The assessment will take as its starting point the requirements regarding ELP expressed in the Threshold Standards. These are:

Course Accreditation Standard 1.2:
There are robust internal processes for design and approval of the course of study, which .... provide for appropriate development of key graduate attributes in students including English Language Proficiency.

Course Accreditation Standard 3.2:
The higher education provider ensures that students who are enrolled are sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in the course of study and achieve its expected learning outcomes and sets English language entry requirements accordingly.

Course Accreditation Standard 5.6:
The higher education provider is able to demonstrate appropriate progression and completion rates and students who complete the course of study have attained key graduate attributes including an appropriate level of English language proficiency.

The assessment will cover ELP for all students, irrespective of their category (for example, international, domestic, full-time, part-time) and mode of study (for example, face to face in a classroom, distance learning, work-based learning, e-learning and online learning). The assessment will also cover various pathways to a course of study (such as nested courses or courses offered by another provider, including ELICOS, or in conjunction/jointly with another provider) and any courses of study delivered and/or assessed in a Language other than English (LOTE).

The definitions of specific terms used in the quality assessment can be found at Appendix B.
4. Terms of Reference

The quality assessment will investigate and report on higher education provider approaches and practices relating to ELP in the following areas:

1. Overall plans, strategies, policies or similar that set out institutional-wide philosophies for developing ELP in students, and staff development in the area of assessing ELP, as well as mechanisms used to ensure that such strategies, policies or similar and ELP practices are adequate, effective, and appropriately resourced, implemented and monitored to ensure that a provider maintains compliance with the Threshold Standards.

2. The type and content of communication to prospective and enrolled (including conditionally enrolled) students in relation to:
   - English language requirements for admission
   - support to develop ELP throughout their studies.

3. How effectively minimum levels of ELP for admission relevant to a particular course of study are established and upheld. This includes criteria used to determine what a sufficiently competent student is at the time of enrolment.

4. The type and effectiveness of processes used after enrolment to ascertain that students are sufficiently competent in the English language in order to participate effectively in the course of study and achieve its expected learning outcomes.

5. Performance measures/data to track students’ academic performance in a course of study according to various pathways; and how such data is used in decision-making.

6. Processes used to:
   - identify students requiring English language support
   - develop students’ ELP and academic language proficiency both prior to and following enrolment (including any students offered conditional enrolment)
   - seek feedback from students on ELP support.

7. How, and how effectively, expected ELP learning outcomes are established, monitored, assessed, and achieved throughout the course of study. This includes identifying the definitions of appropriate levels of English used for various cohorts of students.

8. The extent to which practices are in place to ensure that students have attained key graduate attributes and learning outcomes relating to ELP at the completion of a course of study.

5. Methodology

The quality assessment will be conducted using a sample of providers that represent a cross-section of the sector.

- The quality assessment will use a survey tool to identify challenges, opportunities for improvement and good practices. The survey will require providers to reflect on how they define, measure, support, monitor and test ELP and will cover the eight areas listed in the Terms of
Reference above. The tool will seek quantitative and qualitative information, and include key questions and requests for examples.

- The information received by TEQSA through the survey tool will also be analysed with a view to identifying good practices. The practices will be identified applying a set of pre-defined criteria. The criteria will be shared with the providers sampled to complete the survey in advance of the administration of the survey.

- TEQSA will draw on the expertise of external advisers who will provide advice and input to key phases of the project, such as: development and testing of the proposed survey tool; analysis of findings; and development of the final reports.

6. Report

The higher education sector will receive two reports from TEQSA as a result of the quality assessment.

- The first report will: i) address issues that require attention, and the challenges in effectively ascertaining, developing and ensuring students’ ELP in the higher education sector; and ii) make recommendations to the sector for improvement.

- The second report will present the good practices related to various aspects of ELP identified in the course of the assessment to serve as a reference for higher education providers.

7. Timeline

This quality assessment will be undertaken in 2014. Indicative timelines for the various phases of the assessment will be announced later in 2013.
Appendix A

Relevant Provisions under the TEQSA Act

Section 134 - authority for TEQSA to undertake review activity and to utilise the findings to support TEQSA’s role in quality assurance and quality enhancement of the higher education sector. Specifically the relevant functions include being able:

(c) to investigate whether this Act, or this Act’s associated provisions have been or are being complied with, including by:
   (i) conducting compliance assessments and quality assessments;

(e) to collect, analyse, interpret and disseminate information relating to:
   (e) higher education providers; and
   (f) regulated higher education awards; and
   (g) quality assurance practice, and quality improvement in higher education; and
   (h) the Higher Education Standards Framework

(g) to conduct training to improve the quality of higher education

Section 60 - relates specifically to quality (including thematic) assessments and provides that:

‘TEQSA may review or examine any aspect of an entity’s operations to:

(a) assess the level of quality of higher education provided by one or more registered higher education providers; or

(b) assess whether there are any systemic issues relating to a particular course of study leading to a particular regulated higher education award; or

(c) assess the level of quality of, or whether there are any systemic issues relating to, the courses of study that lead to one or more kinds of regulated higher education awards.’

Section 28 - relates to the condition of registration for a provider to comply with requests for ‘other information’ relevant to TEQSA’s functions

Section 63 - requires a person connected with a registered entity to give information or documents to TEQSA which are relevant to TEQSA’s functions.

Section 26 - it is a condition of registration that higher education providers require any third parties to meet all Threshold Standards.

In addition to these points of reference in the TEQSA legislation, a number of Threshold Standards are also relevant and will be applied to the work of the quality assessment and report.
Definitions

For the purpose of this quality assessment:

*English Language Proficiency (ELP)*: refers to language proficiency (the ability to communicate in the English language) and academic language proficiency (the ability to:
- participate effectively in a course of study delivered in English and to achieve expected learning outcomes without requiring significant English language support; and
- to gain entry to the labour market or a further course of study.)

*Proficiency*: reflects a student’s *knowledge* (Language Proficiency) and *practice* (Academic Literacy) of the English language against core competencies. Proficiency is measured at admission (including conditional admission), throughout a course of study, and at completion of a course of study.

*Overseas (international) student*: refers to a person (whether within or outside Australia) who holds a student visa as defined by the *Education Services for Overseas Student Regulations 2001*.

*Domestic students*: refers to all students who are not overseas (international) students.

*Course of study*: means a course or programme of study that leads to a higher education award as defined in the TEQSA Act.