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## **Assessment Planning at the program-level: a higher education policy review in Australia**

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## **Program-level assessment planning: Higher education policy review in Australia**

It is incumbent upon universities to deliver quality degree programs that produce employable graduates with discipline-specific knowledge and a well-developed set of generic skills known as graduate attributes. To safeguard the achievement of these outcomes, this paper argues for a holistic, longitudinal approach to degree planning known as programmatic assessment. The status of this relatively new phenomenon in the Australian university landscape is examined through an analysis of assessment-related policies from twenty-two of Australia's top-performing universities. Discourse analysis was employed to determine how programmatic assessment is depicted in policy, how key players are positioned in this space, and the discursive practices used to imbue policy with hortatory intent. The results of this analysis are outlined and indicate that policy constructions of a program-level approach to assessment are inconsistent across different universities and very few policies have specific guidelines about how programmatic assessment should be implemented.

Keywords: programmatic assessment, curriculum planning, assessment design, higher education,

## **Introduction**

The need to ensure quality within the higher education sector has been gaining momentum in recent years. The higher education sector is the highest grossing export in the service sector in Australia and is the third highest export overall (Harmon, 2015). Therefore, in an increasingly competitive international market (Bevitt, 2015; Page, 2019), quality education programs are essential for Australia to maintain market positioning. Several measures within the Australian higher education sector exist to guarantee national standards of teaching and learning. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) is one such measure designed to ensure consistency and quality of teaching and learning across the sector and to protect the global image of higher education in Australia and guarantee consistency in qualifications offered by any Australian higher education institution (Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency, 2016). Whilst the AQF sets the standards with the intention of regulating qualifications, assessment is one method that enables an institution or student to demonstrate the quality of the learning within the academic qualification. To demonstrate the quality of education for students to graduate, the impetus should be planning assessment at the program-level.

The concept of program-level assessment planning is to organise the assessment across the degree in its entirety and ensure the graduate attributes or professional standards are demonstrated. Through a program of study, students should undertake a range of assessments (Jessop & Tomas, 2017) and apply related discipline knowledge and skills to complete unit tasks (Dijkstra et al., 2010; Johnson, 2012). If assessment is not planned across a qualification but compartmentalised into individual academic ‘blocks’ of learning, the tendency will be for the student not to see the interconnectedness of the learning through assessment across the degree. Instead, they will see assessment as a unit of learning currency or as an assessment of competency. A quality learning and teaching experience that facilitates

a sequential development of discipline skills and knowledge would enhance their attainment of program learning outcomes, graduate attributes and enhance their employability.

At the sector level, each Australian university has program learning outcomes to ensure consistency between courses within a given degree program and a set of overarching graduate attributes that underpin the universities skills, knowledge and values (Madsen & Bell, 2012). For professional degree programs there are additional standards that are industry specific practice thresholds that must be met for accreditation by respective professional bodies (Bergsmann et al., 2015; Trencher et al., 2018). Furthermore, an increased emphasis on the employability of Australian graduates has led to a focus on core competencies (Perera et al., 2017) that align industry expectations with degree qualifications, although gaps can exist between industry professionals and academia (Zhao et al., 2021). Thus, the higher education sector is heavily regulated to ensure that institutions are accountable to a range of teaching and learning standards set by industry, professional bodies and statutory government authorities.

Meeting the regulatory requirements and academic standards expected of the university sector demands greater complexity in planning a degree program to ensure these standards and employability skills can be demonstrated through graduate outcomes or attributes. Ultimately, individual course assessment tasks should enable students to demonstrate course and program learning outcomes, as well as graduate attributes, professional standards, core competencies and general capabilities. But often these assessment items are siloed, connected to a single subject rather than being interrelated and connected to the program of study thus reflecting the graduate attributes or professional standards required of the graduate. Recent Federal Government policy changes focus on performance-based funding to ensure quality learning and teaching to optimise graduate outcomes, specifically employment status post-graduation (Australian Government, 2019).

To ensure quality learning and teaching and enable a quantifiable measure of the attainment of graduate outcomes and industry expectations, a program approach to planning assessment is imperative.

Research needs to be conducted to understand how program-level assessment planning is currently occurring in Australian higher education. An investigation into the status of program-level assessment planning in university policies is required to understand the current practices of program-level assessment planning at a selection of top ranked Australian Universities. In this paper we argue that an effective way to create a cohesive program of learning is to ensure a focus on assessment, since assessments provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate what they know and what they can do (Weir, 2020) and affects what and how learning occurs (Baird et al., 2017). This paper reports on the findings of a review of relevant university policies to establish whether program-level assessment planning is occurring in Australia's top-ranked universities.

### **Program-level approach to assessment**

Research on approaches to program planning have largely focused on the contribution of individual course curriculum to program learning outcomes. Program-level planning is described by Stark et al. (1997) as the collaborative approach between staff to prepare courses, specifically to organise the curriculum and assessment across a series of courses, however, the emphasis has rarely been on assessment. Stavrou (2016) concurs that the focus is predominantly on course curriculum design for which individual teaching academics are largely responsible. If there is to be increased awareness and adoption of an assessment focus in program design, then this requires a more coordinated approach to planning a program of learning through assessment, that constitutes a qualification.

Programmatic assessment or program of assessment describes an approach to program planning that takes a holistic, longitudinal perspective of assessment being scaffolded and sequenced vertically, and horizontally, across a degree program (Van der Vleuten et al., 2012). The underlying ethos of programmatic assessment is to ensure that students experience a range of assessments that enable them to demonstrate the skills, knowledge and values that are essential requirements to graduate with an accredited degree (Dijkstra et al., 2010; Johnson, 2012). In contrast, the term program assessment and/or evaluation is a systematic review of student learning at both the course and program-level, sometimes for re-accreditation or to improve learning outcomes (Ramlo, 2015). What we are proposing here is that programmatic assessment will create a more cohesive program of learning. This is because assessment tasks are the instruments used to demonstrate course and program learning outcomes, graduate attributes, professional standards, core competencies and general capabilities. A coordinated program of course-based assessment tasks, compared to the traditional approach based on assessment of content taught at the subject/course level would encourage a more holistic student assessment experience and acquisition of the requisite skills, competencies and knowledge.

The key drivers for a program approach to assessment are: the need for quality assurance (Kelley et al., 2008; Janke et al., 2013; Lyvers Peffer & Flood, 2017); the advancement of assessment for learning (Schuwirth & Van der Vleuten, 2011; Wiliam, 2011; Harrison & Wass, 2016); and the need for a consistent and holistic student assessment experience (Boud, 2000; Jessop & Tomas, 2017). Quality assurance is required for Australian universities to compete globally in the higher education sector (Bevitt, 2015; Page, 2019) and to adhere to policy directives and performance-based funding models (Australian Government, 2019). The scholarship of learning and teaching is evolving to accept that assessment for learning supports students to understand what level they attained from their

assessment and to apply the learning from the assessment to subsequent learning and assessments (Sadler, 1989; Wiliam, 2011). A fundamental consideration is that the assessment focus needs to be more than an end product of learning, but a stepping-stone to further learning.

A programmatic approach to assessment requires a range of assessment types that support program-level assessment and tasks that assesses program-level learning outcomes. A diversity of assessment types is essential as students need a range of opportunities to develop core competencies and general capabilities. According to Jessop and Tomas (2017), essays and exams are still the dominant assessment types, however, we know that learning outcomes and competencies are best assessed by other task types including reflections, critiques, reports, presentations, portfolios and research projects (Schuwirth & Van der Vleuten, 2011). Assessments should be designed to engage and support students' learning through assessment and reflecting on their experience (Black & Wiliam, 2018; Carless, 2019). Furthermore, students need to regulate their own learning, while receiving guidance to monitor progress towards learning outcomes (Andrade & Brookhart, 2019). A variety of assessment tasks provides students with a range of opportunities to monitor their progress towards achieving learning outcomes, whilst supporting holistic program-level assessment planning.

A programmatic approach to assessment design and delivery is currently not the focus of traditional course curriculum. Jessop and Tomas (2017), identify that course design and assessments have traditionally been siloed into individual subjects and determined by the respective individual academics. To change this approach and enable a more collaborative, program-level approach, requires long term structural and cultural change that is guided and supported by management. A concerted effort from faculty heads and executive personnel charged with university teaching and learning, is needed if this change is to occur. For this to happen a clear set of guiding regulations and practices that are central coordinated is needed



(Schuwirth & Van der Vleuten, 2011). A university culture where learning and teaching at the program-level is valued is also needed to change the traditional culture and practice of assessment at the individual component level of a qualification (Mason & de la Harpe, 2020). The benefits to academic staff need to be articulated, so that any initial workload increase is outweighed by the long-term advantages of a programmatic approach to assessment (Janke et al., 2013). This is not short-term change, the proposed program-level assessment planning approach is an inverse approach to curriculum planning for most academics. Hence, clear policy and management practices that not only supports collegial collaboration between academic staff but enables a programmatic approach to assessment, this is needed if this approach to assessment is to succeed in higher education. However, barriers do exist to the implementation of a programmatic approach to assessment.

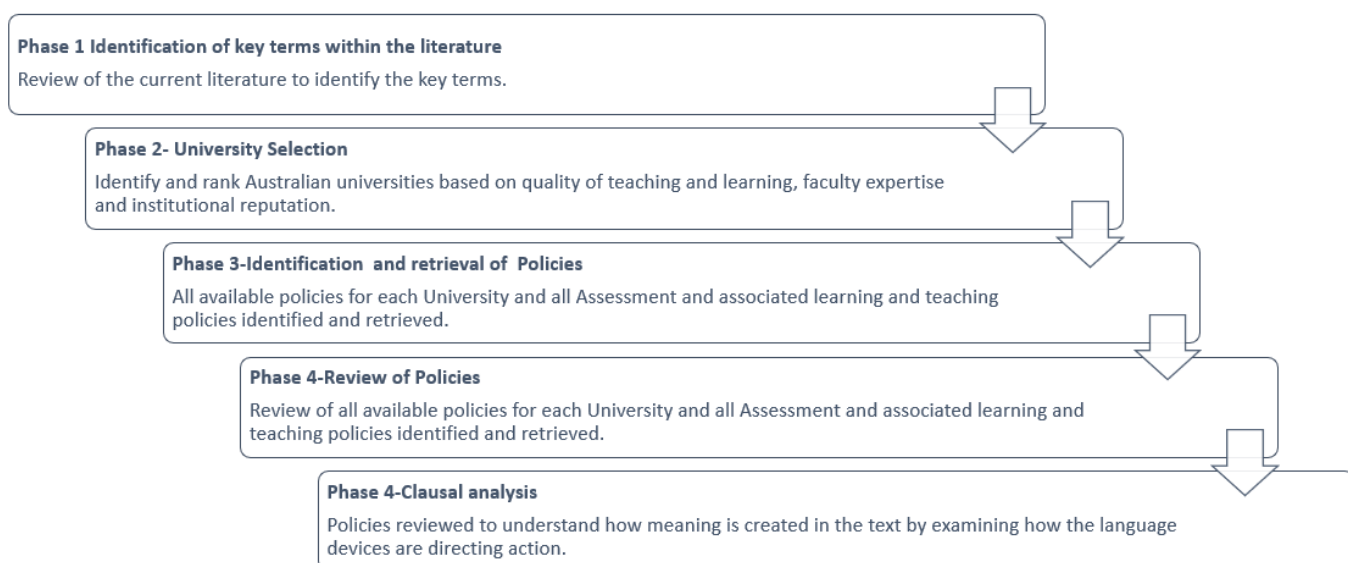
The literature indicates two key barriers to implementing programmatic assessment. These include, the cost and demand on resources (Dijkstra et al., 2010; Van der Vleuten et al., 2012; Janke et al., 2013), and balancing organisational culture with existing academic workload commitments (Carless, 2015; Bearman et al., 2017; Charlton, 2017). Raaper (2017, p. 323) also emphasises that “institutional assessment policies are expected to become increasingly complex” with global competition demanding quality assurance and the need to address competing influences. However, academics are often unaware of the minutiae of policy changes (Beach, 2013). One way to mitigate this is that appropriate professional development would be required to facilitate the shift to programmatic assessment if explicated in policies (Van der Vleuten et al., 2012; Janke et al., 2013). These barriers are challenges to overcome in the program-level planning space, while the drivers encourage this approach. Therefore, this policy analysis aims to understand the extent program-level assessment is supported or encouraged at a policy level. This paper aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What is the current status of program-level assessment planning in policy across Australian universities?
- (2) From a policy statement, what is the intent for program-level assessment planning?
- (3) How is program-level assessment planning explicated from the policies reviewed, explicit or implicit?

### Research methodology

To understand the extent to which program-level assessment planning is included in the curriculum, teaching and assessment space in Australian universities, a policy discourse analysis was conducted. The five phases of this research included i) identification of the key terms within the literature, ii) identification of the Universities, iii) retrieval of the relevant policies, iv) review and relevant policies kept for inclusion and analysis, and v) clausal analysis of the policies retrieved (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Steps involved in the research process



### *The Policy Selection Process*

The first step was selecting the appropriate terms informed from the literature. The next phase in this research was to determine which of the 43 Australian universities would be selected. Three global university ranking systems were used to select them - QS World University Rankings, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, and the Centre for World University Rankings. These university ranking systems were chosen using criteria that included the quality of teaching and learning, faculty expertise and institutional reputation. The average ranking of each Australian university across the three lists was calculated and the top 22 Australian Universities were selected. Initially the top 20 Australian Universities were selected to make the policy analysis process manageable. Although, the number was increased to include the top 22 based on the similarity in aggregate scores for those between 19 and 22. The top 22 were selected as they have the highest rankings for quality of teaching and learning, faculty expertise and institutional reputation and it was anticipated that they would be implementing best practice approaches in assessment as part of their learning and teaching.

Once the universities were identified, the relevant policy documents from their respective web sites were accessed (phase 3). Note that the initial search was for assessment-related policies, however the first scan of these revealed a more nuanced network of policies, guidelines and procedures that relate to different aspects of teaching and learning in higher education. A total of sixty-one policies were identified and tabulated for their respective university. The following features of each policy were documented in a spreadsheet to provide some institutional context: the name of the policy, the number of pages, its publication (or approval) date, the most recent revision date and the date scheduled for its next review. The number of pages of each policy is especially significant because it provides some indication of its detail and interpretability, and this is a signifier of its clarity, or opaqueness, for its target

audience - academic teaching staff.

### *Analysing the policy discourse*

The study draws on Ball's (1994's) post-structuralist perspective of educational policy conceived as text and discourse that is situated in a particular social field (in this case curriculum, teaching and assessment in Australian Universities). When educational policy is conceived in this way it is accompanied by an indeterminate understanding, its outcomes are unclear, resulting in policy makers trying to narrow interpretation ensuring the end-users achieve a 'correct reading' of the policy. According to Ball (1994, p. 19), policies "create circumstances in which the range of options available...are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set". Based on Ball's (1994) ideas, this study takes the perspective that educational policy is a textual intervention in teaching, learning, and assessment practices that educators need to address for their specific context. This standpoint enables the deconstruction of assessment-related university policies in order to establish the enabling and constraining effects of policy representations, and the types of operating spaces which these policies invite or limit, for teaching academics.

The study adopts a discourse analysis approach to deconstruct university policies and determine the discursive practices used to describe program-level planning and how it should be implemented. Discourse analysis investigates written representations that dictate the meaning and dominant views (O'Toole & Beckett, 2010). The notion of exploring meaning in texts is that the accumulation of ideas provides insight into the current social ideologies that prevail (O'Toole & Beckett, 2010; Taylor, 2013). Each discourse is socially owned and operated, so in the higher education context, contemporary beliefs and values underpin the language used to construct their policies (Gee, 2011).

In phase four of the research process, a simple analysis was conducted of lexical

choices used to construct the policy. This meant identifying key terms or phrases associated with program-level planning that were commonly used in the literature reviewed for this study. These key terms include *program learning outcomes*, *program-level*, *program-based* or *program-approach*. The term *alignment* was also selected as this is a quality assurance indicator referring to the constructive alignment between course curriculum, learning activities and assessments. Furthermore, the term *collaboration* was selected because it indexes a shared approach to degree planning. Lastly, the term *capstone* was included as this refers to a final year course that involves an assessment task designed for students to demonstrate the complex knowledge and skills they have accumulated.

Initially, the frequency of each term or phrase in the policy was tallied and recorded to determine how often they appeared within the texts as this would provide some indication as to whether program-level planning is a current policy phenomenon. Once the findings of this initial, quantitative analysis were collated, a finer-grained analysis of the text was conducted by examining the collocation of these key terms with other ideas about degree planning to determine the broader context in which they were situated. That is, a focused reading of the specific section of the policy text was undertaken to determine the discursive construction of the phenomenon.

The fifth phase of deconstructing these policy texts involved a clausal analysis to understand how meaning is created in the text by examining how the language devices are directing action. The responsibility for enacting teaching and learning policies lies with those in management roles who oversee program development or implementation, thus the results from this phase of the policy analysis reveals who the participants are in this space and how they are supposed to act. It tells us whether the policy is hortatory in nature, that is, how strongly the text is encouraging academics to engage in program-level planning, and it uncovers the grammatical complexity of the text or its interpretability by the intended users.

The results from this fine-grained clausal analysis, combined with the basic lexical analysis, provide a better understanding of the current policy status, how universities are trying to implement this new approach and who should be enacting the policies in planning a degree program.

## Results

### *Frequency of associated terms/phrases*

The frequency of terms was tallied to provide an indication of the extent to which the terms associated with programmatic assessment was included in higher education policies in Australian universities. The following table (Table 1) indicates the frequency of terms used in the 61 policies at 22 Australian Universities. The most notable outcome was the absence of specific references to programmatic approaches to assessment. The number of assessment and the related policies that included terms associated with program-level planning was low, compared to the terms associated with program planning such as alignment, collaborate and capstone.

Table 1 Frequency of terms in assessment and related policies.

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| <b>Policy Term</b>        | <b>Number of Assessment Policies</b> | <b>Number of related Policies regarding assessment</b> | <b>Total Frequency</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|------------------------|
| Program Learning Outcomes | 6                                    | 3  | 43                     |
| Program-level             | 2                                    | 7  | 33                     |
| Program based /approach   | 2                                    | 0  | 4                      |
| Alignment                 | 16                                   | 5  | 83                     |
| Collaborate               | 10                                   | 4  | 63                     |
| Capstone                  | 6                                    | 6  | 56                     |

## *Discourse and clausal analysis*

Discourse and clausal analysis of terms in assessment and related policies.

Table 2 Frequency of terms in assessment and related policies

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| <b>Policy Term</b>        | <b>Context (number of policies)</b>  | <b>Context of instruction</b>   |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| Program Learning Outcomes | Variety of assessment tasks to assess CLOs and PLOs (3)<br>Variety of assessment tasks throughout a program (8)<br>Arrangement of assessments throughout a program (6)   | Mostly explicit to outline how PLO's applied to assessments   |
| Program-level             | Outline responsibility attributed to various roles (7)   | Some explicit and some ambiguous  |
| Program based /approach   | Define the approach to assessment design (1)<br>Collaborate with colleagues for a coherent assessment experience (1)   | Implied guidance  |
| Alignment                 | Of assessment tasks to learning outcomes (18)<br>Of assessment tasks to learning experiences (10)<br>Of strategic directions to the university (4)<br>Of the marking criteria to task and learning outcomes (3)<br>To national (AQF or TEQSA) and international standards<br>To graduate attributes (3)<br>To PLOs (2) | Mostly explicit to outline how alignment occurs in assessment practice<br><br>Responsibility predominantly outlined to teaching staff<br><br>Responsibility predominantly outlined to teaching staff<br>Responsibility predominantly outlined to Committees |
| Collaboration             | In a group work assessment task (8)<br>Interaction within teams (7)<br>Program directors with course teams (4)<br>Between colleagues (3)<br>With external partners (4)<br>Through use of technology (1)  | Mostly explicit and outlining responsibility  |
| Capstone                  | Definition of term (4)<br>Need to develop skills and experience through a capstone course (4)<br>Quality assurance (4)<br>Requirement of Bachelor degree (3)<br>Challenging assessment tasks (3)<br>Connection between capstone course and future scenarios (2)  | Explicit with some flexibility  |

### *Program Learning Outcomes*

The term program learning outcomes (PLO) was infrequently cited in policies and was predominantly used to refer to the range of assessment tasks and to guide how the assessments should be organised. Of the 22 universities included in the study, three stated that a variety of assessment tasks are necessary to assess the range of course learning outcomes (CLO) and PLO. Although eight other universities also highlight the need to have a range of assessment tasks, only one university provided examples of different types. Some policies identify the need for variety to cater for different disciplines and provided various assessment and learning activities so a range of learning outcomes can be appraised. Additionally, a range of learning preferences also need to be accommodated, diverse assessments should be used to support equity and minimise disadvantage and provide, fair, valid and engaging tasks. While a range of assessments tasks were outlined in various policies, inconsistencies were apparent.

The term program learning outcomes was also used to indicate how assessment should be arranged throughout the program. The terms used to represent assessment organisation included vertical integration, progressive, holistic and systematic. Only one institution uses the term vertical and horizontal alignment to describe the integration of assessment throughout the program, however the terms progressive and holistic integration were also used to describe assessment arrangements throughout the program, while an integrated curriculum framework indicated where the program components and assessments need to be aligned. The terms systematic assessment or systematic opportunities were also used to describe students' potential achievements in relation to PLO, CLO and graduate attributes. In policies from six universities' the various aforementioned terms were used to explicate the arrangement of assessments throughout a program.

The language used to enact PLO was mostly explicit. Many policies that refer to PLO used modal auxiliary verbs like *will* and *must*, to indicate the degree of certainty how about



the PLO need to be applied to assessments. For example: “assessment practices must be continuously improved and updated...to ensure alignment with program learning outcomes or graduate attributes”. Similarly, another stated: “programs will be designed and structured to provide students with a coherent education experience, which supports their achievement of the program learning outcomes and graduate capabilities”. In some instances, the language is explicit: “programs are structured to achieve program learning outcomes” and “program teams are responsible for ensuring a ... holistic, coherent and integrated approach to assessment design and implementation where students develop and demonstrate their achievement of program learning outcomes”. Some policies are also explicit when outlining the requirement for a range of assessment types “across a program, students will be given a variety of tasks to demonstrate achievement of program learning outcomes”. In some instances, the instructions were less insistent, indicating: “a range of assessment types are to be used in a course’s assessment plan to assess the range of course and program learning outcomes”. Overall, all policies indicate a high degree of certainty of how program learning outcomes should be interpreted and applied in practice.

### *Program-level*

Program-level was mentioned in seven university policy documents and encapsulated an element of quality assurance, predominantly outlining responsibility attributed to various roles. The use of program-level was often associated with modal auxiliary verbs such as *should* and *must*: “program-level coordination should aim to have assessments timetabled to take account of other academic demands on a student’s time” and “assessment at the program-level must be consistent with best practice guidelines”. In others, the term responsibility was often expressed in context to guiding the assessment review process such as “program assessment boards, which are responsible for monitoring and managing coursework student academic performance at the program-level”. In some policies the phrases were less clear,

“this section prescribes the assessment principles and requirements at course and program-level” and a program director’s role includes “guiding the program-level curriculum development and design process, including student assessment, learning and teaching approaches, in collaboration with the Program Support Team”. These examples demonstrate that the term program-level is not frequently used or explicated with assessment design.

#### *Program based /approach*

The terms program-based, and program-approach, were included to capture the program planning perspective advocated in the research. Only two universities detail a program perspective using either the term program-based or program-approach to assessment. One university defined the term to include “a holistic, coherent and integrated approach to assessment design and implementation, where students develop and demonstrate their achievement of program learning outcomes,” and outline responsibility of program teams to ensure that “assessment will be program-based”. Only one policy specified “collaboration with colleagues to provide the whole-of-program approaches that make assessment a coherent experience for students” as well as to review and improve assessment practices. There was only one instance of program plans being articulated for program and course configurations.

#### *Alignment*

Of those policies included in the discourse analysis, the term alignment was the mostly frequently used term, and was used in a range of contexts throughout the policies. Most universities (n=18) documented the need for alignment of assessments to learning outcomes stating, “there is alignment between the stated course learning outcomes and assessment,” and similarly “assessment methods will be selected that are appropriate to the topic and course learning outcomes”. Ten universities included the alignment of assessment tasks to learning experiences with statements like: “assessment tasks should be aligned with learning activities

designed to assess whether a student has achieved the intended learning outcomes for the subject and where appropriate, the course” and “there should be clear alignment between stated intended learning outcomes, the learning experiences provided for students, and the assessment tasks”.

The alignment of the marking criteria to task and learning outcomes, strategic directions of the university or alignment to national (AQF or TEQSA) and international standards are also stated. Furthermore, alignment to graduate attributes, vertical or horizontal alignment, or alignment to the grade system or PLOs was also referred to in some university policies. However, using the term alignment from a program perspective was only indicated by two universities.

The clausal analysis identified several terms providing instruction with alignment in the policies. The word alignment was predominantly applied with modal auxiliary verbs like *will*, *must* and *should*. For example: “course outlines will include a statement of the assessment tasks noting their alignment to the course and program learning outcomes (if applicable)” and “the method and focus of each assessment item must align with the learning outcomes of a course”. Additionally, “Assessment tasks should be aligned with the objectives and teaching and learning arrangements of the course”. However, the ‘if applicable’ implies that exemptions could occur, making the instruction less definite and providing some flexibility, while the use of ‘should be’ also offers a degree of uncertainty. Furthermore, procedures and principles are regularly included in policies to guide practice. The language choices were often explicit where the principle stated, “Assessment practices must advance student learning-This principle requires that: assessment practices align with goals, context, learning activities and learning outcomes” and specifically that “assessment is regularly updated to ensure alignment with program learning outcomes or graduate attributes”.

The policies frequently outlined who was responsible for enacting alignment; the

“Associate Deans provide assurance to faculty academic boards and University Academic Board that the proposed curriculum development is aligned to University strategy and complies with relevant University policies,” another states that “the Chief Examiner or delegate must ensure that all assessment tasks are aligned with and mapped against unit outcomes, content and learning activities and those criteria by which the student work will be judged are defined and applied”. In other policies, teaching Faculties/Schools, Program Director/Coordinator and staff were included: “staff with responsibility for teaching will: “align the delivery of learning activities to the learning outcomes and/or graduate capabilities”. Although in a few policies the instructions are a little less explicit with the purpose of one policy stating: “engaged, aligned, resourceful, moderated and relevant assessment design ensures the integrity of course delivery and student learning”. In this example the lack of a modal auxiliary verb affects the intent of the policy.

### *Collaboration*

The term collaboration was frequently used with regard to an assessment task (e.g., group work); however, collaboration also referred to interaction within teams, between colleagues and external partners as well as use of technology. Only four universities policies included collaboration between senior staff and academics to ensure consistency between curriculum and assessment. The recognition of collaboration with colleagues is similarly stated by three universities mentioning stakeholders, and faculties, for example, “faculties will consult and communicate with each other, where necessary, in order to ensure the collaborative design, development, review and delivery of Programs and Courses”. The collaborative approach between academics and management is outlined in some policies.

The policy phrases specifically referring to collegial collaboration were analysed to determine how they were applied. They were predominantly linked to the responsibility of certain roles to either collaborate with teams or ensure collaboration with specific academic

and professional staff. This is illustrated by: “specific responsibilities include: collaborating with the Academic Program Director and relevant course teams to ensure that the design of their subject provides alignment with the courses that it feeds into”. Occasionally, policy wording was designed so collaboration was to maintain compliance, through statements like “Academic Program Directors, in collaboration with course teams, are responsible for ensuring compliance with the learning outcome provisions of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) “. In some instances, policies were couched with terms like support, for example “Professional development support will be provided ... in collaboration with faculties for assessment review as part of course quality improvement process to facilitate effective learning” or being definite that “Assessment practices are collaborative and promote continuous improvement”. Collaboration is considered an essential for ensuring effective program-level planning occurs in practice.

### *Capstone*

Lastly, the term capstone was frequently defined in policy to describe the relevance of a capstone course. Definitions included “a subject [or course] designed to allow a student to demonstrate the application of knowledge and skills to plan and execute a substantial research-based project, capstone experience or piece of scholarship”. The term signals a unit of study undertaken at the end of a program of study where students demonstrate their accumulated knowledge and skills . Additionally, four universities stated the need to develop skills and experience through a capstone course which “provides the opportunity for a student to integrate and consolidate knowledge and skills learned throughout the degree program”. Further acknowledging the need to develop skills, three universities indicate that capstone courses will include more challenging assessment tasks, where “courses at higher levels have assessment tasks that require a demonstration of greater depth” and “performance descriptors reflect the expected standards of performance for the assessment criteria relative to the level

of assessment (i.e., introductory, developing, mastery, capstone)”. Furthermore, only two universities identify the need for capstone to “link between next stage of study” and “facilitate student transition to future study or work”. The nuances in the use of capstone imply that knowledge and skills develop throughout a program so the capstone assessments are the culmination showing that students can fulfil graduate attributes and gain employment.

Many policies provided clear definitions to encapsulate the term capstone (n=12 universities). The modal auxiliary term *will*, was used to state which programs include a capstone course, for example: “where appropriate to professional requirements, Professional Masters degrees will include a capstone experience”. Although the words ‘where appropriate’ provide less clarity for inclusion and therefore, an exit clause. Similarly, another university states “all Bachelor degrees will include a Capstone Experience that meets the requirements of Schedule X” and the related policy provides clarity on alignment to PLO, experience examples and written assessment requirements, supporting the inclusion of a capstone, rather than an exception. The types of assessment tasks that were required as a capstone assessment were specified in some policies.

This policy review has provided some insight into the status of program-level planning occurring in Australian Universities. The key terms- program learning outcomes, program-level, program based /approach - were less frequently cited compared to terms that have implications for, and association with, program planning, such as alignment, collaboration and capstone. This suggests that program-level planning around assessment is a process that is understood but not explicitly articulated in policy.

PLO appeared to be the surrogate for program-level planning, with PLO explicated in policy to include a range of assessment tasks and, how assessment should be arranged throughout the program in terms of vertical, sequential, progressive and integrated assessments. The terminology around assessment used in the policies was relatively explicit,

indicating how program learning outcomes should be interpreted and applied in practice. The importance of quality assurance is recognised in the policies reviewed and encouraged through assessment review accreditation processes (Kelley et al., 2008; Lyvers Peffer & Flood, 2017) and alignment of program learning outcomes to the Australian Qualification Framework (Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency, 2016). Van der Vleuten et al. (2012) advocate that a program-based approach to assessment is required. Since program learning outcomes are currently being adopted in Australian universities then they could be used to facilitate the program-level planning approach.

## **Discussion**

The review indicated that a program-level approach to assessment is outlined and emphasised in seven higher education policies within Australia as a quality assurance process. However, this review would indicate that only two universities explicitly use the term program-based/approach to assessment. Despite the surprisingly low number of terms associated with program-based/approach to assessment in the policies cited, when PLOs are included in the review, they explicitly indicate how they should be used and interpreted within a plan of assessment across a program.

The term alignment was the term most frequently used in Australian higher education assessment policies of those included in the discourse analysis and used in a range of contexts. The need to align assessments to course learning outcomes and to align assessment to learning experiences was articulated in most policies. The benefits of alignment to course learning outcomes (CLOs) are evident in the literature (Lawson, 2015; Bearman et al., 2016). However, alignment of PLO was not often detailed, in contrast with research that indicates alignment of assessments to PLO is essential to the sequential development of students' requisite skills and knowledge (Bearman et al., 2016). The term alignment is phrased with a degree of certainty

using modal auxiliary verbs such as *will*, *must* and *should*, in conjunction with learning outcomes, indicating the importance of alignment within the assessment and related policies. Additionally, alignment was regularly included within policy to outline explicitly who was responsible, although in some instances this was implicit.

In policy, the term collaboration was expressed mostly in the context of how group assessment should be managed, although it is used to encourage program-level collaboration. Seven universities indicated the need to collaborate, to ensure a programmatic approach to assessment occurs and to enhance the student learning experience. Collaboration is considered an essential feature to ensure effective program-level planning occurs in practice and the successful implementation of program-based assessment requires the collaboration between program managers and faculty staff or between academics (Schuwirth & Van der Vleuten, 2011; Janke et al., 2013). As indicated above, the responsibility is often explicated as alignment of learning outcomes and who is required to comply with other policy frameworks. In addition, the term capstone is used in policy to support the development of students' knowledge and skills throughout the program which they can demonstrate in the final, challenging assessments. Although twelve universities included the term in their policies, only six specify the need for students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge through the capstone experience. The term is well-defined although there is a lack of clarity in its interpretation and relevance to a program-level approach to assessment.

## **Conclusion**

This review showed that only a small number of universities across Australia have adopted programmatic assessment within their policies with the remainder demonstrating inconsistencies in terminology and opaque policies. If national standards are to be achieved in quality assessment of program learning outcomes, more universities need to incorporate a programmatic assessment perspective as policy. The practical implications from these



findings are, that program-level assessment planning needs to be more clearly articulated within the university policies. A more consistent use of terms like vertical, sequential, progressive and integrated, is required to describe the arrangement of assessment throughout the program, as well as clarity of alignment of program learning outcomes and a consistent use of capstone courses would be beneficial across the sector. If program-level assessment is to be adopted, then policies need to provide more guidance to faculty so that academics have a clearer direction and supporting guidance for a clearer understanding and easy adoption of a systematic assessment approach to program-level planning as well as drive continued research in the area to maintain currency.

The findings from this review suggest that there are several considerations for policy around program-level assessment planning. These include, consistent terminology is required in university policy, a clear narrative to describe and clearly outline the variety of collaborations and ownership of the processes necessary to facilitate a program-level planning and drive knowledge. In addition, consistent interpretation around a sequential assessment experience for a students' skill and knowledge acquisition is essential. Lastly, program-level assessment planning needs to be more than a reliance on capstone assessments but a program of assessment across the whole qualification to ensure program and or course learning outcomes compliance.

### **Limitations**

Across the universities used for this study, different terms like courses, subjects, units are used that signify a module of study, and programs or courses for a degree. This may have resulted in some policies being missed during the search. Equally as this is a new and emerging area of assessment within the university sector some universities may have been missed due to policies being in a development phase and unpublished. These two limitations

may have underestimated the extent of engagement in programmatic assessment by the university sector. Another limitation to the data was that it was limited to the authors interpretation of the respective policies and not how they are interpreted and the intention of implement by academic staff. Further work in this area is needed.

### **Future direction**

Future research is required to understand what assessment practices are being implemented within Australian universities at the program-planning level, as well as the perceived constraints and enablers. Conducting interviews with academics who interpret these policies will inform whether the policies are hortatory, strongly advising the adoption of program-level assessment planning. This policy review and future interviews with academics who interpret these policies, will determine if a framework can be devised for program-level based.

### **Declaration of interest statement**

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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