Accountability and quality policies relating to learning standards, and their implications for assessment in higher education.

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Faculty of Education

2014
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Declaration

This thesis is my own work and no part of it has been submitted for a degree at this, or any other university. All sources have been appropriately acknowledged.

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Jonathan David Yorke

Date: 10th December 2014
Abstract

The aim of this study was to analyse accountability and quality policies relating to learning standards, and their implications for assessment in higher education. Whilst primarily focusing on the Australian setting, this research was located within a broader frame of reference that included the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (US), and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Across these settings, comparative measures of learning have been seen as a policy ‘solution’ to the problem of ‘proving quality’ in a globalised and increasingly competitive higher education market.

Comparative measures of learning depend on the specification of learning standards. Learning standards attempt to articulate the capabilities expected of graduates, and students’ achievement of these is determined through the practices of assessment carried out within institutions. Quality policy, learning standards and assessment practices all intersect within the broader umbrella of accountability, with relevance to governments, higher education providers, employers, parents, and students.

This study drew on the theoretical frameworks of critical theory and poststructuralism to enable a comprehensive approach to policy analysis. Critical theory facilitated an examination of the way policy processes served to empower or disempower actors, whilst the theoretical lens of poststructuralism focused attention on the complex and dynamic power relationships between actors at all levels.

Within the Australian setting, a ‘policy trajectory’ approach was used to analyse the evolving ‘ensemble’ of quality policy texts relating to learning standards released by the Australian Government between 2009 and 2013. Four policy contexts were examined, comprising: (global to local) influences; policy text production; practices/effects; and emergent or predicted longer term outcomes. These contexts were examined at a national and institutional level. The ‘national’ level comprised the Australian Government and other non-Government national groups within Australia. The ‘institutional’ level spanned four ‘types’ of public and private institution, selected to represent the hierarchy and diversity of the Australian higher education sector.
This study also sought to compare quality policy processes relating to learning standards in higher education settings beyond Australia. In view of the historically strong policy flows from the UK and US to Australia, perspectives from selected policy actors in these settings were included alongside the Australian policy trajectory study. In addition, the perspectives of a participant from the OECD were also sought in view of the growing influence of this organisation on national level policy processes.

Interviews were conducted with 35 participants between 2012 and 2013. These included government policy elite members, institutional leaders, policy researchers, and leaders of national projects within the domain of learning standards. Critical discourse analysis of extracts from five key policy texts was undertaken within the Australian national setting.

The findings of this study highlighted a number of policy influences, including the rising demands for national and international comparative data on learning standards to compare quality and inform student choice in a globally competitive market. Processes of policy text production were characterised by intense struggles over the ownership and control of learning standards, strongly driven by vested and competitive interests. The practices/effects emerging in response to proposed policies included defensive manoeuvring by the higher education sector, which strove to fend off government intrusion. Longer term outcomes were seen to potentially impact assessment practices through a narrowing of the curriculum and reduction of academic freedom if external tests of learning standards were to be introduced. Furthermore, despite policy rhetoric to address equity issues, there was little evidence to suggest that equity would improve. Taken together, the findings of this research suggest that an excessive reliance on narrow quantitative indicators designed to measure, compare and improve quality may only serve to weaken it.

Fifteen propositions were synthesised from the Australian policy trajectory study and the perspectives of participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD). A key integrating theme of ideology and power was identified, and analysed. The policy trajectory approach used to examine the Australian setting was critiqued, and combined with network theory to further develop theoretical framings for future policy analysis. The thesis concludes by identifying a number of implications for the development of quality policy relating to learning standards and for future research.
Table of Contents

DECLARATION ............................................................................................................. III

ABSTRACT ....................................................................................................................... IV

TABLE OF CONTENTS ........................................................................................................ VI

LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................... X

LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................ X

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ...................................................................................................... XI

CONVENTIONS ................................................................................................................. XIV

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .............................................................................................. XV

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................... 1
Aim and context .................................................................................................................. 1
Key conceptual themes ...................................................................................................... 3
Research design and questions ......................................................................................... 6
Theoretical frameworks ..................................................................................................... 8
Data collection and analysis ............................................................................................. 9
Significance of this research ........................................................................................... 10
Structure of this thesis .................................................................................................... 11

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND .............................................................................................. 15
Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 15
Quality and standards in selected international higher education settings ......................... 16
Quality and standards in the Australian higher education setting ...................................... 19
The Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System policy (2009) ................................. 22
Policy contestation and tensions in Australia between 2009-2013 ..................................... 27
Concluding discussion .................................................................................................... 34
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW .......................................................... 37

Introduction ................................................................................................................. 37
Globalisation .................................................................................................................. 37
Globalised education policy .......................................................................................... 42
Accountability ................................................................................................................ 45
Quality ............................................................................................................................. 51
Learning standards ......................................................................................................... 53
Assessment practices ...................................................................................................... 57
Concluding discussion ..................................................................................................... 68

CHAPTER 4: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .............................................. 71

Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 71
Critical theory ................................................................................................................... 71
Poststructuralism .............................................................................................................. 75
Approaches to policy analysis ......................................................................................... 80
Critical theory and poststructuralism – a hybrid approach ............................................ 86
Concluding discussion ..................................................................................................... 89

CHAPTER 5: METHODS .......................................................................... 91

Introduction ................................................................................................................... 91
Qualitative research ......................................................................................................... 91
Research questions .......................................................................................................... 93
Data collection methods ................................................................................................. 95
Sampling .......................................................................................................................... 97
Data analysis .................................................................................................................... 104
Ethical considerations .................................................................................................... 110
Concluding discussion ................................................................................................... 112

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS (1) - POLICY INFLUENCES .............................. 113

Introduction ................................................................................................................... 114
Australian national level themes .................................................................................... 116
Australian institutional level themes .............................................................................. 124
Selected perspectives from beyond Australia ................................................................. 128
Summary of interview data - policy influences ............................................................... 138
CHAPTER 10: A META-ANALYSIS OF POLICY PROCESSES ...................... 241
Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 241
Discussion of emergent themes and construction of propositions ........................................ 241
Ideology and power: A key integrating theme across policy contexts and settings ................. 269
Insights from network theory .................................................................................................. 277
Combining analytical frameworks for policy analysis ............................................................ 279
Concluding remarks .............................................................................................................. 281

CHAPTER 11: FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS ...................... 283
Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 283
Continuing policy evolution in the Australian setting: beyond empirical data ....................... 283
Implications for the development of quality policy ................................................................. 287
Implications for future research ............................................................................................ 289
Conclusions .......................................................................................................................... 292

REFERENCES .......................................................................................................................... 295

APPENDICES ............................................................................................................................ 321
Appendix A: Timeline of events (Australian policy text production) ........................................ 322
Appendix B: Participant information form ............................................................................... 329
Appendix C: Participant consent form .................................................................................... 330
Appendix D: Interview questions (Australian participants) ...................................................... 331
Appendix E: Additional interview questions for Australian Discipline Scholars ....................... 333
Appendix F: Interview questions (UK, US, OECD participants) ................................................ 334
List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Globalisation, accountability, quality, learning standards and assessment....4
Figure 3.1 Forms of accountability..................................................................................47
Figure 7.1 Architecture of the proposed teaching and learning standards..............158
Figure 10.1 Actor power and ideological stance towards learning standards ..........270
Figure 10.2 Combining analytical frameworks: policy trajectory levels and networks relevant to this study ....................................................................................................279

List of Tables

Table 5.1 Sources of data..................................................................................................98
Table 5.2 Participant identity coding ............................................................................101
Table 5.3 Extract of the interview data coding table....................................................105
Table 6.1 Summary of themes relating to policy influences ........................................115
Table 7.1 Summary of themes relating to policy text production (documents) .........142
Table 7.2 Summary of themes relating to policy text production (interviews)............173
Table 8.1 Summary of themes relating to policy practices/effects ..............................198
Table 9.1 Summary of themes relating to policy outcomes .........................................222
Table 10.1 Quality policies relating to learning standards in higher education: summary of emergent themes .................................................................242
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For my family, who travelled this journey with me.
Conventions

Use of capitalisation: ‘state’ vs. ‘State’; ‘government’ vs. ‘Government’

When capitalised, this refers to a proper noun referencing a single entity, i.e. it refers to a specific instance (e.g. the Australian Government). When lower case, it refers to the generic or plural case (e.g. ‘governments’).

Reference style

APA 6th referencing is used in this thesis. This version, released in 2009, introduced a number of changes. Amongst others, these include the preferred use of digital object identifiers (DOI), and the requirement to include the country and city for publisher locations outside the US in the reference list (e.g. ‘London, England’). Note also that this referencing style requires the notation [emphasis added] to appear immediately after the emphasised text.

For further information, refer to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Sixth Edition.
### List of Abbreviations

Frequently used acronyms are shown in **bold**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACER</td>
<td>Australian Council for Educational Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHELO</td>
<td>Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (OECD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALTC</td>
<td>Australian Learning and Teaching Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQF</td>
<td>Australian Qualifications Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATN</td>
<td>Australian Technology Network [Australian Universities]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUQA</td>
<td>Australian Universities Quality Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Critical Discourse Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEQ</td>
<td>Course Experience Questionnaire [Australia]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLA</td>
<td>Collegiate Learning Assessment [US]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEEWR</td>
<td>Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [Australia]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIICCSRTE</td>
<td>Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education [Australia]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIISRTE</td>
<td>Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education [Australia]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go8</td>
<td>Group of Eight [Australian Universities]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSA</td>
<td>Graduate Skills Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HESP</td>
<td>Higher Education Standards Panel [Australia]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRU</td>
<td>Innovative Research Universities [Australian Universities]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTAS</td>
<td>Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project [Australia]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OLT</td>
<td>Office for Learning and Teaching [Australia]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAPLAN</td>
<td>National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy [Australia]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PISA</td>
<td>Programme for International Student Assessment [OECD]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Socioeconomic status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEQSA</td>
<td>The Australian Tertiary Quality and Standards Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLOs</td>
<td>Threshold learning outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSA</td>
<td>Voluntary System of Accountability [US]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You can add up the parts,
but you won’t have the sum.

From the song ‘Anthem’
Leonard Cohen (1992)
Aim and context

The aim of this study was to analyse accountability and quality policies relating to learning standards, and their implications for assessment in higher education. Whilst primarily focused on the Australian setting, this research was located within a broader frame of reference. This included other national settings that have been significant sources of ‘policy borrowing’ (Alexiadou, 2014; Winstanley, 2012) for Australia, specifically the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (US). Whilst the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is neither nation state nor policy maker, it was included in the frame of reference for this study in recognition of its growing influence on education policy processes at a national level (Bøyum, 2014; Sellar & Lingard, 2013b).

This research primarily examined the Australian policy setting and it is therefore important to establish a brief outline chronology of significant relevant events in Australia. There has been a sharpening focus on quality and learning standards in the Australian setting which has been carried through a number of policy evolutions (Baldwin, 1991; Bourke, 1986; Dawkins, 1988; Kemp, 1999; Nelson, 2003), culminating in their sharpest expression in the Review of Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). This landmark review proposed the development of “a set of indicators and instruments to directly assess and compare learning outcomes; and a set of formal statements of academic standards by discipline along with processes for applying those standards” (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 137). The Australian Government responded with a comprehensive reform package, titled Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009).

Initially this reform package was seemingly well received by the higher education sector, but proposed performance indicators released towards the end of 2009 produced a furore, precipitating a significant backlash from the sector which delineated the beginning of a prolonged period of contestation within policy processes. During this time, the emerging OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project was starting to draw on the US-based Collegiate
Learning Assessment (CLA) as a measure of learning standards, and the Australian Government attempted to borrow the CLA from the US and embed it within Australian national policy. This attempt was roundly resisted by the higher education sector. After facing four years of sustained opposition, the Australian Government eventually dropped all comparative measures of learning from proposed quality indicators, settling instead for proxies of learning in the form of self-reported student and employer evaluations (Department of Education, 2014c).

Internationally, there has also been a long-standing drive to compare and enhance the outcomes of higher education in order to advance national positioning in an increasingly competitive international marketplace. In the UK, calls for comparative measures of quality were made in the landmark review titled *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). This led to the introduction of ‘subject benchmark statements’ in 2000, which sought to improve the quality, coherence and comparability of taught programmes (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2012). The issues of quality and learning standards have remained prominent over many years in the UK, with occasional ‘crises’ such as the public row over the lack of comparability of standards across institutions (Alderman, 2009; Brown, 2010b) which led to a Select Committee review (UK House of Commons, 2009).

In the US, the release of *A Test of Leadership* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) stepped into a similarly vexed policy terrain with the argument that standardised external testing of graduates was needed as a means of comparing and proving quality to maintain the international standing of US higher education. This was met by a severe backlash from the academic sector which was swift to compare the approach proposed for higher education to the recently enacted and highly contested No Child Left Behind Act (2001) in the US schooling sector. Elsewhere, however, Brazil had experimented with national tests of learning standards in higher education as long ago as 1996 (Schwartzman, 2010).

Harmonisation, a process of creating common standards (Maletic, 2013), was emerging in the domain of learning and its assurance. In Europe, the Bologna Process (European Higher Education Area, 1999) was seeking to harmonise qualification frameworks for the purposes of credit transfer and cross-recognition.
Descendent projects arising from the Bologna Process included the formation of the European ‘Tuning’ process in the year 2000 and ‘Tuning USA’, established in 2009 (Adelman, 2009). Such harmonisation was also apparent in approaches to quality assurance, such as in the guidelines produced by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2009).

Inter-national comparisons were also being advanced by the OECD, including, amongst others, the publication of national participation rates in education (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2014a). Of particular relevance to this study was the fledgling OECD AHELO project. This ambitious project commenced in January 2010, setting out to develop a “direct evaluation of student performance at the global level ... valid across diverse cultures, languages and different types of institutions” (OECD, 2014c, "What is the AHELO Feasibility Study?", para. 2).

**Key conceptual themes**

The key conceptual themes of globalisation, accountability, quality, learning standards and assessment practices fall within the purview of the policy terrain studied here. All of these concepts are complex and heavily contested, and Chapter 3 presents a comprehensive examination of these themes in the light of the literature.

In essence, processes of globalisation are producing a number of pressures that impact on nation states to a greater or lesser extent. These pressures are associated with substantial and continually evolving changes to the economic and political landscape. In higher education and in other sectors, a number of nation states (including Australia, the UK and the US) have responded to these pressures by increasing the emphasis on processes of accountability, in order to compare and ‘prove’ quality in a globally competitive market. National quality policies aim to demonstrate that graduates are meeting learning standards, the appraisal of which depends on institutional practices of assessment.

Quality policy, learning standards and assessment practices therefore all intersect within the broader umbrella of accountability, framed within wider processes of globalisation. The inter-relationship of these concepts is illustrated in Figure 1.1 below, and each is briefly introduced in turn in the following sections.
Globalisation can be thought of as a complex and contested set of deeply interrelated processes that are producing social, economic and political changes in the nature of relationships across and between nations (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Pressures arising from these changes are not always downwards, however, and ‘globalisation from above’ is always mediated to some extent by ‘globalisation from below’ (Lingard & Rawolle, 2009), reflecting the high power of (some) nation states. Nevertheless, as Stiglitz (2006) and Ball (2012b) pointed out, the political and economic forces of neoliberal ideologies (Harvey, 2005) within a globalised setting have been particularly powerful. Apple (2007) described neoliberalism as an economic theory that emphasises market efficiency to advance government priorities by mechanisms of indirect control, or steering from a distance (Marginson, 1997) through processes and technologies of accountability (Olssen, 2009).

Processes of accountability (Burke, 2005; Shavelson, 2010; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011) offer the possibility of demonstrating to various stakeholders that education institutions are meeting society’s expectations (Massaro, 2010). Signals of quality are
considered to be important in a globally competitive higher education market (Marginson, 2013), and processes of quality assurance (El-Khawas, 2013; Reid, 2009; Rowlands, 2012) draw the related themes of accountability and quality together, although a unitary definition of quality defies a simple description (Harvey & Green, 1993; Santiago, Tremblay, Basri, & Arnal, 2008; Vidovich, 2001).

At the heart of contemporary and neoliberal conceptions of accountability lies the public comparison of ‘quality’, increasingly rendered through ‘objective’ data in a range of settings (Lingard, 2011; Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Ozga, 2009, 2012; Sellar & Lingard, 2013). Within this framing, if institutional (or national) quality is to be in part defined by students’ achievement of learning standards, it follows that comparable measures of learning are needed.

Comparative measures of learning depend on defined learning standards against which students’ work is consistently appraised. Throughout this thesis, learning standards are taken to mean a “definite degree of academic achievement established by authority, custom, or consensus and used as a fixed reference point for reporting a student’s level of attainment” (Sadler, 2012, p. 9), although this construction elides a number of important theoretical and practical issues that are examined in later chapters.

Learning standards therefore aim to describe the knowledge, skills and capabilities expected of a graduate of a particular discipline, and they are of relevance to a wide range of groups, including government and non-government bodies, employers, higher education providers, parents, and students. ‘Threshold’ learning standards attempt to describe a minimal acceptable level of achievement.

Students’ achievement of learning standards is appraised through the many practices of assessment (Yorke, 2008). The term ‘assessment’ carries different inflections in different social contexts: in the US the term can be used to mean the systematic evaluation of taught programs, for example (Wall, Hursh, & Rodgers, 2014). However, in the UK and Australia, the term is commonly used to describe both the process and the product of a decision about student achievement (Price, Carroll, O’Donovan, & Rust, 2011), a convention adopted throughout this thesis. Assessment tasks set for students are appraised through processes of grading which produce results, or codes (Sadler, 2014) that are intended to signify a particular level of achievement. These
results are aggregated in order to decide whether the student has met the requirements for qualification. The underpinning institutional assessment practices are therefore of critical importance to national and international comparisons of learning standards. In short, comparative measures of quality at an institutional or national level depend on learning standards, and these, in turn, depend on the local practices of assessment.

This research takes place in an era of accelerated globalisation, across a dominant neoliberal ideological terrain within which technologies of accountability take centre stage. In Australia and other national settings, there is a growing desire to acquire ‘evidence’ to demonstrate that graduates are of high ‘quality’, to secure competitive advantage in an increasingly globalised education marketplace. As Figure 1.1 indicates, there are many policies and processes associated with accountability and quality, and these include formal qualifications frameworks, national and international accreditation bodies, and institutional policies for recognising prior learning, to name but a few. Whilst acknowledging the wide diversity of interrelated accountability and quality policies, this study is delineated with respect to selected quality policies relating to learning standards.

Research design and questions

In this study, Australian policy processes were analysed using a ‘policy trajectory’ approach (Ball, 1994a; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Vidovich, 2007, 2013). This approach can be traced back to the early work of Bowe, Ball, and Gold (1992), who argued that policy development could not be neatly split into discrete stages of formulation and implementation. They proposed three ‘messy’ and interrelated contexts of policy influences (where global pressures, national agendas, and local stakeholder views come together); policy text production (the characteristics of texts and where/how they are produced); and practices/effects (first order effects arising from where/when policy is enacted, transformed, rejected or ignored). Ball (1994a) later added two further contexts, the contexts of outcomes (second order effects of justice, equality and freedom) and of political strategy (to tackle inequalities) both of which have been drawn together as a fourth context of outcomes given their close interrelationship (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).
However, whilst Ball made a seminal contribution to policy analysis by giving more attention to ‘micro’ level policy processes within institutions, his approach was also criticised for its strong ‘postmodern turn’, and for paying insufficient attention to ‘macro’ (i.e. global and international) influences beyond individual nation states (Lingard, 1996). In the light of growing recognition that processes of globalisation were increasingly impacting on nation states’ ability to set policy, subsequent work by Vidovich (2007) extended the policy trajectory approach. This introduced a stronger focus on the macro level and the many interrelationships within policy processes spanning ‘macro’ (global and international) to ‘micro’ (local) levels. More recently, the increasing diversification of policy actors has been recognised and drawn into policy analysis (Ball, 2012a; Vidovich, 2013).

Using the ‘policy trajectory’ approach described above, Australian national and institutional level policy processes were analysed to examine the contexts of: influences; policy text production; practices/effects; and longer term outcomes. In this study the ‘national’ level comprised the Australian Government and other non-Government groups within Australia. At this level, both interview and document data (the latter from the critical discourse analysis of five selected key policy text extracts) were collected in order to examine policy processes in the Australian setting. The local/institutional level spanned four ‘types’ of Australian institution, selected to represent the hierarchy and diversity of the public and private parts of the higher education sector, with data gathered from interviews only. Within the Australian setting, quality policy was taken to mean the evolving “ensemble” (Ball, 1993, p. 14) of quality policy texts released by the Australian Government between 2009 and 2013.

Specifically, this study sought to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the key influences (international, national and local/institutional) affecting the development of quality policies relating to learning standards in Australian higher education?

2. What are the key characteristics of quality policy texts relating to learning standards in Australian higher education and how were they produced?

3. What are the emergent and predicted practices/effects of quality policies relating to learning standards in Australian higher education?

4. What are the longer term outcomes (both emerging and predicted) of quality policy trends relating to learning standards in Australian higher education?
This study also sought to compare quality policy processes relating to learning standards in settings beyond Australia. Consequently, the perspectives of selected policy actors within the UK and US were included within the frame of reference given the historically strong policy flows from these nations to Australia (Winstanley, 2012). With respect to the UK and the US, ‘quality policy’ was taken to mean those quality policies relating to learning standards within the participants’ national settings. Whilst the OECD is neither policy maker nor nation state, the perspectives of a participant from this organisation were also sought in recognition of the growing influence of the OECD on national level policy processes (Martens & Jakobi, 2010). For this participant, quality policies were referred to in a broad sense (i.e. not in relation to any specific national policy). These perspectives from policy actors in the UK, US, and the OECD were gathered from interviews based on the research questions, but with modifications as necessary to reflect the participants’ different locations. To facilitate comparison, data gathered from settings beyond Australia were collected and analysed in a similar way to that undertaken within the Australian setting, but they do not constitute policy trajectory studies in their own right.

**Theoretical frameworks**

Consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of policy trajectory approaches (Ball, 1994a; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Vidovich, 2007, 2013), this study drew on both critical theory and poststructural approaches to frame the investigation. This research acknowledges both theoretical lenses for their complementarity: both critical theory and poststructuralism have a deep interest in issues of power although it is conceived differently in each case. Critical theory focuses on ‘bigger picture’ issues of equity and justice, by questioning and illuminating how hegemonic power (Morton, 2007) is centralised and sustained within society’s elite (Agger, 1991; Bohman, 2013; Horkheimer, 1982; How, 2003). Poststructuralist approaches conceive of power as circulating widely in a plurality of forms, and, rather than focusing on negative/repressive conceptions, power is seen to also create productive/beneficial consequences (Humes & Bryce, 2003; Vidovich, 2013). Thus a hybrid theoretical approach is able to span both macro level constraint and micro level agency to produce a more sophisticated view of complex and increasingly globalised policy
processes. This hybrid theoretical approach underpins the policy trajectory framework employed in this study.

**Data collection and analysis**

This research took a qualitative approach, acknowledging issues of researcher positionality (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013) and drawing on semi-structured interviews (refer to Appendices D-F) as the main source of data to provide rich insights into participants’ experiences of policy processes. Consistent with the hybrid theoretical framework described above, critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010), a technique which straddles both critical theory and poststructuralism (Vidovich, 2013), was used to interrogate selected extracts from five key policy documents produced by the Australian Government to examine these policy texts in more detail.

Data collection took place between August 2012 and May 2013, involving in-depth interviews with a total of 35 participants. Within the Australian setting and at the national level, 19 participants included senior bureaucrats from the Australian Government, former Vice-Chancellors and other institutional senior leaders, coordinators of national projects, and prominent researchers. As outlined above, document analysis was also conducted at this level. At the local/institutional level, six participants were included to represent three types of public university and three private higher education providers. Given that processes of policy text production relating to learning standards had not reached a settled position within which institutions would operate, the focus in this study was intentionally weighted towards the Australian national setting. The perspectives of selected participants from beyond Australia were also sought, in order to examine broader global/international policy quality trends relating to learning standards as outlined earlier. Data were gathered from interviews with four participants within the UK, five participants within the US, and a former senior official within the OECD.

Data were analysed drawing on qualitative approaches in accordance with procedures described in Yin (2011, 2014). Qualitative software (NVivo, Version 10), operated in a fully manual mode without making use of ‘auto-coding’ features, was used to assist with the organisation of themes and data.
The emergent themes (reported in Chapters 6 to 9) revealed many issues relating to the four research questions. Themes from the Australian policy trajectory study were drawn together with those from participants beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD) and examined in the light of the literature. Fifteen theoretical propositions relating to the four research questions were generated. The key integrating theme of ideology and power was revealed, and further analysed using Marginson and Rhoades’ (2002) ‘glo-na-cal’ (global-national-local) agency heuristic to closely examine the dynamic nature of global to local policy processes.

**Significance of this research**

This research makes an original contribution to the field of globalised policy analysis in relation to the development of future quality policy in higher education, and it offers insights and suggestions for the ‘wicked problem’ (Knight & Page, 2007) of learning standards and their assessment.

First, this research explicates the complex relationships between accountability, quality, and learning standards to provide contemporary insights into international, national and local (institutional) assessment practices, generating theoretical propositions that will have relevance in a number of settings. For example, this research highlights and examines the growing role played by national non-government groups in the establishment of learning standards, representing a significant development in new forms of global-local policy networks.

Second, a key contribution of this study lies in the international dimension to this research. By examining global/international influences on Australian policy processes, the policy trajectory approach extends the scope of analysis beyond the national level. This is consistent with a growing body of research that argued that processes of globalisation are central to contemporary policy studies (Adie, 2014; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Policy processes in the Australian setting are compared with policy processes in settings beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD), which adds breadth to the study. Furthermore, in all of the settings studied, the researcher was able to gain access to elite participants (Cohen et al., 2013). These policy actors are difficult to access (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002; Thompson-Whiteside, 2011) and their inclusion is a
substantial coup for the research as it provides privileged and valuable insights into the ideology and practices of policy elite actors.

Third, and within the Australian setting, this research is of contemporary significance as it focuses on an emergent ‘turning point’ in Australian higher education quality policy relating to learning standards. It took place during a dynamic and rapidly evolving policy landscape characterised by the deregulation of student quotas, the activation of a new national regulatory body and the attempted introduction of a set of controversial new performance indicators for the sector. These were profound and ‘landmark’ changes for Australian higher education. Through detailed empirical studies conducted with elite actors, significant stakeholder groups and individuals, this has led to an original contribution in the form of analyses of policy practices/effects and outcomes across public and private higher education institutions. The findings of this research form an empirical evidence base for ongoing policy development, providing a useful foundation for contrasts and comparisons elsewhere.

Finally, this research contributes to theory development by critiquing existing theoretical frameworks for policy analysis, offering potentially innovative modifications to these approaches. In particular, this thesis draws together analytic frameworks in a combination which may have utility in future policy analysis.

**Structure of this thesis**

This thesis contains 11 chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 establishes the background to this research, exploring international and national developments in higher education quality policy. In the Australian setting, the landmark policy *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009) is discussed, and key points of contestation are outlined.

Chapter 3 examines the key concepts of globalisation, globalised education policy, accountability, quality, learning standards, and assessment practices, taking each in turn and revealing their complex and in places highly contested status. In short, comparative measures of quality depend on comparable learning standards which in turn depend on local institutional assessment practices. A number of problematic assumptions relating to the theoretical definition of learning standards and their
practical application through the practices of assessment are discussed in this chapter. The final section within this chapter draws on the preceding discussion to examine issues relating to the national and international comparability of learning standards.

Chapter 4 discusses the theoretical frameworks used to analyse policy processes in this study. Sections within this chapter explicate how both critical theory and poststructural approaches were used within a policy trajectory framework in order to analyse policy processes across four policy contexts: influences; policy text production; practices/effects; and outcomes. These contexts of the policy trajectory are analysed within the Australian national and local (institutional) settings, and complemented with the perspectives of selected policy actors beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD). A final section within this chapter discusses the theoretical underpinnings of critical discourse analysis, the use of which is described further in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 addresses the qualitative research design, sampling and methods used for data collection and analysis. Here, issues of ‘trustworthiness’ and researcher positionality in qualitative research are identified in the first section. The four research questions are introduced in the second section. Subsequent sections discuss data collection methods (interviews and policy documents), sampling techniques and participant identity coding. It also elucidates a number of issues encountered when interviewing elite participants. A further section explains the approach to data analysis, including an example of how critical discourse analysis techniques were applied to a key Ministerial speech in the Australian setting. A final section discusses a number of ethical considerations.

Chapters 6 to 10 present the findings of this research, with each chapter focusing on one of the four policy trajectory contexts. Although not forming part of the Australian policy trajectory analysis, the perspectives of participants from the UK, US, and the OECD are included in a separate section within each of these chapters to facilitate inter-national comparisons.

Chapter 6 identifies key global, national and local influences that have affected policy processes in the field of quality policy relating to learning standards and their assessment. Chapter 7 addresses policy text production, and this chapter is extended to include critical discourse analysis of five Australian policy texts most relevant to the
research interests. Chapter 8 examines a number of emerging practices/effects including, amongst others, the various ways higher education sectors have sought to fend off government intrusion. Chapter 9 identifies predicted and emergent longer term outcomes, outlining implications for student equity and academic freedom.

Chapter 10 advances a meta-analysis of the themes emerging from the Australian policy trajectory study and from the perspectives of selected policy actors from the UK, US, and the OECD to generate 15 theoretical propositions. The overarching key integrating theme of ideology and power is identified and examined in depth. In later sections within this chapter the research design undertaken in this study is critiqued and compared with other contemporary approaches that focus on networks, leading to the advancement of combined theoretical framings which may offer value for future policy analysis.

Chapter 11 commences by outlining evolving developments within the Australian setting after the period of data collection which was completed in May 2013. This highlights a number of ongoing tensions associated with proposed quality policies relating to learning standards and reveals how these issues remain highly problematic. Subsequent sections within this chapter draw on the findings of this study to identify a number of implications for the development of quality policy relating to learning standards and for future research.
Chapter 2: Background

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the background to contemporary Australian and international quality policy relating to learning standards in higher education. A number of policy antecedents and pressures are identified, establishing the historical and political landscape within which this research is situated. This chapter closes at the point when data collection was completed in May 2013. Ongoing policy developments that occurred between this point and the time of thesis submission (December 2014) are discussed in Chapter 11. A comprehensive timeline of key developments in relation to the time span of this research is provided in Appendix A.

Australian quality policy in higher education has been shaped by various influences, and the first section of this chapter examines developments in a number of international settings. In particular, Australian quality policy has been influenced by developments in countries and regions that have served as significant sources of what has been termed ‘policy borrowing’ (Alexiadou, 2014; Dale, 1999; Ozga & Jones, 2006; Winstanley, 2012). The most prominent sources of policy borrowing by Australia are the United Kingdom (UK), Europe and the United States of America (US), and, as a result, many examples are drawn from these areas in the opening section.

In the second section, Australian quality policy developments in higher education are traced, concluding with the landmark Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008). The third section of this chapter deals with the Australian Government’s response to this review: the establishment of the Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System policy (Australian Government, 2009), a key turning point which introduced a number of significant changes into Australian higher education. The fourth and final section of this chapter discusses some of the tensions that have arisen in the period following the introduction of this new Australian higher education policy. This chapter is therefore divided into the following sections:

- Quality and standards in selected international higher education settings
- Quality and standards in the Australian higher education setting
- The Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System policy (2009)
- Policy contestation and tensions in the period 2009-2013
Quality and standards in selected international higher education settings

This section discusses key developments in higher education quality policies relating to learning standards in a number of international higher education settings. The following section examines the growth and influence of these developments in Australia in closer detail, and, as will be shown, a sharpening interest in developing comparable measures of quality based on student achievement of learning standards is a theme common to all settings.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has been a prominent actor (Sellar & Lingard, 2013b) in international policy processes, fostering networks and producing a number of highly influential publications. These include thematic reports of governance and quality (Santiago et al., 2008) and international comparisons such as those contained within Education at a Glance (OECD, 2014a), which provides information on participation rates in higher education and equity outcomes, amongst others. Comparative measures of learning were also established in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which sought to compare learning standards in sampled schools across a growing number of countries every three years, starting from the year 2000 (OECD, 2014b).

Of particular relevance to this study was the fledgling OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project, conceived at the 2006 Meeting of OECD Education Ministers and referred to initially as a “PISA for higher education” (OECD, 2012, p. 56). Following a feasibility study in 2008, this three year project commenced in January 2010 with aims to provide a “direct evaluation of student performance at the global level ... valid across diverse cultures, languages and different types of institutions” (OECD, 2014c, "What is the AHELO Feasibility Study?", para. 2). Within this project, 15 countries and 150 institutions had agreed to participate in the development and application of standardised testing instruments to evaluate generic skills (critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving and written communication) and some discipline-specific skills within the fields of economics and engineering. Contextual information (background and learning environments) was also collected as part of the AHELO project, in order to facilitate processes of international benchmarking (OECD, 2014c).
In Europe, the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 by ministers from 29 countries signalled a commitment to work towards comparable degree specifications with outcomes defined at bachelor, masters and doctoral levels (European Higher Education Area, 1999). By 2000, the European ‘Tuning’ project was linking the Bologna declaration to activities in the education sector, ultimately producing a ‘tuning process’ and a set of tools (Tuning Management Committee, 2006), spawning similar projects in other settings such as the US (Adelman, 2009). Australia signed a joint declaration in 2007 to enhance the links with the Bologna Process (Zajda, 2014). Harmonisation, a process of creating common standards (Maletic, 2013), was occurring within Europe in the domain of qualification frameworks and also in quality assurance processes. Following an invitation from the Ministers of the Bologna Process in 2003, a landmark document, titled Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, was produced by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2009). Within this growing network, expectations were established for institutional assessment policies and processes within a standards-based framework of learning outcomes.

The UK has also had a long-standing interest in the comparability of educational qualifications across and beyond the higher education sector. Early work conducted by Johnes and Taylor (1990) reported a number of differences between institutional degree classifications in an attempt to ‘benchmark’ or compare standards across institutions. By the year 2000, ‘subject benchmark statements’ had been released, following recommendations made in the antecedent landmark review titled Higher Education in the Learning Society (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). Subject benchmark statements describe the attributes, skills and capabilities that a graduate of a particular discipline would be expected to have (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2012). However, these statements are not intended to specify a detailed curriculum or favour particular assessment approaches. Instead, they are intended to inform and assist those involved in program design and review through an established consensus on the nature of standards in that discipline. It is of interest to note that these benchmark statements were originally cast as subject benchmark standards before being renamed in response to critique from the academic community; an issue that is taken up and examined more fully in Chapter 3.
In the US, an increased focus on learning outcomes, their measurement and their comparability was also becoming more apparent at the turn of the millennium. In the school sector the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act in January 2002 had introduced standardised testing for all students on an annual basis, with punitive measures meted out to schools that failed to demonstrate ‘adequate yearly progress’ (Hurst, 2008). In higher education, and taking a line similar to that taken in schools, the Spellings Commission published *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, calling for increased accountability and suggesting that “higher education institutions should measure student learning using quality assessment from indicators such as, for example, the Collegiate Learning Assessment” (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 24). Released in 2002 by the Council for Aid to Education (a not-for-profit educational foundation), the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) sought to measure critical thinking, analytical reasoning and written communication using a standardised test. It is important to note from the outset that this test was designed to be used for quality enhancement (with a focus on improving quality), rather than quality assurance (with a focus on ‘proving’ quality).

Partly in response to the Spellings Commission, the American Association for Colleges and Universities embarked on a three year mission in 2007 to develop *Valid Assessments of Learning in Undergraduate Education*. A key outcome of this project was the collaborative development of a set of detailed standards for 15 essential learning outcomes (such as critical thinking and information literacy), expressed at the level of the graduate (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2006).

In short, over the 20 years preceding this study, policy discourses within the OECD, Europe, UK, and the US were increasingly focusing on learning standards, and, in particular, their comparability across disciplines, institutions, and regions. Networks were forming and growing in scope and membership: the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, formed in 1991 with only eight members, had listed over 250 members on their website in 2014 (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, 2014). Evolving discourses focusing on quality and learning standards were also recognisable in quality policy developments in the Australian setting, and these are discussed in the following section.
Quality and standards in the Australian higher education setting

In Australia, the focus on ‘quality’ in higher education came to the forefront in the early 1990s with Australia’s first official quality policy (Baldwin, 1991). Prior to that, Australian universities were largely self-regulated. However, in the antecedent paper titled Quality Measures in Universities (Bourke, 1986) nascent calls were made for clearer performance indicators and measures of achievement. The Australian Government had also considered the use of student experience surveys such as the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) in the Green Paper titled Higher Education: A Policy Discussion Paper (Dawkins, 1987) as a means of assessing the quality of higher education in Australia. This paper promoted the need for greater institutional accountability and proposed that funding for universities should be linked to institutional performance. In the White Paper that followed, student satisfaction was among a number of measures of institutional performance in a list of outcome based quantitative key performance indicators including completion rates, relative staff levels and research output (Dawkins, 1988).

The quality policy that followed (Baldwin, 1991) included the distribution of $AUD 76 million between 1993 and 1995 for universities that opted into the quality programme under the auspices of the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all elected to participate. This policy largely constructed quality in terms of ‘excellent standards’ in universities with a focus on institutional processes. This was to gradually transition towards a discourse of ‘quality assurance’ with an emphasis on accountability (Vidovich, 2001) when in 1992-3 incoming Minister Beazley added an outcomes component to reviews. Discourses of quality assurance were maintained by the subsequent Minister (Crean), who retained the focus on educational outcomes.

In 1999, Minister Kemp criticised the lack of external review and pointed to the difficulty of comparing Australian standards with other countries (Kemp, 1999). This document also signalled new power relationships between the Australian Government and universities through the introduction of ‘at risk’ funding (conditional funding released if targets were met) and a shift in terminology from ‘review’ to ‘audit’, to be carried out by the new Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), constituted as a

In the ten year period between 1999 and 2009, a growing interest in learning standards in Australia was also becoming prominent in the academic literature. Similar activity was also visible in Australian Government policy texts, where Minister Nelson had heralded the development of a National Institute for Learning and Teaching in the policy paper *Our Universities: Backing Australia’s Future* (Nelson, 2003). One of the responsibilities of this new institute (the Carrick Institute) was to liaise with the sector about options for articulating and monitoring a number of standards, including the investigation of the feasibility of a national portfolio scheme (Nelson, 2003). This paper also foreshadowed the establishment of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, which was to ultimately include student progression and attrition rates in its funding calculations (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2008). The quality of student outcomes was also measured using ‘proxy’ self-reported scales such as the CEQ, which had started in 1993, surveying students completing their studies in 1992, originally using a questionnaire with 24 items. The CEQ was administered concurrently with the Graduate Destination Survey; the two surveys being collectively identified as the Australian Graduate Survey.

During this period AUQA had also referred to the value of benchmarking a number of times in audit reports (Stella & Woodhouse, 2007), pointing to the need to focus on learning standards. A number of comparatively small scale projects relating to learning standards had been funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council and the predecessor Carrick Institute, with many focusing on the building of shared understandings of learning standards within an academic community (a process termed ‘moderation’).

In March 2008, following the election of the Labor Government under Prime Minister Rudd, the then Minister for Education (Gillard) initiated the *Review of Australian Higher Education*, under the aegis of a panel chaired by former Vice-Chancellor Denise
Bradley with a remit to examine the fitness for purpose of the sector in “meeting the needs of the Australian community and economy” (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 205).

By June 2008, the Bradley group had released a discussion paper with a request for evidence-informed comments. Despite a fairly tight timescale for consultation, 353 comments had been received by the group when the consultation period closed at the end of July 2008. The final report of the panel, released in December 2008, highlighted the need for Australia to invest in higher education to increase the proportion of the population with a degree, and to improve and assure the quality of those graduates. At the heart of these conclusions lay the assertion that Australia was losing ground against other countries, thereby being placed at a competitive disadvantage in a global economy. Attention was drawn to the slippage from 7th to 9th position in international rankings produced by the OECD, and Australia’s position was compared with ambitious widening participation targets established by other OECD countries:

> Australia is losing ground. Within the OECD we are now 9th out of 30 in the proportion of our population aged 25 to 34 years with such qualifications, down from 7th a decade ago. Twenty nine per cent of our 25- to 34-year-olds have degree-level qualifications but in other OECD countries targets of up to 50 per cent have already been set. These policy decisions elsewhere place us at a great competitive disadvantage unless immediate action is taken.

(Bradley et al., 2008, p. xi)

The Bradley report ultimately made 46 recommendations to the Australian Government, including the establishment of national targets for participation rates in higher education, improved indexation and further support for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and/or regional and remote areas (Bradley et al., 2008). Substantial changes to quality assurance processes were proposed, through formation of a single body charged with regulating all tertiary education, replacing AUQA and other state/regional regulators. Within these proposals lay stronger discourses of quality assurance, a sharpening focus on academic standards and, in particular, learning standards and their comparability within Australia and internationally.
The Bradley report firmly positioned learning standards within the context of the new quality assurance arrangements within recommendation 23, which proposed that:

... the Australian Government commission and appropriately fund work on the development of new quality assurance arrangements for higher education as part of the new framework set out in Recommendation 19. This would involve:

• a set of indicators and instruments to directly assess and compare learning outcomes; and
• a set of formal statements of academic standards by discipline along with processes for applying those standards.

(Bradley et al., 2008, p. 137)

The Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System policy (2009)

In a speech made at the Universities Australia conference in March 2009, Deputy Prime Minister Gillard foreshadowed the Australian Government’s response to the Bradley group’s report, asserting that “in an era when investment in knowledge and skills promises to be the ultimate determinant of national and individual prosperity, Australia is losing ground against our competitors” (Gillard, 2009, para. 6). Gillard located the rationale for change within a context of devolved responsibilities, value for money, and contribution to the national interest:

It is crucial because more responsibility will devolve to students and to institutions. It is vital because both domestic and international students will need to know how our institutions are performing. It is essential because taxpayers will need to see not just whether value for money is being delivered but whether the national interest is being well served.

(Gillard, 2009, "A new approach to quality", para. 2)

The Australian Government accepted the majority of Bradley’s recommendations, and in 2009 a policy “ensemble” (Ball, 1993, p. 14) was put forward for consultation with the sector. Articulated as an overarching ten year vision, titled Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System and positioned as a comprehensive response to the Bradley review, this ensemble included proposals to usher in “A New Era of Quality in Australian Tertiary Education” (Australian Government, 2009, p. 31).
Despite prevailing economic headwinds precipitated by the Global Financial Crisis, $AUD 5.4 billion of Federal funding was allocated to support tertiary education and research over four years. This reform package included the creation of a demand driven funding system, improved indexation on grants, and performance funding to be released against progress targets established in ‘compacts’ (agreements) between the Australian Government and higher education institutions. The package also heralded the introduction of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), a significant new regulator for the sector. This development signalled considerable change to the legislative framework for Australian higher education.

A number of consultation papers were released to the sector in flurry of activity that took place between May and July 2009. Amongst others, these consultations included proposed changes to strengthen the Australian Qualifications Framework and to establish ‘Mission-based Compacts’ (Australian Government, 2009) to facilitate the negotiation of individual agreements between higher education institutions and the Australian Government. A key consultation relating to learning standards was released by AUQA in May 2009, titled Setting and Monitoring Academic Standards for Australian Higher Education: A Discussion Paper (Australian Universities Quality Agency [AUQA], 2009b). This paper argued the need for clearly articulated learning standards, also raising possibilities of using standardised testing of learning standards to appraise graduate capabilities.

In August 2009, an ‘environmental scan’ commissioned by AUQA was published, entitled International Trends in Establishing the Standards of Academic Achievement in Higher Education (Harris, 2009). This document reported on the various approaches being taken in a number of other countries relating to learning standards and their appraisal. The report identified a variety of approaches in use, ranging from countries employing loosely defined standards to the long-standing use of national standardised assessments of learning standards in Brazilian higher education.

Further funding was committed by the Australian Government in October 2009 when the Australian Learning and Teaching Council was awarded $AUD 2 million to facilitate the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project. This project ultimately drew together disciplinary groupings, led by ‘Discipline Scholars’ (experienced academics at a professorial level) in the fields of arts; social sciences and humanities; business,
management and economics; creative and performing arts; engineering and information and communication technologies; health, medicine, and veterinary science; and law (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010). The key deliverable for Discipline Scholars was the production of a document containing ‘Threshold Learning Outcomes’, articulating minimum standards for graduation for that discipline. These outcomes were to be established through a process of discussion and negotiation with other academic colleagues.

During this period, other policy processes were gaining momentum. In December 2009, the Australian Government released a paper titled *An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding* (DEEWR, 2009a), hereafter identified as the Indicator Framework Discussion Paper. Essentially this proposed a staged release of funds based on the meeting of targets to be negotiated during 2010. Under these proposals, load-based ‘facilitation’ payments totalling $AUD 90 million would be distributed by the Australian Government to universities that negotiated and reached agreement on these targets. From 2012, universities meeting their agreed targets would receive ‘performance’ funding. Such targets would “be institutional targets against sector-wide measures and indicators” (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 5). Whilst the indicators themselves had not, at this stage, been specified in precise detail, 11 principles for the selection of appropriate indicators were established. According to these principles, desirable indicators were those that were “statistically sound and methodologically rigorous … derived from high quality, objective data sources … without having a perverse influence on behaviour” (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 6).

One of four indicator clusters proposed in this paper was the ‘quality of learning outcomes’. This cluster spanned both discipline-specific and general outcomes and included the quality of teaching performance, measured by the percentage of staff with a teaching qualification. Direct measures of learning outcomes were positioned as the best kind of indicator of learning standards. The work of the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project was seen to contribute to the measurement of discipline-specific outcomes, whilst the Graduate Skills Assessment was posited as a way of including a value-added measure of generic skills.

As an interim step, use of the existing Course Experience Questionnaire was proposed, with an acknowledgment of the limitations inherent in self-reported measures. The
Graduate Skills Assessment (developed in 1999 by the Australian Council for Educational Research) was also an existing indicator, albeit not one in wide use. It comprised a three hour assessment consisting of multiple choice (two hours) and written tasks (one hour). In this Indicator Framework Discussion Paper, references were also made to the fledgling OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project in terms of its potential ability to draw both discipline-specific and general comparisons across and between nation states (DEEWR, 2009a).

In response to the 61 stakeholder comments received as part of this consultation process, the first draft of the Indicator Framework Discussion Paper was substantially revised with various aspects being dropped or modified in a second draft released for consultation in October 2010. In the cluster of indicators concerning the quality of learning outcomes, the measure relating to the proportion of staff with a teaching qualification was dropped, and in its place a teaching quality indicator was proposed, but not defined. Measures relating to student retention and progression targets were also dropped. The use of the Graduate Destination Survey as a measure of learning outcomes was abandoned, and in place of the Graduate Skills Assessment, a new indicator was proposed, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), developed in the US by the Council for Aid to Education (Benjamin et al., 2009). Originally designed to operate within a quality improvement framework, the CLA sought to measure capabilities of critical thinking, problem solving and written communication, with testing in first and final years posited to offer ‘value-add’ comparisons between institutions. Significantly, the CLA had been drawn into the OECD AHELO project as a means of comparing learning standards internationally.

Elsewhere in the Indicator Framework Discussion Paper, the development of a new University Experience Survey was proposed in order to appraise the first year experience. Although the survey did not purport to directly measure learning outcomes, assessment is particularly relevant to the first year experience (Kift & Moody, 2009). The University Experience Survey would invite student responses to questions relating to the development of graduate capabilities. It would therefore operate in a similar area to that measured by the CLA but with a focus on self-reported measures (Radloff, Coates, James, & Krause, 2011).
In a third draft of the Indicator Framework Discussion Paper (released December 2011) the teaching quality indicator was dropped without ever being defined. Although the CLA remained as a performance indicator for the quality of learning outcomes, clarification was offered that this was to be a newly developed Australian version of the American test (Australian Government, 2011a).

By the end of 2011 the Australian Government had established conditional ‘performance’ funding for universities (DEEWR, 2011d). The first and second conditions established requirements relating to the teaching and learning missions of universities, and their recruitment of low socioeconomic and other under-represented student groups respectively. The third condition specified that universities were required to participate in the development and establishment of a performance baseline for the following indicators, including: satisfaction with teaching (CEQ); first year experience (University Experience Survey); satisfaction with generic skills (CEQ); and value-added generic skills (an Australian version of the CLA). These were to be published on the yet to be developed website labelled My University, scheduled for launch in 2012.

As outlined later in this section, the passage of this legislation was to be delayed, but ultimately in July 2011, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act passed into law (Australian Government, 2011b). The purpose of TEQSA was to evaluate the performance of tertiary education institutions against five broad standards. These comprised the: Provider Standards; Qualification Standards; Teaching and Learning Standards; Information Standards; and Research Standards. So called ‘threshold’ standards for institutions were established by the Provider Standards and the Qualification Standards. All higher education providers were required to meet these in order to register and operate within Australia’s education system.

The specific objectives of TEQSA were enshrined in six ‘Objects’:

(a) to provide for national consistency in the regulation of higher education; and

(b) to regulate higher education using:

(i) a standards-based quality framework; and

(ii) principles relating to regulatory necessity, risk and proportionality; and
(c) to protect and enhance:

(i) Australia’s reputation for quality higher education and training services; and

(ii) Australia’s international competitiveness in the higher education sector; and

(iii) excellence, diversity and innovation in higher education in Australia; and

(d) to encourage and promote a higher education system that is appropriate to meet Australia’s social and economic needs for a highly educated and skilled population; and

(e) to protect students undertaking, or proposing to undertake, higher education in Australia by requiring the provision of quality higher education; and

(f) to ensure students undertaking, or proposing to undertake, higher education, have access to information relating to higher education in Australia.

(Australian Government, 2011b, Part 1, Division 2, para. 3)

Policy contestation and tensions in Australia between 2009-2013

The number of policy consultations, the volume and character of stakeholder responses and the various policy re-drafts that were experienced in the period following the release of Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009) signalled a significant level of contestation and tension. Strong resistance from the sector prompted a number of changes, some of which were outlined previously, ultimately delaying key TEQSA legislation through parliament. Such tensions were also picked up and given a public airing in various parts of the Australian media. The debate over learning standards and their measurement also attracted attention from the international press, such as the Times Higher Education (UK) which carried a provocative article by the Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University (Sydney), lamenting the significant strings that were now attached to public funding (Schwartz, 2011).

Three areas of contestation were particularly relevant to this research. The first area of contestation related to the role and value of threshold learning standards, provoked by an AUQA discussion paper released in May 2009. The second area of contestation related to proposed indicator frameworks for higher education performance funding released in December 2009. This document was subject to considerable challenge, with stakeholders raising the possible perverse consequences for assessment practices
if such funding arrangements were to be introduced. The third area of contestation revolved around the role of TEQSA and the ways the agency might ‘police’ these learning standards. A number of examples drawn from each of these three areas of contestation are outlined in the following three subsections.

**Threshold learning standards.**

In May 2009, AUQA published a discussion paper titled *Setting and Monitoring Academic Standards for Australian Higher Education* (AUQA, 2009b). This consultation drew 55 responses from a diverse group of stakeholders, of which 10 exercised their option to make a confidential submission (AUQA, 2009a). Considerable challenges were mounted in the 45 publicly available responses, with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of New South Wales asserting that “the discussion paper will not benefit from modification. Its approaches are flawed and it needs to be totally rewritten” (Henry, 2009, p. 2).

Many responses to the consultation picked up on the implications for diversity and innovation if the outcomes were to lead to increased standardisation. One response warned of the possible emergence of convoluted competency frameworks similar to those employed in the vocational education and training sector, where despite the production of comprehensive documentation, such information “still wouldn't ensure equivalent achievement standards even at base level” (Welsman, 2009, para. 6).

Commentators questioned underpinning arguments for threshold learning outcomes, suggesting that anxieties about the quality of Australian graduates were unjustified (Robson, 2009). McLean (2009, p. 2) argued that rationales for change were “ill-defined and ill-informed” and that it was not clear what the underlying problems to be tackled were, suggesting that the drive of the consultation paper was perhaps more about establishing inter-institutional comparisons. In practical terms, remarks were made about the onerous benchmarking exercises that had taken place in the 1980s and the “marginally useful” (MacGillivray, 2009, p. 1) reports that resulted.

Other responses queried the trustworthiness of grading practices in assessment, given long-standing tensions in this area. Fisher (2009) noted that many commonplace assessment practices (such as the granting of conceded passes, the application of late submission penalties, and supplementary or repeated assessment tasks) could
potentially adjust the final grade or mark. This was important, because such adjustments could potentially mean that the standard indicated was not the standard achieved.

Despite various policy ‘settlements’ en route (such as the removal of progression rates as a performance indicator), the issue of learning standards and their definition remained contested. For example, writing in *The Australian* after the conclusion of the project to establish threshold standards in Law, Dietrich (2011, para. 17) asserted that “threshold learning standards are so widely drawn almost any criticism can be met with a nod to the outcomes and an assertion they are being complied with”. This echoed concerns raised earlier by the Australian Technology Network institutions that “any useful approach would not be doable and any doable approach would not be useful” (Australian Technology Network, 2009, p. 4), an issue that also featured in the AUQA summary of stakeholder responses, albeit cast in more attenuated tones (AUQA, n.d.).

**Proposed indicator frameworks for higher education performance funding.**

As outlined earlier, the first draft of the Indicator Framework Discussion Paper was released in December 2009 (DEEWR, 2009a). This provoked 61 written stakeholder submissions in response, all of which were published on the Australian Government website (DEEWR, 2009b). Stakeholder comments were received from individual universities, formal groupings of universities, businesses, student groups and other peak bodies such as councils of deans and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

The Indicator Framework Discussion Paper described ways in which the quality of learning outcomes could be appraised through the use of the various instruments proposed in the funding framework and many responses criticised the design of the indicators themselves. The paper also made reference to the need to avoid perverse influences on behaviour as a design principle, and many responded to this theme, pointing out the various perverse effects that would ensue as a consequence of the policy approach. For example, the paper proposed the use of progression and retention rates to determine student attainment targets. Progression rates are essentially measures of pass rates, and critiques of this approach pointed to the extent
to which such measures were open to manipulation by institutions and the flawed nature of the measure itself. The risk that standards might be lowered in an attempt to improve pass rates was seen as a potential perverse outcome by a number of stakeholders. Progression/retention measures were also seen to be too simplistic, given that these rates are influenced by a number of complex factors, such as the effect of students who switch courses or institutions.

The nature of ‘lagged’ indicators such as the CEQ (taking place after graduation) was also criticised. The Innovative Research Universities’ collective submission pointed out that it was difficult for universities to gain funding against students who had already started their studies (Innovative Research Universities, 2010). Other responses, such as that made by the University of New England (2010), pointed to the fundamental philosophical tensions associated with individually negotiated compacts between the Australian Government and higher education institutions and the employment of a common set of indicators for the sector. Challenges were also mounted against unbalanced indicator frameworks (i.e. those relying too heavily on outcome measures) and their unintended consequences (Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development, n.d.), a point taken up by Gallagher (2010) who also argued that the quality of inputs (such as teachers and facilities) should not be ignored.

Instruments proposed as measures of learning outcomes were also singled out for particularly sharp criticism in responses to this first draft of the funding framework. In particular, the Graduate Skills Assessment received widespread criticism. The Vice-Chancellor of the Central Queensland University (Bowman, 2010, p. 3) pointed to the “huge financial and administrative burden” of testing, criticising the Graduate Skills Assessment for failing to take into account those learning outcomes that are in the psychomotor or affective domain, such as the ability to work effectively in teams.

The Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (n.d.) pointed to the lack of a direct connection between generic measures reported by the Graduate Skills Assessment and the discipline learning outcomes. Furthermore, a number of responses warned of the risks of promoting generic skills over existing university graduate attributes with the risk of standardisation against distinct outcomes. To this end, some responses pointed to the risk that institutions would set up conditions to allow them to ‘teach to the test’ (Allport & Kneist, 2010; University of Western Sydney, n.d.).
Griffith University (n.d.) pointed to the minimal (and falling) use of the Graduate Skills Assessment, suggesting that it was difficult to get students to complete the three hour test in addition to their studies, criticising the test as it failed to measure anything considered to be useful by universities or employers who, they argued, tended to use other information to make decisions. Taking a student perspective, the University of Tasmania (n.d.) pointed to the lack of incentive for students to do well, given the disconnection between the test and their studies.

In the face of stiff opposition, the Australian Government dropped the Graduate Skills Assessment in a second draft of the Indicator Framework Discussion Paper released in October 2010, proposing instead the adoption of the CLA, imported directly from the US. This second draft received 44 responses (DEEWR, 2011c). In contrast to the first draft, individual stakeholder responses to this second draft were not published on the Australian Government website although a brief one page document was made available summarising changes made in the light of those responses (DEEWR, 2010).

In short, the proposal to adopt the CLA fared no better, prompting strongly negative reactions from the academic community with respect to inadequate funding, problematic standards and risks of standardisation (Trounson, 2010a). For example, shortly after the release of the second draft of the discussion paper, The Australian newspaper carried an article that argued that “if the CLA is introduced here, widespread teaching of how to take tests and more tests in assessment to help students practice taking tests will become the norm” (Matthews, 2010, para. 9).

Benjamin (the President of the Council for Aid to Education, the American body responsible for the CLA) responded to the growing dissent in Australia with an article published by The Australian in which he sounded a number of cautionary notes regarding the use of CLA for performance funding, pointing to the American usage of the indicator as just one tool within a wider quality improvement framework, arguing that performance-based funding systems had not proved to be practical (Benjamin, 2010).

The Australian Government subsequently dropped the proposal for a direct importation of the American CLA in favour of a version of CLA adapted for the Australian setting, pushing back timescales for implementation to ensure that there
was sufficient time to consult with universities and build robust instruments (Australian Government, 2011a; Lane, 2011b). However, in a third draft of the Indicator Framework Discussion Paper, the Government announced that reward funding for the development of performance indicators was now withdrawn, explaining this decision “in the context of the Government’s fiscal strategy and on the basis of feedback from the sector that there was no consensus on the issue of whether it is appropriate to use such indicators for Reward Funding” (DEEWR, 2011c, p. 4).

By the end of December 2011, funding arrangements had been ‘finalised’. A new consultation paper titled Assessment of Generic Skills had been released to the sector, with a longer time frame for comments extending to mid February 2012 (DEEWR, 2011a). Notable changes in this consultation included the introduction of a smaller set of more broadly defined design principles, a more cautious adoption of an Australian version of the CLA, and an explanation that highlighted the value of adopting an indicator which was in use within the OECD AHELO project. The potential inclusion of disciplinary learning outcomes alongside generic outcomes was also raised for discussion, something that the sector had argued for in responses to previous consultations.

However, these arrangements did not prevail, and by the end of 2012 the idea of using the CLA at all was silently dropped, following the publication of a report from the Advancing Quality in Higher Education Reference Group (2012) which mounted strong criticism of the proposed usage of the CLA. This group argued that the CLA was not fit for the intended purposes in an Australian context, reiterating widespread concerns that had been expressed in the sector. Two further proposals were advanced by the group. First, they proposed that further consultations “with TEQSA, the Higher Education Standards Panel and the Office for Teaching and Learning [sic] commence to achieve coherence and consistency to assure the quality of higher education outcomes” (Advancing Quality in Higher Education Reference Group, 2012, p. 4). Second, to assure that the generic skills of graduates were able to meet the needs of employers, the group proposed a literature review and scoping study to investigate the feasibility of an employer satisfaction survey. The Australian Government quietly dropped proposals to introduce the CLA and from that point onwards it simply vanished from policy discussions.
In March 2013, the Higher Education Standards Panel, a formally constituted expert advisory body to the Australian Government (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2014) put forward a set of consultation documents describing course and learning outcomes (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2013). Within this consultative proposal, processes of peer review and external verification of learning standards were described, and, significantly, the word ‘measure’ was not used. These documents marked a considerable departure from previous policy consultations, but the status of the proposal was unclear, as it had emanated from an advisory body to the Australian Government rather than the Government itself.

The role of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA).  
The report by Bradley et al. (2008, p. 175) posited that “accountability for the performance of the institutions and public funding within this framework would be relatively simple, clear and transparent”. This point was picked up by the then Minister for Education (Gillard) in her 2009 speech to the Universities Australia Conference: “I understand the anxiety some will have of more red tape and managerial control. That is not the intention and it will not be the effect” (Gillard, 2009, “A new era of quality”, para. 5). However, by June 2010 there were strident calls in the press arguing that the formation of TEQSA had not simplified arrangements but in fact had made them more complex, with the Vice-Chancellor of the Australian Catholic University going as far as to publicly label TEQSA as ‘toxic’ (Craven, 2010).

With the appointment of Bradley (who led the Review of Australian Higher Education) as the interim Chair of TEQSA in July 2010, tensions abated, although they did not disappear (Australian Technology Network, 2010). Subsequent policy settlements removed the power of a single executive (who could, in extremis, deregister a university) and replaced this with a group of Commissioners led by a Chief Commissioner. Furthermore, several assurances were given that TEQSA action would be on a risk-based and proportionate basis, with regulatory action targeted towards those issues and providers deemed to be most at risk.

In 2011 the Australian Learning and Teaching Council was dealt a fatal blow when its forward funding was discontinued by Prime Minister Gillard as part of the budget cuts designed to assist with the costs of rebuilding flood-affected regions across Australia
(Gillard, 2011). The Council had been prominent in the development of learning standards across disciplines, and for work in the area of teaching and learning quality more generally. This decision precipitated an outcry from the sector, prompting Independent Member Wilkie to negotiate continued (albeit reduced) funding for key activities in exchange for his supporting vote on the flood levy in parliament. In November 2011, Minister Evans announced the subsequent establishment of the Council’s successor, the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), funded with $AUD 58.8 million over four years with a remit to promote excellence in learning and teaching through a Grants and Awards Program (Office for Learning and Teaching, 2014). By that time, Carol Nicoll (the head of the former Australian Learning and Teaching Council) had been appointed in August 2011 as the Chief Commissioner of TEQSA in a move which appeared to further defuse tensions (Lane, 2011a). However, questions regarding the potential longer term practices and effects of TEQSA still remained (Mazzolini, 2012).

Inadequate and at times hurried consultation with the sector has been a consistent theme across consultation processes. Such consultations were occasionally exclusive, provoking criticism and media comment (Trounson, 2010b). Furthermore, issues relating to ‘trust’ have been consistently raised by the sector. For example, responding to the performance indicator funding framework proposed in December 2009, a number of stakeholders questioned the need for an ‘arms-length’ independent body, arguing that this in effect duplicated the role of institutions as self-accrediting bodies (Bowman, 2010; Solomonides, n.d.).

**Concluding discussion**

This chapter has identified a number of antecedent and contemporary international, national and local/institutional influences on Australian quality policy in higher education. The Australian Government responded to these issues by establishing a “New Era of Quality” within the *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* policy ensemble (Australian Government, 2009, p. 31).

There were three aspects to this emergent quality policy that were especially relevant to institutions’ assessment practices. First, a standards-based framework for quality
was predicated on learning standards to be developed and owned by the disciplinary community under the aegis of a Higher Education Standards Panel. These changes were designed to ensure that graduates met minimum (threshold) learning standards, on the logic that this would assure quality in Australian higher education. Furthermore, these standards were positioned to facilitate comparison across a complex and diverse sector. Second, TEQSA, a unified regulator was created with a remit to accredit, evaluate and report on higher education performance, including learning standards. Third, via individual compacts (agreements) between the Australian Government and higher education institutions, facilitation funding was to be allocated to those institutions contributing to the development of a suite of performance indicators relating to the student experience and quality of learning outcomes. For a time, these performance indicators included the CLA, a standardised test of generic capabilities which had originated in the US, later being drawn into the OECD AHELO project.

Taken together, these substantial and significant changes represented a landmark turning point in Australian higher education quality policy relating to learning standards, the effects of which form the major investigative thrust of this research.
Chapter 3: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter examines the key conceptual themes of globalisation, globalised education policy, accountability, quality, learning standards and the assessment practices that underpin them. The first section of this chapter addresses the concept of globalisation, and explicates how processes of globalisation have exerted a profound effect on nation states. The second section focuses on globalised education policy, and identifies how comparisons at a national and international level are increasingly drawn from quantitative data. The third section examines the concept of accountability, exploring the increasing attention given to this in education policies. The fourth section addresses the complex concept of ‘quality’ and describes how quality is evaluated through processes of audit and assurance. The fifth section turns to the concept of learning standards, scrutinising their theoretical foundations and exploring issues of specificity. The sixth and final section provides a detailed examination of the way learning standards are appraised through institutional assessment practices, identifying a number of implications if ‘measures’ of student achievement are to be used as the basis for comparisons of ‘quality’.

Globalisation

Globalisation is a widely employed term, used to describe a highly complex set of processes and outcomes, “concealing contested meanings and dominant ideologies” (Zajda, 2014, p. 166). It is associated with changing patterns of economic activities across national boundaries, and it also encompasses “the ways in which contemporary political and cultural configurations have been re-shaped by major advances in information technologies” (Rizvi, 2014, p. 22).

Although the growth of information and communication technologies has accelerated interconnections in recent times, conceptions of globalisation are by no means new. For example, Rodrik (2011) pointed to the increasing effects of globalisation several centuries ago through the formation of international trading routes and the establishment of the English and Dutch East India Companies.
However, globalisation represents more than just an increase in trade or improved connectivity between individual nations; it describes a fundamentally different set of relationships across and between nation states. Lingard, Rawolle, and Taylor (2005) differentiated between ‘international’ relationships (between nations), ‘transnational’ (across national boundaries) and ‘global’ (supranational) networks. Dale (2005, p. 123), writing about globalised education, asserted that we are witnessing “new supranational forms of ‘education’ that consciously seek to undermine and reconfigure existing national forms of education, even as they run alongside them, and even in their shadow”. A key element of globalisation, according to Dale (2005), is that these supranational influences are not necessarily reducible to the activities or interests of any one nation state, describing a qualitatively different position to that associated with transnational or inter-national relationships.

Rizvi and Lingard (2010, p. 24) observed that these shifting relationships have had different effects on different communities, suggesting that the globalised world is “fundamentally heterogeneous, unequal and conflictive”. They discussed three ways in which globalisation can be understood: as a description of changes taking place in the world; as an ideology that advances certain interests and masks others; and as a ‘social imaginary’ that describes how people view their own identity and place in the world. Each way describes a different view of a complex phenomenon.

Bottery (2006, p. 96) suggested that globalisation is “intimately connected with the way we view our place and meaning on this planet”, describing changes in the way boundaries and possibilities are individually and collectively perceived. Whilst Bottery (2006) highlighted that economic globalism prevailed, he also identified other processes associated with globalisation, such as environmental globalisation (which has witnessed the depletion of the ozone layer and the spread of previously localised diseases across national borders), demographic globalisation (posing both opportunity and challenge through the couplet of increasing life expectancy and an aging population) and cultural globalisation (providing wider access to culturally diverse approaches and experiences). Each of these processes of globalisation has social and economic ramifications, but to see globalisation as a single influence with a unified effect on nation states would be somewhat naïve, as such matters are not easily described in simple power-up and power-down terms (Bottery, 2006; Dale, 2005).
On this note, Lingard and Rawolle (2009) suggested that globalisation from above is always mediated to some extent by ‘globalisation from below’, reflecting the influences of local and national cultures and politics.

The power of the political and economic forces of globalisation is described by Stiglitz (2006), and contemporary descriptions of globalisation speak of flows of human and financial capital across borders and an “extension of market relationships globally” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 31). These powerful forces have been associated with ideological dimensions to globalisation, and, in particular, to neoliberalism (Olssen, 2009).

In the broadest of terms, neoliberalism is an economic philosophy that has become dominant (Exley & Ball, 2014). Harvey (2005), amongst others, claimed that neoliberal ideologies gained rapid ground with the ascendance of the Thatcher (UK), Reagan (US) and Xiaoping (China) governments of the 1980s and their turn away from the Keynesian (welfare state) system towards market deregulation, privatisation, consumerism and free trade. This development was not limited to these areas: amongst others, parallel changes were also underway in New Zealand under Douglas, the finance minister of the incumbent Labour Government (Olssen, 1996).

Bagnall (2013, p. 284) described neoliberalism as a “philosophy in which social policy is dominated by market principles, privatisation, free trade and deregulation, and individualism”. Dean (2010) observed that whilst it was possible to identify a number of variants of neoliberalism, he argued that all essentially shared a common belief in the fundamental principles of economic governance and the power of the market. In a similar vein, Apple (2007) saw neoliberalism as a political and economic theory that emphasised market economy efficiencies to advance government priorities through the ‘invisible hand’ of the free market. A number of provider and consumer market ‘freedoms’ are identified by Brown (2011): in a free market, providers can set their price and consumers are free to choose between providers. Furthermore, private sectors operate with minimal regulation in the free market (Exley & Ball, 2014).

Webb (2011) identified that neoliberalism is also reflected in a set of practices that transfer risks from governments to individuals through redefined relationships. A common thread running through discussions of neoliberalism identifies a relocation of
power away from the nation state (Ball, 2012b; Bottery, 2006; Rodrik, 2011). Karlsen (2000), writing about such power relocations and coining the term ‘decentralised centralism’, described the ways in which tasks and responsibilities are repositioned away from a nation state government ‘centre’ towards the ‘periphery’ (the governed). According to Karlsen, the rationale advanced for such decentralisation has changed over time. In the 1970s, decentralisation strategies purported to support the development of democratic decision-making processes. However, in the 1980s and 1990s decentralisation gradually became more associated with efficiency reflecting the “wave of neo-liberal ideology” (Karlsen, 2000, p. 528). Arguments for decentralisation also changed to emphasise individual rights and choice. Dean (2010) drew a similar set of conclusions, observing that whilst the dominance of the nation state as the authoritative centre has gradually given way, neoliberal perspectives of market freedom and individual autonomy and choice (agency) have become increasingly powerful. In short, state power has been transformed (Exley & Ball, 2014).

Webb (2011, p. 736) asserted that neoliberalism “paradoxically re-asserts the state’s role while attempting to reduce its financial responsibilities into the public sector”, through mechanisms of control that are ‘distanced’ from the state. Forms of control may have changed, but they have not necessarily decreased, and devolved control is a kind of ‘steering at a distance’ (Ball, 1998; Marginson, 1997; Thompson & Cook, 2014; Vidovich, 2007; Webb, 2011) on the part of government. In a sharp dismissal of arguments claiming that devolution reduced government control, Marginson (1997, p. 66) asserted that some authors “persist with the fiction that devolution constitutes a reduction in government and control, whereas it often facilitates an advance”. The governance technique of steering from a distance is claimed to be a readily recognisable characteristic of neoliberal ideologies (Ball, 1998, 2012b; Dean, 2010; Marginson, 1997; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002).

Foucault introduced the notion of ‘governmentality’ to describe techniques by which governments control, arguing that the liberal (and by extension, neoliberal) rationality attempts to found the “art of government on the rational behaviour of the governed” (Foucault, 2008, p. 312). As Ozga (2012) observed, this relies on individuals and their capacity as self-actualising agents. To this end, Dean (2010, p. 190) suggested that this “new prudentialism” was characterised by the passing of ever increasing
responsibilities to individuals and groups, which required them to monitor and manage their own risks. Neoliberal approaches can therefore be seen in techniques of government, where contemporary practices of government appear to depend at least in part on the agency and actions of the governed. Olssen (2009) provided an important distinction between classical liberalism and neoliberalism:

Whereas classical liberalism represents a negative conception of state power in that the individual was taken as an object to be freed from the interventions of the state, neoliberalism has come to represent a positive conception of the state's role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation. In classical liberalism the individual is characterised as having an autonomous human nature and can practise freedom. In neoliberalism the state seeks to create an individual that is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur.

(Olssen, 2009, p. 3)

Turning towards the economic governance of higher education, there are a number of broad assumptions espoused by neoliberal ideologies, two of which have market freedom at their core (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The first describes how higher education institutions should be able to compete freely in the globalised education market place, without borders or restriction of enrolment quotas. The second is that such institutions should produce highly trained, proficient self-interested graduates who are themselves equipped and predisposed to compete freely in the global market. Within this neoliberal view, education is seen as being subject to two related processes: that of commodification (the process of turning social goods and educational outcomes into commodities to be traded) and marketisation, where market principles are used to drive greater efficiencies through competition in non-market (i.e. public) institutions (Canaan & Schumar, 2008).

The extent to which higher education is a free market is open to question, however. A free market would be sensitive to issues of price, and Moodie (2011a) observed that price sensitivity has not been significant in the Australian setting as income contingent loans have served to insulate students from the effect of (capped) fees. Moodie (2011a, p. 71) further estimated that there has been “no effective competition for about a third of the higher education student load”. This he attributed to the lack of geographic mobility of domestic Australian students and the limited choice of institutions and disciplines available in smaller population centres.
Rizvi (2014) identified a number of growing tensions associated with the neoliberal commitment to economic productivity, market freedom and ‘user-pays’ principles in education, as these powerful forces have collectively served to displace interests in democracy and justice. In a similar vein, Bagnall (2013, p. 282) pointed out that “economic globalisation has not treated all players equally”. These market-based assumptions, processes, and tensions are evident in education policy development, which is itself framed, influenced and advanced by globalisation.

**Globalised education policy**

Easton (1953) offered a classical definition of policy as the authoritative allocation of values, such as those found in policies advanced by nation states. Nation states have the authority to develop policy, but such policy development now takes place in a globalised context, influenced by bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the World Bank (Bøyum, 2014; Dale, 2005; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Although globalisation has by no means rendered nation states impotent, policies that were “once enacted within a national setting are now located within a global 'system' around a common set of assumptions” (Rizvi, 2014, p. 47).

Organisations such as the OECD seek to develop responses to common problems for nation states in a globalised setting. Whilst these bodies may produce resources for nation states, their goals and agendas may simultaneously produce pressure to conform and such conformance may be observed in education policy study. Amongst others, Ozga and Jones (2006) distinguished between ‘travelling policy’ (reflecting the common agendas of transnational groupings) and ‘embedded’ policy (that which is found at the local, national, or regional level), where global agendas are adopted or adapted with reference to more locally defined policy antecedents and priorities. Uncritical policy adoption has been referred to as ‘policy borrowing’, in contrast to ‘policy learning’ which involves more critical and active policy adaption (Alexiadou, 2014; Lange & Alexiadou, 2010; Vidovich, 2009).

A number of globalisation influences related to education policy and practices are described in the literature. Some of these influences, outlined below, describe the
growth of neoliberal approaches to policy development, which are associated with an increasing focus on comparison and competition between nation states and institutions. Many of these influences on education policy have their origins at the global level, with various stakeholder agendas and interests lying behind those established norms, leading Bottery (2006, p. 96) to suggest that “globalisation talk is not descriptive but highly normative”. On this note, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) suggested that much of the confusion about globalisation can be ascribed to a failure to recognise that such discourses are simultaneously both descriptive and normative.

Drawing on Easton’s (1953) classical definition of policy and Foucauldian notions of bio-power they argued that “governments secure their authority by allocating values through attempts to forge people’s subjectivities in terms of a dominant social imaginary”, i.e. by fostering a way of thinking that is shared in society (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 36). The rise of a global ‘common good’, representing widespread shared interests across society is discussed at length by Olssen (2009), who proceeded to argue that individualist traditions characteristic of neoliberalism have failed to account for the escalation of uncertainty, unpredictability and the emergence of new and widely-shared concerns such as climate change and population growth.

Drawing together education policy and normative social imaginaries, Lingard and Rawolle (2009) advanced the concept of ‘policy imaginaries’, suggesting that policies may seek to establish desirable imagined futures, the pursuit of which may then be supported by market forces. This, they suggested, represents a crucial distinction from traditional neoliberal views, where any intervention in the market would be seen as antithetical.

Policy imaginaries may be supported and advanced by the media. For example, Lingard et al. (2005, p. 768) suggested that “policy release has become synonymous with media release”, in places orchestrated for synchronous release to ensure that the main political message is not lost in policy detail. Furthermore, policy ‘pronouncements’ (Zajda, 2014) serve to bolster policy imaginaries by creating a sense of crisis, establishing imperatives for change based on appeals to logic and common sense in policy rhetoric. Arguably, policy imaginaries are also advanced by bodies such as the OECD, through their establishment of policy concepts offered as converged ‘solutions’ to socioeconomic problems.
Cussó and D’Amico (2005) identified both competition and convergence at a supranational level between organisations such as the OECD and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). They noted the “strong competition between the agencies in the production and analysis of international education statistics” (Cussó & D’Amico, 2005, p. 212) and suggested that UNESCO had become increasingly aligned to the statistical approaches of other agencies such as the OECD. Zajda (2010) argued that whilst UNESCO’s humanistic models of education were weakening, the techno-determinist paradigm of the OECD was gaining in strength.

The “relentless drive” (Zajda, 2014, p. 166) to establish comparative performance data is also identified in the work of other policy theorists who have focused on ‘evidence-informed’ policy where quantitative data is central to the policy process (Grek, 2009, 2013; Lingard, Creagh, & Vass, 2011; Lingard & Rawolle, 2009; Ozga, 2009; Sellar & Lingard, 2013a; Wiseman, 2010). This “emergent global education policy field” (Lingard & Rawolle, 2009, p. 218) is reliant on comparison as a form of governance. In a similar vein, Ozga (2009, p. 153) spoke of the way that “apparently objective data” was used to drive improvement reforms in English schools, arguing that rational techniques were being used to construct a value consensus around educational goals. Sellar and Lingard (2013a) also pointed to the rise of large scale international tests, arguing that comparison is made possible through the development of a global space of measurement. Drawing on the work of Novoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003) who suggested that the ‘national eye’ governs through comparison with the ‘global eye’, they suggested that these global comparative measures are now used in conjunction with national measures, asserting that “the global eye and the national eye come together to govern through comparison” (Sellar & Lingard, 2013a, p. 467).

Notions of policy framed in the light of comparable numbers are observable in practices such as ranking and the publication of international ‘league tables’, which attempt to provide simplified and consumer orientated comparisons in fields such as education. However, the effects of ranking on relationships within and between institutions and nations can be significant, so much so that reforms to national policy can be triggered as a result of ranking pressures (Dobbins & Martens, 2011; Gür, Çelik, & Özoğlu, 2011; Rauhvargers, 2011; Rautalin & Alasuutari, 2009). In effect, rankings have become the universal performance indicator (Marginson, 2014).
Comparisons can be drawn from processes of benchmarking. Fundamentally, benchmarking is a means of comparing the performance of an organisation against that of others, a process with its historical roots in industrial practice (Alstete, 1995). For example, the OECD is taking an increasing role in the development of international benchmarking and comparisons in education through mechanisms such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2014b) in schooling sectors, and the more recently introduced Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project in higher education (McGaw, 2008; OECD, 2014c; Wiseman, 2010). In this respect the OECD is a significant policy actor, and “no longer a mere think-tank or data centre” (Bøyum, 2014, p. 857).

Whilst neoliberalism may be dominant, the conceptual terrain is by no means static, and alternative framings evolve (Exley & Ball, 2014). For example, Spies-Butcher (2012) identified ‘Third Way’ progressive responses to neoliberalism that retained a greater commitment to social justice whilst remaining aligned to market principles. Enns (2014) saw evidence of a renewed commitment to education as a societal good and human right emerging in agendas for education post-2015, but conceded that the imminent demise of neoliberalism was unlikely.

Overall, education policy development for many nation states is highly globalised, framed by neoliberal ideologies that have become dominant over time. Contemporary governance within a neoliberal framing relies on the agency of the governed as an indirect form of control, established and maintained through mechanisms of accountability.

**Accountability**

Accountability is a frequently used term, but one that is more complex and ill-defined than might appear on a first reading. A closer inspection of the literature reveals many different and sometimes opposing views on the definitions, typologies and mechanisms of accountability. In the broadest of terms, accountability may be described as the ability to ‘give an account’ (to explain a set of actions, for example), or it may be cast in terms of being ‘held to account’ (Ranson, 2003). In a similar vein, Frolich (2011) suggested that accountability can be defined as a ‘procedure’, or as a
‘result’. Although not the main thrust of her paper, Frolich offered, *en passant*, the interesting observation that there is a certain contradiction between the two definitions, in that “if we define accountability as results, this does not necessarily mean they are ‘produced’ by a procedure that is accountable” (Frolich, 2011, p. 842), a point relevant to this research which is to be picked up later. In Frolich’s terms, accountability offers the promise of fair and equitable governance, partly through association with other politically and socially desirable (albeit loosely defined) terms such as transparency, equity and democracy. On this issue Massaro (2010, p. 22) argued that fundamentally, “society has a right to know whether its institutions are capable of meeting its expectations”.

Watty (2003) identified a number of stakeholders who all have a varying degree of interest in higher education. On the supply side, Watty identified governments, quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions and academics. On the demand side, students, employers, parents and society are included. A key issue, therefore, is to identify the stakeholders to whom universities might be accountable.

Early work by Corbett (1996) was important for extending traditional notions of simple upward accountability (to managers) into accountability ‘flows’ along two axes, with ‘legal responsibility’ located on the vertical axis and ‘social responsibility’ on the horizontal axis. On the vertical axis, upward accountability described traditional flows of accountability to superiors up a hierarchical management line and ultimately (in the case of higher education) to governments, whilst downwards accountability related to the extent to which managers were, in turn, accountable to their subordinates. The horizontal axis of social responsibility spanned inward accountability (the personal morals and ethics used in decision-making) to that which was outward (directed towards clients, stakeholders and the wider public interest). Corbett (1996) defined political accountability in terms of the upward and outward flows of accountability.

Although an individual may strive to be inwardly accountable to a personal moral code, contemporary conceptions of accountability are usually expressed in external terms (Ranson, 2003; Vidovich, 2009). With respect to externally orientated dimensions of accountability, Vidovich and Slee (2001) reviewed a number of typologies that have been offered in the literature, distinguishing four accountability flows which are particularly relevant to higher education. These included: professional accountability
(to peers); democratic accountability (to the general community); managerial accountability (to government); and market accountability (to ‘customers’).

Vidovich (2009) outlined a number of dimensional continua as shown in Figure 3.1. Each polar position is not mutually exclusive, and both may co-exist within the same overall process. For example, it is common for an internal quality review to produce a self-evaluation document that is then subject to external scrutiny, a process used by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) and outlined by Shah (2012).

![Figure 3.1 Forms of accountability](source: Vidovich, 2009, p.560)

These continua offer a typology upon which accountability flows can be framed. Significantly, they also highlight major points of tension and contestation along each continuum. Vidovich (2009) suggested that the balance of power has shifted to the right over time, moving away from ‘improve’ and towards the ‘prove’ side of the continuum, a point taken up by others (Ranson, 2003; Reid, 2009). Similarly, Shah (2012) suggested that ten years of external audit in Australian higher education had failed to produce convincing evidence of improvements in the student experience, whilst Quinn (2012) called for quality assurance in teaching and learning to be (re)conceptualised as enhancement and development.

A diverse range of approaches are employed as mechanisms of accountability, some of which are outlined by Burke (2005). Such mechanisms include the processes and products of accreditation, academic audit, market forces, reputation, student ratings, standardised testing and institutional ranking. All of these mechanisms are underpinned by various performance indicators, both qualitative and quantitative.
In Australian higher education, two broad accountability approaches have included performance audit and conditional funding, and both approaches can be used in combination. For example, performance-based funding is a common approach to accountability where institutions are assigned responsibility for ensuring that targets are met, with continued funding contingent on satisfactory progress.

Audits of performance, according to Kells and Hodge (2009, p. 50), are “an activity in which outsiders are authorised to discover, synthesise and publish information that would otherwise be confidential”. Kells and Hodge identified five elements of an audit where the first element, independence, relates to the externality of the auditor. The second element, authorisation, provides the auditor with an authority (higher than that of the auditee) to conduct the investigation. Three further elements of discovery, synthesis and publication describe the process by which the auditor acquires information, categorises and collates it, and then publishes it in some form. Such publication may be held confidential or disseminated widely as is the case with AUQA reports of institutional audits.

Turning now towards the relationship between accountability and policy development, there are a number of parallels to be drawn across international settings, including those within schooling sectors. For example, Barker (2010), writing about government reform in the school sector in the UK, drew out five broad policy imperatives that, he argued, have driven education policy over the last twenty years. Positioning these assumptions/imperatives as ‘illusions’, he summarised them as follows:

1. Effective and efficient schools overcome disadvantage and improve life chances;
2. Markets and competition improve school efficiency and outcomes;
3. Central regulation and inspection ensure high standards of quality and performance;
4. Successful leaders transform their schools and change the system; and
5. Best practice can be transferred from one site to another.

(Barker, 2010, p. 5)

These ‘travelling policy’ (Ozga & Jones, 2006) assumptions about market efficiency, accountability and transferability are also visible in higher education. Although the need for accountability per se is widely asserted, a number of authors have argued
that the pendulum has swung away from professional and democratic forms of accountability towards market forms of accountability (Ball, 2003, 2012a; Currie, Vidovich, & Yang, 2008; Ranson, 2003; Reid, 2009), representing a shift to the right in the set of continua outlined in Figure 3.1 previously. Some, such as Stewart-Weeks (2006) have suggested that this shift is a response associated with a broader decline in trust and the credibility of large organisations including (for example) banks and churches.

Whatever the cause, this shift has arguably been highly problematic. The discursive definition of professional accountability as the “giving of an account” is characteristic of the “age of professionalism”, according to Ranson (2003, p. 461). However, Ranson also described how an age of professionalism has gradually given way to what he termed the “age of neo-liberalism” with its more instrumental conceptions of accountability as answerability, asserting that only those markets supported by the customer will thrive (Ranson, 2003, p. 462).

A similar paradigm shift is also reported by Reid (2009), who described incremental shifts in policy discourse that pointed to the increasing adoption of readily measurable and quantitatively described outcomes. Using critical discourse analysis to deconstruct the first three iterations of the AUQA Manual, Reid demonstrated how conceptions of evidence were overwhelmingly constructed in quantitative terms through (for example) the repetition of the word ‘number’: a technique identified as “overwording” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 193). A similar preoccupation with specification and measurement was found in an Australian Government consultation paper on teaching and learning standards: “Standards will need to be specified, and appropriate measures determined” (DEEWR, 2011b, p. 4).

De Lissovoy and Mclaren (2003), in their Marxian reading of accountability argued that it is the initial operation of reducing complex things (such as learning) to a single score that gives rise to a number of damaging consequences. They asserted that a score is required, unavoidable even, if there is to be a common currency, a universal yardstick against which comparisons can be drawn. In this vein others, such as Lederman, Stratford, and Jaschik (2014) have pointed to the serious unintended consequences that follow from the use of single metrics.
On this issue, Ranson (2003), writing about measurable performance targets in the UK school sector was sharply critical of these accountability practices:

... a sophisticated national system of regulations is put in place to measure and monitor a limited set of performances and outcomes – principally, test and examination results which inadequately represent the more comprehensive spiritual, cultural, moral, aesthetic, and intellectual values and purposes the nation has established for its schools.

(Ranson, 2003, p. 467)

Whilst the danger of ‘counting what is measured rather than measuring what counts’ is readily recognisable (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2008), there is a broadening body of literature which points to the growth of this form of accountability as a method of control (Hursh, 2008, 2013; Lee, 2010; Rauhvargers, 2011; Rowlands, 2012; Salmi, 2009; Thompson & Cook, 2014; Wall et al., 2014; Webb, 2011).

Extrapolating a position articulated by Frolich (2011) that was described earlier in this chapter, it is possible for seemingly acceptable results to be produced by procedures that might themselves not stand up to close scrutiny. In other words, whilst the accountability product (scores, ratings etc.) may appear to carry face validity, the process by which they were derived may be fatally flawed. High stakes systems of accountability may produce perverse outcomes in the form of “fabrications” (Ball, 2003, p. 224), which are ‘versions’ of the truth, possibly even falsehoods, produced in order to appear accountable. Such game playing tactics are reported elsewhere. For example, Vidovich and Slee (2001) described some of the strategies Australian and British universities used to present themselves in a positive light, such as staging departmental meetings during audit visits, or renovating facilities in the departments that were next in line to have a teaching quality inspection. Lee (2010) offered evidence which suggested that a number of universities in the US have attempted to outwit unreachable policy targets by lowering standards. A notable example of the potential extent of fabrication is reported in the example of Iona College in the US, where externally appointed auditors found that the College administration had displayed a consistent pattern of overstating student performance data in reports to external agencies in ten categories over a ten year period. The discovery of this issue prompted a public apology to the community (Hynes & Nyre, 2011).
Notions of ‘quality’ have long occupied a contested space in higher education. Definitions of quality are multiple, malleable, and infused with individual perspectives (Harvey & Green, 1993), a position which prompted the classic remark that “it all goes poof!” (Pirsig, 1974, p. 179) when attempts are made to explain what quality is. Whilst they acknowledged the lack of an accepted definition, Harvey and Green (1993) went on to produce a seminal deconstruction of the complex concept of quality into five dimensions, which suggested that in broad terms, quality could be understood and described as being any or all of the following terms:

- Exceptional (meeting output standards for excellence, or when expressed more weakly, as meeting standards for a minimum acceptable level)
- Perfection, or consistency (conformance to specification, where perfection means ‘zero-defects’ with a focus on process as well as output)
- Fitness for purpose (relating quality to a purpose defined by the provider)
- Value for money (with a focus on efficiency/effectiveness)
- Transformation (with a focus on enhancement and empowerment)

Conceptions of quality as traditional notions of ‘excellent standards’ within universities (Vidovich, 2001) have much in common with Harvey and Green’s first classification. Such standards may be maintained (and advanced) through processes of quality improvement, and proven through processes of quality assurance (Sachs, 1994; Vidovich, 2002). As El-Khawas (2013) observed, quality assurance is a central component in contemporary higher education policy, having seen considerable expansion since the mid-1980s.

Arguably, however, the balance has shifted over time to place a greater emphasis on Harvey and Green’s (1993) conceptions of quality as consistency, and as value for money. The OECD, in their landmark report titled *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society* (Santiago et al., 2008) identified a number of global trends in quality assurance and improvement of which two are relevant here. First, the transition from elite to mass participation in higher education has, they argued, increased the cost burden on nation states, triggering concerns over value for money and rendering central management techniques inappropriate. Second, the adoption of New Public
Management approaches across a number of OECD governments with its emphasis on “leadership principles, incentives and competition” (Santiago et al., 2008, p. 260) has placed the quality issue to the fore, as quality assurance was linked to economic growth through the signals sent to labour markets by high quality graduates from reputable providers. Here, the appearance and expansion of private providers (especially those which operated on a ‘for-profit’ basis) was seen to be a risk from which consumers needed to be protected through processes of quality assurance. Santiago et al. (2008) also identified three main approaches to the assurance of quality adopted across OECD member countries. These included accreditation (establishment of new or renewal of existing arrangements); assessment (defined as the evaluation of the quality of the process and outputs); and audit (a process of checking that procedures are in place to assure processes or outcomes). It is significant that the substantial majority of the 24 countries participating in this OECD review imposed some form of quality assurance process on a mandatory basis.

Bloxham, Boyd, and Orr (2011) suggest that contemporary quality assurance emphases are firmly located within a techno-rational paradigm of accountability in higher education, established across English-speaking higher education systems to a greater or lesser extent and characterised by a focus on the specification of desired goals (learning outcomes), which are constructively aligned (Biggs & Tang, 2011) to clearly defined assessment criteria. Others have also argued that discourses of quality have increasingly become cast as quality assurance for accountability within a powerful neoliberal framing (Ball, 2003, 2009; Currie et al., 2008; Ranson, 2003; Reid, 2009; Vidovich & Slee, 2001; Wall et al., 2014; Webb, 2011; Zajda, 2014).

Accountability and quality strongly intersect within the territory of assessment. Clearly defined criteria and learning standards are intended to improve consistency, reducing the arbitrariness of staff decisions (Boud & Associates, 2010; Sadler, 2009) and rendering matters open to scrutiny from other interested parties. Santiago et al. (2008, p. 312) took up the link between learning outcomes and quality, asserting that “in the absence of objective measures of learning outcomes, there is no way for students to judge the quality of TEIs [tertiary education institutions] except by reputation”.
However, a review of the assessment literature reveals a number of serious challenges to the notion that learning may be measured objectively to yield valid and reliable comparative data. The issue of learning standards and the extent to which assessment practices can support quantitatively comparable measures of quality are examined in the following two sections.

**Learning standards**

Learning standards, defined here as a “definite degree of academic achievement established by authority, custom, or consensus and used as a fixed reference point for reporting a student’s level of attainment” (Sadler, 2012, p. 9), have a long and somewhat chequered history. Such standards have their roots in curriculum goals, and Tyler (1949) is credited with being an early proponent of curriculum planning models that used pre-specified objectives as the goals of learning. He proposed that these goals, or ‘educational objectives’, became the unifying criteria by which methods and materials for teaching and examinations were selected. However criticisms levelled at the broad meaning implicit in the word ‘educational’ prompted the redefinition of such goals as ‘instructional objectives’ (Mager, 1962). This revision more closely tied together the achievement of the objective to the instruction given, emphasising the role of the student. This approach essentially broke down complex tasks into highly discrete and more narrowly defined subcomponents, a position which has, over time, prompted a number of challenges. One of these early challenges was from Eisner (1979) who criticised the objectives movement for effectively compelling the abandonment of any educational aims that had no corresponding observable and measurable behaviours, suggesting that there was a place for what he termed ‘expressive outcomes’. Although the term ‘expressive’ has not been universally adopted, the term ‘outcome’ with its broader constructivist connotations has prevailed in higher education (Bloxham et al., 2011). In a similar vein, Biggs and Tang (2011) used the term ‘constructive alignment’ to describe how teaching and assessment practices should be aligned to intended learning outcomes, the achievement of which is judged against learning standards.

Bloxham et al. (2011) suggested that there are two oppositional models of assessment relevant to the establishment of standards. Positivist models of assessment suggest
that standards can be objectively defined with some precision, and that achievement can be reliably measured against those standards. Interpretative models of assessment see standards as those broader, tacit, normative and consensually established judgements, or ‘rules of the discipline’. There is significant challenge and contestation between these models: some argue for approaches more consistent with specification and measurement whilst others call for holism and judgement. Coates (2007), for example, writing about the quality of institutional measures summed up a number of frustrations relating to the lack of objective standards and other deficiencies in assessment:

In individual subjects student knowledge and skill is often measured using uncalibrated tasks with unknown reliability and validity, scored normatively by different raters using unstandardized rubrics and then - often with little moderation - adjusted to fit percentile distributions which are often specified a-priori by departments, faculties or institutions.

(Coates, 2007, p. 91)

Other arguments mounted in support of objectively defined standards point to the need for transparency in assessment, arguing that such specification is needed if students are to be dealt with equitably (Stowell, 2004). On this note, Woolf (2004, p. 479) observed that the “production, publication and discussion of clear assessment criteria are a sine qua non of an effective assessment strategy”, drawing together a number of key references for academics and administrators to illustrate the point.

However, significant challenges are mounted in the literature against the notion that standards can be specified in detail in higher education. Eisner (1985) is credited for introducing the concept of ‘connoisseurship’ to describe the subjective but skilful judgements made by experienced practitioners who have progressively immersed themselves in the discipline over time as they become enculturated in a community of academic practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Adie (2014) also highlighted the role of the community of practice, pointing to the way that consensus emerges from the process of having one’s judgements critiqued by others. A similar position is described by Jawitz (2009), who drew on Bourdieu’s conception of ‘habitus’ to suggest that staff gradually become more familiar with the tacit criteria and standards of their faculties and schools. A key thrust of these arguments is that the definition and application of
learning standards is facilitated through social processes such as the building of consensus over time. The corollary of this is that the value of pre-defined formal criteria and standards will be severely limited in the absence of these social processes.

In his analysis of summative assessment practices in higher education, and drawing together Eisner’s conceptions of connoisseurship with learning theory and psychometrics, Knight (2002b, p. 280) asserted that “benchmarks, specifications, criteria and learning outcomes do not and cannot make summative assessment reliable, may limit its validity and certainly compound its costs”. Whilst Knight conceded that criteria referenced grading may be effective within a community of practice, he argued that the “differences in the criteria used prevent, even impede, communication between communities … since it is not possible to know what criteria have been used, what meanings have attached to them and how they have been used” (Knight, 2002b, p. 280). More recently Jones and Alcock (2013) argued that reliable and valid judgement in the absence of criteria was possible, and in some cases even desirable.

Assessment criteria may be highly specific to a particular assessment task, or they may be generic and broadly defined, such as those graduate attributes which span all undergraduate programmes offered by that institution. Levelling sharp and persistent criticism against the dangers of over-zealous prescription, Sadler (2007, 2008, 2009, 2012) pointed to the various ways in which students are, as he puts it, ‘short-changed’ by pre-specified criteria and standards, arguing that tightly defined standards serve to narrow diversity. This position is, he maintained, especially unfortunate given that higher education aspires to allow for (and encourage) a diversity of equally acceptable approaches to a particular task. Furthermore, not only do student responses vary, the assessment tasks themselves generally exhibit a low level of standardisation in higher education (Shay, 2004).

With respect to the level of specification, Sadler (2009) argued that learning standards can be described as being either ‘analytical’ or ‘holistic’. In Sadler’s terms, analytical approaches attempt to break down the characteristics of a performance into a number of defined qualities (criteria), with each criterion being further amplified in terms of a number of possible different levels of performance (standards) for that criterion.
Holistic approaches also draw on standards, but in comparison these are more broadly expressed against relatively few criteria.

Whilst critical of tightly pre-specified outcomes, a compromise position was offered by Hussey and Smith (2003), who suggested that learning outcomes (and by extension learning standards) should not be abandoned entirely. Rather, they argued, outcomes should be framed in broader and more general terms thereby improving flexibility. Although broadly defined learning outcomes and standards offer the scope for multiple interpretation and diversity of response, they suffer an inevitable trade-off in terms of reduced comparability and consistency. If too broad, learning standards may fail to adequately communicate what is expected to students and other stakeholders. If they are too narrowly defined, they may produce adverse consequences, such as those reported by Torrance (2007), who observed that the explicit specification of learning standards in the interests of transparency had led to narrow and instrumental responses on the part of learners.

Whether narrowly specified or not, Allais (2011) strongly criticised outcomes-based education, arguing that qualification frameworks and learning outcomes are fundamentally neoclassical economic tools for creating and regulating education markets. With respect to learning outcomes and their transparency, she argued that extensive and ever increasing documentation was needed in order to provide sufficient clarity. This process produces a narrowing of the curriculum and ultimately a self-defeating level of specification, leading her to conclude that “the ‘new educational paradigm’ places additional expectations on this sector, at the same time as introducing policy mechanisms which make it ever more likely to become even weaker” (Allais, 2011, p. 265).

An examination of the theoretical basis of learning standards has therefore revealed highly contested approaches to the appraisal of learning, with plural interpretations of what standards mean within a local setting, and the possibility that their imposition may fundamentally advance certain agendas at the expense of others. This implies that the application of those learning standards in assessment practices may also be highly problematic.
Assessment practices

This section examines the complex interrelationship between learning standards and the assessment practices used to determine whether students have ‘met the standard’. Whilst Yorke (2008) identified that the many practices of assessment serve many purposes, all are fundamentally associated with the intent to determine and codify (Sadler, 2014) students’ achievement. The following three subsections scrutinise these practices in closer detail, commencing with a comprehensive examination of issues associated with the application of learning standards at the level of the individual assessment task. The second subsection identifies a number of issues associated with the application of learning standards at the level of the graduate. Drawing on these issues, the third and final subsection examines a number of implications for the national and international comparability of learning standards.

The application of learning standards at the level of the assessment task.

Assessment practices span both process and product (Yorke, 2008). At the level of the assessment task, processes of assessment describe the ways that student achievement is determined through the process of grading. The products of assessment are the various codes (Sadler, 2014) used to report student achievement in the form of marks or grades. Summing up the endemic problems of grading student work, Dressel (1983, p. 12) classically suggested that a grade can be best defined as: "an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material". Whether playfully made or not, the point is a serious one as the problems associated with standards-based assessment grading decisions are long-standing (Bloxham et al., 2011; Newstead & Dennis, 1994; Price, Carroll, O'Donovan, & Rust, 2011; Sadler, 2014; Woolf, 2004; Yorke, 2008).

Bloxham et al. (2011) identified three fundamental tensions at the heart of standards-based assessment practices. First, they argued, there is an assumption that standards can be readily described without reference to norms. Second, there is an assumption that standards can be clearly and unambiguously described and interpreted by students and staff alike, whilst a third assumption is that marks can be awarded
against those standards in a reliable way. Each of these important but highly problematic assumptions will be examined in turn.

**Assumption 1: standards can be divorced from norms.**

The first problematic assumption is that standards can be divorced from norms. Normative approaches to assessment express results in terms of the distribution of some population, and thereby set individual performances against each other, using the rank position to determine the grade (Yorke, 2008). A simple example of norm-referenced assessment would therefore be to award the highest grade to the top 10% of the cohort. An interesting and undesirable consequence of this approach is that students with very low levels of achievement could quite possibly obtain the highest grade if they happened to be in the top band of their particular group.

Sadler (2005) reviewed a number of arguments that have been advanced in favour of a normative approach. For example, such approaches can prevent highly capable students from receiving seemingly ‘poor’ results from an unusually hard examination paper if marks are scaled (adjusted) to produce a normal distribution. Norm-referenced assessment also serves to retain the exclusivity of upper grades, ensuring that a ‘distinction’ remains distinctive in terms of the proportion of students that achieve that grade. However, if percentage band allocations remain fixed (e.g. the top 10% are awarded an ‘A’ grade), norm referenced grades will have at best a local and relative meaning (Sadler, 2005). Furthermore, a normative approach may not be sensitive to trends, in that a decline in task difficulty or an increase in student capability will not become evident through increased pass rates, for example. Finally, there are ethical questions in that an acceptably capable student surrounded by more academically able peers may fail simply due to the presence of stronger candidates. In very large groups at a national level using standardised tasks this position may possibly be defended; however in smaller groups using diverse tasks it is highly problematic.

Despite the increasing interest in standards based assessment, it is difficult to argue that norm-referencing has disappeared from the landscape. Standards, for example, are largely based on accepted norms which have been established at some level (Bloxham et al., 2011). Furthermore, there are normative pressures superimposed on grading decisions: it would be a courageous move on the part of an academic to award
their entire cohort a ‘distinction’ grade in a discursive discipline, for example. On this note, Price (2005, p. 226) reported that those responsible for assessment results “checked averages and ranges as a first step in the moderation process” even though they had pre-specified criteria and standards to work with. The calculation of these descriptive statistics is associated with norm-referenced approaches.

As Orr (2007) neatly illustrated, even within established communities of practice there can be considerable negotiation between two markers before a final grade is agreed. In some cases grading practices might be influenced by a local institutional policy requirement to investigate all cohorts with a pass rate above or below a set threshold. In extremis, an institution may even challenge or change the grades awarded by the academic member of staff with disputed cases leading to litigation and court rulings with respect to academic freedom (Brown, 2010b; Hill, 2011).

**Assumption 2: standards can be unambiguously described.**

The second problematic assumption is that standards can, in fact, be unambiguously described. Knight (2006) referred to the local practices of assessment to describe how grading decisions are made in a particular context, arguing that they reflect both the nature of the assessment task and also the circumstances in which the assessor made their judgement. Drawing similar conclusions, Price (2005) pointed out that the local circumstance of the assessor can be quite variable along a number of continua which include their experience as a marker, their awareness of course content and their positional status (full time, part time, casual) amongst others. Both authors contended that this heterogeneity means that standards will inevitably be interpreted differently by different assessors. For example, novice markers were shown to be more likely to attend closely to the articulated standards than their more experienced counterparts, which was attributed to a desire to ‘get it right’ as novitiate members of the community of assessment practice (Price, 2005).

Rust, Price, and O'Donovan (2003) described an institution-based project to develop a common assessment ‘grid’ (rubric) within a business programme, a project which arose partly in response to pressures from external examiners to improve consistency of standards between modules of study. The developed grid consisted of detailed criteria with associated descriptions of standards against which student work could be
appraised. Evaluating the project one year on, the authors concluded that the “grid failed to establish a common standard” (Rust et al., 2003, p. 149), pointing out that the grid had even been used, *without modification*, by markers for both first year and masters level modules without any apparent difficulty. In explanation, they pointed to the multiple possible interpretations on the part of staff and students as one factor, and whilst students appreciated the intention of the grid, it was also “seen as of limited practical use if presented in isolation without the benefit of explanation, exemplars and the opportunity for discussion” (Rust et al., 2003, p. 151). Explanations for this dissonance included the mismatch between feedback given and the published standard, suggesting the possible presence of a hidden curriculum (Snyder, 1973). Drawing on Polanyi (1998), they concluded that the transfer of both explicit and tacit knowledge is required if standards are to be communicated effectively in any direction within or between students or staff.

However, even if standards *can* be unambiguously described, assessors may not necessarily follow them. Jessop, El Hakim, and Gibbs (2014) reported that students were of the common view that lecturers drew on tacit standards rather than the published criteria when marking work. This observation was supported by Sadler (2009), who argued that assessors tend to discount specific criteria if they were at odds with their holistic appraisal of the work.

**Assumption 3: marks can be awarded in a reliable way.**

The third problematic assumption is that marks can be awarded in a reliable way. In the oft-quoted and seminal work of Newstead and Dennis (1994), the inter-rater reliability of grades awarded by external examiners (highly experienced academics) in the field of psychology was shown to be poor, even where learning standards were specified. This position has been repeatedly borne out in successive studies (Bloxham, 2009; Bloxham & Price, 2013; Newstead, 2002; O’Hagan & Wigglesworth, 2014; Orr, 2007; Price et al., 2011).

The consistency of assessors’ judgements may be improved by a number of processes that fall under the general banner of ‘moderation’. Approaches to moderation may be limited to a post hoc analysis of results or they may embrace a more holistic approach that includes *a priori* activities such as pre-marking meetings to establish consensus.
(Oliver, Lawson, & Yorke, 2008). Post-hoc approaches include ‘double marking’ where a second assessor appraises students’ work, and a variety of strategies may be employed such as random sampling, purposive sampling according to pre-set rules, or a combination of both. Second marking may also be conducted ‘blind’ where first marker comments are made unavailable to successive markers. However, Bloxham (2009) warned of the ‘false promise’ of post-hoc approaches to moderation, pointing to power dynamics in marking and the imperfect way in which disagreements between markers are rationalised. Often, she argued, the different marks given by two disagreeing markers are simply averaged, an observation borne out in empirical studies conducted by Orr (2007). Averaging two dissimilar marks (as opposed to perhaps returning to the work to examine the reasons for the dissonance) could be seen to do a disservice to the professional judgements of both markers.

An examination of these three problematic assumptions has shown that it may be extremely difficult to achieve consistency on grades/marks awarded for assessment tasks solely on the basis of comprehensively and exhaustively defined learning standards. This position is consistent with the long-standing argument that “consistent assessment decisions among assessors are the product of interactions over time, the internalisation of exemplars, and of inclusive networks. Written instructions, mark schemes and criteria, even when used with scrupulous care, cannot substitute for these” (Higher Education Quality Council, 1997, para. 4.7).

The remainder of this subsection focuses on the products of those grading activities, where the output of the application of learning standards is rendered visible through the production of results. Assessment results can be described with respect to learning standards in many different ways, with strengths and weaknesses associated with each approach. For example, Yorke (2008) identified that results may be expressed in simple pass/fail terms, or, more commonly, as a numerical percentage mark. Grade bands are also in common use throughout higher education, and these serve to bracket similar levels of achievement. Single letter grades (such as A, B, C) may be used as codes (Sadler, 2014), together with +/- inflections (such as ‘B+’) employed to signal intermediate performances. Other approaches draw on verbal descriptors, such as ‘Merit’ or ‘Credit’. In short, there are a number of ways in which an assessment result can be described and used.
Learning standards are inextricably linked with pass rates. Pass rates are typically defined as the percentage proportion of a cohort who gain a pass, a somewhat simplistic definition which fails to convey the complexity of deciding which students are included in calculations and which are not. For example, one Australian university, finding they were unable to replicate Government calculations of their progression (pass) rates, argued for simpler and more transparent approaches to calculating this seemingly simple indicator (Evans, 2010).

Further confusion may also arise from the ways changes in pass rates are ascribed to the maintenance of standards. Dearn (2009) described how a drop in pass rates might be ascribed to the maintenance of high standards or to a declining level of student achievement due to (perhaps) poor teaching practices. Suggestive of a level of confusion with terminology, a drop in pass rates is occasionally seen as a ‘decline in standards’, perhaps misleadingly, as a decline in the standards per se would be expected to lead to an increase in pass rates!

Overall, there is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that the conceptual basis of learning standards and the processes and products of assessment grading practices are complex and contested, with a diversity of interpretations attached to the methods and the outcomes of assessment judgements. The various ways in which these issues exert a profound impact on institutions’ ability to apply learning standards at the level of the graduate are explicated in the following subsection.

**The application of learning standards at the level of the graduate.**

The discussion so far has focussed on the myriad issues relating to the validity of learning standards and the extent to which grading practices are able to reliably follow those standards. This is important, as graduation from higher education has historically been determined through the aggregation of marks or grades from individual assessment tasks. There is a strong (albeit complex) relationship between learning standards and assessment practices at the level of the individual assessment task, and this relationship impacts on the extent to which an institution can ‘warrant’ (i.e. certify) those graduate outcomes.

In the Australian setting, the focus in *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009) is on learning standards expressed at the
broader level of the graduate of the discipline, and not the individual task. However, as indicated above, results from individual assessment tasks are aggregated to determine an overall result. Consequently the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) have had a significant interest in higher education providers’ assessment practices at this fine-grained level. For example, course accreditation documentation released by TEQSA in January 2012 required institutions to explain how “moderation procedures ... ensure consistent and appropriate assessment” (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2012, p. 29). At that time, TEQSA required this fine-grained level of detail for each individual assessment task.

Methodologically, problems are encountered when individual assessment results are ‘summed up’ to generate an overall result (Knight, 2002a; Woolf, 2004; Yorke, 2008). Many of these tensions stem from the mistreatment of nominal or ordinal data as interval data. To obtain an interval scale, it is necessary to undertake measurement procedures that produce equivalence of distance between points on a scale, but it has been argued that most assessment results and scaling techniques are not true interval measurements (Humphry, 2013; Yorke, 2008). Subsequent statistical mistreatments may include, for example, the routine practice of averaging percentage marks obtained from diverse tasks producing grade distributions exhibiting different statistical properties, possibly even with different pass mark thresholds.

Learning standards are also potentially under threat from institutional practices relating to a cluster of actions grouped under the rather broad heading of ‘compensatory assessment’. This includes the way in which marks derived from repeat assessments are manipulated, or the way a ‘conceded pass’ can be awarded even though the student may not have demonstrated the required learning outcomes. On this note, Fisher (2009) pointed out how academic penalties for late work or misconduct might affect standards. This issue of ‘fidelity’ in assessment practices was discussed by Sadler (2010) who identified a number of ‘contaminants’ in assessment decisions which represented a challenge to learning standards (and their comparison).

Even within institutions, compensatory practices may vary at a department level, as illustrated by the example of Goldsmiths College reported in the UK press (Baty, 2002). At Goldsmiths, one set of assessment practices was employed for the college generally, with an exemption granted for the department of Art and Design. A UK
Quality Assurance Agency audit had observed that it was possible for a student to be awarded an honours degree, even if they had failed half of the final year units. Furthermore, weighting practices differed between departments to the extent that identical student mark profiles in one department would achieve a different final degree classification if calculated in another. The amplification of this issue in the educational press presumably was to the detriment of the college’s reputation.

There is one final set of issues relating to the way individual assessment scores are aggregated to warrant learning standards at the level of the graduate. Despite efforts by all parties, it is possible for a student to remain weak over time in a particular area (such as numeracy, or English). Given that summative assessment instantiates different rules of engagement (Knight, 2002b), learners may be reluctant to disclose areas of weakness to the assessor thereby denying all parties the possibility of remedial action. Furthermore, if the assessment rules then permit compensation for this weakness within the marking scheme of that module or unit of study, the student may still pass. When replicated across the degree, the effect of this is to produce a graduate who appears to have met the required standard. However, those who make an appraisal of the graduate in holistic terms (such as employers) may well find this student lacking against the learning standards claimed for that program.

In Australia, this set of issues represents a conundrum for higher education institutions given the Australian Government’s policy focus on learning standards together with the proposed adoption of performance indicators. However this problem is not new, nor is it unique to Australia. Elsewhere, there are moves to address these problems of aggregation through redesigned assessment approaches. For example, the UK Higher Education Academy Programme Assessment Strategies project aims to confront this fundamental issue in assessment by designing an “assessment strategy which delivers the key course/programme outcomes” (Hudson, 2010, p. 4).

A different approach to the problem of aggregation is described by French et al. (2014), where software is used to grade student work against various attributes within an ‘assurance of learning’ framework. This approach facilitates collation and analysis of student grades for each attribute separately, but it does not escape from the problems associated with the grading of student work described previously.
National and international comparability of learning standards.

Earlier in this chapter emergent trends were discussed relating to the casting of education ‘policy as numbers’ (Grek, 2013; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Ozga, 2009, 2012), a development which serves to facilitate governance through processes of comparison. This final subsection extends the discussion thus far regarding assessment practices at the level of the individual task or the graduate, turning now to the comparability of learning standards within and across nation states, where different national practices may render comparison on a global stage especially problematic.

In many countries the use of learning standards as part of national benchmarking is advanced relative to Australia, some specific examples of which are reviewed by Nusche (2008), and Harris (2009). For example, in the UK the landmark report *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) recommended a closer focus on learning standards. Subsequently, the UK Quality Assurance Agency worked closely with the sector to produce ‘subject benchmark statements’ describing threshold and typical expectations for graduate capabilities (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2012). It is pertinent to note that originally these were termed benchmark *standards*, however by the time the first benchmarks were published in May 2000 they had been relabelled benchmark *statements*, a move which prompted comment that this “change recognised the failure of the process to clearly define explicit standards for all subjects” (Rust et al., 2003, p. 148). In a similar vein, the European ‘Tuning’ process sought to establish shared expectations for standards across a European higher education area (Harris, 2009) with similar work being conducted in the US (Adelman, 2009). In Australia, a number of projects also focused on learning standards, of which the work of the *Learning and Teaching Academic Standards* project was prominent (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010).

Despite the presence of qualification frameworks and benchmark statements, national and international comparisons may well prove problematic given that Yorke (2008) identified considerable variation in grading systems at a national level. Comparing the US, UK and Australia, Yorke (2008) reported that grade bands were generally highest in the US and lowest in the UK with Australia falling somewhere in between. Whilst letter grades and percentage marks were typically used in the UK and Australia, institutions...
in the US tend to resolve grade point averages using a scale with a maximum score of 4.00, commonly resolved to two (and occasionally four!) decimal places. These somewhat arbitrary ‘lines in the sand’ make direct comparison difficult. On this point, Soh (2011) reviewed the complexity of international grade translations, highlighting the case of a reasonably high scoring student from the UK who wished to undertake further study in the US, only to find that their UK score was cross-matched to produce a poor grade point average, thereby barring them from entry to their desired program.

In a study of 24 nation states, Karran (2005) drew attention to widespread issues in cross-border translation of standards, even where processes such as the pan-European Credit Transfer System were established in an attempt to simplify matters. Karran (2005) identified multiple complexities encountered in the transfer of grades, which, he argued, added weight to the assertion that “foreign grades are not just numbers that can be calculated by applying a mathematical formula” (Haug, 1997, p. 2). Somewhat surprisingly, Karran concluded by arguing for the introduction of a unified grading system at national and European levels. Although it did not aim to unify national grading schemes, the OECD AHELO project aimed to make international comparisons between higher education providers using the ‘levelled’ playing field of a standardised assessment taken by a sample of students. Australia participated in this project, undertaken within the fields of Economics and Engineering (OECD, 2014c).

Attempts to compare learning standards as a quality indicator in an increasingly competitive and globalised educational marketplace may possibly produce perverse outcomes in terms of fabrications (Ball, 2003) or game playing tactics especially in the light of the global publication of data and rankings (Marginson, 2014). Standardised national tests of progress coupled with public reporting were introduced into Australian schools in 2008 (Polesel, Rice, & Dulfer, 2014). However, the high stakes nature of this standardised testing program has been shown to produce perverse outcomes, and substantiated allegations of cheating have been reported in the media (Caldwell, 2012; Chilcott, 2011). In higher education, standards and assessment practices in four universities in the Australian state of Victoria were called into question by the Victorian Ombudsman (Taylor, 2011). In Australia, the integrity of assessment was a visible part of the TEQSA course accreditation requirements (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2012).
There is also the possibility that the indicators which are subject to either funding or comparison will become the measures that institutions focus on in their assessment (and by extension teaching) practices. This may serve to marginalise other aspects (such as emotional intelligence, or working with others) if such aspects fly under the radar of a narrowly defined performance indicator. Finally, there may be far reaching implications for equity and diversity in higher education if accountability is to be conflated with standardised testing (De Lissovoy & Mclaren, 2003).

In terms of competition, there may be a pronounced influence caused by national league tables that are drawn from publicly available data, such as those data that were to be presented on the Australian *My University* website from 2012 onwards. At the time, the intention was to expand the website during 2013 to include other measures such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, although ultimately this did not prevail.

In the UK, higher education league tables have a longer history, and these have evolved to become reasonably sophisticated comparative tools although they are not without their detractors (Foley & Goldstein, 2012; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2008). Rauhvargers (2011) warned that the calculations on which league tables are based can be value laden, complex, sometimes opaque, and often mathematically treated to make them ‘dimensionless’ (i.e. the number is not the indicator value itself but some kind of proxy for it).

For some time, UK league tables have reported outcomes such as student satisfaction, degree classifications, and completion rates. Given the potential consequences attached to a poor result, institutions are inevitably sensitive to such metrics, and for good reason: Salmi (2009) reported that demand for courses evaluated positively by the Brazilian Provão (a national assessment of graduate learning standards) rose by some 20% whilst the demand for courses with a negative Provão assessment reduced by 41%.

League tables tend to report completion outcomes such as the percentage of graduates achieving a ‘good’ degree and this raises the spectre of grade inflation (Barrett, 2011). Grade inflation is usually explained in terms of a lowering of standards causing an increase in high grades and/or pass rates. In reality, the causes of apparent grade inflation are multiple and complex; alternative explanations may relate to
improvements in teaching and assessment design, amongst others. One notable example of grade inflation is drawn from the US, where the University of North Carolina’s Chapel Hill College has published its internal deliberations on grade inflation and assessment practices over time (The Educational Policy Committee, 2000). Therein, it charted the rise of average student grade point average since 1967, ascribing many reasons for this, including challenges from the growing number of private providers and increases in the numbers of enrolments. One particular bout of grade inflation starting in the late 1980s was attributed to the introduction of mandatory student course evaluations. Here, issues of competition, learning standards and grading practices were firmly linked:

We will never be able to win a grade escalation war with our brethren in private colleges and universities, who clearly must be using high grades as a partial justification for their students’ paying tens of thousands of dollars for an education available at UNC-CH [Chapel Hill] for a fraction of the cost.

(The Educational Policy Committee, 2000, p. 10)

This situation has more than a passing resemblance to the Australian setting, with quantitative measures of students’ achievement of learning standards to be used as indicators of quality, set in a policy landscape framed by globalisation, accountability, deregulation and market choice.

**Concluding discussion**

An examination of Australian and other international education settings has revealed a number of underlying concepts and influences including those relating to globalisation, globalised education policy, accountability, quality, and assessment practices. The use of quantitative performance indicators is becoming increasingly common within a comparative framework of governance, as is the drive towards standards-based and sometimes standardised approaches to assessment.

Linking these multiple themes, Massaro (2010, p. 23) argued that the public will want to be reassured that education qualifications are globally transportable, “comparable in standard from one country to another”, and quality assured through “reports to society that are comprehensible to it”. These aspirations are clearly evident in the
Australian Government’s vision for higher education, which sought to “produce graduates with the knowledge, skills and understandings for full participation in society and the economy” (Australian Government, 2009, p. 7). This was to be supported through the implementation of “a quality assurance and regulation framework that enhances overall quality in the sector and provides clear information and access to learning about what and where to study ... to provide industry and the community with assurances of graduate quality” (Australian Government, 2009, p. 9). As discussed in Chapter 2, the landmark Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008) firmly linked quality with standards, and the Australian Government’s Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System policy ensemble responded with a strong focus on “meaningful academic standards” (Australian Government, 2009, p. 32). However, the preceding discussion has identified a number of implications if “learning standards rest on assessment practices and depend on their trustworthiness” (DEEWR, 2011b, p. 20).

In summary, this chapter has examined key conceptual issues associated with higher education quality policies relating to learning standards. An inspection of policy trends across a variety of international settings has indicated that the OECD and a number of nation states have been actively pursuing the ‘measurement’ and comparability of learning standards, despite long-standing issues of assessment that remain highly problematic. A recurrent theme through the literature suggests that whilst there might be agreement that some form of accountability is needed, the approaches to quality assurance that are periodically advanced by various interest groups are heavily contested. In particular, there are significant tensions surrounding: the way learning standards are described; the way student achievement is appraised against those standards; and the extent to which students’ achievement of learning standards can be compared at a national or international level.
Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This chapter discusses and critiques the theoretical frameworks or ‘lenses’ used by the researcher to analyse Australian higher education accountability and quality policies relating to learning standards and their implications for assessment. In particular it explicates how the hybrid theoretical framework employed in this research drew on the respective strengths of both critical theory and poststructuralism in a ‘policy trajectory’ approach (Ball, 1994a; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Vidovich, 2007, 2013).

The first section of this chapter outlines and critiques the contribution that critical theory makes to policy analysis with its broader focus on the exposure of ideologies to advance social justice. The second section critically examines poststructural approaches which aim to explore aspects of micro (institutional) level agency. The third section traces the historical development of theoretical frameworks adopted in approaches to policy analysis. In the final section the hybrid theoretical framework used in this research is explicated.

Critical theory

Critical theory is a normative form of social inquiry that aims to increase freedom and reduce domination (Bohman, 2013). It seeks to illuminate differences between appearance and reality, exposing power structures and highlighting the “disjunction between ostensible claims and what actually happens” (How, 2003, p. 5). Critical theory originated with a community of philosophers and social scientists usually referred to as the Frankfurt School; a group of scholars with a common interest in furthering a socially just society where people would be empowered to take political and economic control of their lives. Critical theory can be defined in broad terms, or it can be more narrowly defined as relating specifically to the work of the Frankfurt School, where it is usually capitalised as ‘Critical Theory’. Critical theory has its roots in Marxism, and the Frankfurt School attempted to explain why Marx’s prediction of a socialist revolution did not eventuate, believing that Marx had underestimated the
extent to which workers’ ‘false consciousness’ (essentially, a false belief that their situation was fair) had maintained the social and economic systems of their time.

Gramscian notions of hegemony and hegemonic power are of significance to critical theorists. Morton (2007) showed how Gramsci’s ideas of hegemony served as a complement to the theory of the state as a dictating force, showing how diffused and indirect pressures became mediated organically through society and the classes. As he put it, “hegemony within the realm of civil society is then grasped when the citizenry come to believe that authority over their lives emanates from the self” (Morton, 2007, p. 91).

Early critical theorists such as Horkheimer were also concerned with the dominance of positivist science, which extended a sphere of research influence into human and social worlds. At the heart of this argument lay a belief that the positivist sciences had become a new ideology in that “people everywhere are taught to accept the world ‘as it is’, thereby unthinkingly perpetuating it” (Agger, 1991, p. 109). Positivism cast practical problems as technical issues, thereby creating an objective reality, one which an individual has little control over. As Agger (1991) argued, the role of science with its focus on objective ‘facts’ had left questions of values and judgements unanswered, and this approach served to promote and maintain social inequalities.

Critical theorists drew from the work of Aristotle and his conceptions of ‘praxis’ (acts which change the world) and ‘phronesis’ (practical wisdom) to articulate visions based on a practical understanding of what should be done in a particular situation to address inequity. In this sense, critical theory is more than just criticism: it embraces emancipatory aspirations to improve equity; to “liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244). Bohman (2013) suggested that critical theoretical approaches are only adequate in Horkheimer’s terms if they are able to be simultaneously explanatory, practical and normative.

Although Moore (2007) argued that power asymmetries and consequential inequity are simply unavoidable, proponents of critical theory would mount a counterargument to suggest that critical theory nevertheless has a role to play in the surfacing and reduction of such inequalities. In this sense critical theory is more than just “living on the balcony” (Apple, 2012, p. xi). It is active, as it must be if the power of dominant
systems is to be reduced. However, the question of whether dominant systems are beneficial (and to whom) is a value judgement.

In this respect critical theory is not value neutral. Hammersley (2007a, p. 294) argued that “incommensurable paradigms” would be the theoretical outcome of sharply divergent value orientations to research in the social sciences, unless one held to the Enlightenment idea that a single conception of a common good would eventually prevail through the development of consensus over time. Critical theory with its inherently anti-establishment stance and a desire to support particular groups could not readily be identified as disinterested, and whilst Hammersley (2007a) conceded that values were important to acknowledge in terms of providing a framework for study, he maintained that practical values should not be the goal of social science research.

In terms of values, justice, and science, Habermas (a student of Adorno and Horkheimer) departed from some of the ideas of the founders of Critical Theory partly as a response to poststructuralist challenges to modernity, summarising the fundamental tensions between the ethical and practical approach of critical theory and the rigour of science thus:

... how can the promise of practical politics – namely providing practical orientation about what is right and just in a given situation – be redeemed without relinquishing, on the one hand, the rigour of scientific knowledge, which modern social philosophy demands, in contrast to the practical philosophy of classicism? And on the other, how can the promise of social philosophy to furnish an analysis of the interrelationships of social life, be redeemed without relinquishing the practical orientation of classical politics?

(Habermas, 1974, p. 44)

Habermas concluded that science was unable to offer a neutral or objective account of reality given that different kinds of knowledge are inevitably shaped by the human interests that they serve. For Habermas, criticism was grounded in everyday communicative action within the public sphere, with solidarity and freedom established through communication free of domination. Bohman (2013) argued that the significant contribution of Habermas was to advance positive conceptions of complexity, embracing differentiation and plurality and permitting analysis of how the
recognition of such differentiation opened up possibilities of democratic self-organising systems independent of a totalising structure. Interestingly, whilst Habermas (1996) acknowledged that unavoidable social complexity led to ‘differentiated’ criteria for democracy, he also suggested that public opinion was able to ‘counter-steer’ institutional complexity.

With respect to social complexity and the values that underpin critical research, Fairclough (2010) acknowledged that there is a ‘devil in the detail’, given that there are (necessarily) very different ideas as to what constitutes fairness, or equality. However this was the crucial point, in that such critique calls into question “what exists, what might exist and what should exist” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 7). He further distinguished between negative critique (analysis of social wrongs) and positive critique, which analyses the ways in which people seek to remedy issues.

Critiques of critical theory.

Critical theories have been challenged for their complexity and insufficient practical application, with persistent critique levelled at the desire of critical theorists to attack dominant structures for ideological reasons rather than for philosophical rigour. For example, Moore (2007, p. 26) asserted that critical analysis was epistemologically weak and sociologically reductive, and called for philosophy to “recover an epistemologically powerful theory of knowledge for socially progressive purposes”. He suggested that critical approaches were epistemologically weak because the task of epistemology is to define criteria by which it becomes possible to distinguish truths from non-truths, and, as he argued, the sociology of knowledge has had great difficulty establishing precise definitional criteria. Such approaches were seen to be socially reductive as they reduced knowledge to that held by those groups under study. This was, he argued, a fundamental problem with critical approaches, in that there is no absolute knowledge by definition, because “truth claims are demonstrated to be always relative to a context of some kind” (Moore, 2007, p. 28), a kind of ‘Catch-22’ (Heller, 1962) argument. Others identified this issue as a ‘crisis of representation’, a rejection of the idea that critical research is able to give an “objective depiction of a stable other” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 53).
Further challenges to critical approaches were mounted by Apple, who suggested that although critical educational research has been politically and theoretically important, it has failed to sufficiently analyse the tensions in differential relations of power, leaving us with a “less than elegant understanding of the field of social power which they operate” (Apple, 2004, p. 14). Apple also identified what he saw as a dangerous side-effect, in that research into educational issues has, over time, become increasingly orientated around a neoliberal terrain, with a concomitant decline in the number of discussions of feasible alternatives. In short, “the analysis of ‘what is’ has led to a neglect of ‘what might be’ “ (Apple, 2004, p. 40).

In summary, critical theory focuses on authority and injustice within a modernist paradigm in a context of industrial capitalism, with negative conceptions of hegemonic power and repression. However, critical theoretical approaches with their historical bias towards state-centric analyses may give insufficient attention to finer grained micro-level issues of power in policy processes. Furthermore, as Apple (2012) pointed out, structural approaches have historically attempted to create ‘grand narratives’, with the risk that the multiple and often contested spaces in which power struggles play out are left neglected and unexplored. It is in this ‘messy’ terrain within which poststructuralism is able to make a contribution.

**Poststructuralism**

Poststructural approaches view power as decentralised, circulating across all levels producing effects that are positive/productive as well as negative/repressive. In the context of policy study, poststructural approaches have been associated with a focus on individual agency (choice) and a plurality of possible interpretations, and this has been especially relevant at the micro level of policy processes (Ball, 1994a, 2012a; Bowe et al., 1992; Humes & Bryce, 2003; Vidovich, 2007, 2013).

However, despite perhaps an implied singularity in the term ‘poststructuralism’, it is difficult to define in any precise fashion (Marshall, 2004). At the broadest level poststructuralism is a philosophical response to structuralism, and in particular it is a challenge to scientific claims of truth and objectivity.
Peters and Humes (2003, p. 111), for example, mounted a spirited assertion that poststructuralism provides a “philosophical corrective to the confidence with which mainstream theorists allow these concepts or terms to remain undefined, untheorised and unreconstructed”.

Poststructural approaches are heterogeneous in nature. For example, though they might not have identified themselves as poststructuralists, two figures most commonly associated with poststructuralism, Foucault and Derrida, took quite different directions with their respective foci on power-knowledge, discourse, and conceptions of deconstruction. Possibly the only unifying hallmark of poststructuralism (and postmodernism, arguably from which poststructuralism cannot be cleanly separated) is a marked aversion to positivism and a rejection of structure (Agger, 1991).

Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida have made substantial contributions to poststructuralism/postmodernism and their theoretical influences are readily apparent in policy study. Lyotard (1984), for example, rejected what he termed ‘grand narratives’, i.e. totalising perspectives on history such as Marxism which attempted to identify structural principles that could be used to explain a variety of social phenomena. Instead, Lyotard argued for ‘little narratives’ that reflected local understandings and contexts.

Foucault’s major contribution was in the couplet of power-knowledge and in particular through his refusal to allow them to be separated. From a semiological point of view he rejected the idea of a one-to-one relationship between the signifier and the signified (de Saussure, 1916/1974), as to accept such unity would privilege particular ideas and concepts across the world (Olssen, 2003). Foucault is credited with the “dismantling of the subject as a self-knowing and autonomous actor” (Springer, 2012, p. 134), through his demonstration that social reality is produced through a myriad of activities that are not readily amenable to identification and location through scientific inquiry. Drawing from the work of Poster (1984), Olssen suggested that the coupling between discourse and practice enabled Foucault to “study the way in which discourse is not innocent, but shaped by practice, without privileging any form of practice such as class struggle. He can also study how discourse in turn shapes practice without privileging any form of discourse” (Olssen, 2004, p. 457).
Derrida is generally credited with the coining of the term ‘deconstruction’ (Biesta & Stams, 2001), which is perhaps most succinctly defined as a theoretical approach to textual analysis with a specific interest in acts of exclusion (though Derrida would likely have resisted any attempt at definition – in a sense, to understand Derrida is to misunderstand Derrida).

As a method, deconstruction recursively and progressively analyses texts to reveal underpinning assumptions. As an epistemological stance, deconstruction has been argued to represent a serious challenge to textual objectivism through the theoretical instability of language and meaning, suggesting that “Derrida’s insights into reading and writing disqualify the positivist model of research that simply reflects the world ‘out there’, suggesting new ways of writing and reading science” (Agger, 1991, p. 112). Language here was seen as a deeply constitutional act, far more than being merely a technical/rational device for conveying a singular and stable meaning.

Simons, Olssen, and Peters (2009, p. 77) suggested that “deconstruction reveals that taken for granted concepts, objects and distinctions exist in language and receive their meaning through language, and hence, cannot be taken in their pure or given form”. A similar point was made by Wagner (2007, p. 38): “Agentialty and historicity are amenable to interpretation [emphasis added] rather than to explanation, and every interpretation takes place in language, with its infinitely open range of possibilities of expression”. Therefore, within every text there are concealed ‘voices’ with different authority, and every text is contested in that superficial appearances cannot be understood without reference to contextualisation and possible concealments.

However definitions need to be clarified, and such clarifications in turn need further definition, a position which prompted Agger (1991, p. 113) to remark that “meaning always lies elusively in the future”. Others, such as Biesta and Stams (2001) also acknowledged the critical potential of deconstruction in that it includes an explicit concern outside of what presents itself as self-sufficient, in that it is able to affirm what is excluded, stood aside or otherwise forgotten.

In particular, poststructuralist approaches seek to avoid falling into the trap of finding a neat answer to the problem of power, avoiding the impression that “the story is too pretty to be true” (Foucault, 1977/1980, p. 209). This rejection of neatly packaged solutions is to be found in the work of Ball (1994a, 1998, 2012b), who is recognised to
have done much to advance the use of poststructuralist approaches within critical policy analysis (Vidovich, 2007, 2013).

**Critiques of poststructuralism.**

Poststructuralism is not without its critics (Cole, 2003; Hammersley, 1995; Hill, 2001; Hodgson & Standish, 2009; Humes & Bryce, 2003). Hammersley (1995), for example, argued that poststructuralism was an ill-defined theoretical landscape devoid of distinctive features. Hodgson and Standish (2009, p. 310) were provoked to conclude that “despite its concern with power and social justice, educational research that is supposedly informed by poststructuralism fails to acknowledge the conditions of its own constitution”.

In the words of Humes and Bryce (2003, p. 186), poststructural writers have “failed to move beyond deconstruction” as they have sought to address a number of problems without success and become stalled in a mire of methodological uncertainty. Hill (2001) rehearsed a number of limitations of poststructural/postmodern approaches which essentially made the point that such approaches did not lead to useful practical action. Hill argued that such limitations included an inherent inability to: agree and/or define a reconstructive vision for the future; develop a project; actualise the vision; and define the roles educators might play. In short, as he put it, nobody had “gone beyond de-construction into constructing a coherent programme for re-construction” (Hill, 2001, p. 140). Cole concurred with Hill, arguing that:

> By their very essence, poststructuralism and postmodernism are about neither theory nor practice. They fail in both and remain an academic practice, based on deconstruction alone, with no practical implications for social or educational transformation. Indeed, deconstruction without reconstruction typifies the divorce of the academy from the reality of struggle on the ground.

(Cole, 2003, p. 496)

In short, like critical theoretical approaches, poststructuralism seeks to understand, but poststructuralism does not necessarily seek reconciliation. Cole raised a further, more intractable problem and argued that because neither poststructuralism nor postmodernism were able to provide strategies for reform, the paradoxical result was that in practice such ‘post’ approaches actually served to disempower the oppressed.
Cole (2003) conceded that ‘post’ approaches had the potential to be liberating within individuals or localised groups, but argued that to serve wider and politically valid purposes, analyses had to break free of the ‘small picture’ criticism and set out an agenda for larger scale change. In a similar vein, concerns were raised that if the Foucauldian power-knowledge couplet was emphasised in the context of a rejection of metanarratives, we may be “simply condemned to a politics of resistance of local sites” (Lingard, 1996, p. 86). Other arguments called for “careful attention to real systems of exploitation and domination that unfortunately continue to operate, undeterred by even the most sophisticated of theoretical announcements of their obsolescence” (De Lissovoy & McLaren, 2003, p. 137). The point made starkly here in different ways is that micro-level challenge (no matter how elegantly articulated it is) may not be a particularly strong way of resisting powerful ideologies and structures.

The researcher’s ‘positionality’ (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) is germane to policy analysis. Poststructuralist approaches acknowledge that such positionality will carry implications for research: the purposes of the data collection will decide what data is collected, for example. On this note, Humes and Bryce (2003) also picked up the issue of what might be termed ‘academic detachment’ that Cole (2003) referred to, arguing that efforts should be focused on communicating widely the results of poststructural research with the proviso that such research should be conducted into ‘problems that matter’ to communities. This position with respect to the role of the intellectual is in sharp contrast to that described by Foucault, who remarked in an interview with Duccio Trombadori that:

I absolutely will not play the part of one who prescribes solutions. I hold that the role of the intellectual today is not that of establishing laws or proposing solutions or prophesying, since by doing that one can only contribute to the functioning of a determinate situation of power that to my mind must be criticized.

Interview with Foucault, 1978 (as cited in Olssen, 2004, p. 464)

In summary, poststructuralist approaches are sensitive to agency and power (especially power circulating at the micro level) and power can be both positively and negatively construed. However, in the context of policy study these approaches have also been subjected to critique for failing to provide useful practical advice and giving insufficient acknowledgement to the power of the state. For example, Apple (2012, p.
xix) warned that “unfortunately, in the rush to poststructuralism and postmodernism, many of us may have forgotten how very powerful structural dynamics are in which we participate.” Contemporary policy study must therefore engage with the enduring power of structure in dynamic and contested policy spaces, but it must also recognise highly complex power relationships and ‘messy’ networks of policy actors and processes (Ball, 2012a).

Approaches to policy analysis

There is as much contestation in theoretical frameworks for policy studies as there is in policy itself (Wang, 2011), and perspectives on policy to an extent depend on the theoretical standpoint of the author (Ozga, 2000). Taking the notion of theoretical standpoint further and locating it in the context of policy study, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) suggested that researcher positionality carries at least three meanings. First, they argued, positionality may relate to the theoretical stance adopted by the researcher with attendant implications arising from underpinning ontological and epistemological assumptions. Second, there is the potential positionality of the researcher in terms of their role as (for example) academic researcher, government policy adviser or hired consultant. A third dimension relating to positionality they linked closely to globalisation where the location of the research in a particular geopolitical context (such as the global north during a financial crisis) may be highly significant. These expanded dimensions to conceptions of standpoint are especially relevant to policy studies and their underpinning theoretical frameworks.

Changes over time in theoretical positioning within the broader social sciences have had an influence on the development of policy studies. According to deLeon and Vogenbeck (2007), policy studies have reflected a broader transition in the social sciences from methodologies based on positivism and empiricism to post-positivist methodologies that are associated with a rejection of instrumental rationality and a recognition that differences in context require different perspectives and epistemologies. Essentially, these challenges advanced the argument that positivism was inadequate and unable to answer the kind of questions demanded from policy study. Wagner (2007) in his historical account of public policy, social sciences and the state also broadly concurred with this position, observing that during the last three
decades of the 20th century the design of theory and research had become more sophisticated, with an abandonment of positivism becoming increasingly evident.

Reflecting (on) these influences, Apple (2012, p. viii) posited that there has been a significant reorientation of one of the key guiding questions within education, and he suggested that traditional questions of “what knowledge is of most worth” have, over time, been reframed as “whose knowledge is of most worth?” in a political climate characterised by neoliberalism and the purported ascendance of the knowledge economy.

**Early theoretical frameworks.**

Early theoretical frameworks used in policy studies were generally concerned with a focus on the state. Towards the end of the 19th century the nation was “regarded as the ‘natural’ container of rules and resources extending over, and mastering, a defined territory” (Wagner, 2007, p. 32), with the exception of the United States which did not have a strong central ‘state’ at that point. Dale (1992) was critical of studies that had focused on individual actions, arguing that such an approach lacked systematic analysis, thereby limiting the extent to which wider social explanations could be drawn. Whilst he agreed that the state was complex, contradictory and heterogeneous, he asserted with some force that “a focus on the State is not only necessary, but the most important component of any adequate understanding of education policy. Of that there can be no doubt” Dale (1992, p. 388).

In terms of policy processes, Jann and Wegrich (2007) suggested that early theoretical frameworks for policy analysis generally revolved around four discrete and linear stages in the policy cycle, which they summarised as: 1) agenda-setting; 2) policy formulation and decision-making; 3) implementation; and 4) evaluation. Over time, however, studies of policy-making became less likely to follow the implicitly top-down and rationalist perspective embedded in the traditional staged model outlined above, moving to include other kinds of actors alongside the nation state. Essentially, if earlier theoretical underpinnings of policy processes were more prescriptive and normative, then later ones became more descriptive and analytical.
Policy trajectory studies.

Early work conducted by Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) described three contexts of policy processes, spanning the contexts of: **influences** (focusing on the various drivers and interactions that influence policy development); of **text production** (where policy text is created) and of **practices** (where policy is re-created and produced, i.e. they are subject to mediation at their point of impact). Ball (1993) identified this as a ‘policy trajectory’ study, and, in his subsequent work, Ball (1994a) added two further contexts: a context of **outcomes** (impacts on equity and social justice); and a context of **political strategy** (actions to improve matters).

Drawing on both poststructuralism and critical theory to address both micro and macro concerns respectively, Ball rejected neatly sequenced definitions of a policy cycle as a structured linear process from creation to implementation, instead describing policy as being an inherently ‘messy’ affair, involving both contestation and compromise. Ball (1994a) accepted that education policy should relate to the working of the state, but argued that it must not be limited to this. He drew on poststructuralism and the work of Foucault to criticise the simplistic notion of the nation state as dominant, arguing that this view ignored the multiple possible interpretations of policy which may be entirely at odds with the policy text. His significant concern was that this approach was insensitive to the way that people could (and did) respond creatively to policy:

> The point is that we cannot predict or assume how they will be acted on in every case in every setting, or what their immediate effect will be, or what room for manoeuvre actors will find for themselves. Action may be constrained differently (even tightly) but it is not determined by policy. Solutions to the problems posed by policy text will be localised and should be expected to display ad hocery and messiness.

(Ball, 1994a, p. 18)

In terms of policy analysis, Ball’s definition of policy as “text and action, words and deeds” (Ball, 1994a, p. 10) was seminal in that it extended the focus from the written intent of the policy towards the inclusion of discourses in policy texts and practices, although Ball recognised that policy processes could never be entirely predicted. Whilst policies were, in his terms, “crude and simple”, practice was “sophisticated, contingent, complex and unstable” (Ball, 1994a, p. 10).
Whilst the work of Ball and his colleagues (Ball, 1993, 1994a; Bowe et al., 1992) was highly influential in advancing poststructural approaches to policy, it was criticised for attempting to swing the pendulum too far in the recognition of micro level agency, in that it “distorts understandings of the policy process, especially in the relative powers which it assigns to the central apparatus of the state and to the schools” (Hatcher & Troyna, 1994, p. 156). Essentially, the argument advanced by Hatcher and Troyna was that the micro political focus was insufficient to oppose state policy and any oppositional activity needed to be more collective in order for it to be effective. Whilst not wishing to defend a purely top-down linear model, Hatcher and Troyna (1994, p. 162) argued for “an understanding of the policy process that, while acknowledging processes of institutional reinterpretation, gives much greater weight to the ability of the state to control outcomes than Ball and his colleagues do”, provoking in turn an equally swift and spirited defence in response (Ball, 1994b).

Further critique of this downplaying of the role of the state came from Evans and Penney (1995) in their study of how a working group, formed to advise on a national curriculum for physical education in the UK, had interacted with the then Minister for Sport and Secretary of State. Their analysis of policy processes showed how “central government control over the curriculum was often exercised subtly through an expression of discursive power, but it also drew on positional and material forms of power” (Evans & Penney, 1995, p. 42). It is significant that when discussions were not heading in the direction the government found favourable, that expression of power became formidable.

The preceding discussion has focused on the tensions between the state and micro-level (institutional) policy actors in earlier policy analysis. Contemporary theoretical perspectives in policy study are broader in reach, and theoretical frameworks paying greater attention to the effects of globalisation have become prominent in more recent policy studies.

**Theoretical frameworks underpinning globalised education policy analysis.**

Lingard (1996), amongst others, suggested that much of Ball’s theorising was limited because it was situated within the specific nation state. Drawing on both Ball’s (1994a) work on policy trajectories and Dale’s (1989) work with its state-centric focus, Lingard
called for a greater theorisation of the processes of globalisation, arguing that whilst the approaches of Dale and Ball were different, they were “both nonetheless blind to the inter-related economic, political and cultural processes of globalisation” (Lingard, 1996, p. 75). Lingard was quick to realise the growing significance of international agencies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the diffusion of educational policy across boundaries of nation states, and he called for policy analysis to be more aware of how these globalised influences were affecting policy processes at a national level. This stance was later acknowledged and taken up by Ball (1998).

The effects of globalisation are prominent in policy analyses from the new millennium (Alexiadou, 2014; Ball, 2003; Dale, 2005; Henry, Lingard, Rizvi, & Taylor, 2001; Lange & Alexiadou, 2010; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Vidovich, 2002, 2004, 2007, 2013; Vidovich & Slee, 2001). Marginson and Rhoades (2002), for example, called for a greater recognition of the effects of globalisation, and offered their conception of a ‘glo-na-cal’ agency heuristic which included within their theoretical frame of reference the agency of global, national and local groups and their ability to take action either individually or collectively. The utility of this heuristic has been acknowledged elsewhere (Cantwell & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009; Costa, 2011; Saarinen & Ursin, 2011; Välimaa, 2004; Vidovich, 2004) and it is employed in the meta-analysis of policy processes in this research (refer to Chapter 10).

Henry et al. (2001) pointed to growing global policy convergence and identified the possible emergence of a ‘global model’ of policy in higher education. However, just as Ball (1994a) had been criticised for his focus on micro level agency, theoretical framings that potentially overemphasised the role of globalisation in policy processes were also subject to critique. Whilst Vidovich (2004) recognised a degree of policy convergence (and divergence), she also argued that the idea of a ‘global model’ was potentially misleading, given that policy developments were nuanced to context and they remained significantly controlled at the national level. Similarly, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argued that policy analysis should seek to understand how the effects of global influences work in their localised social and political contexts, highlighting the need to avoid seeing globalisation as an all-powerful blanket cause of policy shifts. Grek (2013, p. 697) made a parallel point, arguing that many scholars whilst emphasising processes
of globalisation had still “failed to acknowledge the extent to which the national is critical, if not the critical element, in the formation of global policy agendas”. Each of these positions essentially argued that policy analysis must resist the tendency to reify globalisation as a homogenising force. Calls for more balanced approaches to policy analysis with an emphasis on both macro level constraint and micro level agency remain (Vidovich, 2013).

Vidovich (2007) extended Ball’s (1994a) policy trajectory framework by making three principal modifications. First, the analytical frame of reference was expanded to include macro level (global and international) factors and their growing influence on nation states. Second, the revised framework placed more emphasis on the state, to recognise the powerful role of nation states. That is, the state was recognised as one of many policy actors, but it was privileged: it was not merely an “actor amongst actors” (Vidovich, 2007, p. 294). A third modification gave greater attention to the multidirectional and dynamic interrelationships between different levels of policy processes (macro, meso, and micro). These three orientations are adopted in the policy trajectory framework employed in this study.

It has been argued in preceding sections that critical theory (with its focus on hegemonic power and the dominant role of the state) and poststructuralism (with its focus on the messiness and potential agency of policy actors at the micro level) can both provide useful theoretical lenses with which to examine complex policy processes such as those associated with accountability and quality policies relating to learning standards and their implications for assessment. Furthermore, it has been shown that a number of education policy analyses have drawn on the complementarity of both critical theory and poststructuralism to bring together micro and macro level foci. Although power is conceived in different ways in each case, a concerned interest in the role of power in relationships lies common to both critical theory and poststructuralism and these approaches are drawn together to form the theoretical basis of this research.
Critical theory and poststructuralism – a hybrid approach

The discussion thus far has explicated how contemporary theoretical frameworks for policy analysis need to be sensitive to both issues of structure and distributed power supporting agency. An argument has also been advanced to suggest that such endeavours should also be coupled with an interest in going beyond deconstruction and analysis to suggest theoretical and practical possibilities for the future. With these aspirations in mind, the final section of this chapter explicates the hybrid approach which underpinned this research, introducing also critical discourse analysis as a theoretically framed approach that straddles both critical theory and poststructuralism (Vidovich, 2013). A discussion of critical discourse analysis as a method is located in Chapter 5.

This research therefore drew together critical theory and poststructuralism in a ‘policy trajectory’ approach (Ball, 1994a; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Vidovich, 2007, 2013) in order to examine quality policy processes relating to learning standards within the Australian setting. Whilst critical theory was most useful at the macro level, poststructuralism was used to focus on an illumination of the complexity and plurality of the policy processes at all levels. The idea of combining critical theory and poststructural approaches is neither new, nor transient. Agger, for example argued for a combination of critical theory and poststructuralism that incorporated Derridean deconstruction as far back as the early 1980s (Agger, 1991). The previous section of this chapter outlined how hybrid theoretical approaches have been used in a number of studies in the intervening period, such as Ball (1994a) or Vidovich (2004). More recently, Springer (2012) also drew together poststructuralism and critical theory, arguing that to follow Foucault is to question the relationship between structure and agency, thereby recognising that the historicity of systems and structures remain highly relevant to understanding power dimensions and flows.

Critical discourse analysis.

Returning to the classical definition of policy as “text and action, words and deeds” (Ball, 1994a, p. 10) outlined earlier, it can be argued that the study of discourse is therefore central to policy study (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013; Fanghanel, 2007; Hyatt, 2013a; Taylor, 2004). With respect to critical discourse analysis, the work of
Norman Fairclough is recognised to straddle both critical theory and poststructuralism (Simons et al., 2009; Vidovich, 2013). The distinguishing characteristic of Fairclough’s work and his point of departure was to “analyse the actual language used in text, but to combine this analysis with a focus on discursive and social practices within which the actual text plays a role” (Simons et al., 2009, p. 68).

Fairclough’s focus was on the ideological role of discourse, using the term discourse to show how language both shapes social practices, and is itself shaped by them. He acknowledged that Marxian structural critiques of capitalism were both substantial and influential, but argued that the place of critique of language in the critical method applied to capitalism had not been sufficiently recognised, suggesting that “Marx’s method includes elements of what is now generally known as ‘critical discourse analysis’” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 303).

Fairclough’s (1992, 2003, 2010) approach to critical discourse analysis aims to examine complex relationships between texts, practices and processes located in a socially determined context. It focuses on syntax, semantics and semiotics to provide a systematic framework to explain how such relationships are influenced by power and language (Taylor, 2004). As a methodology, informed and influenced by critical theory and poststructuralism, it is both political and analytical. Taylor (2004, p. 444) illustrated how “language works in policy texts” arguing that critical discourse analysis was able to play a role in policy analysis and (pressing the point rather less firmly) she suggested that the approach may also support change towards socially democratic ends.

The aim of critical discourse analysis is therefore to reveal “how authors of texts (seen as semiotic representations of social events) represent and construct the social world, institutions, identities, relationships and how these are shaped and characterised ideologically through relations of power” (Hyatt, 2013b, p. 5). The power of critical discourse analysis lies in its ability to interrogate struggles in policy processes where policy texts, speeches and even consultation papers are used tactically. On this point Ball (1993, p. 14) in his earlier work argued that “we need to appreciate the way in which policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercise power through a production of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’, as discourses”. 

Critiques of hybrid approaches and critical discourse analysis.

It is recognised that some commentators have argued that critical theory and poststructuralist approaches have conflicting ideologies and are therefore mutually exclusive (Cole, 2003; Evans, Davies, & Penney, 1994; Hill, 2001). Critical theorists would hold that policy processes serve to maintain hegemonic ideological power through domination, whilst poststructuralist views of decentralised power are expressed in positive and productive terms as well as negative and repressive. Evans et al. (1994) criticised the dangers of this methodological pluralism, drawing on visual imagery and metaphor to liken it to the drabness of the resultant colour when mixing different paints, thereby perhaps missing the point that a careful and limited selection of base colours may produce pleasing results when mixed. However, whilst it is relatively easy to find points of demarcation between the two (such as the poststructural rejection of structure in comparison with critical theory which is predicated on issues of structure), arguably neither approach on its own satisfactorily addresses the complexity of contemporary approaches to policy analysis in globalising times.

This unsatisfactory position has led others to argue that there is value in bringing the two approaches together in a hybrid theoretical framework (Agger, 1991; Apple, 2012; Ball, 1994a, 1998; Springer, 2012; Vidovich, 2007, 2013). Such hybrid approaches draw on the strengths of both critical theory and poststructuralism but acknowledge their respective weaknesses: they therefore attempt to recognise and understand both the larger social context and the more local circumstances where policies play out.

Whilst they recognised the historical epistemological debates of the previous century, Simons et al. (2009) suggested that the focus has now shifted to address new socio-political matters of interest. This included a growing acceptance of what Vidovich (2007) termed ‘theoretical eclecticism’. Drawing on a theoretically eclectic approach enabled a “more situated investigation of many of the routes and effects of discourse by keeping it within its structural context” (Apple, 2012, p. xxvii).

Theoretical frameworks that draw on critical discourse analysis are also subject to critique. For example, Molina (2009) made the point that critical discourse researchers’ vital interest is in the (selected) texts that they consider a priori to be discriminatory.
thereby revealing an underpinning assumption that power and ideology are manifest in discourse. Molina also argued that the omissions in a text pose a significant challenge to analysis, however others have argued that one of the purposes of critical discourse analysis is to read texts ‘contrapuntally’ - in other words to search for what is excluded, suppressed or ignored (Fairclough, 2010; Luke, 2002). The diverse range of other theoretical frameworks with which critical discourse analysis has been associated prompted Luke (2002, p. 103) to ask whether it was a “technique in search of a theory” given the lack of a consistent theoretical basis. Luke called for critical discourse analysis to demonstrate what ‘should be’, in that deconstruction should also be used with positive configurations of power in discourse, without which “CDA [critical discourse analysis] risks becoming entrenched in a neo-Althussarian paradigm operating under the assumption that all media are forms of centrally controlled interpellation” (Luke, 2002, p. 105). On the other hand, others have argued in favour of critical discourse analysis, pointing out that it can draw attention to discursive shifts over time and space (Vidovich, 2013). It is also helpful in terms of “providing an account of how political ideologies are authorized through policies by locating them in the dominant popular imaginaries so they are interpreted as emerging from a commonly agreed set of values” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 63).

The preceding discussion has highlighted that it is difficult to dismiss the argument that educational research is inevitably framed and influenced by the value positions held by the researcher (Hammersley, 2007b). However, as Humes and Bryce (2003) conclude, all forms of social knowledge have a degree of uncertainty, but to fail to contribute constructively to the debate is a dereliction of academic duty.

**Concluding discussion**

The theoretical framework underpinning this research was positioned as a ‘hybrid’ approach, combining the broad focus of critical theory with the recognition and acceptance of the indeterminate and complex view of the world that is representative of poststructuralism. Critical theory is underpinned by a commitment to greater justice, equality, and freedom; the contribution of poststructuralism is to provide emphasis to the couplet of power-knowledge in relation to policy texts and the discourses which both frame them, and are in turn framed by them.
The use of critical theory provided a means of illuminating structural power dynamics and constraint, whilst poststructuralism facilitated a focus on power circulating particularly at the micro level. This hybrid approach was appropriate given the intersections between global pressures and trends such as those established by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, significant national policy pressures and influences, and the ability of institutions and individuals/groups to exert agency at all levels of the policy processes.

In summary, this hybrid approach to policy analysis brought the analytical and deconstructing lens of poststructuralism together with the recognition of state constraint and hegemonic power from critical theory. This created a theoretical framework that was able to address the complexity of contemporary policy processes, but not one so complex that it stood in the way of utility. This policy trajectory approach (Ball, 1994a; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Vidovich, 2007, 2013) acknowledges the ‘messiness’ of policy whilst remaining sensitive to global and political contexts, the application of which is discussed in the next chapter. As Ball (2012b, p. 16) argued, “we need to ‘see’ education policy and governance on a different scale and through new conceptual lenses; neatness is not an option.”
Chapter 5: Methods

Introduction

This chapter presents the qualitative research design, sampling and methods used for data collection and analysis, derived from the combination of theoretical frameworks described in Chapter 4.

The first section in this chapter examines why a qualitative research design is appropriate for this research, outlining the researcher’s ‘positionality’ (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) and describing methods adopted to maximise the rigour of the research. The research questions are introduced in the second section. The third section describes the data collection methods - interviews and document analysis - that were used to address the research questions, identifying the particular challenges and approaches associated with interviewing elite policy actors. The fourth section addresses the approach to sampling, including a description of the coding used for participants. The time frames for data sampling and the procedures used in transcription are detailed in this section. Following this, the data analysis methods used to interrogate the data are described in the fifth section. In the sixth and final section ethical considerations relating to this research are examined.

Qualitative research

This study analyses higher education policies in the domains of accountability, quality, learning standards, and assessment. A qualitative approach was judged to be the most appropriate for this research, given the desire to focus on the social and political context and the intention to explore the views and perspectives of the stakeholders to understand and explain events using existing or emergent concepts (Yin, 2011).

The theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter described a hybrid approach to this research, drawing on both critical theory and poststructuralism. Both of these approaches tend to draw upon qualitative methodologies as they are sensitive to context and process, offering the opportunity to provide in-depth and holistic descriptions of complex phenomena, and in the words of Punch (2005, p. 238) they
“are the best way we have of getting the insider’s perspective, the actor’s definition of the situation”. Both critical theory and poststructural approaches have a common interest in exploring social structural inequalities and power relationships although they are conceptualised differently in each case. The previous chapter also outlined the theoretical framing which shapes critical discourse analysis, a qualitative technique which straddles both critical and poststructural approaches (Vidovich, 2013).

Qualitative studies are able to focus on depth rather than breadth, and whilst this gives rise to difficulties with their ability to make generalisations, they are particularly well suited to the exploration of complex social contexts (Yin, 2011). With sufficient detailing of the settings of the research, readers can make judgements about the relevance of theoretical propositions generated by this research in their own settings.

**Researcher positionality and the trustworthiness of qualitative research.**

It is recognised that qualitative approaches may be criticised for their subjective nature and the potentially biased stance taken by the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Silverman, 2006). In Chapter 4, three dimensions of ‘positionality’ (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) were introduced, describing positionality in terms of: the role of the researcher; the theoretical frameworks adopted; and the location of the researcher in time and in space. It is important to recognise and acknowledge the positionality of the researcher as the researcher’s values and intentions inevitably influence the stance taken. Hammersley (2007a) argued that the situated nature of judgement called for researchers to clearly explicate the conditions of their investigation, and, with this in mind, the following discussion examines the role and location of the researcher.

The researcher was an academic member of staff, specialising in assessment, and working in a central teaching and learning department in a large Australian university. The researcher was therefore involved to an extent in the formulation of assessment policy at the local (institutional) level and was aware of some of the policy actors, policies and processes at the Australian national level. Furthermore, having lived and worked in the UK previously, the researcher had some familiarity with English quality policy relating to learning standards.

The researcher undertook a number of approaches designed to improve the trustworthiness of the research in an attempt to recognise and reduce potential issues
relating to positionality and bias. Many guiding principles for qualitative research have been identified in the literature (e.g. Northcote, 2012), such as those relating to theoretical and methodological rigour, defensibility and credibility. The researcher’s approaches to this study included: a clear explication of the theoretical frameworks adopted; careful sampling of participants based on defined criteria; and rigorous and comprehensive approaches to data collection, transcription and analysis. The various ways in which the researcher attempted to reduce bias are discussed later in this chapter. Finally, the researcher reflected on the processes and findings throughout, holding them up to careful scrutiny to ensure that participant views were faithfully reported.

**Research questions**

The aim of this study was to analyse accountability and quality policies relating to learning standards, and their implications for assessment in higher education. Using a ‘policy trajectory’ approach, this research focused on policy influences, texts, practices/effects and longer term outcomes in the Australian setting, examining policy processes at a national and institutional level. The national level comprised Australian Government and non-Government groups; the institutional level spanned four ‘types’ of public and private higher education provider in Australia. The primary focus was on the Australian national level, because policy processes had not reached a settled position within which institutions would operate.

Within the Australian setting, quality policy was taken to mean the evolving “ensemble” (Ball, 1993, p. 14) of quality policy texts released by the Australian Government between 2009 and 2013.

This extended period of policy text production commenced with the landmark Australian Government policy *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009). Although the research time frame concluded with the release of the *Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes* (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2013), it should be noted that policy production processes were ongoing and a policy position had not been finalised by the point at which data collection concluded in May 2013.
Using the policy trajectory approach explicated in Chapter 4, and drawing on both interviews and documents as sources of data, the following research questions were examined in the Australian setting:

1. What are the key influences (international, national and local/institutional) affecting the development of quality policies relating to learning standards in Australian higher education?

2. What are the key characteristics of quality policy texts relating to learning standards in Australian higher education and how were they produced?

3. What are the emergent and predicted practices/effects of quality policies relating to learning standards in Australian higher education?

4. What are the longer term outcomes (both emerging and predicted) of quality policy trends relating to learning standards in Australian higher education?

This study also sought to identify and compare quality policy processes relating to learning standards in settings beyond Australia. The perspectives of selected policy actors within the UK and US were included, given the historically strong policy flows from these nations to Australia (Winstanley, 2012).

With respect to the UK and the US, ‘quality policy’ was taken to mean those quality policies relating to learning standards within the participants’ national settings. Whilst the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is neither policy maker nor nation state, the perspectives of a participant from this organisation were also sought in recognition of the growing influence of the OECD on national level policy processes (Sellar & Lingard, 2013b). With this participant, policy influences relating to learning standards were explored in broad terms (i.e. not in relation to any specific national policy).

These perspectives from policy actors in the UK, US, and the OECD were gathered from interviews that also drew on the research questions as outlined above, but with modifications as necessary to reflect the participants’ locations. To facilitate comparison with the Australian setting, these perspectives from policy actors external to Australia were collected and analysed in a similar way, but it should be noted that they do not constitute policy trajectory studies in their own right.
Data collection methods

Within this research design, two qualitative research methods - document analysis and interviews - were selected to gather data to inform the research questions. The rationale for the choice of these methods and a brief discussion of their respective strengths and limitations is outlined below.

Document analysis.

Policy is both text and discourse, and document analysis or the study of texts is an important part of policy study (Ball, 1994a; Fairclough, 2003, 2010; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Taylor, 2004). Historical and contemporary documents comprise a rich source of data (Punch, 2005) which can serve to triangulate findings against other methods such as interviews. Yin (2014) listed a number of strengths of documents as sources of data, including stability, potentially broad coverage, and what he termed an ‘unobtrusive’ nature as they are not created as part of the research, although the contents represent social constructions (Fairclough, 2010). Preliminary document analysis is also an appropriate point to start gathering data and laying foundations for subsequent interviews.

Opportunities for scrutinising document data proved to be plentiful, through the ready availability of a rich and diverse set of sources of government policy documents, media releases, consultation papers (and their published responses), and other documents directly or indirectly associated with these. All documents were located in the public domain and available online. In addition, extracts from five key policy texts were selected for close examination using critical discourse analysis. These extracts are outlined later in this chapter and summarised in Table 5.1.

Interviews.

Interviews were selected to encourage participants to respond in depth, offering opportunities for probing and expansion of areas of interest (Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, & McKinney, 2012; Kvale, 2007). Punch (2005) described a continuum of interview approaches ranging from those highly structured (standardised) variants to those which are completely unstructured, acknowledging that each approach has various advantages and disadvantages. Cohen and Manion (1994) suggested that
although interviews conducted according to a pre-specified standardised format may facilitate ready comparison, they may also trade validity for reliability. In this research semi-structured interviews were selected as they offered a compromise position in this respect, permitting broadly similar themes to be explored and compared, whilst also facilitating amplification of the unique contribution each participant was able to make (Kvale, 2007).

Many of the participants in this research would be considered to be elite policy actors. Elite actors are those who hold peak leadership positions within an organisation, such as Chief Executive Officer, President or equivalent. Whilst the policy elite are generally well-informed and highly articulate professionals, they can be difficult to reach (Selwyn, 2012). For example, in one recent study in Australia focusing on academic standards, approximately one third of the mainly elite individuals approached responded to the researcher’s request for a single interview, with many not even electing to reply to the invitation (Thompson-Whiteside, 2011). Furthermore, as Cohen et al. (2013) point out, policy research can be sensitive and this group can be highly experienced and sometimes specifically trained in the art of avoiding questions (Harvey, 2011).

In spite of these potential problems, interviews were judged to be a particularly appropriate way of gathering data from the elite policy actors in this study, as they are, in the words of Charmaz (2006, p. 28) “open ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted”. Chances of success can also be improved by following advice offered by Harvey (2011), who asserted that researchers should initiate interviews only after acquiring a sufficiently thorough grasp of the interview topic through detailed background research and literature review. Harvey (2011) also highlighted the importance of making a positive first impression when interviewing elites, and provided guidance on how these interviews should be conducted to improve the chances of creating a social setting characterised by trust and openness. Open-ended and semi-structured interview questions were chosen in this study in order to allow participants the freedom to draw on their knowledge and experiences, as recommended by Kvale (2007).

Overall, the research design was a qualitative ‘policy trajectory’ (Ball, 1994a; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Vidovich, 2007, 2013) study of the Australian setting, drawing on a
combination of documents and interviews as sources of data to examine policy processes across the contexts of policy influences, texts, practices/effects and longer term outcomes. In addition, perspectives were sought from policy actors beyond Australia, and these included participants from the UK, the US, and the OECD. The next section discusses how documents and participants were selected for inclusion in this study through the process of sampling.

**Sampling**

Sampling in qualitative studies is a deliberative process aligned to the theoretical framework adopted (Cohen et al., 2013; Punch, 2005; Yin, 2011, 2014). The sampling strategy adopted was purposive (Palys, 2008) as the primary intention was to examine policy processes across the Australian policy trajectory and to compare this with perspectives from actors beyond Australia (i.e. the UK, the US and the OECD). Participants were therefore selected on the basis of their involvement with quality policy and learning standards.

Interviews were sought with elite and key policy actors across the settings studied, and document analysis was conducted at the Australian national level. Within the Australian setting, the majority of the interviews were conducted at the national level given that a policy settlement had not been reached within which public and private institutions would operate.

Four ‘types’ of public and private higher education provider were included in order to examine policy processes at the Australian institutional level. The inclusion of private providers alongside public universities was important for two reasons. First, this was because the introduction of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) created a unified national regulator spanning both private and public sectors. Second, the inclusion of private higher education providers was important in view of the rapid growth of this part of the sector both within Australia and internationally.

An overview of the sources of data is presented in Table 5.1 overleaf.
Table 5.1 Sources of data

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<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Documents</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
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<td><strong>Australian National level</strong></td>
<td>Australian Government policy ensemble 2009-2013 *</td>
<td>Australian Government</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1. Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (2009)</td>
<td>• Australian Government (2)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding (2009)</td>
<td>• Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (1)</td>
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<td>3. Developing a framework for teaching and learning standards in Australian higher education and the role of TEQSA (2011)</td>
<td>• Office for Learning and Teaching (1)</td>
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<td>4. Assessment of Generic Skills (2011)</td>
<td>• Australian National level grouping</td>
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<td><strong>Australian non-Government</strong></td>
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<td>• Higher Education Standards Panel (1)</td>
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<td>• Australian Learning and Teaching Council Discipline Scholars (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Leaders in national level learning standards projects (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Policy researchers (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Chair of a sector review panel (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Australian Institutional level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public and private institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Research-intensive university (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Australian Technology Network university (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Ungrouped university (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Private higher education providers (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selected perspectives from beyond Australia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Quality assurance elite policy actors (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Senior institutional quality leader (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Policy researcher (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Selected perspectives from beyond Australia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>US</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Council for Aid to Education (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Project leader in learning standards (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Policy researcher (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selected perspectives from beyond Australia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>OECD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Former senior official (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Policy documents 1 to 5 are those key policy texts selected for critical discourse analysis. They are numbered in accordance with their presentation in Chapter 7.

Selected perspectives from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD) are shown separately. This is because these are not part of the Australian policy trajectory study, and because they do not constitute policy trajectory studies in their own right (refer to ‘Research questions’ earlier in this chapter).
Within the Australian setting at the national level, interviews were sought with representatives from: the Australian Government; the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA); the Higher Education Standards Panel; and the Office for Learning and Teaching. The inclusion of the Australian Council for Educational Research was also identified as being particularly relevant, given its long-standing role in the provision of national level evaluation and testing services. Disciplinary contexts were represented through the inclusion of a number of Australian Learning and Teaching Council Discipline Scholars. The Discipline Scholars were relevant to this study because they had been formed with the specific intention of focusing on learning standards in their respective disciplines (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010). In this regard ‘maximum variation’ sampling strategies (Cohen et al., 2013; Yin, 2011) were employed in order to ensure that the spread of disciplines studied was representative of those in higher education, within the need to delimit the number of participants in the study. This approach to sampling was judged to be important, given the different approaches to learning standards that arise in different disciplines (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010). Although in most cases the Discipline Scholar was located within an institution, these participants were located at the national level of the policy trajectory in this research owing to their national level involvement in the development of cross-sector learning standards within their respective discipline. Finally interviews were also sought with prominent policy commentators and leading scholars on learning standards within Australia.

At the national level, five documents from the Australian quality policy ensemble were selected for detailed analysis, as outlined in Table 5.1. These documents spanned the time frame delineated by this research, commencing with the relevant section(s) of the landmark Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009) and three further subsequent policy documents that were integral to policy processes, concluding with the Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2013) released in March 2013. These evolutions of policy texts were selected for analysis to examine and illuminate changes over time. As Chapter 2 indicated, these changes have been substantial.

At the institutional level, four types of higher education provider were identified from across the Australian public and private sector. Specific types (cases) were selected for
their ability to represent particular groups or grouped interests (Stake, 2000). Yin (2014) highlighted situations where case based sampling is particularly appropriate and these conditions were pertinent to this research, such as the need to acquire information about particular cases or the need to represent members of a group.

Public universities comprised three of the four types of institutions sampled. The first institution selected was a research-intensive university within the formally constituted grouping known as the ‘Group of Eight’. The second was drawn from one of the ‘Australian Technology Network’ universities, a formal grouping of former institutes of technology with a history of working in partnership with industry. A university not part of a formal grouping in 2012/13 was selected to represent the third institutional type.

The fourth institution type focused on private higher education providers, represented by participants from three private institutions to balance the three public universities selected, and also to ensure that this part of the Australian higher education sector was not otherwise under-represented in this research. Across all four institutional types, Deans or Directors of Teaching and Learning, Directors of Quality, or their nearest equivalents were identified as the most appropriate participants.

The perspectives of policy actors beyond Australia were also gathered. The UK and the US were considered to be of particular interest, given the historical frequency of education policy flows between these countries and Australia (see, for example, Lingard, 2010; Vidovich & Slee, 2001; Winstanley, 2012). In particular, emergent Australian quality policy had aspects in common with the UK where benchmarking statements had already been developed (Rust et al., 2003), and elite policy actors from UK (English) quality assurance organisations were identified. In the US, participants were approached from the New York based Council for Aid to Education (creators of the Collegiate Learning Assessment), and also from an American national project which offered an alternative approach to standardised testing within the US. Within both the UK and the US, prominent quality policy researchers with specific expertise in learning standards were specifically sought in order to gain their broad perspectives. Finally, one participant was identified with specific experience as he had been a former senior official within the OECD, an organisation with growing importance for higher education policy.
Participant identity coding.

The participant identity codes that arose from this approach to sampling are summarised in Table 5.2. The organisations sampled are listed in Table 5.1 but the mapping of these groups to individual participant codes is intentionally rendered opaque by clustering these within in their broader groupings in Table 5.2. This was required if anonymity was to be protected. In this way, for example, a participant from TEQSA is identified as an Australian Government participant, and included alongside other Australian Government participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Sampling criterion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Australian National level</strong></td>
<td>AG1 to AG4</td>
<td>Australian Government (4 participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Government and non-Government national level groups.</td>
<td>NG1 to NG15</td>
<td>Australian non-Government (15 participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Australian Institutional level</strong></td>
<td>U1</td>
<td>Research-intensive university (Group of Eight)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private and public higher education institutions.</td>
<td>U2</td>
<td>Australian Technology Network university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 participants</td>
<td>U3</td>
<td>Ungrouped university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PP1</td>
<td>Private higher education provider 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PP2</td>
<td>Private higher education provider 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PP3</td>
<td>Private higher education provider 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selected perspectives from beyond Australia</strong></td>
<td>UK1</td>
<td>UK quality policy elite 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK, US, and OECD.</td>
<td>UK2</td>
<td>UK quality policy elite 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 participants</td>
<td>UK3</td>
<td>Senior quality leader in a UK institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UK4</td>
<td>UK Policy researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US1</td>
<td>US Council for Aid to Education 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US2</td>
<td>US Council for Aid to Education 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US3</td>
<td>US Council for Aid to Education 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US4</td>
<td>US National learning standards project leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US5</td>
<td>US Policy researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OECD1</td>
<td>Former senior official within the OECD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that in some cases participants were also members of other policy actor groups. Such overlapping membership, in practice, proved to be rather common.
To illustrate, a participant who was selected because they had led a national level project in assessment may have also been a director of teaching and learning in an institution. Participants were therefore located in this table according to the primary rationale for their selection in this project, and also to preserve their anonymity (a more detailed explanation of this ethical issue is advanced later in this chapter).

**Timelines and processes.**

Data were purposively sampled from three broad sources in sequence. First, relevant documents relating to both antecedent and contemporary policies were collected and subject to preliminary analysis. Second, two pilot interviews were conducted with non-participating policy actors in order to trial and refine the process, and to verify the clarity of recording. Finally, formal interviews were conducted with participants in order to examine policy processes in the Australian setting, and to draw in the perspectives of participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD).

Interviews were conducted within a nine month period with the first occurring on the 27th August 2012; the final interview concluded on the 1st May 2013. During this period, 32 interviews took place with a total of 35 participants. The majority (29 of 32) were single person interviews, with the remaining three interviews involving two participants (both were from the same organisation).

There was a very high response rate to requests for interview: all of those approached agreed to participate, with two exceptions. In the first case a very senior government official demurred, but elected to nominate their immediate subordinate who was a senior departmental head (and they agreed to participate). In the second case, the prospective participant had entered semi-retirement and declined to participate, however he recommended a project co-leader (who agreed to be interviewed).

Scheduling of interviews proved to be as time consuming and labour intensive as Odendahl and Shaw (2002) suggested, and although none were ultimately cancelled, most of the original appointments were rescheduled (some several times) to find appropriate times to accommodate the meeting. There were no cancellations following agreement to participate. Response rates were therefore consistently excellent across all areas of the research.
Despite difficulties with scheduling and locating interviews together so as to facilitate the researcher’s travel arrangements across Australia as well as in the UK and the US, the majority of interviews (30 of 32) were conducted face to face. One participant expressed a preference to reply to the interview questions by email and one international interview was conducted by telephone in view of the difficulties in coordinating a meeting. The 30 face to face interviews were conducted at a variety of locations including six capital cities and other regional locations within Australia, the UK, and the US. Most of the interviews were conducted in the participant’s office, or in a nearby meeting room. The remainder were conducted within a quiet area located in a more public setting such as a library or an empty café.

With the exception of the participant who responded by email, all interviews were voice recorded with permission established in the participant information and consent forms as outlined later in this chapter. An Olympus WS-201S digital voice recorder with high quality stereo recording capability was used to capture the audio. This device proved to be reliable and although a backup recording system had been prepared it was not used. A total of 33 hours and 29 minutes of interview data was collected with the majority of the interviews (29 of 32) falling between 40 and 90 minutes in length. The three outlier interviews were 36 minutes (shortest), 100 minutes, and the longest was 135 minutes. The median interview length was 62 minutes.

During data collection a number of approaches were adopted to reduce the potential for bias and to maintain a chain of evidence (Yin, 2014). Voice recording and transcription processes provided a fixed artefact which was able to be repeatedly quarried over time, and this was supplemented by field notes which included a description of the interview setting, the tone and rapport, and any specific aspects that were not otherwise captured by the voice recorder. This was in accordance with advice offered by Kvale (2007), who warned of the dangers of relying on the recording itself, articulating the need for active listening and supplemental note taking to avoid the trap of potentially reducing the research output to an under-theorised series of verbatim quotes recovered from recordings.

In an attempt to reduce bias, techniques outlined by Cohen et al. (2013) were employed. These practices included the use of open ended and non-leading questions in an attempt to avoid the researcher appearing to favour a particular position or
response. To further reduce bias and improve what Punch (2005, p. 29) referred to as “interpretive validity”, the researcher also used the technique of paraphrasing and questioning during the interview to check for meaning and to clarify intentions of the participant statements. Furthermore, through a form of triangulation (Cohen et al., 2013) it was possible to improve confidence in data gathered within a single interview owing to the multiple points of reference that arose, and through the way the participant’s responses hung together to paint an overall picture of consistency. Finally, one particular interview technique used on occasion in this research was to ask participants what views they thought others held, a corroborative technique endorsed by Yin (2014).

All transcription was undertaken by the researcher in order to maintain immersion in the data and to help prepare for later stages of data analysis (an approach that proved to have an additional and somewhat serendipitous benefit described later in this chapter). The following three-stage protocol was developed and applied to all interviews. First, the recording was played at a speed slower than normal using proprietary ‘Express Scribe’ software to control the playback during transcription. This initial pass through each interview focused on producing a syntactically correct transcription of the words in the conversation. Following this first pass, the interview recording was played a second time at normal speed in order to ensure that the conversation ‘flow’ and transcript punctuation represented a faithful rendering of the discussion. Any errors detected in the first pass transcription were corrected at that point. Finally, the transcript was read through in entirety, with the researcher making initial annotations to identify possible emergent themes. This third and final pass through the written transcript was also designed to catch any remaining transcription errors.

Data analysis

The analysis of the documents and interviews drew on the five stage qualitative data analysis framework described by Yin (2011), involving components of data compilation, disassembly, reassembly, interpretation and conclusion. This is a long-standing approach to qualitative data analysis (Cohen et al., 2013). Rather than being discrete and sequential steps, these five phases were concurrent activities that ran throughout
the data analysis but with differing levels of emphasis as the research proceeded. Following compilation of the data, ‘coding’ was used during the data disassembly and reassembly phases to summarise and descriptively label the data. This was essentially a process of data reduction, which sought to “reduce the data without significant loss of information” (Punch, 2005, p. 198).

A coding table was developed in accordance with the framework established by the four research questions. Within each of these four areas, interview data was quarried for emergent themes. NVivo software (version 10) was used to assist with organisation of the data, using the program in a ‘fully manual’ mode. This ensured that the data were analysed by the researcher as opposed to the software, and NVivo’s automated data handling features were not used. Emergent themes were provisionally clustered, and as the analysis proceeded, these tentative clusters were refined to produce aggregated higher order level codes. Themes arising under these codes were grouped and organised in order of descending dominance. Transcripts were line numbered in order to structurally organise the data analysis. Together with the interview identity code established for each participant (and reported in Table 5.2) this facilitated organisation of the coding stage. A sample extract of this coding table is shown in Table 5.3 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Codes (ranked by dominance)</th>
<th>Transcript references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Policy Influences</td>
<td>Australian (national level)</td>
<td>Code 1</td>
<td>AG1, line no. 114 AG3, line no. 431 NG14, line no. 95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Code 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Code 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian (institutional level)</td>
<td>Code 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Code 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Code 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selected perspectives from UK, US, and OECD</td>
<td>Code 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Code 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Code 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.3 Extract of the interview data coding table
This structured approach to coding was therefore framed by the research questions. A number of techniques were employed to improve the trustworthiness of this research during the development of the higher order codes from the initial and lower level clustering of emergent themes. These included making ‘constant comparisons’ and identifying ‘negative cases’ across the transcripts (Yin, 2011). Essentially the process involved repetitively working through the transcripts and identifying emergent themes across the sequence of categories established by the coding table.

Finally, a cross reference ‘tally chart’ was developed to map the numbers of times a participant was identified in the coding table and selected for quotation. This was designed to monitor the balance of views represented, given that some participants were more articulate than others. This approach sought to reduce any tendency for the status of issues to be inadvertently elevated in the research simply because they were elegantly expressed.

The process of ‘memo writing’ ran concurrently with the coding phase. This is a critically important technique of recording researcher notes, thoughts and ideas as they occur (Yin, 2011). Data interpretation, according to Yin (2011, p. 207), is the “craft of giving your own meaning to your reassembled data”, a process which can be both descriptive and explanatory, building towards the development of themes and patterns.

To interrogate policy texts in their social and political context, critical discourse analysis (refer to Chapter 4) was used to examine emergent themes raised by preliminary document review. Critical discourse analysis facilitates the study of text beyond the level of the sentence to unpick and understand culturally located systems of meaning (Punch, 2005), an approach that supports the building of explanations (Yin, 2014). Policy texts use rhetoric and metaphor to support a particular position (Zajda, 2014), and interviews offered an opportunity to juxtapose policy intentions with their reception.

Using techniques described in Fairclough (2003) and applied in Fanghanel (2007), Reid (2009) and Taylor (2004), emergent themes were analysed in the social, historical and political context in which the discourse was situated. Techniques such as those outlined by Hyatt (2013a) also proved to be a helpful way of interrogating data, and
these approaches included an analysis of policy texts from the perspective of both ‘engagement’ (seeking affiliations with the text), and ‘estrangement’ (seeking to challenge it). Following Fairclough (2010), such techniques included an examination of genres (ways of acting), discourses (ways of representing), and styles (ways of being). Policy texts were examined to establish how these semiotic concepts were drawn together and orientated in the document. Policy texts were analysed both holistically (overall structure, narrative, mood) and at a word/sentence level (the use of specific words, phrases, repetitions).

Whilst analysing the policy texts, the conceptions of ‘warrant’ outlined by Hyatt (2013b) proved to be helpful when probing policy processes. Drawing on the work of Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001), Hyatt pointed out that policy discourses typically revolve rhetorically around the establishment of ‘warrant’, where a warrant is the type of justification for the particular course of action proposed. Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) posited that there are at least three forms of warrant. First is the ‘evidentiary warrant’, which essentially establishes a position based on ‘evidence’, claiming justification (or rebuking it) on the basis of often quantitative ‘fact’. Second is the ‘accountability’ warrant, where the position taken is based on results or outcomes such as student achievement. The third form is the political warrant and this relates to how the position is constructed to be in the public or national interest. As Hyatt (2013b) observed, the political warrant is not dissimilar to the accountability warrant, but it is usually expressed in broader terms such as freedom, social justice or inclusion.

**An example of critical discourse analysis.**

All three forms of warrant are present in varying strength in the extract below, selected to exemplify how techniques from critical discourse analysis were drawn upon to analyse Minister Gillard’s speech (Gillard, 2009) at the launch of the Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009). This policy document has a central place in this research, and the context of this speech is significant. Given at the annual Universities Australia Conference in the capital city Canberra in May 2009, this speech was well-attended by Vice-Chancellors and other senior staff from across the higher education sector and the event was widely reported in the media. It was a high profile occasion, themed around change, globalisation, competition and the need for a ‘new approach’.
The following extract was taken from the part of the speech where the Minister turned to outline ‘A new approach to quality’. A brief commentary follows the extract, showing how critical discourse analysis was used to interrogate the text of this part of the speech. (The paragraphs are unaltered from the original text of the Minister’s speech; the researcher’s addition is to group individual paragraphs into five numbered sections to facilitate explanation.)

1. Professor Bradley makes the point that focusing provision and funding around the needs of students demands a new approach to quality assurance, accreditation, and regulation. This is a central feature of the public interest approach underpinning our reforms.

2. It is crucial because more responsibility will devolve to students and to institutions. It is vital because both domestic and international students will need to know how our institutions are performing. It is essential because taxpayers will need to see not just whether value for money is being delivered but whether the national interest is being well served.

3. I am therefore announcing today that the Government will establish a national regulatory and quality agency for higher education.

   The regulator will accredit providers, carry out audits of standards and performance, protect and quality assure international education, streamline current regulatory arrangements to reduce duplication and provide for national consistency.

   I understand the anxiety some will have of more red tape and managerial control. That is not the intention and it will not be the effect.

4. We have to know where we are succeeding and where we are failing if our investments are to be effective.

   A key task will also be to establish objective and comparative benchmarks of quality and performance.

   Richer data will be collected. Performance in areas such as retention, selection and exit standards, and graduate outcomes will be important. A priority will be to continue to encourage our academics to value teaching as much as their passion for research.

   Having a national approach is vital so that students in different states and regions can be assured that the offerings of our institutions have been tested and assessed in a consistent and transparent way.

5. The role of a university is unique in our society. It carries with it the weight of history, and, as I have said, a good measure of responsibility for our future.

   The right to be designated a university must be earned rather than taken at face value. The measures we are taking – to fund the preferences and needs of students and to establish stronger public accountabilities – will place a considerable onus on our universities.

   The future of Australia’s higher education system rests on its quality and on its reputation.

(Gillard, 2009, "A new approach to quality", para. 1)
In the extract above, the opening paragraph (numbered here as Section 1) makes clear the position taken by Government: the need for action is in accordance with the expert advice offered by Professor Bradley, a former Vice-Chancellor who had led the highly influential *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008). Here the reader is again reminded that the whole rationale for this policy is to meet the needs of the student. It is left to the reader to infer whether Government is responding to Bradley, or whether Bradley’s findings are simply in agreement with the Government ‘public interest’ position.

Section 2 draws on loaded and emotive terms to support the position advanced, and the selection of the words ‘vital’; ‘crucial’ and ‘essential’ contribute to a sense of importance and urgency. Co-located in this section is the issue of ‘need’ as this policy is ‘meeting the needs’ of various interest groups. The issue of efficiency is raised here with a slightly *en passant* reference to value for money through the use of the words “not just”. This sets the stage for the issue of efficiency to reappear more forcibly later in the speech.

In Section 3, the policy intent to establish a new regulator is revealed, and perhaps because of the presence of senior university leaders in the audience, this revelation is swiftly followed by reassurance that the intention is not to increase ‘red tape and managerial control’. As outlined in Chapter 3, reduced oversight by Government and mechanisms of indirect control through technologies of accountability are associated with neoliberal ideologies. A key accountability theme revealed in this section is that of consistency, which is expanded later.

The issue of efficiency and value for money is picked up again in Section 4, couched in terms of the work being an ‘investment’. Here the possibility of *failure* is also identified, and, given the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, the juxtaposition of investment and failure is interesting. In Section 4 we also see an evidentiary warrant with respect to objective data being established, with an implicit claim that existing data and/or data collection has not been adequate through the assertion that: “*Richer [emphasis added] data will be collected*”. The focus on exit standards and graduate outcomes (learning standards) is revealed, and the theme of consistency surfaces again in terms of *comparability* between institutions, mentioned twice, across states and regions. The likelihood of institutions’ outputs being more closely scrutinised in
future is raised, as they will be “tested and assessed”, signalling issues of trust, or perhaps a lack thereof.

Section 5 of this extract addresses the political warrant, positioning universities as having significant responsibilities for ‘our’ future, though who the ‘our’ refers to is left unclear. Embedded in this section is a hint that universities must continue to ‘earn’ their historical title. Quality and reputation (which arguably could be defined as a perception of quality) are co-located as determinants of the future of Australia’s higher education system.

The above interpretation shows how critical discourse analysis was used to deconstruct the text of the speech within a wider context that recognised the broader geopolitical and economic context prevailing at the time; the particular time and place that this occurred; and the audience to whom the speech was aimed. This section of Minister Gillard’s speech introduced themes relating to objective data, comparison, consistency, trust and accountability. The overall tone was directive, in that comment was neither sought nor invited, and it was set within a neoliberal policy genre with its focus on market accountability, performance measurement and objective comparative data. The selection of this particular extract is intentional in terms of ‘setting the scene’ for the following chapters, given that the accompanying policy related to this speech takes the centre stage in this research.

**Ethical considerations**

Research inevitably involves a number of ethical issues, which arise at various points of the process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Silverman, 2006). First, and prior to collecting any data, the ethical framework must be established and key documentation (such as information and consent forms) prepared. In the second phase of data collection, documents were publicly available online and this did not present significant ethical concerns. Interviews were less straightforward, however. This was because the majority of participants held very senior positions, and in some cases these were at an extremely senior (i.e. peak) level. Whilst not impossible, it is more difficult to protect the identity of elite policy actors (Cohen et al., 2013), and the researcher obtained specific permission to quote those who might be identified.
Participating individuals were adults with a high degree of personal capability and none would be identified as being members of an ‘at risk’ group. During data collection and analysis, steps were taken to assure data security to prevent any possible breach of confidentiality. Finally, the approach taken to the reporting of data sought to preserve anonymity through the use of identity codes as outlined in Table 5.2.

In accordance with procedures established at the University of Western Australia, prospective interview participants were initially provided with an information sheet (Appendix B), together with a consent form (Appendix C). The information sheet outlined the rationale for the study and described the ethical procedures that were employed. In all cases written consent was obtained from the participant prior to the commencement of the interview. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the interview process at any time without needing to give a reason. None elected to exercise this right.

The researcher took particular care to ensure that any questions relating to the process were satisfactorily addressed prior to commencement of the interview. In the event, there were very few process-orientated questions, but one participant asked who would be undertaking the transcription of their data as they were concerned about possible exposure externally. They were reassured to learn that transcription was to be done solely by the researcher and were happy to proceed on that basis.

Following each interview, all participants were offered an opportunity to review the transcripts in a ‘clean copy’ format (i.e. unannotated) and two took up this offer. One asked for an archival copy because he thought it was a good discussion of the complex issues regarding learning standards; the other wanted to draw on the interview structure to organise the sequence of some material he was developing. Neither requested any changes upon receiving the transcript.

During data analysis, participants’ identities remained confidential and digital recordings and transcripts were stored on a secure drive, protected by password and/or fingerprint biometric security. Data backups were similarly treated. In accordance with the ethical procedures described, data were not shared beyond the researcher and supervisors.
Finally in the reporting of this research, participants were described very carefully so as to prevent inadvertent identification given that in most cases even a partial description would immediately reveal the identity of the participant. On occasion, participants’ multiple memberships posed a particular problem for reporting, necessitating measures to address this. For example, a participant might belong to the group of Australian Learning and Teaching Council Discipline Scholars, and also be a director of learning and teaching, located within a certain institution type such as a Group of Eight university. With these pieces of information provided it would then become possible to identify the participant. Similar risks were also present in the case of elite policy actors, where it would be easy to work out the identity of someone identified as a ‘Chief Executive Officer’ or ‘President’, or similar.

In this thesis, participants are not identified in any way and their home institution or organisation remains de-identified. Participants’ multiple memberships were intentionally rendered opaque to the reader, and descriptions of positions were selected with a view to giving as much contextual information as possible, but without revealing the individual’s identity.

Concluding discussion

This chapter has outlined the qualitative methods used to carry out this study, describing the research questions and explicating the processes by which data (interview and documents) were collected and analysed. Documents were analysed using critical discourse analysis (which is theoretically framed by critical theory and poststructuralism, as detailed in Chapter 4) to identify and illuminate the Australian policy text production process, and to understand power dynamics and influences.

Interviews were analysed with respect to the structured research questions, drawing on qualitative analysis techniques described in Yin (2011) to extract themes, which were then examined using critical and poststructural approaches. Employing the policy trajectory approach described in Chapter 4, policy processes were examined within the Australian setting across national and institutional levels. These policy processes were compared with the perspectives of participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD).
Chapter 6: Findings (1) - policy influences

This chapter is the first of four chapters that present the findings of this research. These four chapters are structured similarly, as summarised below.

Format of Chapters 6 to 9 (Findings)

Chapters 6 to 9 present the findings from each of the four research questions in turn, following a common format to facilitate later triangulation. Each commences with a brief introduction before presenting themes that emerged from the policy trajectory study conducted within the Australian setting, reporting first national then institutional level findings. Following this, the themes that arose from the perspectives of participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD) are reported. A final section in each chapter summarises the key issues to emerge from the interview data.

Chapter 6 focuses on the findings from interviews in relation to antecedent policy influences (the first research question). Chapter 7 analyses policy texts and their production (the second research question) from Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009) to the Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes (Australian Government, 2013). This extended chapter includes findings from both policy text document analysis and interviews. Chapter 8 presents findings relating to policy practices/effects (the third research question). The fourth research question is addressed in Chapter 9, which presents findings relating to longer term outcomes, both emergent and predicted. Themes are presented in descending order of emphasis accorded by participants: the more prominent themes therefore appear first. Within the following text, theme titles are labelled using bold text, and, where applicable, dimensions (sub-themes) are labelled with bold italic text.

The findings are presented without reference to the literature to ensure that the participants’ voices are not otherwise attenuated. Quotations have been selected to show both commonalities and differences. Participant codes are used throughout (see Table 5.2). These findings offer a richness of insights into the quality policy processes relating to learning standards. Following Chapters 6 to 9, a meta-analysis is presented with reference to the literature in Chapter 10.
Introduction

What are the key influences (international, national and local/institutional) affecting the development of quality policies relating to learning standards in Australian higher education?

This chapter presents the findings with respect to the first research question, identified above, which sought to analyse the key influences that have affected the development of quality policy relating to learning standards.

In the Australian setting, the focus was on international, national and local/institutional factors that had influenced the development of Australian quality policy relating to learning standards. In this study, Australian quality policy is taken to mean that which was articulated in the Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System policy (Australian Government, 2009), and in subsequent policy texts through to 2013 (see Table 5.1). Thus, the policy under investigation is an ensemble of Australian policy texts (refer to Chapter 2) which evolved over time, examined here using the policy trajectory approach described in Chapters 4 and 5.

This study also sought to identify and compare influences on quality policy processes relating to learning standards in settings beyond Australia. This included the UK and the US, where ‘quality policy’ was taken to mean those quality policies relating to learning standards within the participants’ national setting, and with a former senior official within the OECD, where policy influences relating to learning standards were explored in broad terms (i.e. not in relation to any specific national policy).

Six themes relating to policy influences were identified:

- Impact of global pressures
- Problems with standards
- Sector expansion threatens quality
- Institutional status and stance on learning standards
- Rising demands for accountability (participants from beyond Australia only)
- Powerful policy actors (participants from beyond Australia only)

These themes and, where appropriate, their dimensions (sub-themes) are summarised in Table 6.1 overleaf. Each is discussed in the following sections, dealing with the Australian setting first. This is followed by an examination of the themes identified in the perspectives of participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD).
Table 6.1 Summary of themes relating to policy influences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australian policy trajectory study</th>
<th>Selected perspectives from beyond Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>National level</strong>&lt;br&gt;19 participants</td>
<td><strong>UK, US, and OECD</strong>&lt;br&gt;10 participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional level</strong>&lt;br&gt;6 participants</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note 1: Selected perspectives from beyond Australia are shown separately. This is because these are not part of the Australian policy trajectory study, and because they do not constitute policy trajectory studies in their own right (refer to Chapter 5, ‘Research questions’).

Note 2: Themes are labelled using **bold text**; dimensions (sub-themes) are in *italic text*. The number of participants identifying each theme/dimension is shown in brackets. Theme totals are not derived by summing the numbers of participants in each dimension, because some participants may have identified more than one dimension within a theme.
**Australian national level themes**

The 19 national level participants (drawn from Australian Government and non-Government groups) identified a number of influences that were affecting quality policy development relating to learning standards in the Australian setting. The **problems with standards** emerged as the most prominent theme. A second theme revolved around the issue of how **sector expansion threatens quality**, whilst a third theme identified issues relating to **institutional status and stance on learning standards**. The fourth theme concerned the **impact of global pressures**.

**Theme 1: problems with standards.**

A majority of participants (15 of 19) pointed to the multiple problems associated with learning standards in higher education. Dimensions within this theme included the **challenge of measurement** which was characterised by sharply divergent views as to whether standards could be objectively defined and appraised. Others raised concerns regarding the **lack of comparability** of learning standards within and between institutions. The **failure to assure standards** through previous Australian Government quality initiatives was identified as a policy influence, as was the persistent issue of **employer dissatisfaction with graduates**. Each of these dimensions is discussed in turn in the following subsections.

**The challenge of measurement.**

A majority of the national level participants (12 of 19) acknowledged in some way the technical difficulties of defining and using learning standards. As one participant observed, “there is no room anywhere on the planet that you can go to with your graduates and say here’s how they measure up” (NG8). Furthermore, nine (of 19) participants also pointed to the reliance on ‘proxies’ for learning standards, such as student satisfaction surveys and their inherent limitations. However, the use of proxy measures of learning was seen as inevitable, given that “measuring learning outcomes is a real challenge” (NG2).

Seven of 19 participants identified divergent and highly contested views, suggesting that these had influenced Australian quality policy development with respect to learning standards in quite different ways. A senior Australian Government official
acknowledged the “debate in Bradley [the Review of Australian Higher Education chaired by Professor Bradley] about outcome measures and how you’d measure outputs” (AG2). A significant part of this debate revolved around two sharply contrasting groups of views regarding the means by which standards should be appraised. To illustrate, one participant saw learning standards as being amenable to measurement through standardised testing whilst another took the position that standardised measurement would be of very little use:

> I don’t agree that there is a standard output of any system of education - it’s naive of us to think that there is. And if there was some sort of standardised test it would have to be so generic and general that it would be meaningless. (NG13)

**Lack of comparability.**

Seven (of 19) participants referred to the lack of comparability of learning standards across different institutions. Institutional diversity was seen as desirable, but one participant also referred to the “unspoken hierarchy” (NG15) between universities. On that note, one research-intensive institution had, as another participant reported, gone so far as to scale (i.e. adjust) the graduate scores of certain other institutions in order to compare them to their own standards:

> When we come to admit students to graduate studies, we want students who will succeed and we simply cannot trust the quality of the degrees or the grades on the transcripts from those other universities, so we’ve carried out research over a number of years, got some regression equations and we say we’ll apply these and this will give us the true value. (NG6)

**Failure to assure standards.**

With respect to the assurance of learning standards, five (of 19) participants pointed to the lack of success of previous attempts to focus on standards through the work of agencies such as the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA): “its original mission was to look at standards. And it didn’t” (NG5).

Furthermore, there was also a policy influence regarding the perceived need to bring in those providers that fell outside of the purview of existing quality policy in the higher education sector. As one participant explained, “the AUQA reviews didn’t cover
a lot of those private providers” (NG6) and this was seen as inequitable. Another participant asserted that AUQA’s inability to prevent institutional failures in the private provider sector had directly influenced the creation of a single regulator for the tertiary sector in the form of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) which was established in 2011.

Employer dissatisfaction with graduates.

This fourth dimension within the theme of problems with standards related to employer concerns with the standard of graduates and five (of 19) participants made reference to this aspect. One participant remarked on the large number of peak bodies that had expressed dissatisfaction with learning standards achieved by graduates, another suggesting that “the employers are the people we have to listen to and keep on side” (NG6). The issue of employer dissatisfaction with graduates was also identified as a policy influence for the Australian Government, with one participant remarking that there were higher levels of employer dissatisfaction from those degrees that were subject to professional accreditation:

We’ve had consultations with the Business Council of Australia, with the Australian Industry Group, with the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and almost to a person they’ve all said we get more complaints about the graduates that come out of professionally accredited degrees from our employers than we do out of graduates that come out of the non-accredited degrees and that’s because the universities seem to focus on developing all the technical skills. So they come out and they can tick all the boxes, whatever it is engineers do, but they’re not able to communicate, they’re not able to work in teams, they’re not able to do all of the things that employers really want them to do. (AG4)

Articulated here was the problem that learning standards did not adequately address all of the capabilities that employers valued (such as teamwork), producing a policy influence calling for learning standards that would demonstrate these capabilities. However, undergirding this issue was a more vexed question of whether low standards in certain institutions were more of a perception than a reality. One former Vice-Chancellor challenged the evidence base for such assertions: “you talked to employers and you listened to some of the highly prejudicial comments that were made about some universities on basically no evidence whatsoever” (NG3).
Theme 2: sector expansion threatens quality.

A majority of participants (11 of 19) made reference to the way that the expansion of the Australian higher education system had created a particularly strong influence on the development of quality policy relating to learning standards. This was based on what was seen to be a widely held view that “increasing the numbers of people in higher education will mean a drop in standards” (NG3). However, this issue was not new, as following the publication of Higher Education: A Policy Statement (Dawkins, 1988) there had been “much criticism about lowering standards, magically converting college students and staff into university students and staff” (NG1).

Strong links were made between quality and expansion in the demand driven system proposed in the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008). Here, further sector expansion precipitated by the demand driven system was seen to be risky because standards could decline in the absence of robust quality frameworks, thereby making an argument for increased participation and closer regulatory oversight to run in parallel. On this point, a former Vice-Chancellor identified issues of sequencing, remarking that quality policy had to precede system expansion, because “you shouldn’t open up the market until you have more effective forms of regulation” (NG3). According to this participant, the argument for anticipatory regulation was highly influential in persuading the Australian Government that increased attention to learning standards in quality policy was necessary, a view that was echoed in the remarks of this senior Government official:

... and the quality issue very much fell out of the demand driven system so the thinking was that if you had unconstrained growth effectively in the system you would need to be sure that you also had some sort of quality framework metrics to maintain the standards that obviously universities would want to maintain and the Government would want them to maintain. (AG1)

The need for quantitative metrics to demonstrate quality was identified by one participant, who recognised the “concern that there has perhaps been a slide in standards or quality and the need to be able to demonstrate in some quantifiable way that that has not, in fact, happened” (NG11).
Theme 3: institutional status and stance on learning standards.

The issue of institutional status and stance on learning standards emerged as the third most commonly reported theme by nine (of 19) participants at the national level. Institutional stances were seen to have influenced the development of Australian quality policy primarily through processes of formal consultation, such as those within and following the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008).

Four participants (of 19) suggested that research-intensive elite institutions had vigorously opposed a closer focus on learning standards in Australian quality policy. In this respect one former Vice-Chancellor was of the view that the Group of Eight elite institutions had “fought back most profoundly” (NG3) against the imposition of learning standards. Another participant elaborated that this rejection of a closer focus on learning standards was partly based on the homogenous nature of the group of elite institutions where there was believed to be a strong pre-existing consensus with respect to standards. Citing the University of Oxford in the UK as an example of an elite institution, this participant pointed out that “Oxford never needed to write a learning outcome. It never needed to have a course outline” (NG4).

Two contrasting perspectives on institutional stance were offered by senior Australian Government participants. One argued that some institutions were simply more managerial in their approach whilst others were more collegial, with the former being more accepting of a greater focus on standards in quality policy than the latter. Another Government participant, however, saw such differentiation as being related primarily to institutional confidence and belief in their status:

Some of the Group of Eight have a very particular approach ... about the priority that should be given to those who are considered to be deserving for research dollars, they think that they should be immune from any surveillance by a regulator because they’re so good. (AG3)

A ‘level playing field’?

Three participants identified influences stemming from non-elite institutions, who sought to ‘level the national playing field’ by being able to demonstrate that the learning standards achieved by their students were of equivalent quality to those in elite institutions. One former Vice-Chancellor noted the “reasonable push from some
of the middle to lower ranking universities to go in this direction because they actually think that the current arrangements really advantage the Group of Eight university graduate” (NG3). Another participant took up the issue of comparison, suggesting that “not just the Go8’s but some of the higher ranked universities in Australia, they really want to be able to show that the degree from us is better than a degree from x, y or z” (NG10). This differentiated stance towards learning standards was explained in terms of potential gains and losses across a globally defined market thus:

So, for an institution that feels that the global rankings don’t reflect well on their teaching quality because it’s research driven, you can imagine that anything that allows them to make claims that will be recognised on a global scale would be useful. So you can see IRU [Innovative Research Universities] and possibly ATN [Australian Technology Network] universities getting excited about that. For research institutions that place their standing on the basis of their research, well you’ve only got something to lose. (NG9)

Theme 4: impact of global pressures.

The issue of global pressures and their impact emerged as the fourth most commonly reported theme (by eight of 19) at the national level. Here, there were two component dimensions. The first dimension related to quality policy influences that had arisen through selective policy borrowing, whilst the second concerned Australia’s global reputation. These dimensions are discussed below.

Selective policy borrowing.

Six (of 19) participants identified aspects that fell within the dimension of selective policy borrowing. One non-Government participant suggested that certain aspects were selectively drawn from other policy settings by policy elite actors within the Australian Government in order to “drive their own practices” (NG4). Conversely, a senior Government official was keen to underscore the Australian Government’s impartiality, citing the independent nature of the influential Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008):

We do the nuts and bolts but the author, the genesis of TEQSA [the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency], was this independent review led by Denise Bradley. TEQSA came from Denise Bradley and the Bradley review, which was outside of Government. That’s a really important point. (AG2)
One senior Australian Government official identified a “sort of policy loop between Australia and the UK” (AG1), where ideas were passed backwards and forwards iteratively. In this vein, four participants spoke of the mobility of individuals between the UK and Australia, pointing to the historically strong connections between the two countries. However, another (non-Government) participant suggested that policy borrowing was not particularly well thought through: “Australia is very good at copying what the UK did 5 to 10 years beforehand without looking at the fact that what they did didn’t work” (NG4).

An alternative perspective was advanced by a senior Australian Government official who rejected the idea of uncritical policy borrowing: “we are clearly influenced by all sorts of things but I think in terms of the learning standards/learning outcomes approach, we have taken our own path” (AG3). This view was supported by another non-Government participant who also observed that ultimately “Australia didn’t adopt any of the methods of assuring learning standards that were available from overseas” (NG1).

Influences emanating from the US were also cited, but participants generally saw them as having a more limited impact given the greater differences between the Australian and American education systems. A senior Australian Government official observed that “we looked to occasional innovations at the state [US] level. You know, for example, something like a Tennessee value-added” (AG2), referring to the system adopted in Tennessee for measuring learning standards in order to calculate value-added metrics for state schools. However, one non-Government participant argued that standardised testing associated with the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) in the US had been highly influential on the then Australian Minister of Education (Gillard), who had subsequently pushed for the adoption of standardised testing in the domestic school sector, signalling that they also favoured a similar approach in higher education.

**Australia’s global reputation.**

Six (of 19) participants identified influences that had, in their genesis, the desire to assert Australia’s reputation for high quality higher education on a global stage. One participant spoke of pressure from “overseas governments which sought the Australian Government’s assurance that their citizens were getting a high quality education in
Australia” (NG1). This general sense was echoed in other participant responses within this dimension, illustrated by the senior Australian Government official who suggested that the “starting point for Bradley [Chair of the Review of Australian Higher Education] was Australia’s standing in the international world” (AG2).

Others pointed to the influences associated with the rise of international accreditation movements such as the American Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, membership of which had become increasingly important for those institutions who wished to recruit internationally. Here, the acquisition of international accreditation was seen to advance reputations globally, but most of these bodies required a clear articulation and demonstration of how learning standards were assured before membership would be granted.

Bodies such as the OECD were also judged to have been influential on the development of Australian quality policy relating to learning standards. As one participant put it, “people like to make international comparisons and say ‘are we up to scratch?’” (NG12). Commenting on the OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project, one participant remarked:

_I think the attitude in Australia was we just have to be a part of this. If AHELO and comparison of student learning across nations, languages and cultures is possible then the future of ‘Brand Australia’ is at risk unless were able to demonstrate how well we achieve._ (NG8)

Reputational advantage and risk were also identified as significant issues for both governments and individual institutions. One participant commented on the duality of the potential institutional advantage combined with national reputational risk that might arise from the publication of quality data relating to learning standards. Whilst such publication might trigger increased sector funding to address an issue, the risk of being identified as deficient in some way was also present:

_That’s why people are so anxious about these supranational bodies … governments can be shamed about apparent national performance, whether it’s in funding or in student outcomes, in ways that may be advantageous to you. I mean like most things it has advantages, it has great dangers._ (NG3)
Australian institutional level themes

The analysis of interview data from the six participants at the institutional level generated three themes that had much in common with those that emerged at the national level. Given the focus on policy processes at the national level, there were fewer participants at this level (refer to Chapter 5), which comprised participants from three public universities and three private providers.

Here, the most significant theme influencing Australian quality policy development again related to the issue of problems with standards. The impact of global pressures was identified as the second most cited theme, whilst institutional status and stance towards learning standards and their influence comprised the third most commonly reported theme. The fourth theme, sector expansion threatens quality, identified policy influences arising from the increased numbers of students in higher education.

Theme 1: problems with standards.

This was the most frequently cited theme at the institutional level with five (of six) participants identifying issues that were categorised into dimensions in a similar way to those reported at the Australian national level. A failure to assure learning standards was the most frequently cited influence, raised by three of the six participants. Secondary to this was the issue of employer dissatisfaction with graduates, an issue raised by two participants. Each of these dimensions is discussed in turn in the following subsections.

Failure to assure standards.

A director of teaching and learning at one private provider spoke of the “fumbling around” (PP2) that had characterised attempts to assure learning standards in Australia, pointing also to the multiple difficulties that arose when attempting to extrapolate measures of student learning to produce data on institutional quality.

A senior director at a second private provider referred to the mandate of AUQA to assure the quality of learning through standards. Attention was drawn to the difficulties the agency had faced when dealing with universities, characterised (as they saw it) by universities’ broad rejection of a closer focus on standards because this could lead to greater control.
I think you’ll find that when he [Executive Director of AUQA] approached the universities with trying to look at standards they said ‘piss off, leave us alone. Because you want to measure us.’ Because when you can measure it you can then manage it. (PP1)

Whilst they identified policy influences that had arisen through a failure to assure standards, they also conceded the lack of consensus within the “significant body of literature investigating how best to measure learning” (PP1).

**Employer dissatisfaction with graduates.**

Two institutional level participants remarked on the issue of employer dissatisfaction with graduates. The first drew attention to the “report after report after report” (U2) that employers had put out to argue that graduates were not always able to do what was needed. Drawing together both employer interests and the difficulties of assuring learning standards, the second suggested that the rate of progress had been slow:

* A 1993 Quality in Australian Education document was saying that these generic attributes are what employers are looking for. 1993. [pause] 2013. 20 years ago. Strikes me we haven’t really made a lot of progress. And there’s something fundamentally flawed about some of this, I don’t know what it is. There is something amiss with what we are trying to do. (U1)

**Theme 2: impact of global pressures.**

Five of the six institutional level participants identified aspects relating to this theme, which consisted of two related dimensions. The first focused on **Australia’s global reputation**. The second dimension related to the Australian Government’s intention to advance the national interest through the linking of **higher education and economic success**.

**Australia’s global reputation.**

Three participants identified factors that related to Australia’s global reputation. One participant from an ‘ungrouped’ university suggested that there was a general sense of agreement that:

* Australia needs to be able to demonstrate that it is competitive in terms of outcomes, and with an increasing interest in graduate attributes or capabilities across OECD countries, Australia needs to be able to demonstrate that it is up there with the best. (U3)
Two participants (of six) identified reputational problems regarding the learning standards achieved by international students, an issue that had served to influence the development of quality policy. Both identified that this related to the English language capabilities of graduates. One participant from the private provider sector spoke of the negative publicity associated with international students from non-English speaking backgrounds, suggesting that:

*those issues cast the spotlight on Australia to say not only do we have to take a political stance and provide some evidence, quantifiable evidence that we have a standard of education across our universities, across our states, but that we are also equitable on an international footing.* (PP3)

**Higher education and economic success.**

Participants from two of the three private providers at the institutional level identified an influence stemming, they argued, from the Australian Government’s view that higher education was a key driver for national economic success. As one Director within a private provider saw it: “*really they are trying to influence the economy*” (PP2). Although both participants identified this influence, one expressed surprise at the strength of the connection between higher education and employment made by the authors of the influential *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008). In their eyes this, combined with the instrumental and employer-orientated view of higher education on the part of the Australian Government had produced an influence which served to configure the way in which learning standards would subsequently be appraised. As this participant explained: “*if that’s what it means to have a University degree, then that reflects the metrics that we’re going to use to report quality in that degree*” (PP3).

**Theme 3: institutional status and stance.**

The third most commonly reported theme by three of six institutional level participants revolved around the different stances taken towards the role of learning standards in Australian quality policy. One participant (from a private provider) suggested that private providers in general were welcoming of a greater focus on learning standards which they saw as helpful in terms of legitimating their presence in the higher education sector. However, although this participant felt that they had
personally exerted some influence in this respect through their membership of various groups spanning both university and private providers, they also recognised that in general, private providers exerted a marginal influence.

In contrast, a participant from the research-intensive Group of Eight elite universities saw very little reason to support an increased focus on learning standards given their strong positioning:

> It just strikes me that the Go8’s would have much less interest in this than other universities, because we are doing so well on rankings based on research. And this University is doing spectacularly well on research based rankings. (U1)

However for one university participant, whilst they recognised the presence of different stances in institutions, for them this simply side-stepped a crucial issue. As they put it, “I don’t think we can assume that what goes on in a Go8 University is any different than any other university ... we are all facing the same problems.” (U2).

**A ‘level playing field’?**

One participant from a private provider drew attention to the lack of parity between private and public institutions. Universities were seen to be relatively immune from regulatory action, but their perception was that this was not the same for private providers, who could theoretically have sources of funding cut in the event of an adverse finding from AUQA:

> So AUQA could write to DEEWR [Australian Government Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations] and say ‘Dear blah, We found this in our quality audit, we recommend that you remove the fee help provision from this institution.’ It never happened, but they did have that power to do that. (PP1)

In their eyes the playing field was far from level in terms of regulatory oversight, and this, they maintained, had influenced arguments for greater regulatory presence and consistency with respect to the assurance of learning standards within the higher education sector.
Theme 4: sector expansion threatens quality.

None of the participants from the three private providers linked expansion of the higher education sector with potential consequent risks to quality. However, two of the three university participants at the institutional level associated sector expansion (and mobility within the sector) with the development of learning standards:

No doubt it’s in a context where there is such mobility, and rapidly growing mobility, in movements of academics around the world and that’s really very significant, and students as well. Plus the huge expansion in higher education and participation, which has been phenomenal. One response to the expansion in many areas has been to look at standards and try to codify standards. (U1)

Expansion was also linked to issues of quality by these two participants, with one describing the “reach down into what we would say are the less traditional students” (U2). They further suggested that voices from the academic community were also raising serious concerns about the negative consequences of expansion in terms of increased workload and diminution of quality.

Selected perspectives from beyond Australia

The 10 international participants included UK and US elite policy actors and a former senior official within the OECD (refer to Chapter 5, ‘Sampling’). Each of these participants identified a number of influences that had affected (or were continuing to affect) quality policy development relating to learning standards. These wide-ranging policy influences were grouped into six themes of which the impact of global pressures was most commonly cited by these participants. In descending order of prominence, other themes included: rising demands for accountability; problems with standards; the issue of how sector expansion threatens quality; the relationship between institutional status and stance on learning standards; and the influence of powerful policy actors.

Theme 1: impact of global pressures.

Issues relating to the impact of global pressures on quality policy with respect to learning standards constituted the most commonly reported theme by international participants. There were three dimensions to this theme: international collaboration
and competition; various forms of resistance to global pressures; and the impact of quantitative global comparisons. These dimensions are discussed in turn in the following subsections.

International collaboration and competition.

Every one of the 10 international participants identified influences arising from international collaboration between countries undertaking work in the policy domain of learning standards. They cited examples that included the OECD’s Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes Project (AHELO); the American Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile; and the European Bologna Process. Participants saw these large-scale projects as influential because of their potential to address common policy problems of international equivalence and comparability of learning standards.

However, five (of 10) participants also made reference to the variable success achieved by these international collaborations, pointing to the way that the projects’ outcomes might be embraced in some countries yet ignored by others. Underpinning reasons for this variable uptake from international collaborative projects related to the extent to which these aligned to national policy interests and existing domestic initiatives: “I think the UK response to Bologna has been ‘well they are only going to be doing what we are doing already, so we don’t need to take any notice of it’ ” (UK4). Whether project outcomes were adopted or not, policy actors from the UK were clearly interested in monitoring what was going on in other countries, especially the US: “people used to go over and make extensive visits to the States to see what they were doing” (UK2).

International collaborative work was also associated with competition, driven by international league tables. Precedents established in the secondary school sector were seen to have an influence in higher education, with one commonly mentioned example being the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The competitive pressures produced by PISA were identified by the former senior official within the OECD, who pointed out that despite being at the bottom of many league tables, Mexico had argued for the inclusion of Latin American countries in the PISA programme. Even though domestic costs of data collection involved with participation
in PISA were high, Mexico was willing to accept this because the Minister was “interested to know where they stood in relation to the countries in their region” (OECD1). The nature of the potential tension between international collaboration and competition was revealed by one participant from the US, who suggested that:

I’m never sure whether our interest in globalisation is really more about ‘yes we like to see what our colleagues around the world are doing because we can share knowledge and learn from them’ on the model of science, right? Building and exchanging knowledge. Or whether it’s really that we want to engage in globalisation because we actually think we are in competition with other people and we might lose the race. (US4)

Resistance to global pressures.

Six (of 10) international participants gave examples of how various global pressures had been resisted in different ways as policy on learning standards was being developed within individual countries. With respect to the Bologna Process (which sought to harmonise learning standards across Europe), one UK participant pointed to the British Government’s desire to minimise the influence of other countries, so as to avoid diminishing their own power: “in DFES [the then UK Government Department for Education and Skills] there was a marked desire on the part of the civil servants and the Government actually to keep Europe out of things. They thought it would curtail their power, and they increasingly wanted to exercise power” (UK2). In some cases resistance even took the form of highly active opposition. Reflecting on the initiation of the OECD AHELO project, the same UK participant (a former elite policy actor) recalled: “I went out of my way to try and block that. Block it actually being started, because I thought it was going to come up with all the wrong answers and all the wrong values” (UK2).

A second example of resistance to global pressures related to the resistance of individual academic staff within institutions. Here, policy influences (of varying strength) were generated through the publication of academic papers critical of policy convergence across countries. Three participants gave examples of such resistance, with one citing the case of an individual academic in Europe who was fundamentally opposed to the Bologna Process on principle: “his major ambition in life is to destroy Bologna” (UK4).
Quantitative global comparisons.

Five (of 10) international participants identified influences (both positive and negative) arising from quantitative global comparisons. In this sense ‘global’ meant the globally available public data comparing participating nations’ performance, such as that depicted in international league tables. In this vein, one participant from the US saw the OECD as having minimal impact until the US rankings started to slide in comparative terms, at which point the slippage became a powerful policy influence:

No one had really, in US policy circles, ever mentioned OECD until about 10 years ago when we started falling behind in the attainment rates of the younger age cohort and then that became a weapon for those of us, and I certainly number myself among them, to raise alarms about slipping international competitiveness. (US5)

There was a strong resistance to the use of quantitative data for ranking purposes from other participants. A former member of the policy elite within the UK saw the use of comparative data as something to be resisted rather than embraced. Citing the example of student surveys, he suggested that publication of comparative quantitative data was already producing undesirable pressures:

Invaluable data there, but as soon as it becomes used for rankings and the rest of it, then of course you have to win. And it doesn’t matter what you do to win, you’ve got to win. And it may have nothing whatsoever to do with improving anything. (UK2)

A number of participants made reference to the power of quantitative data to influence policy in settings outside of higher education. Referring to the secondary school sector, the former senior official within the OECD spoke at length about the transformative effect of quantitative data in PISA. He gave the example of how comparisons of these data had suggested that some countries had high quality in terms of learning standards and high equity, and explained how the availability of these data had “absolutely changed the debate” (OECD1). However, this participant also observed that “the really transforming feature of OECD’s contribution to the educational debate at school level isn’t there in the data for higher education at this point” (OECD1).
Theme 2: rising demands for accountability.

Issues relating to the rising demands for accountability comprised the second most commonly reported theme by six (of 10) international participants. Within this theme, three dimensions were identified: the need to prove value for money in higher education; a lack of trust within the system; and the increasing need for the provision of information to various stakeholders. Each dimension is discussed in turn.

Value for money.

The increased pressure to prove value for money was identified as a policy influence by five (of 10) international participants. The issue of cost was becoming increasingly relevant to a wide range of stakeholders including governments, students, parents, and higher education providers. One participant from the US suggested that the cost of provision of higher education had grown some 20-40% above the Consumer Price Index on an annual basis for the last 30 or 40 years. Another participant from the US identified policy influences stemming from the desire of people to “make sure they are getting a return on their very large investments in their higher education” (US2). In a similar vein a former member of the policy elite in the UK commented on increases in student fees and noted also the rise of parents as an important policy influence, observing that parents were becoming “cross, seriously cross, about the fact that they are paying fees, and their children don’t seem to be getting very much for their money” (UK2).

An increasing focus on demonstrating value for money within departments of government was also identified as a policy influence. To illustrate this, the former senior official within the OECD pointed out how hard it was for a government education department to be able to prove to Treasury “where our increased commitment of funds has ever made a difference” (OECD1). The issue of value for money was linked with potential firmer control of the sector, and this was seen as a policy influence by one UK participant:

*I think politicians are always looking for control, they are always looking for what they call value for money. I think if we ever got seriously into proper output standards in higher education then that’s the way it would go. And they would control it and institutions would be paid according to results.* (UK1)


**Lack of trust.**

Suggestions of a lack of trust emerged as a policy influence in a number of settings, with four (of 10) international participants identifying issues of trust in disciplines, in institutions and in accrediting bodies themselves.

One participant from the UK reported that the British Psychological Society had engaged in serious discussions following the publication of a study which showed a significant lack of consistency by external examiners. This situation had led the Society to question “whether universities could be trusted – is a psychology degree enough to get into the BPS [British Psychological Society]?” (UK4).

Questions of trust were also identified as an influence on quality policy in other parts of the world by the former senior officer within the OECD. For example, in Brazil, a common exit examination for undergraduates in a number of disciplines (the Provão) had been introduced in 1996 by the Minister for Education. This ran for 10 years in various formats until ultimately it was discontinued following a change of government. Here there was a perceived lack of trust in the learning standards achieved by students at private providers compared to their public counterparts: “his [the Minister’s] line was that he was worried about the quality of a lot of the private providers and he wanted to hold them to account. So he imposed a common graduating exam” (OECD1).

In the US, policy influences arose through a perceived lack of trust in the accrediting bodies themselves. In the American setting, accreditation was seen as an important quality policy mechanism, given that “states have very little leverage over independent colleges and even less over for-profit colleges, but in order to receive federal aid all of them have to be accredited” (US5). Here, questions of trust in the accreditors themselves were seen to have influenced the creation of a Federal National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, an accreditor of accreditors. In the words of this participant, the accreditors at that point had become “deputised” (US5) by the US Government, who were now able to exercise greater indirect control.

**Provision of information.**

The need for provision of information to stakeholders was also identified by three (of 10) international participants as a policy influence related to rising demands for accountability. However, the nature of this influence was seen in two different guises.
The first view related to the provision of information as part of a professional duty to improve the clarity of learning standards for students, teaching staff and employers alike. For example, clearer information about learning standards was seen to convey meaningful expectations to students, serving also to guide curriculum development and inform assessment practices such as the grading of student work. For employers, improved information was potentially helpful when comparing applicants:

... if an employer sees two graduates both with Firsts or 2-2’s [first class and lower second class degrees respectively] they have some kind of way of knowing that these two people are broadly similar in their capacity of achievements or in what way they are not. (UK2)

The second view characterised the provision of information in more instrumental terms. This increased need for information was located by two UK participants within an environment of tightening accountability within professions more generally, with one observing that the provision of “information has, in the last 10 or 15 years, largely become the purpose of quality assurance” (UK2). Another UK participant conceded that it was “perfectly reasonable” (UK3) to provide information to improve the transparency of learning standards, but suggested that the need to “articulate everything formally is the opposite of trust” (UK3).

**Theme 3: problems with standards.**

The third most commonly reported theme by six (of 10) international participants related to problems with standards, and these served to produce a number of influences for quality policy development. Within this theme, three dimensions were identifiable: issues relating to **inconsistent grading** of student achievement against learning standards; concerns about **grade inflation** over time; and the lack of stability caused by **changing reference standards**. Each dimension is discussed in turn.

**Inconsistent grading.**

Two international participants made reference to the ways in which different markers could assign different results to the same piece of student work when assessing against specific learning standards. As one UK participant pointed out, these inconsistent grading practices had raised questions of reliability for the long-standing
practice of external examination in British higher education, producing influences that called for more robust and reliable approaches to quality policy.

**Grade inflation.**

A UK participant observed that the percentage of those gaining a first or upper second class degree had demonstrably increased over time, which had been reported in the media as evidence of grade inflation. Similarly in the US it was suggested that “if we were going to get some kind of measure of student learning it would not be grades because grades weren’t trusted. We had grade inflation, you get non-commensurability” (US5). If grade inflation was present, this might suggest that the learning standards achieved by students were in fact falling. On this point, although the UK participant recognised the growing “body of evidence” (UK4) suggesting the presence of grade inflation, he also raised questions of validity regarding the use of these data to argue that learning standards were in decline:

*You may be able to say students are studying smarter and the reduction of study hours is because we’re teaching them better. That might be true. We don’t know. None of the things we do supposedly to assure assurers - to quality assure, actually tell us that. We can all have a debate about falling standards and ‘isn’t it shocking’, but we haven’t got the data we’d need to know.* (UK4)

**Changing reference standards.**

The third dimension related to the question of whether learning standards could be taken as stable reference points against which to judge student achievement. Whereas the problems described above relate to the grading of student achievement against learning standards, this third dimension related to changes in the learning standards themselves as reference points. Such variability over time could potentially mean that qualifications with the same award title from the same institution would have been awarded on the basis of different achievements judged against different standards. However, this situation was couched by one participant in a positive light, as the “purpose of academic standards will change every year, so specific standards will change over years. I do not want the standard of medicine that would have been considered acceptable 40 - 50 years ago” (UK2). This issue was seen to produce a policy influence opposing the rigid specification of learning standards.
Theme 4: sector expansion threatens quality.

The expansion of higher education in many countries over the last three decades was seen as a significant and persistent policy influence in the domain of learning standards by five (of 10) international participants, four of whom were based in the UK.

Expansion was described in terms of increased student numbers entering higher education, and also in terms of the number of universities and providers offering higher education, leading one participant to remark that “they couldn’t all be churning out exactly the same standards” (UK2). Whilst the American participants tended to focus on the increasing cost of education rather than sector expansion, within OECD countries more broadly the issue of expansion and its relationship to quality had been taken up in the quinquennial meeting of OECD education ministers in 2006. This suggested that expansion was being seen as a common quality policy problem across OECD member countries: “Much of the debate in higher education was about expansion, increasing quantity. ... it was moving in the direction of becoming a mass feature of the OECD countries education systems and now was the time to focus on quality” (OECD1).

This expansion/quality couplet was recognised by the UK participants, who suggested that in an era of increasing participation the proportion of students graduating (i.e. graduation rates) would be expected to decline, assuming stability in the learning standards against which they were being judged. On this note, two participants expressed concern that graduation rates had remained steady despite the increased numbers entering higher education. One possible explanation for this could be a decline in standards. However, if the robust application of learning standards resulted in fewer students graduating, then this would immediately produce a different set of problems. To illustrate, one participant recounted a discussion with a former Minister for Education in the UK which highlighted the political and policy tensions between participation and graduation rates:

*And there was another occasion when he came up to me and said ‘I’m really worried about graduation rates. We’ve expanded the system, but they don’t seem to be falling’. So I said ‘well Minister, what do you want?’ He said ‘I’m surprised the graduation rates haven’t fallen’. And I said ‘Minister what would be a good situation for you? Would it be high graduation rates or low graduation rates?’* (UK1)
The net effect of these tensions was to produce an influence calling for stronger quality policy to demonstrate that learning standards had not become diluted despite considerable sector expansion.

**Theme 5: institutional status and stance on learning standards.**

Five (of 10) international participants identified a tendency for a particular stance towards learning standards to be associated with the status of the institution. Institutional stances towards learning standards were located on a continuum from outright support to rejection. This was seen to produce both positive and negative influences for the development of quality policy focusing on learning standards.

One UK participant suggested that non-elite institutions were generally more supportive of a greater focus on learning standards in quality policy and the primary reason advanced in support of this view related to culture and tradition. Here, non-elite institutions (such as the former polytechnics in the UK) were historically more engaged as they “had to think a bit more rigorously about these kinds of issues than staff in the old universities” (UK2) and this they attributed to the longer-standing and comparatively stronger quality assurance models experienced in that part of the sector.

However, for the Russell Group of research-intensive elite institutions in the UK, participants saw airs of indifference and suggestions of complacency regarding learning outcomes (an essential prerequisite of learning standards):

> *I think there might be an argument that the Russell Group’s a little bit more complacent in putting those systems into practice. I suspect there are courses still in Russell Group universities that get away with not having learning outcomes or having them very well written, because I think there is that fundamental belief that ‘well, we’re a Russell Group University – of course our standards are alright’. And also we are a bit more immune to the QAA [the UK Quality Assurance Agency] because of who we are.* (UK4)

In the US, similar issues relating to institutional status and confidence in their learning standards were identified by three participants, one of whom suggested that “institutions that are confident that their students are already developed in these sorts of outcomes would see this as not necessary” (US3).
Another US participant went further, pointing to active resistance from certain groups:

*Major research universities do very little in this area, in fact they resist it. And there’s been a push back in some respects from those kinds of institutions. Then there’s the second tier private universities, you know the Vanderbilts, the Dukes of the world, and so on, that behave in similar ways.* (US5)

**Theme 6: powerful policy actors.**

The sixth most commonly reported theme (by four of 10) international participants revolved around the influence exerted by powerful policy actors. In many cases these were policy elite actors who exerted influence through their position of authority, and examples of their influence were expressed in both positive and negative terms.

One participant spoke of the positive influence exerted by one individual who had been involved with testing learning standards in Asian countries, providing productive support to various ministers by ensuring “*that the data spoke to their policy questions*” (OECD1). An example of a powerful but negative influence on attempts to measure learning standards was also given. Here, a particular policy actor “*was opposed to that kind of measurement model and I think he just almost single-handedly held Britain back*” (OECD1).

The influence exerted by powerful policy actors was not limited to the policy elite, however. For example, two participants identified the powerful influence arising from the publication of a book titled *Academically Adrift* (Arum & Roksa, 2011) which had focused on learning standards in the US. This book had drawn on quantitative data to question the extent to which US colleges had ‘added value’ to students, producing ripples that had spread far and wide following publication. The effect of this was to produce a number of policy influences including arguments for a sharpened focus on accountability, value for money and the use of more robust quality data to demonstrate the learning standards achieved by graduates.

**Summary of interview data - policy influences**

Analysis of the interview data with respect to the various influences (research question 1) on quality policies regarding learning standards revealed a number of themes. These
themes, and where appropriate, the dimensions (sub-themes) were summarised in Table 6.1 at the start of this chapter.

A number of influences were identified by participants. Within Australia and beyond, these encompassed those pressures arising from a need to maintain a national standing in the global community with respect to the quality of learning standards achieved by graduates. Particular emphasis was accorded to the increasing use of quantitative comparative data internationally in higher education and other settings such as the secondary school sector. Participants consistently identified competitive pressures produced by global comparisons, which intensified where there was any slippage in their positioning in league tables.

Furthermore, there were particular risks to quality that were associated with the expansion of higher education. This was an especially important issue given that direct measures of learning had proven to be elusive. Despite a number of theoretical and methodological problems associated with standards, there was a consensus that there had been a long-standing failure to adequately assure learning standards consistently within national higher education sectors. Such concerns were amplified by employer perceptions that the quality of learning standards achieved by graduates was slipping.

However, different institutions and groupings of institutions saw different advantages and disadvantages that would arise as a consequence of a greater focus on learning standards in quality policy. In the Australian setting, these vested interests served to produce influences on policy development that either resisted or supported quality policy development in this area.
Chapter 7: Findings (2) - policy text production

Introduction

What are the key characteristics of quality policy texts relating to learning standards in Australian higher education and how were they produced?

This chapter, the second of the four chapters that present the findings of this research, addresses the second research question, identified above. These four chapters follow the format outlined in Chapter 6. However, this chapter is extended to include policy document analysis (Part 1) in addition to interview data (Part 2).

Part 1 - Document analysis

This first part presents a critical discourse analysis of selected extracts from five policy texts released between 2009 and 2013, from Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009) to the Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2013). It is acknowledged that policy text production is an ongoing process, and that policy processes will continue beyond the period delineated by this research.

This analysis of key policy documents therefore focuses on the “ensemble” (Ball, 1993, p. 14) of quality policy documents published by the various departments of the Australian Government between 2009 and 2013. Within this ensemble of policy texts, extracts were selected for analysis based on their relevance to the research interest. A full listing of the documents analysed within this policy ensemble is presented in Chapter 5, Table 5.1. Critical discourse analysis (refer to Chapters 4 and 5) was used to identify and analyse genres, discourses and silences (Fairclough, 2010) as policy texts changed over time. The analysed documents are presented in their chronological order. Here, emergent themes and their dimensions (sub-themes) are identified using bold and bold italic text respectively.

The broad approach within this policy ensemble can be characterised as having passed through three evolutionary stages. The first stage began with the first policy document within the ensemble, Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian
Government, 2009) which outlined a broad vision for Australian higher education. Successive texts focused on the details of proposed performance indicators and funding, and the production of these more specific policy texts precipitated a furore. This second stage was characterised by high tensions, entrenched positions and a series of attempted policy settlements through a number of changes to policy texts (the second, third and fourth policy documents analysed in this chapter). The third stage described a period where tensions abated following the abandonment of contested performance indicators and the withdrawal of performance funding. During this third stage, the fifth and final policy document within this ensemble was released, titled Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2013). This document returned the policy stance towards a broader conception of quality in learning standards, dropping all mention of proposed direct measures of learning. However, by December 2014 this draft had not been finalised, leaving the Australian Government’s position on learning standards still open more than five years after the release of Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009), the initial document within this policy ensemble.

Five broad themes (some of which contained dimensions, i.e. sub-themes) relating to policy text production were identified from the critical discourse analysis of document data at the national level, and these are summarised in Table 7.1. Each document is analysed in turn in the following sections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australian national level themes from document analysis</th>
<th>Policy Document Number</th>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impact of global pressures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic productivity</td>
<td>√ **</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australia’s global reputation</td>
<td>√ **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The need for change</td>
<td>√ **</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rising demands for accountability</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vested stakeholder interests</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ownership and control</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideological tensions</td>
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<td>Measurement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Judgement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student equity</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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* this dimension was weakly expressed

** this dimension was strongly expressed
Policy document 1: *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System*

The first evolutionary stage of policy text production in this study started with the release of *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009), produced as the Australian Government’s comprehensive policy response to the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008). Its purpose was to announce a series of landmark changes to a number of policy areas in higher education. Using the format outlined above, the following subsections present the critical discourse analysis of this policy document.

**Overview of this document.**

*Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009) was primarily of the policy genre (setting out vision and policy statements); however it also made use of the promotional genre (a way of ‘marketing’ ideas). The cover of this 67 page document was attractively printed with simple lettering of the document title appearing on a black background with a multi-coloured abstract graphic. The Australian Government logo, placed as the highest item at the top left of the document made the authoritative status of the document clear. Ten reform agendas were articulated, introduced by two sections setting out the rationale and the vision. Each reform agenda was addressed in a separate section, with a leading page displaying the title on a single colour background. The effect of this separation was to perhaps downplay the interconnections between each of the reform agendas. It is
possible that each section was written by a different group, but it was unclear who the individual authors were. Copyright was vested with the Australian Government, and this high level attribution served to render the identity of the policy creators opaque. Selected extracts from this document are analysed in the following subsections.

Extract 1: Landmark Reforms that Build Jobs for the Future.

The opening section of this policy document was titled as above, located in pages 5 and 6. The section briefly introduced the rationale for the policy text, leading with the vision of a “stronger and fairer Australia” (p. 5). Slightly over half of this two page section was given to the discussion of the additional funding provided by the Australian Government, and this was identified as an “unprecedented investment” (p. 5). A multi-coloured half page bar chart was used to illustrate clearly the “quantum leap” (p. 9) in funding.

The overall tone of this section was authoritative: assertions were presented as incontestable matters of fact. Policy alternatives were neither given nor sought, and the text drew exclusively on the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008) for justification in three places, including within the highly prominent opening and closing paragraphs. At the start of this introductory section it was asserted that the policy is “in response to the findings of the Bradley Review” (p.5); in closing the reader was reminded that the “Bradley Review charted the course ahead” (p. 6).

The impact of global pressures was prominent. The dimension of the need for change permeated this section, signalled through the use of phrases such as “comprehensive reform” (p. 5), and “landmark reform agenda … that will transform” (p. 5). The need to “address weaknesses” (p. 5) was raised, but without explaining what those weaknesses were. Change was cast in positive terms through the close association with ‘quality’ (a word which appeared 12 times in the text) and ‘improvement’ (which was used six times). Imperatives were established through the heavy use of the words ‘will’ and ‘must’ throughout the section. Other dimensions contained within this section were those of economic productivity and Australia’s global reputation.

A further theme, student equity, was also present, albeit with less prominence in this section. The issue of economic productivity and Australia’s global reputation were interwoven and pervasively presented, with each appearing six times within this
section. For example, higher education was seen to “fuel economic development and productivity”, thereby supporting Australia’s role as a “leader in the region” (p. 5). The theme of **rising demands for accountability** was expressed in four places, most prominently midway through the section where it was asserted that “ambitious targets, rigorous quality assurance and full transparency - is the only way Australia can meet the knowledge and skills challenges it faces” (p. 5). Despite the lead positioning of the word ‘fairer’ in the opening sentence, the theme of student equity was not picked up again until paragraph six: “the nation must provide opportunity for all” (p. 5). Funding was designed to “improve access and outcomes for students from low socio economic backgrounds” (p. 5) with the benefits of higher education to “all Australians with the drive and aptitude” (p. 6). Overall, the weaker expression of this discourse served to position equity outcomes as having lower priority.

**Extract 2: The Vision.**

The second part of the introductory section (pages 7 and 8) set out the vision and underpinning principles in one and a half pages of plain text containing 19 bullet point items. The vision was articulated in the form of three (bulleted) objectives. The first objective “a stronger Australia” (p. 7) related to economic productivity; whilst the second “a fairer Australia” (p. 7) related to student equity. The third was titled “Future challenges” (p. 7), a curious description for an objective, but the accompanying narrative made it clear that the aim was to ensure Australia is well positioned to take advantage of new opportunities in the future.

A concern for Australia’s global reputation appeared in this section which spoke of the need to “be in the top group of OECD countries” (p. 7) and to “provide industry and the community with assurances of graduate quality” (p. 8). However, the theme of economic productivity was less prominent. Neoliberal discourses of knowledge as a means to an end were to some extent attenuated and the pursuit of knowledge was presented as an end in itself:

> Self-fulfilment, personal development and the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself; the provision of skills of critical analysis and independent thought to support full participation in a civil society; the preparation of leaders for diverse, global environments; and support for a highly productive and professional labour force should be key features of Australian higher education. (p.7)
Emphasis was placed on the values underpinning the policy, and these were identified as “enduring principles” (p. 8). The first two principles related to student equity through the socially democratic aims of equal opportunity and access to university. Other principles embraced academic freedom and autonomy, and the advancement of knowledge and critical thinking. The overall tone of this part of the document was ‘softer’ and more inclusive.

The Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008) appeared twice in this section. In the same way as in the previous section, the attribution reappeared in the important final paragraph: “The reforms generated from the Bradley Review should ...” (p. 8). Here, the theme of economic productivity returned with some force, where the closing remarks on improving economic productivity were incongruous, ‘jarring’ with the preceding text.

Extract 3: A New Era of Quality in Australian Tertiary Education.

The rising demands for accountability were pervasive in the three pages of text contained within the sixth reform agenda in the policy, titled as above (pages 30-33). Neoliberal discourses strongly drew together dimensions of conditional funding, performance targets and increased surveillance through new indicators of quality, which were yet to be determined. The language here was that of ‘demonstrating’, ‘monitoring’ and ‘ensuring’.

Once again, the need for an increased focus on quality was “as recommended by the Bradley Review” (p. 31). In this reform agenda, the formation of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) with a four year budget of $57 million was foreshadowed. This was to be a national overarching regulator for the entire higher education sector with far reaching powers of sanction including the ability to withdraw an institution’s right to use the title of ‘University’.

Here, technologies of accountability began to emerge. Quality was cast in terms of providing “better information” (p. 31) to stakeholders, and it was suggested that whilst institutions are experienced in measuring research performance, they will need to “become equally good at demonstrating students’ academic performance” (p. 31). Benchmarks of “objective and comparative” (p. 31) performance were to be
established, and the suggestion that “richer data” (p. 31) will be collected managed to convey a sense of dissatisfaction with (and a rejection of) the current approach.

However, “active involvement” (p. 32) and “close consultation” (p. 32) with the sector was promised, with the ownership and control of standards to reside with discipline communities: “Discipline communities will ‘own’ and take responsibility for implementing academic standards ... within the academic traditions of collegiality, peer review, pre-eminence of disciplines and, importantly, academic autonomy” (p. 32).

An element of coercion through the ‘carrots and sticks’ of performance funding was to be introduced to “ensure that Australia’s reputation for quality remains high” (p. 33). Performance indicators were to be “robust” (p. 33), and subject to an “independent assessment” (p. 33) by TEQSA, suggestive of a possible lack of trust by the Australian Government in institutions themselves. In the closing paragraphs, the phrase “Unlike the previous Learning and Teaching Performance Fund ...” (p. 33) was used to distance the current approach from earlier and heavily contested instantiations of performance funding.

**Extract 4: A New Relationship between Government and Educators.**

The shortest of the reform agendas, as titled above, was presented last. Not including the title page, the space allocated to this was approximately a half page of text. This text, located on page 47, explicated the nature of this new relationship which, it was asserted, would be required in order to maintain Australia’s global reputation. The parameters of the relationship were unequivocally and powerfully defined: “it will be based on mutual respect, trust and shared goals”.

This final reform agenda announced the introduction of mandatory mission-based compacts (negotiated agreements between individual institutions and the Australian Government) which would serve to align institutional activity with national priorities. Present here were neoliberal discourses of accountability characterised by the removal of bureaucratic ‘red tape’ in favour of indirect control through performance targets and rewards. The final paragraph of this section closed the whole document with the statement that there will be “close consultation” (p. 47) during 2009 on the tools and indicators that were to be used to measure performance at an institutional level.
Synopsis.

Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009) was predominately influenced by a desire to participate and excel in a global knowledge society, with higher education seen to fuel economic productivity and international competitiveness. The text was written by members of the Australian Government, and the language used was powerful and authoritative. The document drew heavily on the well regarded Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008) as a source of power to legitimise and justify the approach taken, and assertions were presented unequivocally. Discourses of change were prominent, largely cast within an imperative to improve quality in a challenging and competitive global setting.

Neoliberal discourses of accountability ran throughout the document. Whilst details of the mechanisms were not revealed, the policy signalled that the next stage would be to consult closely with the sector on appropriate tools and indicators. The theme of student equity was also present, but this was attenuated in comparison to the preceding themes, with one notable exception being the section titled ‘The Vision’. Here, social democratic discourses were inclusive, with a strong focus on equality of opportunity and academic freedom. The effect of this ideological tension was to produce a ‘disconnect’ between this section and the remainder of the document.

Policy document 2: An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding

The release of this 31 page policy document in December 2009, titled An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding (DEEWR, 2009a) was foreshadowed in the preceding Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009). Its arrival marked the beginning of the second evolutionary stage in policy text production, a period characterised by high tensions between the Australian Government and the higher education sector. The following subsections present the critical discourse analysis of this policy document following the general format outlined at the start of this chapter (i.e. overview, intermediate subsections focusing on selected extracts, synopsis).
Overview of this document.

The front cover employed a multi-coloured abstract graphic on a white background. The Australian Government logo was centred on the page and placed at the top, identifying the Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations as the author. Text within the document stated that this document has been produced “based on discussion with and advice from the Indicator Development Group” (p. 4). This group comprised a Government chair and eight members from the academic community, and their membership and terms of reference both appear in the document’s appendices.

The discussion paper was divided into three main areas. The first section provided a background to the paper. The second section was divided into two parts. Part A introduced the measures and indicators to be used for negotiating performance targets from 2010, whilst Part B discussed the links between performance funding and other aspects of the reform agenda for higher education. Procedures for making a submission were defined at the end of the document.

Extract 1: Background.

The first extract from this policy document to be analysed was simply titled ‘Background’. This section spanned four pages of text, and it explained that the document had been created as part of the Australian Government’s response to the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008).

The rising demands for accountability were prominent in this document. For example, quality was defined in terms of quantifiable outcomes: “40% of 25-34 year olds will have a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2025” (p. 3). On the other hand, equity was defined in terms of inputs: “20% of all higher education enrolments at undergraduate level will be from low socioeconomic status backgrounds” (p. 3). The document revealed that a total of $135 million of additional funding, subject to indexation, was to be made available to the sector. Here, neoliberal discourses of accountability described how “targets and performance funding will be key elements” (p. 3). Some targets were to be consistently applied across the sector whilst others were to be institution level targets, and, using bold text for emphasis, the document
explicated that: “the targets will be institutional targets against sector wide measures” (p. 5).

The document described the intention to provide a “final set of indicators early next year” (p. 4), with formal guidelines for the allocation of funding to be finalised “later in 2010” (p. 5). In 2011, universities would receive a share of $90 million, representing facilitation payments to help universities prepare for the future. In 2012, “universities’ performance against the relevant targets will be assessed by TEQSA” (p. 5). Those meeting their targets would receive performance funding.

Within the document a curious juxtaposition of two discourses was present. On one hand, parts of the document were assertive, unequivocal, and discussion was not invited. For example, the “requirement … to agree a target … would not be negotiable” (p. 5). The clause ‘Universities will be required to’ appeared no less than four times. On the other hand, parts of the document were tentative, expressing concerns and inviting comment. Discussions about performance indicators were cautiously couched with heavy use of the words ‘consider’ (20 times) and ‘could’ (15 times).

The introductory section closed with 11 principles, developed with advice from the Indicator Development Group. The purpose of the principles was to “guide the choice of indicators for performance funding arrangements” (p. 6). All bar two of the principles related to the dimension of measurement. Here the language used was predominately quantitative: indicators should be “statistically sound” (p. 6), and “derived from high quality, objective data sources” (p. 6). Despite this focus, a definition of statistical ‘soundness’ was not offered. Effective indicators would have a “consistently used definition … and be able to be measured reliably over time” (p. 6). The rising demands for accountability appeared here with some force and the question of trust was raised: data was to be “collected at ‘arms length’ [sic] by an independent body” (p. 6) and “not easily manipulated” (p. 6). The need to make “best possible use” (p. 6) of existing data was identified, and these data were to be “collected and analysed cost-effectively” (p. 6).

Two final principles were broader in reach. The penultimate principle asserted that indicators should “inform and encourage policy and practice at both the national and institution level, without having a perverse influence on behaviour” (p. 6). The final
principle related to the theme of student equity, which was more modestly expressed: indicators should “accommodate and to the extent possible, facilitate institutional diversity” (p. 6).

**Extract 2: Measures and indicators for negotiating performance targets from 2010.**

Four groups of indicators were announced in the section of the policy document which was titled as above. These were: student participation and inclusion; student experience; student attainment; and the quality of learning outcomes. Despite the classification and separation implied by the indicator titles, each of these indicators related to learning standards to a lesser or greater extent.

The student participation and inclusion indicators were based on the numbers of students in domestic undergraduate courses more broadly, and from other under-represented groups more specifically. Universities were able to negotiate the inclusion of one other under-represented group in addition to the low socioeconomic status group. Although the connection to learning standards was not prominent here, acceptance of a student application to an undergraduate program may be in part based on the institution’s judgement of whether they are likely to succeed.

The student experience indicator was designed to “improve the overall teaching, learning and support provided to students” (p. 12). In addition to the Course Experience Questionnaire (a self-reported survey), the use of first year retention rates was identified as an interim measure. First year retention rates describe the proportion of students who are ‘retained’ by the institution at the end of their first year, and it is heavily (though not exclusively) influenced by pass rates. This measure was conceded to be “rather narrow in scope” (p. 12), and here, an academic reference was used to bolster the argument that despite this limitation, retention and student experience were sufficiently linked to make the endeavour worthwhile.

In contrast to the preceding two indicators, the indicator of student attainment was advanced in equivocal, almost hesitant terms: “The Government is considering whether to use an attainment measure...” (p. 16). Completion rates were identified as the most intuitive indicator of attainment. However, it was also explained that this indicator was volatile, partly because of the students who delay completion or switch
courses. Consequently, it was proposed to use progression and retention rates as an interim measure, whilst more complex measures to track individual completions were developed. These interim measures were to be applied to domestic undergraduates, and also specifically to low socioeconomic status students (and one other under-represented group, if selected by the institution). The net effect of this was to put graduation rates of both of these groups ‘under the spotlight’ for the purposes of performance funding.

The final indicator set related to the quality of learning outcomes. Here, both disciplinary and generic outcomes were identified and the language was again tentative in some places and assertive in others. Discipline-specific indicators “could be addressed” (p. 19) in the context of TEQSA teaching and learning standards, and these “may be informed” (p. 19) by the emergent OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes project. However, the paper suggested “moving immediately” (p. 19) to the Graduate Skills Assessment as a value-added indicator of generic skills. Page 22 was given over to describing this indicator, a three hour test developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research in 1999. It was proposed to administer the test to first and final year students to “provide a measure of the value added” (p. 22).

In summary, the majority of the indicators advanced in this discussion paper referred to measures of quality. Measures of student equity were present, but these were narrowly defined to mean the participation rates of low socioeconomic status students and, if selected by the institution, one other under-represented group. These quantitative indicators were output/outcome focused, and they drew heavily on pass rates (cast as progression, retention or completion rates) in a number of places.

Extract 3: Links between performance funding and other aspects of the higher education reform agenda.

This three page section, titled as above, was itself subdivided into three subsections, each taking up one page. The first started by setting out the processes for establishing mechanisms of accountability via ‘Compacts’ (agreements) between the Australian Government and universities. Negotiations for these were to commence in the second half of 2010, and the targets agreed between Government and each university were to become associated with performance funding. The second subsection discussed the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, which was to improve
student equity through outreach arrangements with schools, together with improved funding to universities to drive recruitment and support. Distinction was made between the funding here with its focus on equity, and performance funding which had “broader objectives that are also strongly tied to the improvement of education standards” (p.26). This second subsection was explanatory in style and comment was not sought on the content.

The final section related to TEQSA, and teaching and learning standards, and here, issues of *ownership and control* surfaced. It was announced that TEQSA was to “take the lead in establishing minimum standards” (p. 27) because the development of “objective and comparable standards of assessment is fundamental to ensuring the quality of learning outcomes” (p. 27). The preceding *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* had identified the importance of “active involvement” (Australian Government, 2009, p. 32), and that commitment was echoed in this document: “it is important that the academic community is actively involved in the new quality assurance arrangements and feels it has ownership of them” (p. 27).

The Australian Learning and Teaching Council’s work in the area of learning standards was acknowledged: the Council’s Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project was to “facilitate the formulation of academic standards in six discipline groupings” (p. 27). At that time, this project, due to be completed by the end of 2010, was expected to “form part of the basis for comparative benchmarks of quality and performance” (p. 27), a somewhat tentative endorsement. Finally, the section closed by signalling the possibility that information obtained from the use of the developed academic (learning) standards could, in time, be used for performance funding.

**Synopsis.**

This policy document, *An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding* (DEEWR, 2009a), identified a number of indicators used to determine quality. It established a number of principles for the indicators, which foregrounded themes of accountability, measurement, and neoliberal discourses of performance management through agreed targets and conditional funding. Present also were discourses of student equity, although these were attenuated in comparison. The document was published in December 2009, but the actual date of publication is not identified.
However, the internal metadata contained within the document identified a creation date of 11th December and formal publication would have been subsequent to this date. Consultation closed on the 5th February 2010, and the imposition of this deadline left little time to make a considered submission. This short time frame was exacerbated by the alignment of the consultation period with the festive season, where many universities effectively close for a fortnight. Furthermore, as is common for university staff to take leave in the summer school vacation period during the month of January, their opportunity to contribute may have been further reduced.

**Policy document 3: Developing a framework for teaching and learning standards in Australian higher education and the role of TEQSA**

This policy document, titled *Developing a framework for teaching and learning standards in Australian higher education and the role of TEQSA* (DEEWR, 2011b) was released during the second evolutionary stage of policy text production, a period characterised by tension between the Australian Government and the higher education sector. The following subsections present the critical discourse analysis of this policy document following the general format outlined at the start of this chapter (i.e. overview, intermediate subsections focusing on selected extracts, synopsis).

**Overview of this document.**

This policy document comprised 22 pages of dense text. The format of this document departed from the two documents identified previously. There was no use of the Australian Government logo (or any other kind of graphic). There was no front cover, no table of contents and the document started with the capitalised title in a different shaded colour box at the top of the page. Immediately under the title box were the words ‘Discussion Paper’ and the date, followed by the body of the document. Subsequent sections were separated by page breaks, and title pages were not used. The document included one monochrome diagram. The authorship of the document was not made clear, but paragraph four identified that “The Interim TEQSA Commission seeks feedback...” (p. 1). Furthermore, the footer sections on all pages carried the word ‘TEQSA’ in small, bold font beside the page number.
The opening paragraph set out the objective: “This paper initiates a process of discussion on possible approaches to ... learning standards” (p. 1). The style of the text was explanatory and conversational. Seventeen references were cited, including those from prominent international ‘thought leaders’ in the area of quality and learning standards. Papers from the OECD, the European ‘Tuning’ project and the UK Quality Assurance Agency were also cited. Discussion points were framed as questions, introduced and visibly separated from the text using bordered text boxes. These questions were open ended and broad in focus, and limitations and issues associated with certain aspects of previously proposed performance indicators were acknowledged. The overall effect of this was to reduce the policy and promotional genres in comparison to the two documents discussed previously. Instead, the tone was more akin to that of an academic paper and in this vein, the contributions of two academics from the University of Melbourne were acknowledged. There are comparatively few expressions of power and authority and the language used was tentative: the word ‘might’ was used 29 times in the document.

There were three sections in this discussion paper. These were introduced in a numbered list with a single descriptive sentence at the end of the introductory first page. After each description, a brief italicised paragraph highlighted the issues in question. The phrase “Feedback is sought ...” appeared no less than five times in the seven lines occupied by the three italicised paragraphs. Each of these three section titles contained within the policy document is analysed in turn and presented in the following subsections.

**Extract 1: The policy context for national teaching and learning standards.**

This section of the policy document, titled as above, commenced with the recognition that “the term ‘standards’ is used in a variety of ways” (p. 3), and definitions were advanced to clarify the differences. Learning standards were broadly defined as “the levels of attainment required for graduation and for the award of grades at pass level or above” (p. 3). This section proceeded with the assertion that there was an “emerging focus on standards as central to quality assurance” and a “shift in thinking from fitness for purpose to standards” (p. 4). Although the underpinning reasons for this shift were not explicated further at this stage, the consequences of the shift were. Here, the lack of specified minimum levels of acceptable performance was raised as a
deficiency of the current approach, and therefore a new framework was needed: “Standards will need to be specified, and appropriate measures determined” (p. 4).

The issue of the tension between diversity and comparability was acknowledged here. A footnote on the bottom of page 4 stated: “International interest in teaching and learning standards has converged on [learning] outcomes, as have formal definitions of standards” (p. 4). Two supporting references from the UK were cited here, and the selection of a reference from 1997 served to suggest that Britain had addressed the issue of standards long ago. Although attention was not drawn to this date, the implicit suggestion was that Australia was lagging behind considerably. The rationale for learning standards was articulated thus:

TEQSA is developing learning standards because there is consensus that Australia must be confident that all graduates meet national minimum levels of attainment appropriate for the field or discipline in which they have studied, and appropriate for the level of the award they are granted. (p. 5)

A close analysis of this paragraph revealed three important assumptions with respect to learning standards. The first related to the issue of ownership, and the power that would emanate from the ownership of the process. Here, the assumed ownership arising from TEQSA being the developer of the standards sat in contrast with assertions in previous policy documents that the development of these would be owned by the community. The second assumption was that “there is consensus” (p. 5), but no evidence was offered in support of this assertion. Finally, and perhaps most critically, there was an assumption that it was, in fact, possible to codify national minimum levels of attainment through the use of learning standards.

The final part of this section identified that there were already a number of projects under way in the domain of learning standards, and the work of the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project was identified here, amongst others. This served to build an image of groups moving in unison towards a common shared vision. Concluding this section, seven principles for TEQSA’s approach to teaching and learning standards were identified, and these included: institutional autonomy; sector diversity; regular review; and quality improvement. The inclusion of these principles represented a comparatively ‘soft’ expression of accountability. The discussion points that closed this section asked for feedback on the offered definition of standards; the
separation of teaching standards from learning standards; and the seven principles for TEQSA’s role within the standards framework.

**Extract 2: A brief review of international and domestic developments.**

This section of the policy document reviewed domestic and international practices, as a “step towards considering what teaching and learning standards should attempt to cover and what measures, indicators or evidence would be required” (p. 8). In contrast to the earlier policy document titled *An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding* (DEEWR, 2009a), this document devoted seven pages to a discussion of potential indicators and measures. Here, self-reporting of generic skills was seen to be “questionable” (p. 9) within a standards based framework. On the other hand, the Graduate Skills Assessment and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) were seen to be “independent of institution, curriculum and discipline” (p. 11).

The planned introduction of an Australian version of the CLA to measure generic skills of first and final year students was highlighted, but here the tone was conciliatory and (some of) the shortcomings of the CLA were identified and acknowledged.

Two further discussion points were advanced at the end of this section, both framed as questions. These sought feedback on other developments that might be worth considering, and asked whether the “blunt assessments” (p. 14) of the various approaches described were accurate.

**Extract 3: Steps toward Australian teaching and learning standards.**

A proposed architecture for teaching and learning standards was offered in this section of the policy document. The language was tentative, and couched in hesitant terms: this section presented “a preliminary proposal – a first step in refining a national approach” (p. 15). Three interwoven elements (standards statements; key indicators or measures; and processes for expert review) were advanced cautiously, using the words “there appear to be …” as lead-in text. The relationship between these was illustrated using a simple monochrome graphic, reproduced below in Figure 7.1.

Interestingly, TEQSA (as the regulator) was located at the base of the diagram, a choice of position that avoided creating an overt expression of power. The incorporation of words such as ‘consensual’, ‘collaborative’, and ‘judgement’ alongside the three
elements served to foster a sense of collegiality. However, there were ideological tensions between the dimensions of measurement, and of judgement. The ‘harder’ language of explicit measures contrasted with the ‘softer’ language of insight, judgement and interpretation characteristic of expert review processes. Figure 7.1 intentionally depicts the fonts in their original relative size: the font size used for these softer terms was far smaller, which served to signal their attenuated status.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 7.1 Architecture of the proposed teaching and learning standards**

*(Australian Government, 2011c, p. 15)*

This tension in the measurement/judgement couplet was picked up on the following page, which signalled the importance of “dialogue and consensus building” (p. 16) with respect to learning standards. Statements of standards were recognised as “poor representations of what professionals know” (p. 15), given the complex knowledge that is characteristic of higher education.
This section proceeded to argue that detailed standards were needed by both Government and the higher education sector: “both higher education institutions and TEQSA require a level of detail in statements of standards” (p. 16). Statements of standards were to “embody criteria and levels” (p. 17), with the role of TEQSA being to focus on minimum levels in order to satisfy the rising demands for accountability. The concept of ‘reference points’ was introduced here. Although reference points were not to be necessarily subject to regulatory overview, they were potentially “detailed and specific” to assist institutions and reviewers. This positioning served to separate prescription (in terms of policy and standards) from guidance.

The final part of this section moved towards an identification of the indicators that were proposed. On the subject of ranking and competition, the document set out a clear position:

A national approach to standards is not an exercise in institutional ranking. It is about institutions checking how their courses, their teaching and their students’ learning measure up against agreed national standards, not how they rate in comparison with other institutions. (p. 18)

Here, an argument was mounted for common test instruments, but the tone of this part of the document strove for balance: it was accepted that “there is good reason to be cautious about such testing” and three significant issues with this approach were acknowledged, such as the risk of institutions ‘teaching to the test’. The text was written in a persuasive style, and it painted a picture of pre-existing consensus on key aspects, appealing also to common sense and logic: “Clearly it is in the best interests of Australian higher education ... and it is reasonable to expect all institutions will be able to show that their graduates achieve such levels” (p. 19).

The final part of this section identified the close relationship between learning standards and assessment practices: “The relationship between learning objectives, assessment methods and the grading of attainment or achievement is central to any serious attempt to understand and monitor standards” (p. 20). In this part, a suggestion was made that academic judgement might be subject to “cross-referencing” (p. 20) through processes of external review. The choice of ‘softer’ words such as ‘cross-referencing’ (as opposed to ‘auditing’, perhaps) served to attenuate the prominence of the accountability discourse, though it did not necessarily weaken it.
The section concluded with five further questions which sought comment on: the architecture proposed; the approach suggested; the role of generic skills testing using common instruments; whether other measures should be considered; and how TEQSA should utilise processes of expert review.

**Synopsis.**

This policy document, *Developing a framework for teaching and learning standards in Australian higher education and the role of TEQSA* (DEEWR, 2011b), was released approximately 18 months after the publication of *An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding* (DEEWR, 2009a). Tensions between Government and the sector were running high and the introduction of the CLA as a replacement for the Graduate Skills Assessment had exacerbated rather than reduced the level of contestation.

The document adopted a highly conciliatory tone throughout. From the definitions of terms at the outset and the reversion to basic principles, it took advantage of the formation of TEQSA to effectively position the document as a ‘restart’ in the consultation process. The document appeared to be written for an academic audience through the use of referenced citations, techniques of balanced argument and the avoidance of unsubstantiated assertions. The expression of authoritative power was attenuated, muted even, and the document took the form of an invitation to contribute to discussion. Neoliberal discourses of accountability were present, the need for which was taken as a given, but they were ‘soft’ in their expression of power. Comparisons were drawn with other international developments, and these suggested that Australia was lagging behind.

The power of TEQSA was downplayed through the stance taken both in the text and in the diagram which set out the architecture of standards (reproduced earlier as Figure 7.1). However, the issue of *ownership and control* remained in contention as TEQSA was strongly steering key parameters within which learning standards would be developed. Throughout the document there was a distinct avoidance of the policy and promotional genre, in stark contrast to the predecessor documents outlined earlier in this chapter. Instead, there was a substantial treatment of the advantages and disadvantages of various performance indicators. The document acknowledged and
identified shortcomings in the use of standardised tests such as the CLA, although some of the more critical commentary regarding the fitness for purpose of the indicator was sidestepped. The theme of judgement gained a certain amount of ground, but the theme of measurement was not dropped and it remained prominent. The policy document suggested that the way forward remained open for discussion.

**Policy document 4: Assessment of Generic Skills**

This policy document, titled *Assessment of Generic Skills* (DEEWR, 2011a) was one of a triplet of consultation papers simultaneously released in December 2011. This triplet was issued following the announcement that reward funding for student experience and quality of learning outcomes would be discontinued “in the context of the Government’s fiscal strategy and on the basis of feedback from the sector that there was no consensus on the issue of whether it is appropriate to use such indicators for Reward Funding” (DEEWR, 2011c, p. 4).

In common with policy documents 2 and 3, policy document 4 was produced during the second evolutionary phase of policy text production, a difficult period characterised by conflict between the Australian Government and the higher education sector. The following subsections present the critical discourse analysis of this policy document following the general format outlined at the start of this chapter (i.e. overview, intermediate subsections focusing on selected extracts, synopsis).

**Overview of this document.**

The *Assessment of Generic Skills* (DEEWR, 2011a) discussion paper consisted of 25 pages of text written in an academic style. There were 14 references cited in the text, of which six were from the Australian Government. The front cover consisted of plain text on a white background. The title appeared in the upper middle section of the page, underlined by a simple horizontal line which separated it from the words ‘Discussion Paper’ and the date. The cover is unadorned and no logo or graphic was used. There was no indication of authorship on the cover, nor inside. However, a table of contents set out six sections and three appendices, one of which provided details explaining how to make a submission to the Australian Government in response to the policy consultation document. The document internal metadata suggested a creation
date of the 8th December 2011, consistent with the date indicated on the cover. The deadline for the close of consultation was 17th February 2012, a slightly longer timeframe than that in the 2009 consultation described earlier (policy document 2).

**Extract 1: Introduction.**

The policy document commenced with a two and a half page introductory section titled simply as above. This introduction was split into two roughly equal parts. The first focused on the policy context whilst the second discussed responses to previous consultations. In the first two paragraphs, the document established the broad context, beginning with the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008) and the Australian Government’s response. The third and fourth paragraphs focused on performance funding and associated indicators, and the following three paragraphs explained the rationale for this approach. Neoliberal discourses associated with the **rising demand for accountability** were strongly present, articulated through the triplet of consumer choice, quality measures, and information. Citizens were to “exercise greater choice” (p. 3) between providers, with the introduction of funding that “follows the consumer, and thus gives them more power in the service relationship” (p. 3). Improved regulation was to “ensure minimum quality standards” (p. 3). Informed choices were to be facilitated by “improved information on performance” (p. 3), to be published on the newly created *My University* website.

The second part of this introductory section summarised the consultation processes up to 2011, acknowledging that there were “over 60 submissions” (p.4) that provided “mixed feedback” (p. 5). Interestingly, the discussion here cleaved the principle of measuring learning outcomes from the technicalities of doing so. To illustrate, the paper maintained the assertion that the best kind of indicator of outcomes “would be, as recommended by the Bradley Review, ‘direct measures of learning outcomes’ for the performance funding arrangements” (p. 4). The paper then proceeded to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of various indicators that had been identified in responses to previous consultations. In this respect the problem was selectively framed as the problem of ‘getting the choice of indicator right’, setting aside the question of whether the direct measurement of learning was even possible. The effect of this segregation was to establish **measurement** as an ideological principle beyond argument.
The impact of global pressures, and specifically the dimension of Australia’s global reputation emerged in the latter part of the introductory section where competition, benchmarking and quality were interwoven: “For the Australian higher education system to be internationally competitive, it is desirable that the provision of quality education services is informed and guided by international benchmarks” (p. 4). It was suggested that the CLA (or a version of it) offered the “best prospects for assessment of generic skills against international benchmarks” (p. 5). Here, the identified problems with the CLA were selectively reported and carefully framed in this section of text:

Some submissions did express in-principle support for the assessment of generic skills. However, there remained some concerns about the use of the Collegiate Learning Assessment including the cultural appropriateness of the instrument for Australia and that if it were to be used there should be sufficient time for development before it was used for performance reporting purposes. (p. 5)

Through the positioning of narrative around the pivot point (the word ‘however’) in the sentence, the document managed to convey the impression that the problem was simply that the indicator ‘needs more work’ before it can be used for performance reporting. On this note, the final part of this introductory section ceded a delay to allow “sufficient time for development” (p. 5) of the indicator. However, whilst the indicator was not to become a target for performance funding at this stage, “universities will be required to participate in the development of performance measurement instruments and establish baseline performance” (p. 5). The introductory section closed with the promise of further consultations and discussion with universities, business leaders, and students later in 2011 and during 2012.

Extract 2: Principles and the student life cycle framework.

This section of the policy document, titled as above, comprised one and a half pages of text. The first part of this section was given over to the explication of five principles for “the development of new performance measurement instruments” (p. 6), whilst the second part discussed various points in the student life cycle where measurements could be made. The section opened with a reference to principles published in 1998 and 2001, and curiously, there was no reference to any of the eleven principles that were more recently advanced in policy document 2, An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding (DEEWR, 2009a). The five principles identified in this
section were strongly associated with discourses of accountability. Here, it was argued that indicators should be “fit for purpose”, with “consistency”, “auditability”, “transparency”, and “timeliness” (p. 6). In contrast to the principles outlined in An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding (DEEWR, 2009a), there was no mention of the need to avoid perverse outcomes, nor the advantage of drawing on existing data wherever possible. The theme of student equity which was only weakly present in the earlier 2009 discussion paper was now absent.

**Extract 3: Purpose.**

The third section (titled as above) of this policy document focused on the purpose of directly assessing learning outcomes: “Objective data on student outcomes provides direct evidence that higher education is meeting economic, social and community needs” (p. 8). However it was also accepted that to date, this “has been difficult to achieve” (p. 8).

Two citations from the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008) were used to argue that direct assessment of learning was needed to maintain Australia’s international competitive standing in a demand driven system. The next page and a half of text was devoted to explicating four uses of such direct measures, including: improved quality assurance; the “virtuous circle” (p. 9) of continuous improvement; improved ability to meet employer needs; and an improved ability to inform student choice. A persuasive style pervaded this extract. The first of the discussion questions appeared at the end of this section. It was a question with a highly selective focus. It asked “Are there other uses of the assessment of generic skills?” (p. 10). Overall this section highlighted the need for change. It attempted to persuasively ‘sell the proposal’ to the reader, and discussion on the principle or approach was not invited through the use of the narrowly scoped question at the end of the section.

**Extract 4: AHELO - progress report.**

This fourth section of the policy document focused on the OECD AHELO (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes) project, and it suggested that this “may well have important lessons for the assessment of generic skills within Australia” (p. 11). The emphasis on “scientific and practical feasibility” (p. 11) was a recurrent theme.
within the two and a half pages of text, and the approach taken within AHELO was described in detail. An engagement with students was described, where “up to 10 students from 10 institutions were invited to participate in a focus group” (p. 13), a choice of wording which did not reveal the number of students that did participate.

Overall, the text maintained a persuasive style, positioning the AHELO project as a serious and rigorous attempt to provide a “valid instrument in a cross-national context” (p. 11). An OECD paper was cited, to suggest that the project was “well on the way to proving that an international tool to measure generic skills can indeed be developed” (p.12). There were no questions identified for discussion in this section.

Extract 5: Issues.

This fifth and penultimate section, simply titled ‘Issues’, was the largest section of this policy document, comprising seven pages of text. Not including appendices, this accounted for a third of the volume of the discussion paper’s text. Nine further questions for discussion appeared in this section.

The section devoted considerable attention to the issue of discipline specificity in the assessment of learning outcomes, citing the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project as an example of learning standards in Australia. This positioning seemingly vested ownership and control with the higher education sector. However, the direct assessment of learning outcomes was positioned to be “above curriculum content” (p.14) and the extension of testing generic skills down to the level of the discipline would require “significant resources and effort” (p. 15). A phased approach was suggested as a way of dealing with this issue, and seven possible avenues were identified.

Within this section the format and the methodology of the CLA was explained in detail. Even though the Graduate Skills Assessment had been previously dropped, it was included here and comparisons were made between the two tests. Examples of items from both tests were provided in Appendix 3 of that document, where the CLA was presented with explanatory (san-serif) text and a colour image identifying the various media (emails, pictures, articles) employed in the test. In contrast, the Graduate Skills Assessment was presented with a short factual introduction accompanied by a black and white image of an essay prompt, which used a serif font. This served to make the
essay task look ‘narrow’ and ‘dated’ in comparison to the more sophisticated and media-rich CLA. The detailed explanation and comparison suggests that this may have been an attempt to establish distance between the two tasks in order to ‘defuse’ some of the tensions surrounding the CLA, and thereby persuade the audience of its viability. The final issue discussed in this section related to participation. Here it was revealed that the CLA, as currently configured, would be administered to a sample comprising 100 first year and 100 final year students. To minimise the “burden on students” (p. 19) it was proposed to use matrix sampling, meaning that students within an institution were to be allocated parts of the test rather than the whole test.

Extract 6: Next steps.

This short final section, titled as above, occupied a third of a page within the policy document. Despite an extended discussion of a number of issues in the preceding section, the discussion paper closed by signalling the continued intention to move towards implementation:

The Department will work with stakeholders to develop a suitable assessment of generic skills with a view to sector wide implementation in 2013. Subject to successful development, trial and implementation, results from the assessment of generic skills will be published on the My University [Australian Government comparative] website from 2013 onwards. (p. 21)

Synopsis.

The Assessment of Generic Skills (DEEWR, 2011a) discussion paper entered the policy processes at a time characterised by strong hostility to the CLA from the academic sector. The overall tone of this policy document was conciliatory, measured, and explanatory: it used denser prose, fewer bullet points and it employed an academic style. The use of the promotional genre attempted to ‘sell the proposition’ through persuasively written discourses that sought to identify a number of advantages for institutions. The expression of authoritative power was minimal in this policy document. However, despite a number of concessions offered to the sector, the Government position also signalled that there would be no deviation from the intention to develop and implement direct and comparable measures of learning outcomes.
Policy document 5: *Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes*

The short set of discussion papers collectively titled *Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes* (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2013) entered the public domain in March 2013. The release of these policy documents marked the beginning of the third evolutionary stage within the policy text production processes analysed within this research. In this phase, tensions started to abate, although they did not disappear entirely.

The following subsections present the critical discourse analysis of this policy document following the general format outlined at the start of this chapter (i.e. overview, intermediate subsections focusing on selected extracts, synopsis).

**Overview of this document.**

The set of policy documents consisted of seven pages in total. The author was identified clearly as the Higher Education Standards Panel (hereafter referred to as the ‘Panel’), and the Australian Government logo appeared as a header to each of the four short documents that made up the set.

It is important to note that the status of these documents was different from the documents analysed earlier in this chapter. The Panel was constituted as a Government expert advisory group, with a remit to “advise and make recommendations” (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2014) to the Minister responsible for tertiary education and TEQSA. The Minister had the power to accept, challenge or discard recommendations made by the Panel.

**Extract 1: Call for comment.**

This two page document, titled as above, explained that the Panel has decided to propose revisions to “the format of the standards and the framework in which they are organised” (p. 1). This consultation was because the “Panel wishes to test its approach by inviting feedback” (p. 1), prior to releasing proposals for major revisions to the standards. Comments on the format and the content of the standards were sought. The remainder of this document described how to make a submission.

The second document within this set, a three page ‘Discussion Paper’, explained the purpose of the consultation in more detail. Here the concept of ‘reference points’ was introduced. These were described as “codes or frameworks” (p. 2) that are relevant to providers, but they “are not themselves Higher Education Standards” (p. 2). Reference points therefore constituted non-prescriptive guidance. The final paragraphs of this document described the two standards statements developed for Course Design (Coursework) and Learning Outcomes (Coursework) respectively. Learning outcomes were deemed to be worthy of a separate set of standards statements in view of their role as “critical components of the provision of higher education” (p. 3).

Extract 3: Learning Outcomes (Coursework).

This policy document consisted of one single page of text. Following the title (identified above), a numbered list of 10 statements was presented. In stark contrast to earlier policy texts, learning standards were now cast as “Learning outcomes statements” (p. 1) and described as ‘reference points’, thereby firmly positioning them as frames of reference, but not standards in themselves.

This substantial shift in language appeared elsewhere in this text. In fact, the word ‘standard’ was not used in the body text, and references were made instead to “learning outcomes” (p. 1). The word ‘measure’ did not appear anywhere in the document, and, unlike previous documents, there was no suggestion that learning was to be ‘directly measured’ or compared. The seventh statement set out how learning standards were to be assured, and here the themes of measurement and comparability were conspicuous by their absence:

Learning outcomes for each course of study and the methods for assessment of those outcomes are informed by periodic reviews (at least every 5 years), which take account of external reference points that are relevant to the course of study. (p. 1)

The issue of Australia’s global reputation was hinted at, by the reference to being “informed by international comparators” (p. 1) but this was weakly expressed. On this note, the choice of words was more associated with the ideological dimension of
judgement. The phrases “informed by” and “consistent with” (p. 1) were used three and two times respectively within the page, suggesting that there was now considerable latitude for interpretation by institutions, who would gain more ownership and control if these proposals succeeded.

Synopsis.

This document, Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2013), took a much ‘softer’ stance towards learning standards, to the extent that the use of the word ‘standards’ was dropped in favour of the term ‘outcomes’. This was a significant change, and previous discourses that positioned standards as measurable or comparable were absent. Furthermore, there was no mention of any performance indicators with respect to learning outcomes or standards. Finally, this document firmly located the ownership and control of learning outcomes with the academic community, offering institutions considerable latitude.

However, as the document suggests, this was almost a ‘consultation about a forthcoming consultation’, given that the intent of the discussion paper was to test the approach as a step on the way towards the development of a formal proposal to revise the standards. The different status of this document was outlined earlier: although it was a consultation undertaken by a formally constituted advisory group, the contents of this discussion paper were not necessarily representative of the views of the Australian Government.

Summary of document analysis - policy text production

The critical discourse analysis of these five policy documents selected from the policy ensemble revealed that policy text production (research question 2) was predominately shaped around the themes of economic productivity and a concern for Australia’s global reputation, both of which were used to justify and highlight the need for change. To this end, policy texts identified a number of challenges and threats to Australia’s reputation, and pressures for change were strongly articulated. These identified a need to ‘prove’ and ‘improve’ quality through increased accountability, expressed through neoliberal discourses of consumer choice, quality management and the provision of information. The theme of student equity was also present as a
comparatively minor theme. A number of ideological tensions were revealed through competing discourses and challenges to established positions.

Processes of policy text production were directed by the policy elite, who were in turn influenced through processes of consultation. In general, specific individuals involved with policy text creation were not identified although members of reference groups were. There was a gradual diminishing of the ‘presence’ of the Australian Government in policy texts. This presence was highly visible in the first two papers to be analysed, *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009), and *An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding* (DEEWR, 2009a). There, presence was established through the use of the policy genre, with prominent logos, title pages and authoritative prose. These early policy texts within the sequence were characterised by a strong expression of power.

However, the third policy document to be analysed, *Developing a framework for teaching and learning standards in Australian higher education and the role of TEQSA* (DEEWR, 2011b) marked a departure from the policy genre of the preceding texts to the extent that the reader has to look closely to discover the source of the document. In the third and fourth documents, the discourses changed to become more collegial, even conciliatory, with far greater emphasis on explanation and justification. Written in an academic style, these documents also acknowledged weaknesses and canvassed for advice from stakeholders on how to address the issues. The voice of the Australian Government is absent in the fifth consultation document, *Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes* (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2013). This was led by the Higher Education Standards Panel, an advisory group independent of the Minister or TEQSA.

Over time, the Australian Government’s visible expression of power also diminished through the reallocation of leading roles back to the higher education sector. In *An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding* (DEEWR, 2009a) the Convenor of the Indicator Development Group was a Government employee. On the other hand, in the later consultation on the *Assessment of Generic Skills* (DEEWR, 2011a), the Chair of the Advancing Quality in Higher Education Reference Group was the Vice-Chancellor of Griffith University (DEEWR, 2011c).
There was a gradual weakening of the theme of student equity, a theme which became attenuated over the course of policy text production. The majority of the performance indicators were orientated to the measurement of quality, and those that did purport to relate to equity focused on input measures such as enrolment numbers. Early proposals to use the graduation rates of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds as a performance indicator were not maintained in later drafts.

There were two persistent policy interests that were evident across the first four policy texts analysed. The first related to the Australian Government’s desire to establish direct measures of learning; whilst the second related to the intention to use such data to compute measures of value-add for individual institutions. In the face of stiff opposition from the sector, the Government made a number of concessions with respect to the performance indicators, however there was seemingly no deviation from the intention to develop and implement direct measures of learning. The theme of ownership and control was expressed differently across successive policy texts. Early texts definitively allocated the ownership of learning standards to discipline communities, but by 2011 this was no longer clearly the case.

However, the fifth document marked a stark departure from the preceding texts in that it advanced a different conception of standards (which were now cast in terms of ‘learning outcomes’). In this document ownership and control was to be returned to the academic community and no mention was made of direct measures of learning or computation of the value added by institutions. Significantly, this different conception of standards was advanced by the Higher Education Standards Panel, an advisory body rather than the Australian Government itself.

To conclude, more than five years after the release of Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009), processes of quality policy text production relating to learning standards remained unresolved.
Part 2 – Interview data

This second part of Chapter 7 continues to present the findings with respect to the second research question, which focused on the production of quality policy texts relating to learning standards in higher education. In this second part, the analysis of interview data from Australia and beyond (i.e. UK, US, and OECD) is presented.

In Australia the focus was on quality policies relating to learning standards from *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* policy (Australian Government, 2009) through subsequent evolutions of policy texts up to 2013 (see Table 5.1). The Australian setting was examined using the policy trajectory approach described in Chapters 4 and 5.

In the UK and the US, ‘quality policy’ was taken to mean those quality policies relating to learning standards produced within the participants’ national settings. Policy text production processes relating to learning standards were also explored in broad terms (i.e. not in relation to any specific national policy) with a former senior official within the OECD.

Three themes relating to policy text production were identified from the analysis of interview data. Whilst these themes were all present both within and beyond Australia, the dimensions (sub-themes) within each theme were nuanced differently. These themes were:

- **Vested stakeholder interests**
- **Ideological tensions**
- **Consultation processes**

These themes and, where appropriate, their dimensions (sub-themes) are summarised in Table 7.2 overleaf. Each is discussed in the following sections, dealing with the Australian setting first. This is followed by an examination of the themes identified in the perspectives of participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD).
Table 7.2 Summary of themes relating to policy text production (interviews)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australian policy trajectory study</th>
<th>Selected perspectives beyond Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>National level</strong></td>
<td>19 participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Vested stakeholder interests (14)</td>
<td>1. Ideological tensions (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Institutional competition (8)</td>
<td>b. Standardised testing (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Commercial test providers (3)</td>
<td>3. Vested stakeholder interests (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ideological tensions (14)</td>
<td>2. Consultation processes (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Proposed performance indicators (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Standardised testing (9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Consultation processes (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. The ‘devil in the detail’ (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1: Selected perspectives from beyond Australia are shown separately. This is because these are not part of the Australian policy trajectory study, and because they do not constitute policy trajectory studies in their own right (refer to Chapter 5, ‘Research questions’).

Note 2: Themes are labelled using **bold text**; dimensions (sub-themes) are in *italic text*. The number of participants identifying each theme/dimension is shown in brackets. Theme totals are not derived by summing the numbers of participants in each dimension, because some participants may have identified more than one dimension within a theme.

**Australian national level themes**

The 19 participants (drawn from Australian Government and national level non-Government groups) identified various characteristics of quality policy text production relating to learning standards in the Australian setting. At this level there were two prominent themes relating to policy text production: **vested stakeholder interests** and underpinning **ideological tensions**. A third theme drew together a number of issues associated with **consultation processes**. Each of these themes is addressed in turn.
Theme 1: Vested stakeholder interests.

A majority (14) of these 19 national level participants identified a number of vested stakeholder interests that were an integral part of policy text production. There were three dimensions that fell within this theme: struggles over ownership and control, the effects of institutional competition, and the vested interests of commercial test providers.

Ownership and control.

Issues relating to the vested interests of ownership and control were raised by 13 of the 19 national level participants. As outlined in Part 1 of this chapter, the policy document Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009) had identified that discipline communities would ‘own’ the standards. By the end of the year, An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding (DEEWR, 2009a) had been produced, and this identified the use of the Graduate Skills Assessment as an independent performance indicator of learning standards. This was a significant development, as it positioned the ownership of the indicator outside of the discipline communities. If learning standards (and more specifically, aspects of their measurement) were to be ‘owned’ by the Australian Government, this could facilitate greater scrutiny and tighter centralised control. In particular, the quantitative data produced by these indicators were seen as ‘levers of power’ because they facilitated processes of comparison. One participant expressed serious concerns about issues of control through the use of quantitative data thus:

*It just worries the heck out of me because governments are looking for a cheap quick solution. They want to put a number on a database. They want to be able to say ‘no you are not performing’, take your money away.* (NG5)

On the other hand, another participant criticised the tendency for leaders in higher education to “argue against collecting any data because they are concerned about what it will tell them. And I find this appalling in organisations that are research organisations. Fundamentally they live and breathe collecting data” (NG12).

A further participant described how iconic ‘thought leaders’ from the US had been “brought out and used” (NG5) by the academic community in an attempt to discredit the independent performance indicators proposed by the Australian Government.
These represented efforts to maintain (or reclaim) ownership and control of learning standards. Interestingly, a senior Australian Government official also revealed personal doubts about the performance indicators proposed, but at the same time they recognised possibilities that these data could be used to advantage: “If you were to ask me is there value in a standardised test of generic skills, I’m not convinced that there is philosophically, yet it would be something that TEQSA [Australian Government Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency] would find very useful” (AG3).

The ownership of standards and issues of control also emerged in the work of the Discipline Scholars who were appointed as part of the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project run by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. Two participants spoke of the difficulties that the Scholars had faced when seeking endorsement of the newly developed learning standards from their peak bodies (e.g. a council of deans). In each case, they failed to obtain formal endorsement even though they had secured broad agreement from their disciplinary community in terms of the standards they had developed. This was a ‘double-edged sword’ as despite having the ownership of these standards, their very production brought with it the danger that the disciplinary community might cede an element of control.

**Institutional competition.**

Competition between Australian higher education institutions was a significant feature in the context of policy text production between 2009 and 2013, with eight participants (of 19) making reference to this issue. Details of proposed performance funding emerged in late 2009, and this was seen to enhance competitive tensions with one participant labelling such funding as “political dynamite for universities” (NG8). Later in the policy text production process the additional performance funding was discontinued and tensions abated, partly as a consequence of the removal of funding pressures and partly in the light of the Australian Government’s decision to abandon some of the more contested performance indicators. The effect of this was described by one participant: “all of a sudden everybody relaxes because the stakes are much less high” (NG10).

With respect to competition between institutions, one former Vice-Chancellor remarked on the “long-term reputational factors” (NG2) that served as strong market
signals to prospective students. In this vein another former Vice-Chancellor remarked
that they were certain that some of their courses had higher learning standards than a
nearby elite research-intensive competitor, but this “didn’t actually matter because of
the halo effect of [name of the university]” (NG3). In this respect the independent
nature of the proposed performance indicators provided a “real advantage for us in
moving towards something which would put that issue under the spotlight” (NG3) and
their institution actively pursued this vested interest through the policy text
consultation processes. Another participant also spoke of the “challenge to the
hierarchy [of universities]” (NG15) that was signalled by the proposed indicators.

For two participants the presence of institutional competitive forces served to
generate negative consequences for the sector as a whole. On this note one
participant lamented that “universities fight sideways so much that they have trouble
advancing the ship … they should be in an oligopoly to advance the [higher education
sector] cartel against [other areas of expenditure such as] defence, health, tourism and
mining” (NG7). These vested and competitive interests served to intensify tensions and
prolong the period of policy text production.

Commercial test providers.

One former Vice-Chancellor commented on the opportunities to “make a lot of money
out of the provision of higher education or indeed of tertiary education in general”
(NG3). On this point three (of 19) participants made specific reference to the
emergence and expansion of commercial test providers. One observed that:

there’s a whole set of industries growing up around higher education, some of
them within higher education some of them outside it. Those are industries
around the credentialing, accreditation, assessment, data collection, metrics,
management, you know strategic information business systems. There’s just
this eruption of this sort of bureaucratic apparatchik that sort of sits around it.
There’s money to be made in that. (NG4)

A similar perspective was taken by a different participant, who observed that there
were “all sorts of commercial firms around the world seeking to codify student
outcomes and learning in commercially attractive terms to themselves” (NG7). These
vested interests were seen by one participant to be particularly relevant in an
increasingly globalised setting: “It is not surprising that some of the strongest voices
driving the standards agenda internationally are people with a likelihood of making money out of it” (NG4).

This issue was not confined to commercial providers, however. Another participant expressed concern that the not-for-profit Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) was particularly powerful in Australian quality policy text production through their “strong representation and lobbying” (NG6) for standardised testing. In a climate of policy text production characterised by disagreement and tension between the policy elite and the academic community, the provision of unequivocal advice was seen as welcome, given that “testing agencies have reputations for offering direct concrete advice to governments, which governments like and respect” (NG6). The extent to which such advice was neutral was an open question, however, in view of the high stakes involved:

So if for example ACER got the AHELO [the OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes project] contract, they would be set for the next 20 years. I mean, there will be huge income. And I feel edgy about that because it looks to me like a conflict of interest. (NG6)

**Theme 2: Ideological tensions.**

A majority (14) of the 19 national level participants identified ideological tensions that were embedded in the production of the policy texts in the Australian quality policy ensemble. Of these participants, 10 referred to tensions associated with the proposed performance indicators. Nine made reference to tensions associated with standardised testing, with some participants making reference to both.

**Proposed performance indicators.**

A participant from the Australian Government spoke of the desire to acquire “performance measures that can get a handle on the performance of the sector” (AG2). Issues relating to the dimension of ownership and control were identified in the preceding theme; this dimension focuses on the tensions that surrounded the choice of performance indicators in policy texts.

Although policy texts identified a number of different indicators over time as the ensemble unfolded, the Australian Government’s attempted introduction of the
American CLA produced the majority of the problems in the view of the national level participants. The CLA first appeared in place of the Graduate Skills Assessment which had been originally proposed in *An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding* (DEEWR, 2009a). On this point, one participant suggested that the choice of the CLA as a performance indicator had come from nowhere, appearing as “a magic bullet that had been dreamed up very, very quickly by somebody in policy in Canberra” (NG9). Another participant recounted a conversation with a member of staff in the Council for Aid to Education (the providers of the CLA), who had expressed concern that the instrument had been introduced into Australian quality policy texts without any prior discussion with their organisation:

> And they said that no one ever made any approach to them at all. So, it’s hard to know how serious the whole plan was, or how thought through, if the people who own the instrument and presumably would have to sell it, or provide it, or be consulted in its adaptation were never ever consulted in the first place. (NG15)

From the point of view of the Australian Government, however, it seemed wise to align new domestic performance indicators to those used internationally, as this would facilitate benchmarking. The CLA had been selected as the measure of generic learning standards in the OECD AHELO project, and “given the push for international benchmarking it was considered that it might be appropriate to hitch on to the CLA” (AG2). This decision provoked a strong reaction from the academic community, with one participant remarking that it was “potentially lethal and it galvanised lots of people to do something across the board, because we all couldn’t believe that the [Australian] Government was going down this track” (NG5).

The policy processes of text production between late 2009 and early 2013 were universally characterised as highly contested, and entrenched positions were taken on both sides. On one hand, and for various reasons, the Australian Government was seen to be “quite wedded to CLA” (NG2) whilst on the other, the academic community maintained that the reasons for the selection of the CLA were fundamentally and fatally flawed.

Arguments advanced in opposition to the CLA revealed multiple ideological tensions relating to: the validity of the instrument; the cost of adopting it; and the value of the
information that would be gained from its use. One participant described the instrument as “blunt” (NG10) whilst another asserted that its validity was low because it failed to “test for teamwork and collaboration and the ability to speak and persuade effectively” (NG5), a serious shortcoming in their view given that these generic capabilities were key to learning standards. The high costs of administration of the CLA in an era of increased fiscal prudence attracted attention, as did the loss of information when attempting to “boil down” (NG4) complex matters of learning into a single score. One participant remarked that “the educational endeavour was about investing in students” (NG10), and proceeded to argue that there was no evidence to suggest that this endeavour would be advanced by CLA scores. Further tensions arose from the policy proposal to administer the CLA to students as an additional requirement on top of their studies. This was highly problematic for data integrity as there was no guarantee that students would take this seriously, even if its completion was mandated. Compulsory attendance was seen as “easy to subvert because you just go in there write your name on it and scribble all over everything and walk out” (NG6).

By 2013, tensions had abated to some extent following the disappearance of the CLA from policy discussions at the end of 2012. However, from the Australian Government’s point of view there were now no direct measures of learning standards identified in policy texts, a situation which was less than satisfactory:

I don’t think Government is going to move away from an interest in, and a focus on, performance of teaching and learning in universities. And I guess that’s to say that if we haven’t found an answer yet, I don’t think anyone’s going to say ‘well, you don’t have to now’. (AG1)

On this point, another senior Australian Government official recounted how “the Department actually argued with the folks on the reference group” (AG2) over the “need to demonstrate outcomes from the sector” (AG2). However, a non-Government participant raised the possibility that inter-departmental tensions within the Australian Government may have also contributed to the strong commitment to the CLA. They identified the political processes circulating within the Australian Government and the “requirement from places like the department of finance” (NG3) for quantifiable data to demonstrate that the funded policies of other Government departments were being effective and providing value for money. One participant summed up how this impasse
regarding the CLA had resulted in a significantly extended period of policy text production thus:

*There’s been two years of debate and discussion around that from the higher education community and there’s probably hardly been a single voice that was supporting that, yet it took two years of people saying ‘there is no theoretical, no conceptual, no practical basis for this recommendation. Why are we doing it?’ It took two years for that to actually quietly go away, and even then it hasn’t really gone away.* (NG4)

**Standardised testing.**

In addition to the problems that arose from the incorporation of the CLA into policy texts, there was a further dimension which revealed ideological tensions with respect to the adoption of standardised approaches more generally. These tensions were at the heart of a sustained opposition to the use of standardised measures in the texts of the Australian quality policy ensemble.

Standardised quantitative approaches were seen to have been introduced in order to provide comparable information on learning standards, a requirement established in the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008). Comparative scores of institutions’ learning standards had been identified as part of the information set to be reported in the Australian Government website titled *My University*. On this note, five participants gave examples of challenges that had been mounted based on their experiences of standardised testing in the school sector, as exemplified by one participant who remarked “*I think we’ve got enough experience from the school sector to see how that standardised testing can be used appallingly and damagingly*” (NG15).

Furthermore, challenges were mounted against standardised testing as it was seen to be in conflict with the aims of *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009), which had sought to maintain the diversity in the system. In this respect, the standardisation of quality policy measures in the domain of learning standards was seen as antithetical to diversity:

*What will happen is that they will reduce it to the lowest common denominator and in doing that, if you then focus the achievement of outcomes on the basis of an implemented national test, then you know you’re just going to take away the focus on what really matters within the individual disciplines. And that’s what concerns me about any kind of national testing process.* (NG14)
Theme 3: Consultation processes.

Ten participants raised a number of issues relating to the consultation processes adopted as part of the production of policy texts. Some saw the processes as open and consultative, but others challenged the extent to which this was really the case. There was a unanimous view expressed by participants that the *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009) policy was warmly received by the sector, but seven of the participants commented on the way tensions immediately arose as details of the proposed policy implementation unfolded in subsequent policy texts within the ensemble. This dimension was characterised as the ‘devil in the detail’, discussed later in this section.

There were a number of ‘spins’ that could be placed on the consultation processes undertaken as part of the development of policy texts. On the one hand, some argued that the Australian Government’s consultation processes were ‘healthy’, in that they were open and responsive, demonstrating a willingness to make changes following sector representation:

*I think the Australian Government has run a fairly open process in deciding its position on learning standards and quality assurance generally. It has identified issues that concerns it, published discussion papers and invited submissions. It has responded reasonably to concerns.* (NG1)

On the other hand, a more critical view was advanced by some to suggest that the Australian Government had produced discussion papers that were insufficiently thought through, and this lack of sophistication had precipitated a series of backlashes and subsequent policy reversals that were avoidable. The consequence of this had been to prolong the period of policy text production, to the extent that the Government’s policy position on learning standards was still unclear five years on from the release of *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009). One participant suggested that in part this was because from the outset, the Government simply “didn’t know what they didn’t know” (NG10).

Some of the reasons given for the lack of sophistication in policy texts that followed *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009) revolved around inadequate connections between the policy elite and leading
researchers in the domain of learning standards. Two participants took the view that researchers were unenthusiastic about becoming entangled in the ‘messiness’ of policy production whilst a third suggested that the “universities and the education community in particular have not been very good at communicating the value or worth of the ideas and insights they have for things like policy” (NG4). A fourth was of the view that this was more to do with the constitution of key influential groups, pointing out that if these leading researchers were not invited to contribute, “decisions about appropriate responses are going to be inadequate” (NG5).

Consultation processes adopted during the production of the policy ensemble included closed (i.e. invitation-only) ‘round table’ meetings, and these were combined with public opportunities to comment in response to discussion documents published on the Australian Government website. Two participants felt there was insufficient balance in the membership of the closed meetings, which were mainly attended by the institutions’ senior managers. One remarked on this issue thus: “There was a distinct absence of educational research as a voice. There were a lot of educational managers but not the research sort of voices” (NG4). In theory, there was an opportunity for anyone to respond to open discussion documents through processes of public consultation. In practice, the responses came mainly from institutions and groups of institutions, and relatively few independent submissions were made. Whilst this approach to policy text development was open, it was not necessarily inclusive:

However, the area is technical and specialised and making an informed and influential submission requires considerable knowledge, expertise and time. Furthermore, the implications of what is currently being considered and developed aren’t readily apparent to people without deep involvement in higher education policy. So while all interest groups have formally equal opportunity to contribute to this policy, that does not give them a fair opportunity to participate in policy discussion and formulation. (NG1)

The ‘devil in the detail’.

The vision set out in Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009) was seen to be a “compelling vision for higher education” (NG4) and the inclusion of discipline communities and peer review in policy texts was praised for its “sophisticated approach” (NG5). However, tensions immediately arose as soon as details of performance indicators and funding arrangements started to emerge in
subsequent parts of the policy ensemble. Seven participants remarked that consultation processes had become increasingly fraught as the ‘devil in the detail’ became apparent. Raising questions of open, inclusive participation outlined earlier, one participant suggested that “higher education institutions and staff have mostly supported the move to learning standards because the discussion has been mostly theoretical so far and because not many staff have been involved” (NG1). The issue of detail was further compounded by a certain amount of ‘slipperiness’ in the use of terms relating to learning standards in policy texts. As one participant pointed out:

I’ve read a paragraph and highlighted every time the word ‘standard’ appears, and found four different meanings – in one paragraph. But if you read it quickly, it all sounds good common sense. Everyone would agree with it. But it’s actually sliding around. (NG6)

Australian institutional level themes

The analysis of interview data from the six participants at the institutional level generated three themes in common with those that emerged from the national level. The institutional level comprised three public universities and three private providers. At this level of analysis the most significant theme concerned underpinning ideological tensions with the selection of performance indicators and of standardised approaches to testing. Two further themes relating to consultation processes and vested stakeholder interests also emerged.

Theme 1: Ideological tensions.

A majority (five) of the six participants identified ideological tensions that had characterised the production of the policy texts in the Australian quality policy ensemble. Three referred to tensions associated with the proposed performance indicators, whilst two made reference to tensions associated with standardised testing.

Proposed performance indicators.

Two participants from the private sector criticised the excessive reliance on quantitative performance indicators in policy texts. One participant described learning
standards as “*amorphous*” (PP2), arguing that any ‘measurement’ approach was never going to fully capture the nuances of learning. Another described quantifiable measures of learning as “*quick and dirty*” (PP3).

The reductive nature of quantitative performance indicators was also identified by a participant from a public university, who recognised that there was a “*whole pile of stuff missing in those numbers*” (U2). However, they also identified a need to improve accountability through the provision of data on quality, but were cautious about shifting the balance too far towards quantification. Although they saw limitations with the CLA, they felt the approach showed promise:

> I thought that was just the worst thing that could ever happen until I got to know the test more. Because I assumed it was some sort of multiple choice test which it isn’t. It is actually more robust and interesting. I think it could be possible to make that applicable to a broader cultural context and it could be usable in Australia. (U2)

**Standardised testing.**

Two participants commented on the appearance of standardised approaches to the testing of learning standards that had appeared in policy texts. One (a participant from a private provider) disagreed with this approach on principle as it potentially ‘narrowed’ the curriculum and produced a “*temptation for the institution to teach to the test*” (PP1). Another participant saw both advantages and disadvantages in standardised tests, expressing concerns similar to those outlined above. However, this participant also saw that these data would be attractive to government or accreditation bodies for comparison purposes:

> … an objective comparator, a set of data that is very easy to access for a government body or an accreditation body so the simplicity, the objectivity - they’re all very appealing elements of a standardised test like the CLA. And it’s a fantastic benchmarking opportunity. (U3)

**Theme 2: Consultation processes.**

Consultation processes undertaken as part of the policy text production process were remarked upon by three participants, two of whom were from the private sector. The issue of ‘selectivity’ and bias in consultation processes on the part of the Australian Government was raised by a university participant from the Australian Technology
Network, who expressed the view that “the [Australian] Government tends to ask a very small group of people. And they are the same predictable people. And I don’t think that’s healthy” (U2). This participant also identified that institutional leaders (rather than leading researchers) had been invited to formal meetings with the Australian Government. However, this issue was also present at an institutional level for this participant: “I found that in the University I was working in I really wasn’t party to the conversation, because it became something that [the] quality [department] got involved with” (U2).

Two contrasting perspectives were offered by the two participants from private providers. Whilst they knew of the consultation processes being undertaken as part of policy text production, one participant had maintained their distance from the process despite holding strong personal views on the subject matter. From their point of view, the ‘strings attached’ to performance funding had only ever been relevant to universities: “We don’t have to comply, don’t have to do anything, why should we be engaged with that?” (PP1). On the other hand, the second participant from the private provider sector had engaged deeply with the consultation processes although their feelings about it were mixed. On the positive side, the extended period of policy text production had allowed discussion, debate and clarification: “it’s taken longer than everybody expected ... which I think is good in a lot of ways” (PP3). On the negative side, the sheer volume of material produced had created an overload of information which had led to confusion: “I find that there are so many websites and communiqués to process and think about and map into one another that it’s overwhelming” (PP3). This participant also indicated that she felt frustration with the lack of momentum in the production (and finalisation) of policy texts within the ensemble.

**Theme 3: Vested stakeholder interests.**

Three of the six participants at the institutional level gave examples of how vested interests had featured in processes of policy text production, framed in dimensions similar to those appearing at the national level. These are outlined as follows.

**Institutional competition.**

One participant identified the “pushback” (U2) from universities and from the Group of Eight (Go8) research-intensive universities in particular. On this theme, a participant
from a Go8 university suggested that it would be “less in the interests of the Go8 universities than others to be going down this pathway” (U1). The vested and competitive interests of these elite universities were characteristically associated with considerable power, to the extent that they had, in places, even manipulated processes of policy text production.

The issue of ‘gaming’ during the policy text production process was raised by one participant, who saw their university calculate the financial implications of various policy positions with a view to promoting policy directions that would be advantageous to the institution. This participant was “horrified that we were kind of more self-interested than actually getting to what I would call core values in teaching and learning” (U2).

Ownership and control.

The processes of policy text production had generated some texts that were focused on general principles whilst others were more specific. Some of the proposed indicators (such as the CLA which was to report the quality of learning standards) had been clearly outlined in earlier policy texts within the ensemble, albeit disputed. However, by 2013 these indicators had been abandoned, and the Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2013) was seen by one participant as neither clear nor explicit, given that there were no objective measures of learning standards anywhere in the policy text. This situation had prompted this participant to create a response to the draft arguing for more specificity, but this stance was dropped following a discussion at a more senior level, as the institution’s leaders felt that closer specification might precipitate a loss of control. They explained:

And so my first draft response to the latest learning and teaching standards was ‘give us a rubric’ – and then we had some conversation around it and we pulled that, because there is the fear then that in some ways you want it to stay fairly general, right? Because then you can interpret it how you want, and you can provide your own indicator. (PP3)

More broadly, this participant saw that quality indicators of learning standards proposed in the policy ensemble were potentially owned by those with a vested
interest in the employment and economic outcomes of higher education, specifically the Australian Government and employers.

Selected perspectives from beyond Australia

The 10 international participants included UK and US elite policy actors and a former senior official within the OECD (refer to Chapter 5, ‘Sampling’). Each of these international participants identified that the production of quality policy texts relating to learning standards was, in general, seen as a complex process. They identified a number of vested stakeholder interests associated with a greater focus on learning standards in quality policy. There were also strong ideological tensions regarding the ‘measurement’ of standards, which created further complications. Consultation processes occurring as part of relevant policy text production in these international settings were contested and occasionally fraught.

Theme 1: Vested stakeholder interests.

Eight (of 10) international participants identified ways in which vested interests had an impact on policy text production. The majority of these concerned struggles over ownership and control in policy texts. The effect of institutional competition was also raised as a dimension to this theme, albeit by fewer (two) participants. The vested interests behind the problem of employer disinterest were identified by one participant.

Ownership and control.

Eight international participants described how elite policy actors sought to achieve particular outcomes through policy texts. However, the policy positions taken by elite actors were not necessarily in alignment with the views of the higher education sector, and a number of examples were given to illustrate the extent to which this caused conflict. One participant observed that “the education community often is opposed to public or transparent reporting of performance ... but the rest of the community often wants these things” (OECD1). In this respect, one participant spoke of the “huge political infighting both within the higher education establishment, and between the higher education establishment and the [British] Government” (UK2) that characterised quality policy development in the UK.
For one former member of the UK policy elite, government policy text production commonly revolved around issues of measurement and control, an approach to which they were strongly opposed: “That’s what’s really behind it for some people. They actually think that if you could actually measure and determine what students should learn, you can reward those institutions, faculties, academics who provide that and penalise those who don’t” (UK1). This was echoed by another UK participant who suggested that the British Government’s intention was to “own and control, because they believe they can create certain outcomes, mainly socioeconomic outcomes. If only they had their hands on all the levers, they could create the outcomes they wished” (UK2). However, the British Government was at the same time resisting pressure from the OECD Tertiary Education Panel, a group that was “making autonomy work, freeing up the universities just at that time many countries were trying to control and direct higher education” (UK2).

Control was also seen to be achieved through the definition and application of learning standards. Higher education is associated with a certain amount of academic autonomy, and close prescription of what academics teach was not seen as possible, given the general absence of a national curriculum in higher education. Nevertheless, the former senior official within the OECD suggested that “you might be able to influence it [the curriculum] by talking about standards” (OECD1). However, this participant also suggested that to be effective, learning standards would need to be defined at a disciplinary or field of study level, given that “standards don’t make sense in a general way at University” (OECD1).

Examples of indirect control were also described by participants from the US. For example, one participant described how the “accrediting system in this country is in part what stopped a ‘No Child Left Behind’ effort being implemented [in higher education]” (US4). Another remarked that the US Federal Government had established a national advisory committee, charged with regulating the activities of the accrediting bodies themselves. The genesis of this national committee served to increase the US Federal Government’s indirect control of institutions by requiring accreditors to include specific aspects in their accreditation standards, which were then applied widely to colleges and universities.
Control was also firmly linked to funding by four participants. Two participants from the UK remarked on the recent introduction of new contract arrangements, which served to provide the British Government with greater indirect control than had previously been the case. One saw this packaged as a deregulation agenda to free up universities: “some clever person thought that we’d like to convey the impression that we’re cutting down on bureaucracy” (UK1). However, another believed that universities had simply acquiesced to the funding conditions:

> If the universities think money is at stake they probably won’t fight back because they have been extraordinarily stupid and they will do anything, anything for money. You know, values? Straight out of the window. Give us an extra million and we’re yours. And I think it has been utterly shameful. (UK2)

Power and control was also seen to be leveraged through the establishment of a connection between institutional quality and learning standards in policy texts. The connection between graduation rates (the percentage of those enrolled who graduate) and quality was particularly troublesome according to these international participants. They saw the nature of this connection between learning standards and assessment practices to be highly problematic for two reasons. First, graduation rates are, to an extent, determined by academics, leading to questions of soft marking and/or grade inflation. Second, participants also pointed out that students who fail to complete their studies do so for a wide variety of reasons, many of which lie outside of the sphere of influence of the institution. This connection again raised issues of indirect control through processes of institutional comparison. Furthermore, student achievement data could conceivably be used to review teaching staff performance, something that was starting to happen in the US: “A higher education institution in Chicago is doing this. ... I would have thought that it was unthinkable that my job would be reviewed in whole or in part on the basis of scores that my students got on some test” (US4).

**Institutional competition.**

Vested interests in terms of institutional competition were raised by two international participants. One participant from the UK noted the debates that had arisen over the choice of performance indicators with “places like East London arguing for the value-added measure as a more valid measure than just output measures or input measures” (UK3) as this was more to their advantage. In this vein a participant from the US
expressed concern that the value-added methodology of the CLA “was not designed to be used in the US as a high stakes test” (US3), pointing out that the Council for Aid to Education (the providers of the CLA) had never published institutional rankings.

**Employer disinterest.**

Employers’ dissatisfaction with graduates was identified as a policy influence (refer to Chapter 6). However, one former member of the UK policy elite argued strongly that although employers were vocal on the subject of graduate shortcomings, in their view there was a marked employer disinterest in terms of their participation in policy text production. They described how a number of formal policy consultations had taken place in the UK regarding a proposed abolition of the honours degree classification system in favour of a more comprehensive approach to describing learning standards. If implemented, this would have provided employers with more detailed information to help guide selection processes in recruitment. However, the existing degree classification scheme served as a “wonderful rationing device” (UK1), allowing them to rapidly sift applicants: “we’ll only take students from Russell Group universities and we’ll only take people with 2:1’s [upper second class honours degrees]” (UK1).

**Theme 2: Ideological tensions.**

Seven (of 10) international participants described how they saw differing ideological beliefs embedded in policy text production. There were two tensions at play here. The first concerned the fundamental question of whether it was possible to measure learning at all in any meaningful way. The second tension concerned conceptual and methodological disagreements in the way learning could be appraised through the use of performance indicators. Both of these ideological tensions are discussed below.

A participant from the US argued for standardised measures of learning, taking the view that the “major academic outcome of higher education is learning – shouldn’t we be measuring learning directly?” (US2). Conversely, a former member of the policy elite in the UK saw learning standards as very difficult to quantify in any meaningful form given their transient nature: “the standard of student achievement is only really fixed in relation to individual students, in relation to a particular piece of work at a particular point in time. And to my mind that’s the ultimate wisdom in this area” (UK1). These differing positions demonstrate the plurality of views expressed by participants.
The indicators used to demonstrate learning standards were seen as highly problematic at both a conceptual and a practical level. One UK participant pointed to the “value laden activity” (UK3) of deciding which indicator would be used in policy texts, highlighting the problem of vested stakeholder interests discussed earlier. Another UK participant suggested that if it was possible to define common learning standards then it would be beneficial to have “a common set of measures across the whole sector” (UK4). A former member of the UK policy elite saw the difficulties of establishing standards across their national context, raising serious doubts about whether such attempts could be scaled up to the international level proposed by the OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes project:

*I think it’s difficult enough to develop shared understandings of standards, even within a single national context within a particular disciplinary area. I think to try and do it at an international level is nonsense on stilts. ... I just don’t think it’s worth doing quite honestly.* (UK1)

Four participants from the US illustrated examples of ideological tensions in the selection of performance indicators in policy text production. Here, the CLA (a standardised test instrument used to assess generic learning standards) had been specifically identified as a viable instrument for gathering data on the effectiveness of institutions in *A Test of Leadership* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The production of this policy position paper was associated with a strong backlash from the academic community. Whilst some participants praised the concept of the CLA, others saw the items contained within the assessment as artificial. One participant cited the example of a task which required students to justify the purchase of a light aircraft:

*So one question would be whether this is actually a common experience and the second question would be whether or not, if you were going to buy a plane, you would make that argument in the 45 or the 25 minutes whatever it is you are given to write the essay. And a third question would be whether you would do it with paper and pencil. A fourth question would be whether or not you would want to access other kinds of resources. I mean, I could go on and on.* (US4)

The use of the CLA as an institutional quality performance indicator was subject to strong criticism. The complex methodology used to compute value-added scores was
singled out for critique, especially as it led to the provision of diagnostic information that lacked nuance:

> It’s a very difficult scoring methodology to understand and all you really get back is whether or not you are about the same as everybody else, significantly above, or significantly below. That is not a lot of information on which to make a decision. (US5)

A further problem lay in the lack of integration of the CLA into the curriculum in the US. It was generally delivered as a stand-alone three hour test for students, who did not get any feedback on their performance. This meant that there was very little incentive for students to complete the task and some institutions had resorted to paying students to take the test. One participant questioned the quality of the data that would arise from this situation: “So at my institution we pay them $75 to come and give you what just simply can’t be their best effort. I mean why would you care? You get your $75 either way” (US4). Whilst one participant accepted that there were shortcomings in the CLA, and in the use of performance indicators used to appraise learning standards more broadly, they advanced the argument that this “does not mean that we should have no instrument. Our response should be well how do we improve? How do we find the right collection of instruments?” (US3).

**Theme 3: Consultation processes.**

For seven (of 10) international participants, the production of policy texts was characterised by multiple difficulties encountered in consultation processes. The issue of *pre-determined outcomes* was raised by seven participants from both the UK and the US, with the latter tending to single out consultation processes undertaken by the Spellings Commission (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) as an example of this problem in policy text production. Finally, consultation processes regarding broad principles were less likely to be contested, but such generalities skirted around the issue of the ‘devil in the detail’.

**Pre-determined outcomes.**

Some of the frustrations with consultation processes revolved around the extent to which the outcomes of policy proposals were seen to be pre-determined. This issue, combined with a sense that government departments were not always sufficiently
adept with the nuances of the matters under discussion led one UK participant to sum up this state of affairs thus: “They didn’t really understand really very much about it but they knew what they wanted” (UK1).

The issue of pre-determination was also present for participants from the US. One participant described consultation processes as part of the Spellings Commission as “scripted” (US5) whilst another suggested that the consultation process was “rigged from the beginning” (US4). In explanation, they pointed out that the Spellings Commission steering group had comprised a substantial number of business leaders, with no students and selective representation from higher education: “My perception is that they knew what they were going to say before they said it and so you just basically appointed a group of people who would come to terms [i.e. agree with the agenda]” (US4).

A more subtle way of pre-determining a particular outcome was to ensure that consultation processes were selectively framed. Selectively framing the points for discussion served to focus attention on a particular policy issue, without creating space to discuss the rationale for the approach which was presented as a ‘given’. An example of this more subtle approach was advanced by a participant from the US who criticised the Spellings Commission for “asking for evidence ... without actually providing evidence themselves that this was needed” (US4). By framing the consultation process in a particular way, the net effect was to diminish any opportunity to discuss the rationale behind a particular policy initiative. Consultation processes were consistently described by these participants as ‘open’ and ‘participatory’. However, they were also viewed as tokenistic gestures as participants’ ability to direct matters was marginal or non-existent, even though such conversations were ostensibly open and collaborative:

*I think the conversations are fine, Obama’s Department of Education invited another group in to the White House, last year I think it was, and again I think it’s fine. I don’t see that we are exerting any influence. I don’t see that there’s any change here whatsoever.* (US4)

On the other hand, there were also occasional tendencies for consultation processes to try and ‘broker a deal’ that satisfied as many stakeholders as possible, an approach that was seen as desirable in principle. In reality, however, this potentially led to the production of complicated and incoherent policy ‘solutions’. In the US, the outcome of
the consultation processes undertaken as part of the Spellings Commission had been subject to critique of this nature: “we call it a Christmas tree, you know there is an ornament for everybody, and so it wasn’t a very coherent thing” (US5). A similar problem was raised by a participant in the UK:

What we’ve ended up with in the new institutional review method in the QAA [UK Quality Assurance Agency] just looks like something that is trying to address all of the things that people get hysterical about from time to time – it just seems to be too complicated. (UK3)

The ‘devil in the detail’.

The former senior official within the OECD suggested that agreement was more likely to be reached where consultation revolved around broad principles, as discussions that involved high level principles were less likely to reveal the ‘devil in the detail’. To illustrate, this participant recounted an occasion in Australia where a major agreement was reached across a diverse group of federal and state ministers in the schooling sector, relating this issue to the specificity of learning standards in higher education:

I saw John Dawkins, the federal minister at the time and he said we had a historic day yesterday. We had ministers around the table … agree on these common goals for Australian students. Well. Really, the question is did we find a striking level of consensus about some things that were important, or did we do it at a level of generality that nobody could dissent from? Now standards won’t have value unless we get down to a level where they are clear and specific enough to influence what people do. (OECD1)

Summary of interview data - policy text production

The analysis of the interview data revealed a number of themes relating to policy texts and their production (research question 2). These themes and, where appropriate, the dimensions (sub-themes) that arose from interviews were summarised in Table 7.2 at the start of this chapter. In short, participants within Australia and beyond (i.e. UK, US, and OECD) all identified that the production of quality policy in the domain of learning standards was a complex and heavily contested process. One particularly powerful factor that contributed to this situation included the presence of vested stakeholder interests, with some seeking a greater focus on learning standards in order to ‘level the playing field’ that they perceived to be biased towards elite institutions. On the other
hand, elite institutions sought to avoid yielding their long-standing position of status. Processes of policy text production had, in the eyes of some participants, also been driven by the vested interests of commercial and not-for-profit organisations that were offering tests of learning standards and technical advice to governments.

The issue of ownership and control emerged as an important dimension: in essence, the group who ‘owned’ the process for developing learning standards would also control how quality would be defined, measured and reported. The higher education sector was generally reluctant to cede any aspect of ownership to government, as they would thereby lose an element of control. On the other hand, governments were keen to establish measures of learning standards that were independent of institutions.

Ideological tensions were also present. Here policy text production had been impacted by strong disagreements about fundamental principles regarding the appraisal of learning standards. Performance indicators proposed in Australia and other settings (notably the US) had been heavily challenged as being inadequate and narrow measures of learning. At one end of a spectrum of views, some participants argued that learning standards were impossible to define or measure, whilst at the other end a number of participants argued for standardised testing. However, this spectrum did not clearly distinguish Government from non-Government participants, in that some of the participants from the Australian Government expressed reservations about standardised testing whilst a small number of academics in higher education institutions were in favour of it.

Consultation processes were often described as ‘fraught’ across all settings in this study, with arguments abounding with respect to the appropriate balance of members in formally constituted groups. A persistent view was that the voices of the academic community were marginalised, but others argued that leading education researchers were quick to avoid getting embroiled in the messiness of policy production. Consultation documents that outlined overarching principles for quality and learning standards were usually well received, but these tended to articulate matters at a high level of abstraction. However, tensions immediately arose when specific details started to emerge, as the ‘devil in the detail’ had now become apparent.
Chapter 8: Findings (3) - policy practices/effects

Introduction

What are the emergent and predicted practices/effects of quality policies relating to learning standards in Australian higher education?

This chapter, the third of the four chapters that present the findings of this research, addresses the third research question, identified above. In the Australian setting, policy processes were examined using the policy trajectory approach described in Chapters 4 and 5. Here, the focus was on policy practices/effects associated with the release of Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009) and subsequent evolutions of policy texts through to 2013 (see Table 5.1).

This study also sought to identify and compare quality policy practices/effects in settings beyond Australia. This included the UK and the US, where ‘quality policy’ was taken to mean those quality policies relating to learning standards within the participants’ national settings. Practices/effects emerging from quality policies relating to learning standards were explored in broad terms (i.e. not in relation to any specific national policy) with a former senior official within the OECD.

Seven themes relating to policy practices/effects were identified. These themes were:

- Defensive manoeuvring
- Comparison and competition
- Threshold minimum standards
- Increased bureaucratisation
- Improved sector awareness (Australian national level only)
- Improved assessment tasks (participants from beyond Australia only)

These themes and, where appropriate, their dimensions (sub-themes) are summarised in Table 8.1. Each is discussed in the following sections, dealing with the Australian setting first. This is followed by an examination of the themes identified in the perspectives of participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD).
Table 8.1 Summary of themes relating to policy practices/effects

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<th>Australian policy trajectory study</th>
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<th>Selected perspectives beyond Australia</th>
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<td><strong>National level</strong>&lt;br&gt;19 participants</td>
<td><strong>Institutional level</strong>&lt;br&gt;6 participants</td>
<td><strong>UK, US, and OECD</strong>&lt;br&gt;10 participants</td>
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<td>1. Increased bureaucratisation (11)</td>
<td>1. Defensive manoeuvring (5)</td>
<td>1. Defensive manoeuvring (8)</td>
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<td>a. Burgeoning documentation (6)</td>
<td>a. Discipline standards (3)</td>
<td>2. Comparison and competition (7)</td>
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<td>b. Institutional workload (6)</td>
<td>b. Moderation projects (3)</td>
<td>3. Threshold minimum standards (7)</td>
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<td>c. Expansion of quality portfolios (3)</td>
<td>2. Increased bureaucratisation (4)</td>
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<td>a. Discipline standards (6)</td>
<td>b. Expansion of quality portfolios (1)</td>
<td>5. Improved assessment tasks (3)</td>
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<td>5. Improved sector awareness (5)</td>
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Note 1: Selected perspectives from beyond Australia are shown separately. This is because these are not part of the Australian policy trajectory study, and because they do not constitute policy trajectory studies in their own right (refer to Chapter 5, ‘Research questions’).

Note 2: Themes are labelled using bold text; dimensions (sub-themes) are in italic text. The number of participants identifying each theme/dimension is shown in brackets. Theme totals are not derived by summing the numbers of participants in each dimension, because some participants may have identified more than one dimension within a theme.

**Australian national level themes**

The 19 national level participants (drawn from Australian Government and non-Government groups) identified a number of policy practices/effects associated with evolving quality policy relating to learning standards in the Australian setting. For national level participants, the issue of **increased bureaucratisation** was the most commonly cited theme. Participants also identified various ways that the sector had engaged in **defensive manoeuvring** to mitigate the effect of policies and gain some control over the direction taken. The theme of **comparison and competition** related to
the effects of policy proposals that sought to publish comparative measures. The focus on **threshold minimum standards** brought to the surface a number of tensions with regard to the drawing of a dividing line between the students who graduate and those who do not. A smaller number of participants suggested that one effect of the policy texts had resulted in **improved sector awareness** with respect to learning standards.

**Theme 1: Increased bureaucratisation.**

The theme of increased bureaucratisation was most commonly cited (by 11 of 19 national level participants), and three dimensions (sub-themes) were identified within this theme. These were the dimensions of: **burgeoning documentation**; **increased institutional workload**; and the **expansion of quality portfolios** within institutions.

**Burgeoning documentation.**

Six participants identified aspects that related to the problem of burgeoning documentation. One participant expressed concern that policy foci on learning standards and specific outcomes would mean that “you spend your whole time just providing the evidence for that particular achievement and not for many other things that need to be carried out” (NG14). Another suggested that the curriculum maps and tools would need to become more sophisticated in order to be able to claim that learning standards were covered in the various assessments throughout the program: “curriculum tools are very primitive and they are awful things like Word files and XLS [Microsoft Excel] files” (NG12). On this note, one participant pointed to the “extraordinary complexity” (NG15) of one institution’s attempt to develop an online database of institutional standards for quality assurance purposes.

However, with respect to the publication of quality documentation at the institutional level, one participant suggested that people did not generally use this information to any great extent when making their choice of university. In fact, this participant saw even less application for the Australian Government’s fledgling **My University** website, which was seen to be more difficult to navigate and less transparent than the existing **Australian Good Universities Guide**: “it’s not as transparent. It’s a difficult bloody site to work your way around. It’s very difficult to make comparisons between institutions. You’d have to be very, very persistent” (NG2).
Diverse viewpoints on increasing bureaucratisation were offered by two participants. One pointed to the “strong commitment” (NG10) on the part of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) to use existing data sources wherever possible, in order to avoid being overly bureaucratic. However, another saw no end to the burgeoning of documentation: “I think it’s going to go towards more and more specification, more and more conditions, finer detail, and probably more surveillance” (NG6).

**Institutional workload.**

The issue of increased workload arising from a focus on learning standards in quality policy was raised by six national level participants. Two participants raised questions of value for money if fine-grained tests of learning standards were to be employed, with one suggesting that it would be “very expensive, very time consuming” (NG3), pointing out that “there’s a cost benefit issue here which I think is already there in most issues around the measurement of quality” (NG3). Another remarked on the issue thus: “I think it will generate huge amounts of work, huge amounts of income for the people that do that work. The impact on student learning? A huge question mark” (NG4).

However, another participant saw a positive policy effect emanating from a closer focus on learning standards, arguing that the attention paid to generic skills could prompt activity on the part of universities to improve matters through focused work. Taking the example of teamwork, they suggested that this might be developed by specialists in that field:

> And I’m coming around to the point of thinking the university needs to start hiring people who can fill some of the other gaps. Take teamwork, we don’t necessarily need one in every school, but somebody operating across the college who could come in and provide that kind of really sharp capability around what it means to work effectively with other people, negotiate conflict, all those things. (NG12)

**Expansion of quality portfolios.**

Three participants commented on the way quality portfolios (i.e. areas of an institution devoted to quality matters) had expanded in the period following the release of *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009). On
this point one participant working in a central role in quality enhancement/assurance stated that their own position had expanded considerably: “when I started this position it was a day a week maybe, not paid, an add-on, and now it’s a full-time job” (NG10). Another remarked on the way institutions were “adding a whole new layer of administration which is incredibly expensive at a time of diminishing resources” (NG15).

Two potential scenarios were advanced by one participant who suggested that emergent policy effects could play out in either direction: “It will either spawn an industry of measurement or it will be an excuse for universities in the academic community to really look at what they are doing in terms of teaching and learning, and linking that to assessment” (NG4). Another participant suggested that institutions would end up employing “dozens of assessment specialists” (NG7) in future, pointing to the example of how student survey departments had grown in response to previous Australian Government policies that focused on the student experience.

**Theme 2: Defensive manoeuvring.**

Ten of the 19 national level participants made reference to the defensive manoeuvring that had emerged in response to (or anticipation of) a greater focus on learning standards signalled in the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008), details of which then appeared in subsequent policy texts. Within this theme, defensive practices were grouped within two dimensions. The first described the formation of **discipline standards** through the work of the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards (LTAS) project, funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (2010). The second dimension grouped together the various attempts to verify or otherwise confirm standards across institutions through **moderation projects**. Each dimension is addressed in turn.

**Discipline standards.**

Six participants commented on the relationship between policy texts and the discipline standards work in the LTAS project. For example, one participant saw the LTAS project being triggered by “all this [policy] work on standards” (NG12).
Another took a similar view, suggesting that there was an early recognition of the developing policy position:

*It was the vision I suppose of the ALTC [Australian Learning and Teaching Council] team and particularly Christine Ewan who realised that we, as a sector, needed a proactive response to the Bradley review; that standards were coming, and if we didn’t take some initiative in thinking about what learning standards should and ought to look like, these would be imposed upon us.* (NG13)

A number of policy effects emerged in the context of the LTAS project through the work of the Discipline Scholars, who were senior academics charged with leading the development of threshold learning outcomes (standards) in their field. Participants spoke of the many positive effects of the project. The work was seen to have brought disciplinary communities together, and triggered discussion and debate about how such standards could be assured. The documents produced had proved to have a practical application, as they were starting to be “*used to organise degrees and teaching*” (NG11). Furthermore, the coordination approach adopted by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council had fostered cross-disciplinary connections, facilitating the sharing of good practice across different fields of study.

However, despite the enthusiasm and ‘buy-in’ for the project, the LTAS work was seen by one participant as only weakly orientated towards the intended purposes of improving accountability. In their words, the standards were “*a pretty flexible tool to inform collegial discussion and review, rather than a mechanism by which we ended up with some kind of empirical reviews of standards or progress*” (NG11). This sentiment was echoed by other participants, one of whom remarked:

*So we got buy-in, but not formal buy-in. Nobody wanted to be held to them. People were quite happy to say ‘we think this is good’ and they were much less happy to say ‘and you will hold me accountable’.* (NG9)

In short, their enthusiasm for developing a tool to improve learning standards was quenched, or at least tempered, by concerns over the way the tool might be used as a lever of power.
Other similar concerns were raised regarding the legal status of the standards. One Australian Government participant expressed the view that the “focus on codification and the learning standards is not a good thing because they’re going to be overtaken as quickly as they’re developed” (AG4). Another participant saw wisdom in the decision not to place the LTAS project standards into legislation: “The standards panel eventually formed the view, expressed not formally but by a couple of members in fora, that you would not wish to put learning outcomes in a legislative instrument. And I think that’s actually very wise” (NG10).

The final issue within this dimension related to the nature of the evidence that would be required to demonstrate that the LTAS disciplinary learning standards had been met. One participant suggested that this remained unclear: “What sort of evidence we will be required to produce? I don’t think anybody’s got there yet let alone [the] Higher Education Standards Panel, brave though they are” (NG13). Another participant pointed to the broad nature of the threshold learning outcomes (TLOs) developed, suggesting that: “they can say that they have delivered teaching on all the TLOs, they can say that they’ve assessed all the TLOs, but they can’t say that students have achieved the TLOs” (NG9). In their eyes the LTAS project’s outcomes had not, as yet, provided a functional mechanism for assuring students’ achievement of learning standards.

**Moderation projects.**

Five participants commented on the various moderation projects that had emerged in response to the policy focus on learning standards. These moderation projects sought to verify learning standards through the external comparison of student work. Such projects of external validation had, as one Australian Government participant put it, been “taken up quite enthusiastically across the sector” (AG1). However, as one former Vice-Chancellor recounted, drawing on a different meaning of the word ‘moderation’, this enthusiasm had stemmed more from a vested interest in finding “a way of moderating what was going to come” (NG2).

The idea of “external moderation by well-qualified peers” (NG2) was seen to provide evidence that learning standards were being upheld. However, two participants questioned the approach taken in the Quality Verification System developed by the
research-intensive Group of Eight universities. One participant criticised the lack of rigour in the “blind-ish marking exercises” (NG11), suggesting that this was a “big step backwards” (NG11). Another participant picked up this issue more forcefully, arguing that the approach was superficial:

You know who your reviewer is and the reviewer knows who you are. So if you’re at Melbourne University, and ANU [Australian National University] is looking at your data, your mate John is looking at your data and you see John all the time. John gets 25 distinction papers, 25 high-D’s [high distinctions], 25 passes, 25 credits. Is John really going to go through and rigorously go through that or is John going to go [scribbles in the air]. ‘Verify’. And I’ll find a couple of nuances. Of course that’s all John is going to do. (NG5)

A number of practical difficulties associated with external moderation were raised by one participant. This participant had worked closely with people involved in another moderation project, reporting that the majority felt that “the exercise had almost no value because the material they sent was either incomplete or they were comparing apples and oranges” (NG15). This pointed to administrative issues and the more vexed question of how different pieces of student work could be judged using another institution’s standards.

**Theme 3: Comparison and competition.**

The theme of comparison and competition was raised by six of the 19 participants at the national level, four of whom remarked on the strong probability that institutional ranking tables would quickly follow the publication of proposed performance indicators. These tables were seen as highly significant: one participant spoke of the high stakes and intensely competitive pressure to be ranked highly because institutions were “desperate to be recognised as world class” (NG13). In this vein, another participant suggested that the emergence of ranking systems would place a healthy pressure on underperforming institutions:

If a large number of your courses are pretty bad, then perhaps potential students and employers need to know that. And perhaps you do need to suffer as a result of it. I’m fairly hard-nosed about this. If a university is shit then it should be closed down, really. That would be my view. We feel quite comfortable saying that about private providers. (NG3)
However, other participants saw dangers associated with such competitive pressures. For example, one participant predicted that the policy effect of this competition would be to cut funding from poorer institutions: “I think what’s going to happen, particularly if they are rewarded, is that the good universities will get more resources and the poor universities will get less. I’m sure that’s an unintended consequence” (NG12).

The issue of competitive ‘gaming’ was raised by two participants. One pointed to the existence of “big players and smaller players” (NG9), suggesting that the more powerful players would rapidly move to discredit any system that weakened their position. Another participant saw that there would inevitably be winners and losers in any kind of ranking system, which would “do injustice to some organisations unless they do game. I think it’s natural to expect them to game. And game for all they are worth” (NG6). However, with respect to the OECD’s international Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project, one participant suggested that the rankings produced would, in all likelihood, have little influence on international student recruitment:

*Even if AHELO got implemented I still don’t think at the moment that prospective international students are going to look at some AHELO report and say ‘I’m going to do engineering in Kazakhstan or somewhere because it’s got the highest scores’. I don’t think it works that way.* (NG8)

Finally, one participant spoke of ideas of ‘co-opetition’, suggesting that the sector as a whole would be more competitive if it worked cooperatively: “if, in fact, we shared our expertise we could all save each other a huge amount of cost” (NG12).

**Theme 4: Threshold minimum standards.**

Six (of 19) participants explained how the policy focus on learning standards had proven to be problematic in terms of the conception, description and application of threshold minimum standards.

One participant welcomed the focus on minimum standards, which they saw as an “opportunity to say, nationally Australian higher education is fantastic. We know the minimum standard is delivered anywhere you go. Anywhere you go, you will have the same excellent minimum standard” (NG10).
However, a countering view was offered by another participant, who saw threshold minimum standards as being far from a description of excellence:

*The definition of a pass was all of those students who basically enrolled and continued but at the end really couldn’t do much ... and I said to the guys in charge of this particular programme, I said ‘if you let a journalist have that, they’d have a field day’. (NG6)*

On this point, two participants remarked on the difficulties of describing learning standards at a threshold level, both taking the view that it was very difficult to establish a sharp dividing line between pass and fail. Definitions of failure were seen to be reasonably straightforward in terms of negatives: “*often people could write down what fail looks like, ah they [students] won’t have done this, they won’t have done that*” (NG12). However, robust descriptions of the student performance characteristics that would constitute a ‘narrow pass’ were seen to be far more elusive.

According to one participant, institutions would (and should) be differentiated in terms of their pass rates if threshold learning standards were adopted universally and applied reliably. Put another way, if threshold standards were definable, and these standards were applied across the sector, then some institutions would be expected to graduate more students than others. The idea that threshold learning standards might be achievable by “*35% of one University, 50% of another*” (NG13) was seen to be an indication that cross-sector minimum standards were working effectively.

However, another participant suggested that even if learning standards were definable and usable in this way, there were other institutional pressures that would mitigate the number of students the institution was willing to fail: “*I’ve had lecturers tell me that they are prevented from applying the standards which they, in their heart of hearts believe in, because they’d have too high an attrition rate*” (NG6).

**Theme 5: Improved sector awareness.**

Five participants described ways in which the sector awareness of learning standards had improved as a consequence of the various iterations of policy texts that had sought to grasp a measure of these standards. One participant felt that the attention to learning standards had “*contributed to a developing sophistication of understanding amongst the university sector of the nature of learning and teaching*” (NG10).
Another remarked that the policy interest in learning standards had prompted them to work towards a clearer definition of what it meant to be a graduate in that discipline, which could then “be used broadly to make it clear to prospective students, parents, employers and the like what the discipline was about” (NG11). For this participant, the focus on standards had helped to crystallise the essential dimensions of the discipline.

Improved sector awareness with respect to learning standards was also seen to have been advanced through the collaborative work of the LTAS project. One saw that the greatest value of this project had been “all the conversations we had with people” (NG12). The collegial approach of the LTAS project was seen to be particularly effective, as this had located power and agency with academics in the disciplines. One participant commented thus:

“You can sit down and write some science outcomes in an afternoon. But that wasn’t the important bit. The important bit was the consultation and making people feel that they were part of it rather than something imposed upon them.” (NG13)

**Australian institutional level themes**

The analysis of interview data from the six participants at the institutional level generated five themes in common with those that emerged at the national level. The institutional level comprised participants from three public universities and three private providers. At this level of analysis the most significant theme concerned the defensive manoeuvring taken by institutions in response to (or anticipation of) policy texts, cited by five participants. The themes of increased bureaucratisation and threshold minimum standards were cited by four participants in each case. The theme of comparison and competition was also present.

**Theme 1: Defensive manoeuvring.**

The issue of defensive manoeuvring was identified by five of the six participants at this level. This was categorised in terms of the two dimensions (sub-themes) of discipline standards and moderation projects.
Discipline standards.

Three participants described the work of the LTAS project, one of whom praised the project for having “guts ... because it was discipline based and everything was on the table ... there was real genuine debate” (PP1), suggesting that these consultation processes were seen to be more than mere lip service. Another remarked that it was a “cohesive force, and that put the focus more on process than outcomes, and there was collaboration and conversation and networking and all of that, and I think that’s had a beautiful spin-off” (PP3). However, this focus on process over outcomes remained problematic, and on this point one participant identified the difficulty of using the LTAS project’s standards to measure learning: “if you look at the standards and you read them and interpret them, you go ‘how do I measure that’?” (PP1).

The difficulty in aligning the LTAS work to regulatory processes was highlighted by two other participants. One spoke of the “confusion as to how that [the LTAS project] actually interplayed with TEQSA [Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency] standards” (PP2), whilst another remarked that “there’s a bit better mapping going on but I don’t feel assured that there is a clear pathway of how that’s going to be used to inform TEQSA” (PP3). In this sense, the anticipatory action taken by the LTAS project in the domain of learning standards had not yet achieved sufficient ‘reach’ into the thornier problem of how students would be ‘measured’ in practice.

Moderation projects.

Three participants spoke of the moderation projects that had emerged in response to a greater focus on learning standards. One participant described how they had, from an early stage, sought to establish processes of academic peer review across institutions to provide evidence that alternatives to standardised testing were viable:

And we initiated off our own bat and in collaboration with a range of other universities, a sort of ground swell of interest in looking at the benefit of academic peer review of learning outcomes or learning standards, as an alternative to a focus on competency-based tests and something like the GSA [Graduate Skills Assessment] or the CLA [Collegiate Learning Assessment]. So to that extent I was involved in trying to mount evidence that we could then use as the basis for discussion with people in DEEWR [Australian Government Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations], then DIISRTE [Australian Government Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education]. (U3)
However, this participant also recognised that the “accountability and transparency and the perception of objectivity” (U3) was paramount if processes of peer review were to be successful, speaking of the “raised eyebrows, when within consortia of universities there’s 99 or 100% agreement on academic standards or grades” (U3). This signalled a certain lack of trust in the rigour of some cross-institutional moderation practices.

One participant from a private provider picked up the issue of selectivity in moderation projects. This participant was aware of moderation projects which they were “desperate to be part of” (PP1) but these projects had not extended to embrace private providers. The consequence of this was to segregate the public and private parts of the higher education sector:

*We’re doing our own thing in the private sector. So we talk private to private, and we develop our own external benchmarking and moderation within our sector. But it’s a shame that we can’t engage, you know, at those levels.* (PP1)

This segregation was a potentially serious limitation in two ways. First, separating private and public parts of the sector would have the effect of making it difficult to establish truly cross-institutional learning standards. Second, there was a lack of confidence in processes that did not cross sector group boundaries: “*if the Go8s [Group of Eight research-intensive institutions] are talking to the Go8s, is that really an external moderation exercise? I don’t think there’s a lot of independence and transparency in those sorts of processes sometimes*” (PP1).

The third participant to remark on this issue went further, casting doubt on whether these emergent projects really could provide any kind of meaningful evidence of learning standards:

*I think tweaking marking systems to give you assurance doesn’t dig down under what’s going on, because, if you are comparing for example pass rates, retention rates, and that sort of thing, it’s all fairly meaningless in the sense of learning outcomes. Pass rates, for example. You can compare and benchmark those across the sector but you don’t know what’s making up the pass mark.* (U2)
Theme 2: Increased bureaucratisation.

Four (of six) participants identified issues of increased bureaucratisation, which were grouped within the dimensions of **burgeoning documentation** and the **expansion of quality portfolios** within their institution.

**Burgeoning documentation.**

Three participants made reference to the complexity of documentation that was emerging alongside policy texts. One participant spoke of the various communiques from places such as TEQSA and the Higher Education Standards Panel, suggesting that the volume of documentation produced had “diluted” (PP3) the key issues. Furthermore, this participant identified a “danger in instituting large-scale institutional movement” (PP3), given the number of changes that were taking place as the policy ensemble evolved. To this end, the lack of resolution in terms of policy production was causing institutional activities to stall.

Another participant agreed that learning standards were complex, but argued that they also needed to be specified, agreed and communicated. As they put it: “everyone needs to know what this is, because it is going to be the rule book” (U2). Conversely, one participant from a private provider did not see any burgeoning of documentation, which they attributed to their long experience of already being “regulated to the hilt” (PP1).

One rather extreme example of a policy effect was described by one participant, who pointed out that there was a serious loss of data held by the Australian Government on institutions following the establishment of a sector wide regulator. According to this participant, the closure of various state and territory regulatory offices had prompted some of the vacating staff to discard their files rather than pass them to the new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. If true, this would have left the newly formed Agency in an invidious position, as these data sets would need to be recreated, meaning that institutions would need to be approached again for data that had been provided previously. This was one possible alternative explanation for some of the perceptions of increased bureaucracy.
Expansion of quality portfolios.

One participant remarked that their institution had recently elected to separate one department that had been concerned with quality assurance and teaching and learning into two separate departments, expanding the area that was concerned with quality:

“Our office has evolved, I was the director of quality teaching and learning, and now I’m the director of learning and teaching ... that’s because we have a whole separate planning and strategy office where quality assurance is handled. So it’s not a little bit of a very busy portfolio any more, it has a whole expanded portfolio of its own.” (PP3)

Theme 3: Threshold minimum standards.

Four (of six) participants at the institutional level made reference to the issue of thresholds and minimum standards. With respect to the concept of a threshold minimum standard, one participant remarked “I like the rubric approach where you’ve got ‘standard met’, and you’ve got threshold and aspirational [levels]” (PP3). They also expressed frustration at the “lack of clarity” (PP3) in emergent disciplinary standards, and doubted that these could be used to judge institutional quality in future. However, another participant remarked that the endeavour of establishing threshold minimum standards “would require such a level of expertise in assessment across the whole sector that it is difficult to see it coming off” (U1).

A participant from a private provider spoke of the danger that students’ achievement of learning standards might actually decrease if they were formally established at a threshold level. Articulated here was the concern that a clearly described ‘path of least resistance’ to students could increase the risk that students would lower the amount of effort they felt was needed to pass: “Well, I got 51%. I worked too hard didn’t I?” (PP1).

The relationship between learning standards and student/institutional evaluation systems was highlighted by one participant, who suggested that if it was possible to define and rigorously apply a set of threshold learning standards, this might precipitate a dip in student evaluation ratings. This effect would be problematic, in that teaching staff were seen to be very wary of anything that might affect student evaluations of their performance, “because their promotion hangs on those things” (U2).
Theme 4: Comparison and competition.

Three participants remarked on the competitive practices that they saw emerging as an effect of the various iterations of Australian quality policy texts. The Australian Government’s My University website was seen as one source of comparative data, but for one participant from the private provider sector this was simply irrelevant to them: “Well, we talked about that, but no, it’s My University and it will always be that way” (PP1). Another participant drew comparisons with the Australian National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy testing in the school sector, suggesting that a similar publication of university data would lead to ‘gaming’ behaviours: “Because if we don’t play that game we won’t have any more money to play with” (U2).

Two participants suggested that the publication of comparative data on the My University website could affect grading practices within institutions. On this point, one participant warned of the “soft marking” (PP1) that might occur, with another suggesting that “students are going to suddenly get much higher grades” (PP3) if there was any suggestion that institutions would be publicly judged on the performance of their students. However, another participant saw this as a long-standing concern, and suggested that within institutions, assessment practices themselves had changed in order to maintain expected pass rates: “assessment tasks have gradually or suddenly changed in order to keep pass rates reasonable and because you just can’t have very high levels of failure” (U2).

Selected perspectives from beyond Australia

The 10 international participants included UK and US elite policy actors and a former senior official within the OECD (refer to Chapter 5, ‘Sampling’). These international participants identified a number of policy practices/effects that arose as a consequence of various quality policies that sought to address the issue of learning standards. These were grouped into five themes.

These themes described the defensive manoeuvring taken by organisations to reduce the impact of a policy position which had often sought to facilitate comparison and competition. Policies that aspired to identify minimum levels of quality had precipitated a sharper focus on the problematic issues associated with threshold
minimum standards. More broadly, quality policy was also linked with increased bureaucratisation and an increase in the volume and complexity of documentation required. A smaller number of participants suggested that the quality policy focus on learning standards had supported the development of improved assessment tasks.

**Theme 1: Defensive manoeuvring.**

Eight of the 10 international participants identified various policy effects that were grouped within the theme of defensive manoeuvring. All involved some form of activity to avoid or at least minimise the impact of a particular policy position.

Four out of five participants from the US made reference to the effect of the policy document *A Test of Leadership* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) released by the Spellings Commission. Proposals contained within this policy document sought to increase the accountability of institutions in higher education through the introduction of standardised testing. In the eyes of the participants, the policy paper had stimulated a flurry of activity designed to show that institutions were, in fact, accountable, as part of a narrative designed to defend against the Commission’s proposals. One participant remarked that the American Association of Colleges and Universities had become much more engaged with policy matters as a consequence of this document.

Three participants from the US remarked that the genesis of the American Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) was, in part, a response to the policy position advanced by the Spellings Commission. As one participant put it: “the curious part is that everybody was so afraid of what might happen that they essentially started doing it to themselves and so that’s where the VSA came from” (US5). However, this defensive manoeuvring had, in the eyes of this participant, not necessarily always been helpful: “the community, in reaction to what might have happened, has, in some ways, been harder on itself than what, in fact, was attempted” (US5).

Furthermore, and perhaps more insidiously, these defensive manoeuvres had the potential to displace faculty-owned quality enhancement approaches:

> One of my real fears of the VSA is that institutions which had painfully crawled their way up the assessment ladder to create really good authentic faculty owned things, that take a lot of time, that are difficult to do, would look at the VSA and say ‘Oh Ok, let’s just do that’. (US5)
A number of similar defensive manoeuvring tactics were identified by three UK participants. One participant remarked that in response to policy pressures, universities had “set up their own body in order to stop the [British] Government doing something draconian” (UK4). Defensive practices were seen to have arisen because of precedents set in policy processes occurring outside of higher education, such as those in the school sector. One participant argued that universities “definitely didn’t want OFSTED [UK Office for Standards in Education], we’ve seen how awful that is in schools” (UK4). Inaction was also seen to lead to undesirable consequences, and, another participant recounted the “number of cases where the sector should have taken ownership of the problem but didn’t do so, and then that leaves the way open for the government to come in” (UK2).

**Theme 2: Comparison and competition.**

Seven international participants identified policy practices/effects that were grouped under the theme of comparison and competition. For example, a former member of the UK policy elite suggested that it was in universities’ “competitive interest to be clear about their standards, to be able to compare themselves, maybe through a series of cluster groups of like similar institutions” (UK2). A similar view emanated from US participants, who saw comparisons proposed in policy texts as being potentially “helpful” (US3). The former senior official within the OECD pointed to the way the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes project might facilitate international comparisons by identifying the “universities where they [students] really learn” (OECD1).

Comparison, whilst facilitating competition, also brought the issue of cheating to the fore. A US participant pointed to the risks when stakes were high: “It encourages cheating, it encourages perhaps creaming your sample such that you might game the system” (US3). To prevent this, another participant suggested that there would need to be “some kind of third party corroboration” (US1) of results. However, one UK participant posited that any attempt at comparison was extremely problematic: “I would argue we haven’t, in this country, got any workable system to know the quality of a degree either across from one institution to another, or, in fact, within an institution from one discipline to another” (UK4). To support this view, they cited the 2009 UK House of Commons Select Committee report which had found that “Vice-
Chancellors cannot give a straightforward answer to the simple question of whether students obtaining first class honours degrees at different universities had attained the same intellectual standards” (UK House of Commons, 2009, p. 5).

**Theme 3: Threshold minimum standards.**

Seven (of 10) international participants took the view that contemporary policy texts had the effect of increasing the attention given to the threshold in learning standards. This focus on the threshold (the separation point between a pass and a fail) was connected with discourses of ‘minimum standards’ appearing in policy texts. Here, participants described in different ways how the superficial appeal of a threshold minimum standard concealed a number of highly problematic issues.

One participant from the UK saw threshold standards as a useful way of warranting a guaranteed minimum level of performance in university graduates, whilst also permitting diversity: “So you say everybody will reach that level and after that there will be a variety” (UK2). However, they also identified that the standards would need to be meaningful, useful, and sufficient for the intended purpose, and expressed concern that the whole issue was “far too sophisticated for politicians to understand, and indeed the general public” (UK2). On the other hand, another participant from the UK saw great dangers in publishing a clear description of a minimum standard:

> If you actually wrote threshold outcomes that were all the students currently need to do in order to pass to get a degree, you will have an outbreak, you will have outrage from your national community: ‘how is it people are getting a degree for that?’ Know a little bit about this, can write vaguely fluently about ‘X’? That’s the truth of what an awful lot of people are getting a degree for. You would get pilloried if you publicly published that. (UK4)

Earlier, Chapters 2 and 3 discussed how the results from various individual assessment tasks are aggregated in order to sum-up and decide whether a student should be permitted to graduate from their program of study. For two participants, the focus on minimum standards in policy texts had led them to scrutinise the issue of how these threshold standards related to the various individual assessment tasks undertaken by students. One participant suggested that it was often unclear whether desired learning outcomes and learning standards were described as threshold, aspirational or some kind of aggregate of the two.
Another remarked on this tension thus:

*I do think they’re sometimes written without any real sense of what students are actually going to learn. There isn’t particularly an understanding of learning evident in some of our learning outcomes, which is why we then get confused. If they pass this bit of the assessment but not that, should they pass overall? Have they learned what they’re supposed to learn?* (UK3)

For these participants, the concept of threshold minimum standards in policy texts had the effect of increasing the focus on assessment practice at a finer level of granularity. Although current practices were seen to be less than ideal, they were of the view that it was generally beneficial to place a spotlight on these issues.

The issue of standardisation appeared in relation to threshold minimum standards. On this note, one participant suggested that minimum standards could be upheld through the adoption of common final assessments providing that they were of sufficient validity and reliability.

However, others saw risks that this standardisation would prompt institutions to ‘teach to the test’, and this issue was picked up by four others. Two of these saw the issue of teaching to the test in a negative light, with one US participant pointing to the negative policy practices/effects precipitated by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). However, two other participants saw distinct advantages in having a common ‘final’ test of some sort, as it would steer institutions’ teaching and assessment practices in the ‘right’ direction. As one participant from the US pointed out, “*preparing students for a test like the CLA is a good instructional activity in and of itself*” (US3). Similarly, another remarked that with sophisticated and authentic tests in disciplines such as engineering, this was a desirable outcome: “*the only way to teach to that test is actually to teach the engineering*” (OECD1).

**Theme 4: Increased bureaucratisation.**

Five international participants made reference to the ways that quality policy texts had served to increase bureaucratisation, with some pointing to the issue of *burgeoning documentation* that often accompanied such initiatives.

On the issue of increased bureaucratisation, one participant pointed to the impact of various iterations of quality policies, the effect of which served to divert both human
and financial resources away from teaching and learning. Referring to the processes of review, they suggested that: “it takes a lot of resources to entertain the QAA [UK Quality Assurance Agency] for a week” (UK3). Another pointed to an “explosive growth” (US1) in institutional quality assessment activities.

**Burgeoning documentation.**

An increasing requirement for documentation was identified by five participants within the theme of increased bureaucratisation. This documentation included the provision of information to stakeholders on matters of quality, designed to inform consumer choice. One participant from the UK pointed to the recent introduction of ‘key information sets’, which were standard collections of data about institutions for prospective students. However, in the eyes of one participant the value of this information was limited: “the key information set tells you everything about the course, except what you want to know” (UK2).

Two participants from the US pointed to the volume of information published by one particular college in the mid-west. The approach of this college had been to produce copious information about quality, prompting one participant to remark that “they published so much information it doesn’t matter” (US1). Another concurred, suggesting that “nobody knows what to do with it, or how to interpret it” (US2).

One of the central aims of the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) in the US was to provide detailed information to improve student choice. As outlined earlier, this voluntary system had arisen partly in response to the quality policy position advanced in *A Test of Leadership* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). One participant from the US recognised that the provision of such information served a number of purposes, but dismissed the idea that it informed student choice as fallacious:

*There’s a lot of confusion and VSA [the US Voluntary System of Accountability] is a great example of this. The idea that consumers will benefit from this kind of information is, I think, a pipedream. First of all, consumers don’t care. In the US, college choice is based on cost and location. ... Those choices are largely conditioned by whether you like the campus, or good experiences and stuff like that, not learning outcomes. So the supposed premise of the VSA, which was to inform consumer choice, is nonsense. I mean, it doesn’t.* (US5)
Theme 5: Improved assessment tasks.

Three international participants suggested that a closer focus on learning standards in quality policy had served as a driver for the development of more sophisticated and authentic assessment tasks. For example, an authentic assessment in the discipline of computing might require students to draw on a range of resources (human and technical) to actually build a computer network, as an alternative to setting a written essay about how networks are built. These authentic tasks would, in theory, be able to more clearly demonstrate candidates’ performance against those learning standards. However, one participant from the UK suggested that whilst such sophistication was possible, it was also potentially quite expensive given the differentiation of subjects in higher education: “Now we clearly know that there are ways you can assess those things, but to create a national set of assessments that would do this could be very expensive” (UK4).

Another participant from the US recognised this issue of differentiation, but saw significant commonality of content both within and across disciplinary areas. However, he also observed that “there’s a deceptive simplicity about real world problems, in that they are much more culturally bound than disciplines are” (US5). To illustrate this, he cited the example of the CLA task where students are asked to analyse a problem then write to a fictitious ‘boss’ to make a recommendation. He proceeded to argue that in some parts of the world it would be culturally inappropriate for junior employees to advise their senior managers, suggesting that students would need to be able to “think like an American” (US5) to succeed at this task.

Summary of interview data - policy practices/effects

Analysis of the interview data with respect to the emergent and predicted policy practices/effects (research question 3) revealed a number of themes and dimensions (sub-themes), summarised in Table 8.1 at the start of this chapter.

Analysis suggested that within the Australian policy trajectory and in settings beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD), various practices had emerged in an attempt to mitigate or avoid the consequences of a particular policy position. Some of these defensive manoeuvres were in response to policy texts, whilst others were in
anticipation of them. Participants gave a number of examples which included the establishment of voluntary systems of accountability; the development of disciplinary learning standards; and the initiation of projects which sought to verify learning standards across institutions. In some instances these activities were seen in a beneficial light because they had engaged the academic community in a collegial way, raising sector awareness of the issues and contributing to the development of improved assessment practices. However, some activities were criticised for being more concerned with the production of a thin ‘veneer’ of quality to satisfy various stakeholders.

The competitive pressures that were associated with the production of quality information produced a number of effects as institutions sought to achieve or maintain their competitive edge in a high stakes and globally defined market environment. On one hand, the emergence of comparative information could serve to ‘name and shame’ underperforming institutions into taking action to improve, but on the other, there was a serious possibility that struggling institutions would suffer further as funding was cut or enrolments declined in response to adverse publicity.

An increase in the level of bureaucratisation was seen to accompany the focus on learning standards in quality policy. In part, this involved the production of increasingly detailed information for accountability purposes. A commonly stated aim of governments was that this information would inform student choice, but participants suggested that the influence of published information about quality on enrolments was negligible in the majority of cases. Dangers were identified in the reporting of pass rates, as this could lead to soft marking and grade inflation if institutional quality were to be comparatively judged on this aspect. This increased bureaucracy was seen to produce additional workload for institutions, and some had started to respond by enlarging their quality assurance departments, extending contracts and employing new staff in this area.

A focus on minimum standards highlighted the problematic nature of the threshold, which is defined as the performance level where a candidate just manages to achieve a pass. The concept of threshold learning standards appeared to be a helpful way of establishing a ‘guaranteed minimum’ level of quality across institutions, but the precise definition of where this boundary line lay was elusive. In the eyes of some, the
threshold was impossible to define, measure and compare within or across institutions. However, others pointed to the increased communication, networking and collaboration that had been spawned from the attention to this problem, pointing to improvements in sector awareness and the way some benefits in terms of curricular coherence were starting to appear. Nevertheless, there were also serious concerns that the thresholds for minimum standards, if published, would serve to potentially weaken public perceptions of quality, rather than provide reassurances of it.
Chapter 9: Findings (4) - policy outcomes

Introduction

What are the longer term outcomes (both emerging and predicted) of quality policy trends relating to learning standards in Australian higher education?

This chapter addresses the fourth research question, identified above, and it concludes the presentation of the findings of this research. In the Australian setting, policy processes were examined using the policy trajectory approach described in Chapters 4 and 5. Here, the focus is on emergent and predicted outcomes associated with the release of Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009) and the subsequent evolution of policy texts through to 2013 (see Table 5.1). This study also sought to identify and compare emergent and predicted quality policy outcomes in settings beyond Australia. This included the UK and the US, where ‘quality policy’ was taken to mean those quality policies relating to learning standards within the participants’ national settings. Predicted and emergent outcomes from quality policies relating to learning standards were explored in broad terms (i.e. not in relation to any specific national policy) with a former senior official within the OECD.

Five themes relating to policy outcomes were identified. Two prominent themes of student equity and academic agency were identified across all participant groups (i.e. within Australia, the UK, US, and OECD). Although nuanced differently, these themes were constituted similarly in terms of their component dimensions (sub-themes). These themes were:

- Student equity
- Academic agency
- Institutional diversity (Australian national and institutional only)
- Public confidence (Australian national only)
- Status of teaching versus research (participants from beyond Australia only)

These themes and, where appropriate, their dimensions (sub-themes) are summarised in Table 9.1. Each is discussed in the following sections, dealing with the Australian setting first. This is followed by an examination of the themes identified in the perspectives of participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD).
Table 9.1 Summary of themes relating to policy outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australian policy trajectory study</th>
<th>Selected perspectives beyond Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>National level</strong></td>
<td><strong>Institutional level</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 participants</td>
<td>6 participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Student equity (13)</td>
<td>1. Student equity (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Equivalent standards (9)</td>
<td>a. Equivalent standards (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Access to higher education (5)</td>
<td>b. Access to higher education (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Academic agency (10)</td>
<td>2. Academic agency (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Autonomy and control (5)</td>
<td>a. Autonomy and control (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Academic disengagement (5)</td>
<td>b. Academic disengagement (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Institutional diversity (7)</td>
<td>3. Institutional diversity (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Public confidence (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1: Selected perspectives from beyond Australia are shown separately. This is because these are not part of the Australian policy trajectory study, and because they do not constitute policy trajectory studies in their own right (refer to Chapter 5, ‘Research questions’).

Note 2: Themes are labelled using **bold text**; dimensions (sub-themes) are in *italic text*. The number of participants identifying each theme/dimension is shown in brackets. Theme totals are not derived by summing the numbers of participants in each dimension, because some participants may have identified more than one dimension within a theme.

**Australian national level themes**

The 19 national level participants, drawn from Australian Government and non-Government groups, identified a number of emergent and predicted longer term outcomes associated with evolving quality policy relating to learning standards in the Australian setting. Four themes arose from analysis of interview data, two of which (**student equity** and **academic agency**) were identified both within and beyond the Australian setting. Longer term outcomes for **institutional diversity** and **public confidence** were also identified as themes at the Australian national level. Each of these themes is dealt with in turn.
Theme 1: Student equity.

Of the 19 participants at this level, a majority (13) made reference to the issue of student equity, and within this theme, two dimensions of equivalent standards and access to higher education grouped a number of issues concerning students’ exit from, and entry into, higher education.

Equivalent standards.

Nine participants made reference to the issue of equivalence in learning standards, and the various ways that this impacted on the theme of student equity. One participant remarked on the way student equity was often treated in terms of ‘inputs’ (and this aspect is also picked up in the next dimension to this theme), but for this person, the issue of equity in learning standards was more significant: “a lot of the equity debate has to do with equity of access, equity of participation, equity of provision but not equity of the actual qualifications and transcripts and that’s the bit I’m interested in” (NG6).

A former Vice-Chancellor pointed to the Australian Government’s agenda to increase participation in higher education, advanced in Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009). This, she posited, indicated that universities would need to provide additional support for students “who, at least in the first year, are going to need a great deal more time spent on them to help them make the transition” (NG3). On this point another participant remarked on the “huge amount of remedial work” (NG14) that was needed in certain areas, such as those where literacy levels were low. This, they argued, was already producing challenges in terms of the interim learning standards, or assessment ‘hurdles’ that students needed to clear in order to progress to later years of study. For this participant, the question was “do you lower your standards and accept that because of disadvantage, these students may, in three years’ time, actually meet the standard you are setting out to achieve?” (NG14).

In this respect, a clearer definition of learning standards might, on the one hand, improve longer term outcomes for student equity through the establishment of more transparent goals for learners to work towards. On the other hand, if the focus on
learning standards served to raise these interim hurdles, then this would disadvantage those students who might need more time to acquire sufficient ‘exit velocity’.

The question of funding was raised by two participants who remarked on the complexity of supporting disadvantaged students given the uneven distribution of students across the sector. As one participant put it, “the cream of the cream take the cream” (NG5), pointing to the issue of stratification within the higher education sector.

Another participant raised a question concerning differential value for money realised across the sector. By way of explanation, they suggested that a university that took in highly capable students would provide less value for money than one which took less able students, but then worked hard to help those students succeed. If the learning standards achieved in both universities were shown to be comparable, then this would “shine a light” (NG12) on the fact that some universities “really spend a lot of money doing very little” (NG12) for their students.

The issue of funding was picked up by one participant, who suggested that current funding approaches were inadequate, and that more complex models would be needed to lessen inequities in future. As they put it: “in order for every institution to be able to satisfy the learning outcomes at an equivalent level, the [Australian] Government would need to take account of the inputs, and reward process in novel ways” (NG11).

Two participants identified the impact of expectations in terms of the learning standards seen to be achievable by student groups. For example, one participant remarked that there was research to suggest that “teachers who work with disadvantaged students, Indigenous students or so on, they have far lower standards and it has an inequitable outcome for the students because they are not pushed” (NG15). The presence of different expectations in terms of the standards achieved by different students/institutions was signalled by the suggestion that standards in one institution should only be compared with other similar institutions:

You know if your reference point is the diversity of students that a similar institution with a similar mission has that’s fine, but if your reference point is the diversity of students at a place like Sydney, with the diversity of students at a place like UNSW [University of New South Wales], which has a vastly different mission, it would make no sense. (NG4)
However, student equity would not necessarily be improved if benchmarking was limited to similar institutions. To illustrate, another participant argued that employers saw the outcomes of various universities in different lights, suggesting that in a university with a high proportion of disadvantaged students “you might expect them [the students] to be doing OK, because it’s got low standards” (NG3). Benchmarking activities limited to similar grouped institutions might help propagate that view. Conversely, a focus on learning standards and their comparability across elite and non-elite institutions might, in time, produce the longer term outcome of reducing such inequities, as there would be clearer evidence of comparable achievement.

**Access to higher education.**

Five participants made reference to the issue of access to higher education in the context of learning standards. On this note, one former Vice-Chancellor stated that chancellors and university councils were “very, very concerned, in all universities, about the university offering ‘a fair go’ to a broad range of people” (NG3). Whilst other participants also supported this aspiration, some raised concerns about how this might change if learning standards were to be explicitly defined across institutions.

One participant hypothesised that one longer term outcome could be that universities would become more selective about accepting students if the learning standards were to be clearly articulated: “I think universities will do their darnedest to select students who are more likely to stay the distance and require less input” (NG10). This suggestion was based on the way recruitment behaviours were affected in their institution when changes were made to the way higher degree programs were funded: “we got a lot more fussy here when we started being funded on completions” (NG10). Another participant made a similar point, and suggested that competitive recruitment practices might serve to concentrate numbers of students needing more support in some institutions, which would then bear disproportionally increased costs:

> And they take the best of what might have been the students who you might have offered equity scholarships to, or you’ve been building very good relationships with through schools partnerships, regional partnerships, that sort of thing. They get the best ones. That means the rest of you have to go digging deeper, harder. That costs more money and it means the students you do bring in to reach your targets are going to require more support and that is expensive. (AG3)
However, for one participant, casting the issue of student equity in terms of access to higher education was problematic, in that “the debate has concentrated around the point of entry, not what happens later” (AG1). This raised the danger that a focus on enrolments in quality policy might seemingly show increasing participation, whilst leaving the issue of poor retention rates within certain student groups buried. On this point another participant argued: “you could increase the volume year-on-year in your institution, and have 100% turnover every year in the most perverse situation and in fact there are some institutions that aren’t so far away from that” (NG7).

**Theme 2: Academic agency.**

Ten (of 19) participants at the national level made reference to the ways that individual academic agency would be affected over the longer term as a consequence of the focus on learning standards in quality policy. Two dimensions (sub-themes) were identified within this theme, and these included the loss of **autonomy and control**, and the issue of increasing **academic disengagement** from matters of quality.

**Autonomy and control.**

Five participants identified a number of emergent and predicted longer term outcomes with respect to the autonomy and control of academic staff. These outcomes included a redistribution of power away from individual academics towards their university administrations. Associated with this was a decrease in the amount of control individual academics could subsequently exert over the assessment tasks they set for their students.

One Australian Government official located ownership of (and accountability for) learning standards firmly in the academic domain, pointing out that such standards were “owned by the designers and the teachers of the curriculum” (AG3), and not “superimposed by the regulator or by Government” (AG3). However, this sentiment was not shared widely. For example, one participant predicted that academic staff “will have less discretion in their assessment processes and standards” (NG1). This point was taken up and expanded by a participant who suggested that academic boards would pay increasing attention to matters of assessment, thereby weakening individual autonomy and control.
They predicted:

*I think you’re going to see a cranking up of the responsibilities by academic boards. I think they’re going to be looking to get a better grip on what goes on within institutions. So I think internally you’re going to see boards taking a closer look at the specification of learning outcomes, they’re going to take a closer look at ensuring that assessment practices can, on the face of it, assess those learning outcomes. They are going to be taking a closer look at how grading distributions are derived and so on. Now boards have always been doing that, right? They’re just going to do it with a little bit more intensity and focus. The biggest change that is going to happen is universities themselves are going to look for external reference points so that they can say ‘our pass grade, all things considered, is the same as a pass grade in a comparable course’.* (NG8)

Whilst this might weaken individual academic agency, another participant suggested that clearer accountability for learning standards “would allow institutions in particular to be aware when things were going wrong” (NG3). This was seen as an existing and persistent problem, which was associated with vested interests of staff to protect their courses and perhaps their own positions: “we were still battling with schools and with course coordinators about these kinds of issues, with them arguing ‘it’s just a bit of a dip for this year’ or ‘there’s some particular reason’ [for poor student results]” (NG3).

At the level of the discipline, these issues of control were recognised by another participant, who suggested that “the more of these learning outcomes we have, the more sticks we can be beaten with” (NG11). In this way, as measures of learning standards emerged in future, these data could, in the longer term, become levers of power in the struggles for control between academics and their institutional administrations.

**Academic disengagement.**

Five participants identified the problem of academic disengagement from quality processes. One saw this as a long-standing issue, given that academic staff “see the work involved with the evaluation of their own teaching or their delivery as extra work, rather than work that I think is central to the teaching process” (NG3). In a similar vein, others suggested that the increasing bureaucratisation implied in policy texts would have the longer term outcome of increasing the level of academic disengagement. This was seen as a significant risk to Australia’s international competitiveness. On this
point, one participant remarked on the likelihood that quality assurance “won’t be done by the academics who are the ones who are directly connected to teaching and learning” (NG4). They foresaw that this separation could potentially cleave quality matters from teaching and learning:

*I think the challenge is to avoid a huge risk I see at present, which is that this will degenerate into a bureaucratic exercise which will disengage academic and student communities from doing the sorts of transformation of curriculum that they need to do if we’re going to meet the challenges ahead. One of the problems with this whole approach is that you are hiving off both assessment and evaluation from the act of creating curriculum and teaching.* (NG4)

A further risk to academic engagement was identified by three participants who remarked on the likelihood that externalised production of data for the reporting of learning standards would serve to further distance academics from quality enhancement and assurance. One participant foresaw greater involvement by external commercial companies who might offer to take on part of an institution’s assessment activities, offering to “guarantee the quality of the process and the outcomes” (NG7). Another surmised that there would be greater use of software in future so that “you can press something and it will show that this is developed, and this is assessed, and this is mapped” (NG15).

However, in the eyes of one participant such externalisation would serve only to create a greater disconnection from the academic community: “If you choose to use a data collection process that disconnects the people who need to use the data from the data, then you lose a driver for change” (NG4).

**Theme 3: Institutional diversity.**

Seven participants identified two broad longer term threats to institutional diversity. The first threat was that excessive prescription could stifle diversity and innovation; the second was that standardisation might gradually follow in the wake of common standards, thereby reducing diversity in the sector.

With respect to the first issue of prescription, one participant suggested that there was a need to seek a compromise between “defining standards sufficiently precisely to be monitored but not so prescriptively to stifle innovation and diversity” (NG1). This view
was also echoed by an Australian Government participant who saw similar risks to innovation arising as an “unintended consequence” (AG1) of excessive prescription.

A second risk to institutional diversity was seen to arise as a consequence of the work to establish common threshold learning standards at a disciplinary level. One participant suggested that “if the learning standard is the same thing for everyone, I don’t think it’s a useful standard because that won’t allow institutional missions and institutional differences” (NG4). However, a converse view was offered by another participant who argued that the concept of threshold learning standards facilitated diversity, because with the common base standard established it would become “much simpler for institutions to differentiate their mission” (NG10) by superimposing their distinctive contribution over the base standard.

The emergence of base standards in the form of a “core curriculum” (NG9) in universities was seen as an unhelpful imposition by one participant who spoke of their concern with the narrowing of curricula. However, another participant suggested that new pressures were forming through the coalescence of disciplinary standards at an international level, citing the example of work done by an international community:

*Engineers Australia are members of the Washington Accord. So they are benchmarking themselves against the US and Canada and others. And gradually what’s happening is that that community is co-developing a set of standards and sooner or later they will just decide to give up their own standards.* (NG12)

Theme 4: Public confidence.

Five participants made reference to the improved public confidence that would gradually emerge if standards were clearly defined and evaluated. Improved confidence was associated with the visible presence of regulatory action. One participant remarked that the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) could conduct reviews at a disciplinary level across institutions if they had access to comparative data on students’ achievement of learning standards. Another participant hypothesised that these data would threaten the “shonky operators” (NG2), or those that were “producing graduates of a very low standard that aren’t employable” (NG2).
According to two participants, public confidence in learning standards would be improved through processes of comparison. In particular, comparisons based on defined learning standards would, in time, enable lower ranked institutions to “demonstrate that their graduates meet similar standards as those of higher ranked institutions” (NG1). Another participant pointed to the potential publicity that would arise from value-added measures, which would provide evidence that institutions could use to claim credit in the form of ‘success stories’ of disadvantaged students who had been able to ‘meet the standard’.

However, for one participant the notion of improved public confidence was illusory, because it failed to acknowledge the long-standing difficulties of judging institutional quality by graduation rates, and the ease with which these data could be manipulated: “I mean the existence of progression rates has been around and retention rates et cetera have all been around for years, and the governments use them, but they’re just a farce because we can pass more students no problem” (NG5).

Australian institutional level themes

The analysis of interview data from the six participants at the institutional level generated themes similar to those emerging at the national level. The institutional level comprised participants from three public universities and three private providers. At this level of analysis the most significant theme concerned issues relating to student equity. Two further themes of academic agency and institutional diversity also emerged.

Theme 1: Student equity.

The longer term implications for student equity were raised by five participants at the institutional level of analysis. This theme was further categorised into two dimensions (sub-themes) in a similar way to the national analysis. The two dimensions relating to the issue of equivalent standards and access to higher education are each discussed in turn.
Equivalent standards.

The issue of equivalence in terms of learning standards was identified by four participants. If learning standards were defined and applied, with trust in the comparative judgments being made, then this would, in the eyes of one participant, add evidence to counter the issue that “people see widening participation or equity agendas as synonymous with low standards” (U3). Another participant, taking an absolute view of standards as non-negotiable, expressed the following concern thus:

_I have a real problem with different outcomes for different social groups because I think that’s inherently discriminatory. So, for example, Indigenous students. In my previous teaching experience over years, people have said to me ‘ah but you can’t expect that of these students - these are Indigenous students’. Oh. So. What, they’re all dumb? No, they’re not._ (U2)

In time, the presence of comparative data on standards could potentially signal that it is possible to have high quality and high equity. However, the need for adequate institutional support for students was identified by two participants. One spoke of the “obligation” (PP2) that universities had to support students that enrolled in their programs. On this point, another participant identified that one of the emergent outcomes of the policy focus on students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds was to marginalise other groups:

_The rash of projects in universities at the moment for low SES? Watch out, we’re after you. We’re going to give you more help than you ever dreamt you needed. While other groups also need help, but they’re not the groovy group at the moment so we are not interested in you._ (U2)

Access to higher education.

The issue of access to higher education was raised by two participants, both of whom were from the private sector. The first remarked on the way their admissions criteria were strictly regulated as part of their accreditation requirements. As a consequence, they were extremely careful to “only admit students who have the academic potential to complete, technically. And we couldn’t admit someone who didn’t meet those criteria” (PP1). This was seen as an inequitable arrangement in comparison to universities who were able to offer places to a wider group, as it served to bar the students who were unable to meet the strict entry criteria from these parts of the higher education sector.
A second participant drew comparisons with the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), pointing out that one longer term outcome of rankings was to produce pressures on schools to maintain their scores:

> It was so mistakenly called No Child Left Behind because it did exactly that - it left children behind. Because then the schools no longer want the children with diverse needs because they are going to pull down their average. (PP3)

Drawing on the example of the school sector in the US, this participant suggested that if comparative data were used to produce rankings in Australian higher education, there was a danger that institutions would become increasingly cautious about taking on students with higher levels of need.

**Theme 2: Academic agency.**

Three participants made reference to issues that were grouped under the theme of academic agency. Similar to the national level, two dimensions of **autonomy and control** and **academic disengagement** were present. Each of these dimensions is discussed in turn.

**Autonomy and control.**

Issues of autonomy and control were raised by two participants. One suggested that academics would continue to be reluctant to specify the discipline standards more closely as this would become a mechanism for control by others. Another predicted that the tensions and struggles for control characterised by the preceding four years would continue, and that any resolution in the longer term was doubtful:

> It’s unfortunate because I don’t think we’ll ever find consensus on it, and we want consensus. We want to measure learning, we want to measure teaching and to the n"th degree, and I don’t think we’re going to get there. (PP1)

**Academic disengagement.**

The issue of academic disengagement was identified by two participants. One participant saw risks in becoming too “tied up in this process of demonstrating that we are assuring standards” (U3), arguing that the ownership and control of learning standards needed to be vested within institutions and the sector in the form of a quality enhancement approach. However, another participant suggested that quality
policy processes in the domain of learning standards were already becoming too far removed from the teachers and students:

*My guess is that we’re engaged in a process that is so artificial and so removed from the experience of actual teachers and students that it’s hard to see it having any positive impact on teaching and consequently on learning outcomes. How long governments are going to pursue this agenda is another question.* (U1)

**Theme 3: Institutional diversity.**

Two participants at the institutional level suggested that there were longer term risks to institutional diversity associated with the quality policy focus on learning standards. One participant suggested that the generation of common disciplinary learning standards across institutions would gradually lead to standardised assessment tasks:

*How do you do that [i.e. have common learning standards] when every University has its own final exams? So the next step down the path is that you come up with standardised assessment as the exit exams. And then you’re really narrowing the diversity and the flavour, the spirit of different institutions. And what’s testable and what’s teachable and learnable are very different things.* (PP3)

Another summed up this problem by arguing that quality policy would be problematic if it became “*an impediment to innovation and disrespectful of national and institutional distinctiveness*” (U3). To this end, these participants identified a serious risk that precisely defined learning standards would progressively lead to increased standardisation, which would itself threaten institutional diversity.

**Selected perspectives from beyond Australia**

The 10 international participants included UK and US elite policy actors and a former senior official within the OECD (refer to Chapter 5, ‘Sampling’). These international participants identified a number of emergent and predicted longer term outcomes associated with quality policies relating to learning standards. Three broad themes were identified, including the issue of **student equity**, changes to **academic agency**, and the question of whether there would be a gradual rebalancing of the **status of teaching and research**, from a position which was seen to be traditionally biased towards research.
Theme 1: Student equity.

Eight of the 10 international participants spoke of emergent or predicted outcomes under the theme of student equity. These issues were grouped into two dimensions (sub-themes), the first relating to the question of whether there were equivalent standards between different groups, the second relating to the issue of access to higher education.

Equivalent standards

Six participants identified issues that related to problems of equivalence in terms of the standards achieved by different student groups. These difficulties were summed up by one participant from the US who remarked that “having inequities, for whatever reason, is going to be reflected in performance, and what you do about that is a real question” (US5). Taking a purist view, one UK participant suggested that standards “should be unassailable; they should not be biddable; they should not be compromisable because they cease to be a standard” (UK2).

One participant suggested that a reliance on absolute definitions of learning standards failed to capture the ‘distance travelled’ by students within an institution. This was seen as inequitable given that some institutions would have to invest quite significantly to support a less capable cohort, and this perhaps represented a “greater achievement in terms of the learning and teaching that’s gone on to get that intake there” (UK4). However, the participant also conceded that “quality, in one sense, should be blind to that” (UK4).

For two participants from the US, tests of learning were seen to be an important way of increasing equity by identifying gaps in performance. One participant commented on the way that standardised tests were able to identify underperforming schools in the US. This could improve social justice, he argued, as it would identify whether “students at those schools are disproportionately from under-represented minorities (US2) thereby allowing some form of remedial action to be taken. Another participant explained: “It’s a big deal. If you don’t benchmark the gaps, what are you going to do to fix it?” (US1).

A participant from the UK saw inequities arising out of the choice of test instruments that could be used to measure learning standards, especially if these were to be
separated out as a standalone item where there might be a limited variety of assessment approaches. Limiting the variety in assessment approaches within these tests would tend to favour students differentially. As this participant put it, “if it is very much a written thing then clearly that’s going to disadvantage quite a lot of people as well isn’t it?” (UK3).

**Access to higher education.**

Three participants made reference to the issue of access to higher education. One participant from the UK pointed to the various devices used by the British Government to persuade universities to widen access to higher education, many of which they believed were levelled particularly at the research-intensive institutions. This participant believed that there were “some penalties supposedly in the system if you don’t meet certain targets” (UK4) but was doubtful of the level of impact this had on these institutions’ practices.

The former senior official within the OECD drew attention to the various ways universities lowered entrance requirements for students from disadvantaged schools. This was seen as one way of increasing equity in the system, but the focus on input measures was not necessarily matched by an equal focus on outcomes: As they put it, “It is one thing to say ‘well, we will open up our selection and entry processes to other considerations that will give kids a chance to get in’. But if they don’t then get out, what have they gained?” (OECD1). However, one participant identified the risk that an increased attention to the standards achieved by equity groups might shift “who goes where” (US3), producing increased stratification in the sector. Although there was an argument that the learning standards achieved by various groups were of equal importance to input-focused measures, there were also longer term risks to equity associated with the publication of comparative data on performance.

**Theme 2: Academic agency.**

Six of the 10 international participants made reference to the longer term outcomes of quality policy in terms of the impact on academic agency. There were two dimensions within this theme. The first related to the predicted loss of autonomy and control held by academic staff; the second concerned issues of academic disengagement. Each dimension is discussed in turn.
**Autonomy and control.**

Four participants from the US spoke of the longer term impact of quality policy relating to learning standards which had arisen as a consequence of an increased focus on accountability. One participant commented on the fact that in some institutions, standardised assessments such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) had caused “a lot of pushback in some places from the professors” (US2). This was because such tests were seen as “interference, intruding into their academic space where all the decisions should be theirs” (US2).

Another participant remarked on the way that a colleague had expressed concern that the introduction of learning outcomes had “interfered with the relationship that he had with his students” (US4). Even just defining matters in terms of criteria, rather than standards (i.e. criteria and stated levels of achievement), represented a diminution of academic freedom in their eyes: “The idea you would mark according to a standardised set of outcomes that had come from the Feds [US Federal Government]? It just would be a really cold day before you saw a lot of cooperation” (US4).

A loss of autonomy and control was associated with exo-skeletal approaches to quality assurance, as they were “added on top as some kind of quality control device” (US5) instead of being integrated into the curriculum. However this participant saw younger members of teaching staff as being less hostile to the imposition of external requirements by comparison. The ‘problem’, was, as they put it, generational: “we’re 60s people and we carried signs and all that sort of stuff. And particularly in the social sciences, damned if you’re going to do this to me. I’m autonomous” (US5).

**Academic disengagement.**

Three participants spoke of the ways academics had, over time, become increasingly disengaged from quality assurance processes. One participant from the UK suggested that quality assurance had become “more of an activity that happens in the centre ... perhaps they don’t try and bother individual departments too much” (UK3). Even where matters were discussed at the level of the teaching department, the approach to quality assurance was seen as mechanistic:

*There’s quite a lot of the sort of ‘tick-box’ approach to quality, which means that approval panels are not engaging in any sort of philosophical discussions*
In their eyes, this academic disengagement had emerged from a landscape characterised by increased bureaucratisation, dominated by subject benchmark statements and frameworks for higher education qualifications. In turn, this was mutually reinforced by the institutional review teams who also had their standards, frameworks, and checklists, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

**Theme 3: Status of teaching versus research.**

Three international participants remarked on the way that a closer focus on learning standards in quality policy might, in time, potentially address the imbalance between teaching and research. One participant from the UK saw research activities such as the British Research Assessment Exercise as a “terrible excuse for not doing anything about teaching” (UK1). Another remarked on the increasing concern on the part of the British Government that the current “reward structures favour research” (UK2), a situation which would serve to encourage institutions to accord a lower priority to matters of teaching and learning.

However, the former senior official within the OECD suggested that a focus on learning standards would have a positive impact by increasing the profile of teaching:

> [It] gives us the prospect of elevating the importance of teaching in University. Because at the moment, everything we measure is to do with research. And we keep saying we value teaching ... but when it comes to where [institution name] ranks in the Times Higher Ed [UK Newspaper] ranking or the Jiao Tong [publisher of the Academic Ranking of World Universities], it’s all research. And that’s the thing that gets the publicity. (OECD1)

**Summary of interview data - policy outcomes**

Analysis of the interview data with respect to the emergent and predicted outcomes (research question 4) of quality policy relating to learning standards revealed a number of themes and dimensions (sub-themes), summarised in Table 9.1 at the start of this chapter.
Participants from within and beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD) identified a number of longer term challenges to student equity that they believed would arise as a consequence of the focus on learning standards in quality policy. Equity was often measured using inputs (enrolments and participation), but many participants remarked that this ignored the more important question of whether students from disadvantaged groups emerged from higher education with a usable qualification.

In this respect clear and comparative learning standards (if they were achievable) would be a double-edged sword. On one hand comparative measures could demonstrate that students from all areas were ‘meeting the standard’. On the other hand, the high costs of providing support for disadvantaged students suggested that institutions might become more ‘choosy’ with respect to enrolment if they were to be publicly judged on their ability to support these students through to completion. This would possibly serve to increase stratification of student groups within the sector, thereby reinforcing social difference. The use of pass rates as a basis for measures of success was seen as highly risky given that this was seen to be open to manipulation.

The further erosion of individual academic agency was also described or predicted by participants. Maintaining the active engagement of the academic community was seen as essential, if any reforms to learning standards were to be successful. However, increasing the reliance on externalised data was seen to risk widening the gap between learning and the evaluation of learning, thereby further distancing academic staff from quality enhancement and assurance activities.

Increasing bureaucracy arising from policy intentions to increase accountability was seen to weaken academics’ (and institutions’) autonomy and control. Furthermore, a number of institutions had increased the size and power of their quality departments (at a time of diminishing resources within the sector) and this was seen in a hostile light by academics that were becoming increasingly disconnected from quality matters.

A number of participants from the UK as well as the participant from the OECD suggested that a focus on learning standards in quality policy could eventually start to rebalance power inequities between teaching and the more dominant area of research.
Within the Australian setting, a number of national level participants identified the potential for learning standards to contribute to improved public confidence in higher education institutions over time. However, some participants remarked on the longer term implications for institutional diversity, which was seen to be at risk through gradual processes of standardisation in disciplinary curricula. This was because the precise definition of learning standards would, in time, produce pressures to conform to those standards, primarily through the emergence of common assessment tasks which would in turn gradually define and standardise the curriculum.
Chapter 10: A meta-analysis of policy processes

Introduction

This chapter draws together the findings from across the policy trajectory study in the Australian setting, and it incorporates perspectives of significant policy actors from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD). The first section in this chapter discusses the emergent themes in the light of the literature, and generates a total of 15 theoretical propositions derived from the findings. In the second section, the key integrating theme of ideology and power is discussed, drawing on Marginson and Rhoades’ (2002) ‘glo-na-cal’ agency heuristic to examine the dynamic and complex power interrelationships across the Australian policy trajectory. In the third and final section of this chapter, the policy trajectory approach used in this study (Ball, 1994a; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Vidovich, 2007, 2013) is critiqued, and combined with network theory (Ball, 2012a; Shiroma, 2014) in order to develop potentially new framings for policy analysis.

Discussion of emergent themes and construction of propositions

This first section is structured around the four policy contexts (influences; policy text production; practices/effects; and outcomes), each of which formed the basis for one of the four research questions. Although each context is considered separately, in reality there were multiple points of intersection. This observed ‘messiness’ of policy processes tended to support the assertion that “neatness is not an option” (Ball, 2012a, p. 16) in policy studies. Table 10.1 draws together and depicts the emergent themes across the whole policy trajectory, with a separate section given over to the perspectives of the participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD).

The following four subsections follow a consistent format, with each taking one of the four contexts of the policy trajectory in turn. Within each subsection, themes emerging from interviews (and, where appropriate, document analysis of Australian policy texts) are drawn together and considered in the light of the literature in order to generate propositions associated with that particular policy context.
Table 10.1 Quality policies relating to learning standards in higher education: summary of emergent themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXTS</th>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>Australian policy trajectory study</th>
<th>Selected perspectives from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>National level</td>
<td>Institutional level</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Problems with standards</td>
<td>1. Problems with standards</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Impact of global pressures*</td>
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<td>5. Rising demands for accountability**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influences</td>
<td>(Research Question 1)</td>
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<td>1. Vested stakeholder interests*</td>
<td>1. Ideological tensions</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Ideological tensions*</td>
<td>2. Consultation processes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy text production</td>
<td>(Research Question 2)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Increased bureaucratisation</td>
<td>1. Defensive manoeuvring</td>
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<td>2. Defensive manoeuvring</td>
<td>2. Increased bureaucratisation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Comparison and competition</td>
<td>3. Threshold minimum standards</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Threshold minimum standards</td>
<td>4. Comparison and competition</td>
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<td>5. Improved sector awareness</td>
<td>5. Improved assessment tasks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practices/ effects</td>
<td>(Research Question 3)</td>
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<td>1. Student equity*</td>
<td>1. Student equity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Public confidence</td>
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</table>

Themes are presented in order of emphasis in the interview data. Dimensions (sub-themes) are not shown here. Refer to findings chapters (6-9) for presentation of all themes and dimensions. Document analyses were only conducted within the Australian national setting.

* from interview data and document analyses
** from document analyses (only)
Context of influence (research question 1).

What are the key influences (international, national and local/institutional) affecting the development of quality policies relating to learning standards in Australian higher education?

There were four substantial influences on quality policy relating to learning standards identified within the Australian policy trajectory study and in the perspectives of participants from the UK, the US and the OECD. These were: the impact of global pressures; the problems with standards; the way sector expansion threatens quality; and institutional status and stance on learning standards. Two less prominent themes were also identified, relating to the rising demands for accountability and the influence of particular powerful policy actors. Each influence is examined in turn.

Impact of global pressures.

The first theme described the impact of global pressures, identified by participants within and beyond Australia. In particular, the work of the OECD was seen by participants to construct influential discourses around ‘common policy problems’ and their ‘solutions’, and this is consistent with a growing body of literature identifying the increasingly powerful role of the OECD as a key policy actor (Alexiadou, 2014; Bøyum, 2014; Lange & Alexiadou, 2010; Lingard et al., 2013; Martens & Jakobi, 2010; Sellar & Lingard, 2013b). Participants saw policy influences in higher education emerging from developments in other sectors and many made reference to the power and influence of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which tests 15-year old students triennially (OECD, 2014b). The far reaching effects of PISA are explored extensively in the literature (Dobbins & Martens, 2011; Grek, 2009; Gür et al., 2011; Rautalin & Alasuutari, 2009; Schuelka, 2012; Sellar & Lingard, 2013a).

However, as Lingard and Rawolle (2009) pointed out, ‘globalisation from above’ was also mediated by local and national settings, and the findings of this study revealed the nuanced ways in which mediation occurred. For example, some participants explained how governments exerted power selectively, by responding to global pressures that were aligned with their own national interests, and actively attempting to curtail other pressures. This strategic approach was akin to conceptions of ‘surface policy learning’ (Alexiadou, 2014; Lange & Alexiadou, 2010).
Global pressures were also seen to be exerting an influence at a national level through the widespread use of international comparative data, especially those used to produce rankings, the publication of which served to intensify competition. Rubenson (2008) argued that the OECD has achieved hegemonic status (Morton, 2007) in educational discourses through its capacity to set agendas that are pervasive. In this respect, the OECD’s work has contributed to the development of a climate where comparison is seen as ‘normal’ (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). Public quantitative comparisons operate as a “new form of governance” (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011, p. 498) and participants clearly articulated these comparative pressures, resonating strongly with the notion of competitive policy learning advanced by Lange and Alexiadou (2010). As Marginson (2014) observed, competition has become the norm, however the findings of this study also revealed how competitive undercurrents were deeply embedded within ostensibly collaborative practices between institutions and nations.

A strong drive to perform competitively on a global stage was revealed through critical discourse analysis of Australian Government policy documents including the landmark Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Australian Government, 2009). In this document Australia’s falling global rankings were cited as an ‘evidentiary warrant’ (Hyatt, 2013a) for change. Similarly, the creation of a sense of crisis, a ‘moral panic’ (Zajda, 2014), was used to justify the need to urgently ‘raise the game’ to remain internationally competitive. This was visible across policy texts of the Australian Government and in evidence throughout participant interviews. As Robertson and Dale (2013) argued, positioning and ranking are now dominant, and decisive.

In Australia and with respect to the influence of rankings, the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008) had pointed to the need for Australia to increase higher education participation rates in order to compete successfully in the global knowledge society. Document analysis of Australian policy texts highlighted discourses relating to the development of both economy and society, but themes of social justice and equity were eclipsed by stronger discourses that focused on economic success. This view of education was identified as instrumental by some participants who expressed concerns consistent with an argument that higher education policies are essentially neoliberal tools for supporting economic development (Allais, 2011; Wall et al., 2014).
Problems with standards.

The second theme, identified by participants within and beyond Australia, concerned the myriad problems with standards. Massaro (2013) pointed to the centrality of learning standards in any appraisal of quality, and there was widespread agreement amongst participants that standards (of some sort) were necessary. However, participants also asserted that previous policies had sought to address the issues surrounding standards without success. This view accorded with Shah (2012, p. 770), who pointed to the “lack of evidence to show that external audits have transformed quality in Australian higher education” after ten years of audit by the Australian Universities Quality Agency. However, participants also saw the ‘measurement’ of learning to be somewhat of a ‘holy grail’ in assessment, raising many issues that are well reported in the literature (Bloxham et al., 2011; Bloxham & Price, 2013; Knight, 2002a; Massaro, 2013; Newstead & Dennis, 1994; Price et al., 2011; Sadler, 2012; Woodhouse, 2010; Yorke, 2008).

Participants’ attitudes to the assessment of learning standards could be located on a continuum with ‘measurement’ at one end, and ‘judgement’ at the other, and these observed polar opposites were very much in accordance with those discussed in Bloxham et al. (2011). However, the findings of this study provided further insight into the ways in which the philosophical beliefs of elite policy actors were subjected to increasingly globalised pressures such as those associated with comparison and ranking. For example, one participant from the US claimed not to believe that existing data regarding standards were particularly valid or reliable, but he was willing to invest in the debate for extrinsic (competitive) reasons, given the high stakes involved.

Sector expansion threatens quality.

The third theme, identified by participants within and beyond Australia, related to the way sector expansion threatens quality. The OECD had identified that many constituent countries were seeking to increase participation in higher education, and the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008) picked up this theme. However, an increase in higher education participation was also associated with concerns that standards had fallen as the sector shifted away from an elite model towards participation on a mass scale (Pitman, 2014). On this note, the former senior
official within the OECD pointed out how education ministers had elected to focus on the issue of quality and expansion as a policy interest as early as 2006. This was particularly important, because in the market-driven economy that education is increasingly part of (Bekhradnia, 2013; Marginson, 2009; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Olssen & Peters, 2005), any signals of poor performance would potentially impact on higher education providers’ success in the global marketplace. This was a significant policy problem for Australia, given that the Government had accepted the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008) recommendation to remove the ‘caps’ on student places, in theory inviting unlimited expansion. The attention given to this expansion/quality couplet provided impetus to the development of learning standards as a means of ‘proving’ that quality was not impacted by such expansion, and the generation of ‘proof’ was important at global, national and local levels.

Institutional status and stance on learning standards.

The fourth theme to be raised by participants within and beyond Australia concerned institutional status and stance on learning standards. This theme described how various parts of the sector sought to influence policy development in ways that would be favourable to them. In broad terms, this highlighted positional differences between elite and non-elite institutions. For elite institutions, any change to the status quo risked disturbing their reputation for quality and their prestigious status. In short, they had “little to learn, and a fair amount to lose” (Zemsky, 2011, p. 168). Some participants saw elite institutions to be relatively immune from regulatory action, describing how these institutions had consistently argued that closer scrutiny was not necessary for them. The high power of elite institutions is recognised by Massy (2011), who described how the Russell Group of research-intensive institutions in the UK had successfully lobbied the Minister to abandon deeply unpopular external reviews of teaching quality.

Similar immunity has also been observed in Brazil where high status institutions simply refused to participate in mandated national tests of learning standards, without any apparent penalty for their non-compliance (Schwartzman, 2010). Reputational loss in a fiercely competitive and under-resourced higher education sector could prove to be damaging or even fatal, and high stakes issues of status (Marginson, 2014) and symbolic capital (Thompson-Whiteside, 2013) undergirded institutional stances on
learning standards. Whilst the high power of elite institutions is well reported in the literature (Marginson, 2011a, 2011b; Massy, 2011), the findings of this study offer further insights into the ways that non-elite institutions have sought to gain power and status. For example, non-elite institutions were seen to gain power if measures established in quality policies were able to demonstrate that the learning standards met by their graduates were comparable to their elite counterparts.

**Less prominent themes: rising demands for accountability; powerful policy actors.**

The preceding four themes were identified within and beyond the Australian higher education setting. There were two further themes within the context of policy influences that were less prominent. These were: rising demands for accountability (all settings except the Australian institutional level); and powerful policy actors (settings beyond Australia only).

The first of these less prominent themes related to the rising demands for accountability. This theme was evident in documents within the Australian national level of the policy trajectory study, and it was also present in the perspectives of participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and the OECD). As indicated above, this theme was not present at the Australian institutional level. Here, governments were seen to be creating a narrative around the societal need for confidence in the outcomes of education (Massaro, 2010).

The construction of this narrative, a social imaginary (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), located accountability at the heart of the policy ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of quality. For example, Zajda (2014, p. 164) saw a degree of “moral panic” in policy texts of the Australian Government that argued for stronger accountability to address issues of falling quality and trust in Australian higher education. Similarly, Wall et al. (2014, p. 6) pointed out that the “perceived educational crisis has undermined public trust” in US higher education. However, as Ranson (2003) and Hursh (2008, 2013) have argued, the imposition of increased accountability has itself generated perverse unintended consequences which have served to weaken trust further. Multiple crises of ‘falling standards’ have been at the heart of government policy proposals for stronger accountability in Australian, UK, and US policy texts, a position which has led to
recurrent calls for a rebalancing of trust and accountability in the literature (Barker, 2010; Bottery, 2006; Carless, 2009; Ranson, 2003; Vidovich & Currie, 2011).

In the Australian setting, the distancing of measures of control (Webb, 2011) was identified in the analysis of policy documents (refer to Chapter 7). This was evident through technologies of accountability that to some extent uncoupled the connection between the Australian Government and the higher education sector. This steering at a distance (Marginson, 1997) was achieved in a number of ways. For example, responsibility was passed to institutions to negotiate their contribution to sector-wide targets. Responsibility was also acquired by individuals such as the Discipline Scholars who were developing threshold learning outcomes for their subject areas. Both are examples of what Dean (2010) referred to as ‘new prudentialism’, where groups and individuals acquire more responsibilities for their own accountability. This reliance on the agency and actions of the governed is associated with contemporary neoliberal practices of governments (Dean, 2010; Exley & Ball, 2014; Olssen, 2009; Piro, 2008).

The second less prominent theme (identified only in the perspectives of participants from the UK, US and the OECD) related to the presence of policy actors that were not part of the policy elite but were nevertheless powerful. In this research, power was seen to circulate at all levels (Vidovich, 2007; Wang, 2011), and the expression of power was not limited to the policy elite. At a national level, elite policy actors sought to use ministerial or formal power to influence policy development. Although comparatively weak in general terms, actors at the ‘micro’ level were, on occasion, also able to exert considerable power through the publication of influential information. For example, the authors of Academically Adrift (Arum & Roksa, 2011) had argued that standards were falling in US higher education, producing ripples that extended far and wide.

**Propositions relating to the context of influences.**

These themes relating to the influences on quality policy processes relating to learning standards were synthesised into three propositions as outlined overleaf. Each of these propositions draws on the findings of this research in the light of the literature. Propositions are sequentially numbered throughout this chapter.
Propositions 1-3: policy influences

1. Neoliberal techniques of accountability within Australian, UK and US quality policies are increasingly drawing on quantitative comparative indicators as measures of ‘quality’. These indicators accentuate pressures to perform in a highly competitive and increasingly globalised higher education market.

2. Within Australia and the UK, significant expansion of the higher education sector has served to focus attention on the standards achieved by students. The OECD has also focused on this expansion/quality couplet. In the US, the focus has been on standards and the rapidly rising cost of higher education.

3. There are polarised and strongly contested views (mediated by vested interests) as to whether standards can be ‘measured’, producing influences both for and against the embedding of learning standards in quality policy.

Context of policy text production (research question 2).

What are the key characteristics of quality policy texts relating to learning standards in Australian higher education and how were they produced?

There were three substantive themes associated with the processes of policy text production within quality policies relating to learning standards. These were identified within the Australian policy trajectory study and in the perspectives of participants from the UK, the US and the OECD. Within the Australian setting, the critical discourse analysis of five key policy documents (refer to Chapter 7) released by the Australian Government in the period delineated in this research (2009-2013) were particularly relevant to this research question, and findings from interviews and document analysis were drawn together and examined in the light of the literature. These themes were: vested stakeholder interests; ideological tensions; and consultation processes. Each is examined in turn.

Vested stakeholder interests.

The first theme relating to the context of policy text production concerned the vested stakeholder interests held by different groups. Earlier in this chapter the differentiated
policy stances across elite and non-elite institutions were identified, and these vested interests affected the processes of policy text production throughout.

At the heart of these interests lay the issue of ownership and control of learning standards and, more importantly, their appraisal. The selection and definition of performance indicators was a focal point of policy processes, as it was here that comparative data would be established. Participants across Australian, UK, and US settings suggested that the consequences of introducing quantitative performance indicators based on the achievement of learning standards would be both far reaching and highly differentiated, as some institutions would benefit substantially, whilst others would not. In the Australian setting, vested interests were revealed in various institutions’ detailed submissions to consultation processes. Furthermore, Australian Vice Chancellors also fought a bitter campaign against the Australian Government through the media (e.g. Craven, 2010; Schwartz, 2011), and they voiced their opinion through publications (Coaldrake & Stedman, 2013). These debates in the public sphere are examples of the increasing ‘mediatisation’ of policy processes (Rawolle, 2010).

Participants from Australia, UK, and the US drew attention to the way that policy text production had, to some extent, been driven by commercial and not-for-profit organisations particularly in the realm of standardised testing. Participants saw considerable conflicts of interest and expressed concerns that organisations (such as the Australian Council for Educational Research) were seemingly able to speak persuasively to governments in order to advance a particular policy approach. This was seen to be attractive to governments because these organisations were offering ‘objective’ comparative data. As Exley and Ball (2014) pointed out, the business of education is highly lucrative. In this regard, the advice of ‘independent’ organisations was seen to be anything but neutral, given their vested interests and the high financial stakes involved.

The increasing involvement of these non-government individuals and organisations in policy processes was identified by Stewart-Weeks (2006, p. 200), who argued that it was becoming “increasingly hard to see where policy work is being done”. Ball (2012a) identified a number of relatively new players in policy processes, describing how their presence and involvement served to make matters more complex. On this point Vidovich (2013) also noted the wider range of policy actors involved in contemporary
policy processes and in particular highlighted the rise of those actors from private sectors. The emergence of new and diverse policy actors represents a challenge for contemporary approaches to policy analysis. The implication picked up in the findings of this research is that more sophisticated approaches to policy analysis may be required; an important point which will be considered later in this chapter.

**Ideological tensions.**

Processes of policy text production were impacted by underpinning ideological tensions regarding the appraisal of learning standards. Across Australian, UK and US settings, participants either took the stance that learning standards were impossible to define or measure, or they took the stance that these standards were measurable, with some also expressing support for standardised testing. Interestingly, one Australian Government participant saw great political advantage in having comparable measures of learning, whilst at the same time expressing reservations about whether such measurement was really possible.

Throughout the processes of policy text production, the Australian Government did not waver from the intention to establish the direct measures of learning proposed by Bradley et al. (2008). Using these measures, students’ achievement would be reported as a quality indicator for institutions. However, this preoccupation with indicators that focused on aspects amenable to ‘measurement’ was roundly criticised by participants for producing what Ozga referred to as “apparently objective data” (Ozga, 2009, p. 153). Historically, indicators that had been used as a proxy for learning standards were seen to be limited in scope, and heavily slanted towards employment and economic outcomes, marginalising other outcomes such as social equity, and echoing concerns raised by Ranson (2003) and Bottery (2009). Furthermore, narrow indicators were also seen to reduce the complex and multidimensional nature of learning to a single score, producing many adverse consequences (De Lissovoy & Mclaren, 2003; Lederman et al., 2014; Nichols & Berliner, 2008).

Within the Australian policy trajectory study at both national and institutional levels, many participants argued against the use of these narrow performance data in quality policy, suggesting that such scores would be neither valid nor reliable, echoing the
concern that learning standards are no panacea for the problem of institutional quality assessment (Knight, 2002b) no matter how well-specified they might be.

In short, the issue of learning standards was what Knight and Page (2007) described as a ‘wicked problem’. Characteristics of wicked problems include the lack of a precedent setting resolution; diverse and vested interests; and strongly oppositional views of what a ‘solution’ should look like (Stewart-Weeks, 2006). These tensions surrounding learning standards and their appraisal were further compounded by the Australian Government’s desire to also support innovation and diversity in higher education. Stewart-Weeks summed up the policymakers’ dilemma neatly: “We want our policy cake (flexible, responsive, emergent, networked) and we want to eat it too (measurable, comparable, accountable)” (Stewart-Weeks, 2006, p. 196).

**Consultation processes.**

In the Australian setting many participants were of the view that the public (online) consultations conducted by the Australian Government were reasonably open. However, some expressed concerns about the technical complexity of the issues involved and questioned whether this served to circumscribe public input in practice. Furthermore, analysis of policy texts revealed that the choice of timing of some of these consultations was highly problematic. On this point and in their advice to policymakers, Althaus, Bridgman, and Davis (2013) suggested that most consultations should be run for a period of at least three months, with two months as an absolute minimum. If so, some of the consultation times identified in this research fell short of that ideal, such as the case of one policy consultation covering a spread of technically complicated issues relating to the use of proposed performance indicators (see Chapter 7, policy document 2). Seven weeks was provided for institutions to respond, a period which spanned the Christmas and traditional holiday season. This tight time frame, in combination with the likely absence of key staff would have constrained institutions’ ability to respond adequately. Despite this timing, many institutions still managed to mount a spirited response to this particular consultation, perhaps unsurprisingly, given the high stakes involved.

Whilst there was an acceptance that online consultation processes in the Australian setting were open, the same could not be said of the closed (i.e. by invitation only)
‘round table’ consultations held by the Australian Government. Here, participants were critical of the lack of representation from researchers working in the domain of quality policy and/or learning standards. To this end, it was not clear that relevant and appropriate stakeholder groups had been systematically identified, a key requirement if consultation processes are to be successful (Althaus et al., 2013; Cameron, 2004).

In settings beyond Australia, participants from the US were roundly critical of consultation processes undertaken in the lead up to the production of *A Test of Leadership* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). This was a quality policy document with a strong focus on learning standards within the US higher education sector. Here, criticism was levelled at the policy elite for ‘rigging’ the processes through the selective recruitment of members to key stakeholder groups so as to secure the desired result. To this end, those US consultation processes appeared to lack what Althaus et al. (2013, p. 2) referred to as “procedural integrity”. The desire of governments to offer ‘something for everyone’ in policy texts was observed in both US and UK settings, and participants criticised this approach as it served to produce a muddled ‘solution’ that served no-one.

Whilst there was a persistent view within and beyond Australia that academic voices were marginalised, some argued that leading education researchers were quick to avoid getting embroiled in the messiness of policy production. Denniss (2006) suggested that whilst most political advisors would be in touch with academics, the reverse was not necessarily true. In other words, many academic researchers would not be engaged with processes of policy text production, the consequence of which was that “academic research that has policy relevance is likely to be unnoticed by those in day-to-day policy discourse” (Denniss, 2006, p. 233).

Participants within and beyond Australia asserted that the plan to introduce the US Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) as a comparable test of learning standards in Australia was poorly thought out and badly executed. Although the art of ‘managing’ policy text production through processes of consultation are well described (Althaus et al., 2013), such processes can carry an implicit and normative expectation that “policy managers should consult, and the consulted should consent” (Colebatch, 2006, p. 13). The proposed importation of this US test of learning standards came ‘out of the blue’ for an unprepared Australian higher education sector. The ‘consulted’ did not consent.
A recurrent view expressed by Australian, UK and US participants was that the Australian Government had simply not taken any notice of a substantial body of research pointing to the limitations of the CLA, or the difficulties of ‘measuring’ learning standards more broadly. The counter view, held by a small minority, was that academics were simply unable to agree to anything, which resonated with the assertion that this group can be “unhelpfully out of touch with real and practical policy problems” (Ball & Exley, 2010, p. 153).

During 2011, the Australian Government strategically drew on this lack of agreement as part of their justification for removing funding for the development of performance indicators from institutions (DEEWR, 2011c). Given that this move was also accompanied by the withdrawal of these contested indicators, the removal of funding passed without serious challenge from a relieved sector (Coaldrake & Stedman, 2013). In particular, clarification was offered that the CLA would now be an Australian version rather than a direct importation of this indicator from the US (DEEWR, 2011c).

Participants referred to the way arguments for various performance indicators were carefully structured and presented so as to favour a particular approach, and this was observed in document analysis conducted within the Australian setting (refer to Chapter 7). In this sense, research evidence became a form of ‘ammunition’, to be sought out and used selectively. This was entirely in line with the view of Orland (2009, p. 118) who suggested that “educational research is much more likely to be paid attention to by educational policy leaders when it buttresses arguments about particular policy directions”.

Participants from within and beyond Australia also identified how they had drawn on their professional networks to muster powerful players and strong evidence-based arguments to try and stifle or advance a particular policy approach. Like the policy elite, academics also selectively used researchers and the research evidence as ammunition. One Australian participant explained how they had flown an “iconic person to help shoot down the CLA” (NGS) from the US to Australia to counter the proposals of the Australian Government. This resonated with Keen (2006, p. 39), who pointed to the “increasingly sophisticated nature” of non-government policy actors and their ability to inject high quality data into policy processes. Eventually, and in the face of sustained opposition, the Australian Government shelved proposals to
introduce any direct measure of learning standards, instead opting for the ‘softer’ survey of employer satisfaction with graduates that had been proposed by the Advancing Quality in Higher Education Reference Group (2012).

*Propositions relating to the context of policy text production.*

Drawing on the findings of this research in the light of the literature, these themes relating to quality policy text production were synthesised into three propositions as outlined below.

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<td>4. The production of Australian, UK and US quality policy relating to learning standards has been characterised by considerable power struggles over the ownership, control and means of appraising those standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Australian Government has increasingly sought to exert greater control of Australian higher education through the use of performance funding and published quantitative comparative data on learning standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Australian consultation processes were sometimes criticised for giving insufficient time for stakeholder responses to complex policy proposals, and for holding ‘closed’ (invitation only) meetings. However, online consultations were open to sector/public input, and the often critical nature of this feedback was amplified by the media. The result was a weakening of the Australian Government’s resolve to develop comparable measures of learning, evident in significant changes to policy texts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Context of practices/effects (research question 3).**

*What are the emergent and predicted practices/effects of quality policies relating to learning standards in Australian higher education?*

With respect to quality policies relating to learning standards, there were six themes associated with emergent and predicted policy practices/effects. These were identified within the Australian policy trajectory study and in the perspectives of participants.
from the UK, the US and the OECD. Four of these were substantive themes, present within the Australian policy trajectory study and also in the perspectives of participants from the UK, the US and the OECD. These included: defensive manoeuvring; comparison and competition; threshold minimum standards; and increased bureaucratisation. Two less prominent themes were identified: improved sector awareness (Australian national level only) and improved assessment tasks (settings beyond Australia only). In the following subsections, these themes are examined in the light of the literature. Each of the first four substantive themes is discussed in turn; the two lesser themes are grouped together and discussed in the final subsection.

**Defensive manoeuvring.**

Participants from Australia, UK, and the US spoke of the various ways that quality policy texts had provoked defensive responses from the sector. Many of these manoeuvres were anticipatory in nature, in that they attempted to proactively respond to a possible new policy position that had been signalled in government proposals.

In Australia, participants referred to the Quality Verification System (Group of Eight, 2014) which had been developed by a group of universities as a reaction to proposed external measures of learning standards. Although the Quality Verification System was a relatively simple low-cost approach, this manoeuver was criticised for being superficial as the verification of student work was not conducted ‘blind’ (i.e. the verifier in the external institution was able to see the original grade that had been allocated to the work). This issue was picked up by some participants in this research, and it was also noted in an evaluation report (Krause et al., 2014).

Similar examples were cited by participants from the UK and the US. For example, in the US setting, the Voluntary System of Accountability had been seen to emerge as a reaction to proposals contained within *A Test of Leadership* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). This policy paper had argued for the introduction of standardised testing to address the issue of a perceived fall in the quality of learning standards in US higher education. Across Australian, UK, and US settings, issues of agency, power and control were therefore inextricably linked with defensive manoeuvring to “fend off” (Shavelson, 2010, p. 199) government intrusion.
Comparison and competition.

Participants from Australian, UK and US settings pointed to the dangers of creating additional institutional rankings, the establishment of which would be facilitated by quantitative comparisons of learning standards. Rankings are becoming increasingly mediatised (Stack, 2013), and they represent an apparently “simple, transparent and compelling” (Marginson, 2014, p. 45) rendering of the complex world of universities, albeit one with potentially dangerous unintended consequences for the academic endeavour (Foley & Goldstein, 2012). However, participants also recognised mounting pressure from governments, employers and the public who were becoming increasingly interested in measuring and comparing institutions’ performance in a range of domains including students’ achievement of learning standards. Shavelson (2010) described this tension as a ‘clash of cultures’ because the various stakeholders (i.e. government, academia, public) had different vested interests and beliefs as to the nature of quality and how it might be stimulated (Brown, 2010b).

This tension was also picked up by Schwartzman (2010) who described the Brazilian experience of introducing the Provão, a national test of learning standards that was applied to all students graduating from specific programs. This was deeply unpopular with students and academics, but “from the beginning, it received strong support in public opinion and in the press” (Schwartzman, 2010, p. 293). Students even boycotted the test, but this practice was not successful as the effect of this was to downgrade the published ratings of the students’ courses. One particular iteration of the Brazilian approach produced rankings from students’ results, where the top and bottom 12% of courses were always graded ‘A’ and ‘E’ respectively. In a field where courses were generally quite good, 12% would automatically get an ‘E’ grade, and vice versa. This highlights the problem of rankings which are by definition norm-referenced (Foley & Goldstein, 2012; Marginson, 2014; Rauhvargers, 2011; Redden & Low, 2012; Stratford, 2014). At the very least, performance indicators are complex (Bird et al., 2005), and their use in rankings has received wide attention (Hägg & Wedlin, 2013; Marginson, 2014; Robertson & Dale, 2013). On this point Foley and Goldstein (2012, p. 42) identified the “growing evidence that ‘gaming’ of the league table system is now relatively widespread, particularly in countries where league tables are a deeply-rooted aspect of the higher education sector”.
Shavelson (2010) pointed out that accountability is both a powerful tool and delicate instrument, highlighting that the injudicious use of quality performance indicators has the potential to cause the very behaviours the indicators are trying to prevent. The negative consequences of instrumental and performative approaches to accountability have been repeatedly reported in a substantial body of literature in a range of education settings (Alderman, 2009; Allais, 2011; Amrein-Beardsley, Berliner, & Rideau, 2010; Ball, 2003, 2012b; Caldwell, 2012; Chilcott, 2011; Frolich, 2011; Grek, 2009; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2008; Hursh, 2013; Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Polesel et al., 2014; Rautalin & Alasuutari, 2009; Rowlands, 2012; Turner, 2014).

Whilst the findings of this study are consistent with a substantial body of literature, they also provide further insights into the powerful effects of rapidly intensifying competitive pressures within higher education and their implications for assessment practices. Many participants made reference to the strong probability that perverse consequences would occur given that institutions were desperate to outperform others on norm-referenced and public measures of quality. Participants identified a range of ways that measures had been (or could be) ‘gamed’, including: soft marking (to boost pass rates); selectively paying stronger students to take external tests; teaching to the test (to improve scores); enrolling students selectively (to ‘stack’ the odds by excluding ‘difficult’ students); and responding to policy consultations in ways that would be favourable to their institution.

**Threshold minimum standards.**

The problem of defining ‘threshold’, or minimum learning standards was identified by Australian and UK participants. In the UK setting, disciplinary ‘benchmark standards’ had been recast as ‘benchmark statements’ shortly before their publication (Rust et al., 2003). On a casual reading, this modest change of wording might appear innocuous, but it reflected a profound transition away from the idea that standards could be specified towards a far less prescriptive conception.

In the Australian setting, participants discussed the attempts to develop ‘threshold learning outcomes’ (minimum learning standards) for selected disciplinary groupings (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010). However, the Australian approach
essentially encountered the problems that the UK had experienced when attempting to establish and define learning standards. Whilst participants were clear that there had been substantial value in the Australian process, they also conceded that the product had not yet provided a benchmark against which graduates could be ‘measured’. There was a further concern that minimum learning standards, if publicly articulated, would be judged to be too low, thereby threatening the perceived quality of graduates.

Overall, these findings extend a substantial body of literature arguing that learning standards in the higher education context are extremely difficult to define with any degree of precision (Bloxham & Price, 2013; Brown, 2010b; Knight, 2006; Knight & Page, 2007; Price et al., 2011; Rust, 2014; Sadler, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2014; Yorke, 2008). Knight summed this up unequivocally: “My argument is not that we need to do more work to find solutions. It is that solutions are not to be had. This is because the achievements that are central to higher education resist measurement” (Knight, 2006, p. 450). What Knight was pointing to here was the futility (Sadler, 2014) of trying to ‘fix’ the problem of standards by specifying them in ever-increasing detail. Furthermore, attempts to do so have been associated with undesirable consequences such as curricular narrowing, suppression of creativity, and atomistic approaches to the appraisal of learning (Bloxham, 2009; Sadler, 2008; Torrance, 2007; Welsman, 2009). Taken together, these arguments suggested that the problem of identifying quantitatively comparable threshold minimum learning standards in higher education was, to all intents and purposes, unresolvable. However, this was contrary to the position taken by Australian and UK governments, which at various times took the stance that minimum standards could (and should) be specified, and the nature of the ‘problem’ was that of insufficient specification.

This is effectively a denial of Wittgenstein’s (1953) point that rules (or, in this case, standards) do not specify their own interpretation or application (Van Roermund, 2013). Shavelson (2010, p. 129) made the same point about accountability data, pointing out that “they do not speak for themselves”. An interesting example of the extent to which interpretation can vary appeared in a response from an Australian participant who described how students would all have the same “excellent minimum standard” (NG10), a remarkable juxtaposition of the concepts.
**Increased bureaucratisation.**

The issue of increased bureaucratisation was raised by Australian, UK and US participants, and this largely related to the burden of providing information for accountability purposes. As Shavelson (2010) noted, information is central to accountability, the provision of which is expensive and time-consuming and the value of which is open to question (Foley & Goldstein, 2012).

A number of Australian participants pointed to the irony of policies that directed scant resources towards increased accountability at a time of financial austerity, echoing an argument advanced by Allais (2011) who pointed out that policy settings may weaken the very aspect they are intended to reinforce. Similar observations were advanced by Brown (2010b) with reference to the UK setting.

The provision of information to consumers within a ‘free’ market (Ball, 2012a; Cahill, Stilwell, & Edwards, 2012; Dean, 2010; Harvey, 2005) is at the heart of contemporary neoliberal approaches to government. Participants in Australian, UK and US settings pointed to the increasing volume of information on various aspects of higher education provision, but they doubted that the publication of data on learning standards would have any significant influence on students’ choice of institution, given the enduring prestige of elite institutions (Marginson, 2014). To this end, some participants rejected the idea that an institution highly ranked for learning standards in one country could draw students from other countries, a view in accordance with the suggestion that higher education is not a free market (Brown, 2011; Moodie, 2011a).

However, in the case of the Brazilian setting where national rankings of graduate learning standards were published at the turn of the millennium, some poorly ranked courses saw their enrolments halve whilst demand for highly ranked courses rose (Schwartzman, 2010). A significant consideration is that this Brazilian experiment was in an era prior to the rapid rise of internet technologies and transnational online education (Ball, 2012b). It is likely that providers might now find it easier to recruit internationally, especially if students were able to study online at a distance (Middlehurst, 2014).
Less prominent themes: improved sector awareness; improved assessment tasks.

There were two themes relating to the context of policy practices/effects that were less prominent: improved sector awareness (Australian national level only) and improved assessment tasks (settings beyond Australia only). Both of these themes were seen to be positive consequences of an increased focus on learning standards in policy processes. This suggested that the tensions between various stakeholders in the accountability triangle (government, academia, market) proposed by Burke (2005) can also be positive as well as negative (Shavelson, 2010).

For example, within the Australian setting at the national level, participants spoke of the improved sector awareness of learning standards and their appraisal. Similarly, participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD) pointed to the improved assessment tasks that had arisen, attributing this to a closer focus on the issue of learning standards in quality policies. However, some participants pointed out that a number of these developments were framed in instrumental terms (i.e. they were orientated towards improving performance on a particular measure), rather than forming part of an integrated approach to curriculum. This issue resonates with Wall et al. (2014) who highlighted how aspects that are measured become those that are valued.

Propositions relating to the context of practices/effects.

Drawing on the findings of this research in the light of the literature, these themes relating to policy practices/effects were synthesised into five propositions, as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Propositions 7-11: policy practices/effects</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.   Australian, UK and US quality policies in the domain of learning standards have provoked defensive responses from the higher education sector in order to mitigate or take advantage of proposed policy positions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.   Narrowly defined, high stakes performance indicators have been associated with competitive ‘gaming’ behaviours in Australian, UK and US settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.   Australian, UK and US higher education sectors are concerned about increasing bureaucratisation associated with accountability, and the diversion of scarce resources away from quality enhancement towards quality assurance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. Australian, UK and US quality policies have raised the profile of teaching, learning and assessment and this has, in places, led to some improved practices.

11. The attempted articulation of ‘threshold’ learning standards in Australian and UK quality policies has focused attention on minimal acceptable levels of performance, but this level may be perceived to be too low by employers and the general public.

Context of outcomes (research question 4).

What are the longer term outcomes (both emerging and predicted) of quality policy trends relating to learning standards in Australian higher education?

The themes of reduced student equity and academic agency represented two substantive emergent or predicted policy outcomes associated with quality policies relating to learning standards. These were identified within the Australian policy trajectory study and in the perspectives of participants from the UK, the US and the OECD. Three further themes were identified, but these were less prominent: within the Australian setting, the themes of institutional diversity and public confidence were raised, whilst the status of teaching versus research was identified in the perspectives of participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD). In the following three subsections, these themes are examined in the light of the literature. The two substantive themes are each discussed in turn, and the three less prominent themes are grouped together in the final subsection.

Student equity.

The majority of participants raised issues relating to the theme of student equity and, in particular, the way such equity was being eroded. These concerns revolved around the way that social inclusion was determined, and whether the learning standards achieved by disadvantaged groups were equivalent to those standards achieved by others. For example, participants from Australia, UK, and the US criticised the
dominance of input measures (such as participation) for equity groups on the grounds that this approach left unaddressed the thornier question of whether these groups achieved equivalent outcomes, or, indeed, whether they achieved anything at all.

One participant from the OECD suggested that comparative data arising from PISA had been transformational in terms of improving equity in schools. However, for the areas of higher education encompassed by this research, the findings suggested that the attention and effort directed towards equity was far weaker than that directed to the demonstration of comparative quality. This is consistent with observations that issues of quality are eclipsing equity in a number of higher education discourses (Pitman & Vidovich, 2012; Zajda, 2014).

The intertwining of two discourses (social justice and economic) was observed in document analysis of Australian policy texts. In short, equity reforms were focused on improving “equality of economic opportunity” (Zajda, 2014, p. 168). Issues of ‘fairness’ (Marginson, 2011a) were framed together with economic success, by linking increased participation to the development of a more highly trained and competitive workforce (Australian Government, 2009). Here, economic success was predicated on greater social inclusion, just as it had been more than two decades ago: “the current barriers to the participation of financially and other disadvantaged groups limit our capacity to develop the highest skilled workforce possible” (Dawkins, 1988, p. 7).

Weaving together economic and social outcomes, policy texts of the Australian Government (2009) drew together two broad components to system expansion. The first related to the expansion of the system overall (increasing the percentage of 25-34 year olds with a bachelor degree from 29% to 40%) whilst the second focused on increasing the proportional participation of low socioeconomic status groups to 20%. Low socioeconomic status was defined as the bottom quartile (Marginson, 2011a), and over the preceding 15 years, participation rates from this group had hovered around the 14-15% mark (Gale & Tranter, 2011), far short of the 25% level. Taken together, these two components of system expansion established targets that increased participation from low socioeconomic groups in both absolute and relative terms. However, there were tensions here with respect to social justice and measures of equity. If more students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds entered higher education in absolute terms, then it could be argued that equity had improved. This
was ‘equity as inclusion’ (Marginson, 2011a). On the other hand, if the relative proportion of equity groups in higher education remained unrepresentative of the population at large, it could be argued that equity had not improved and this was a conception of ‘equity as fairness’, advanced by the OECD (Santiago et al., 2008).

These conceptions are problematic on at least two counts. First, conceptions of social justice (in the Australian setting at least) were nation-centric as international students were not included in policy calculations, implying that studies of policy processes were thereby bound to a certain degree of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013). International students comprise approximately 27% of all Australian enrolments (Department of Education, 2014a), and to exclude this group is to discount wider issues of transnational social mobility and equity (Sellar & Gale, 2011).

Second, the focus on input measures (access and participation) for equity side-stepped the issue of learning standards and their achievement. Writing about this issue in the US, Zemsky (2011, p. 159) explained that: “the problem is not access but attainment”. Although Australian Government policy texts released during 2009 did initially attempt to include measures of success in terms of completion rates, these proposals did not prevail. In part, the reason for this was ascribed to the difficulty of defining and measuring standards, but Australian participants also suggested that institutions were very reluctant to be publicly judged on completion rates, especially those rates for equity groups. This was because public data on completion rates might influence grading practices by prompting soft marking to inflate results, thereby weakening perceived quality. Alternatively, these data might also cause institutions to become more cautious about accepting students with diverse backgrounds or needs. In other settings such as the US, the issue of risk aversion and the effect on equity groups had been picked up as an issue in the press (Stratford, 2014), and, in a market economy, such risk aversion might serve to increase social stratification within the sector. This might have the effect of exacerbating the danger that the disadvantaged would be “mostly fobbed off with places in least valued institutions” (Marginson, 2011a, p. 32).

There was a general sense across the Australian, UK, and US settings that learning standards should be unassailable (i.e. not lowered for equity groups). On this point, Australian participants raised the possibility that trustworthy comparative data (if this was achievable) could, in time, signal that equity groups were achieving equivalent
standards to others. Furthermore, these data could also signal that students in non-elite institutions were achieving comparably to those in elite institutions. Whilst these signals might challenge the status quo and prestige of elite institutions (Marginson, 2014), they could make a contribution to improved social justice. However, there are many factors associated with persistent inequality, such as the effect of parents’ educational status on the aspirations of their children (Chesters & Watson, 2012).

Referring to the widespread use of comparative data and drawing on the example of PISA, Sellar and Lingard (2013b) argued that governments tend to assume that these data have arisen as a consequence of a particular policy position. Feniger and Lefstein (2014) concurred, suggesting that the high performance of some countries in global comparisons was typically ascribed to the national policy levers that were in force. However, this linear attribution essentially falls into the trap of confusing correlation with causation. There are a number of variables that contribute to a particular data point, and the policy setting in force at that time is but one factor. As Sellar and Lingard (2013b) convincingly argued, the danger is that successes and failures are attributed to the policy setting, leaving the thornier and deeper problems of socioeconomic inequality unaddressed.

In the Australian setting, early attempts to measure disadvantaged students’ outcomes in terms of their achievement of learning standards were abandoned by the end of the period delineated in this research, leaving equity measured in terms of participation. In a similar vein, whilst Enns (2014) identified evidence of a renewed commitment to equity appearing in discussions as part of a ‘Global Thematic Consultation on Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda’, these commitments were discussed in terms of access to education, which appeared to leave the more difficult issue of outcomes unaddressed.

**Academic agency.**

Participants across Australian, UK and US settings were of the view that academic agency would decline in the light of quality policies relating to learning standards. First, quality assurance tended to be superimposed as an ‘exo-skeletal’ requirement, becoming increasingly divorced from teaching and especially where externalised measures of learning were involved (Ball, 2012b). Second, increases in the number of
standards and measures were seen to imply that there would be less autonomy for higher education teachers in future. Third, and cross-cutting the theme of bureaucracy discussed earlier, institutions had responded to the requirement for more data by strengthening the role of their quality departments and this was seen to divert scant institutional resources from teaching itself. These outcomes were divisive as they further separated academics from their administrations (Houston & Paewai, 2013; Shavelson, 2010). Finally, within the US setting, one participant pointed to the way school teachers could be dismissed if their students performed poorly on flawed tests with manipulated cut scores (Hurst, 2013), observing that similar practices were starting to emerge in at least one higher education institution that they were aware of.

Performative (Ball, 2003) approaches to accountability tend to redirect attention towards the activities that are subject to measurement (Ball, 2012b), at the expense of other aspects that may be equally or more important. To this end, Schwartzman (2010) reported substantial changes in teaching practices after the introduction of standardised testing in higher education, with some 82% of respondents using items from the test in class, and 55% running ‘mock’ tests to practice and prepare.

Dill and Beerkens (2010) argued that the relentless pursuit of high rankings on performative measures (e.g. in league tables) served to displace the very activities needed to improve standards and participants’ views accorded with this line of reasoning. On this note, Giroux (2008) suggested that as higher education becomes ever more exposed to the market, the nature of academic identity is being transformed from that of the tenured critical professional to that of the hired technician who becomes a disposable asset; one that is increasingly subservient to external accounts of performance. This observation is made elsewhere (Ball, 2009; Bottery, 2009; Exley & Ball, 2014; Hursh, 2013) and is consistent with neoliberal conceptions of the interested self (Ball, 2012a; Bay, 2011; Canaan & Schumar, 2008; Gillies, 2011). In Weberian terms, academics were increasingly becoming “specialists without spirit” (Weber, 1958, p. 182).

Less prominent themes: institutional diversity; public confidence; status of teaching versus research.

There were three further themes within the context of policy outcomes that were less prominent. These were: institutional diversity (Australian national and institutional
level only); public confidence (Australian national level only); and the status of teaching versus research (settings beyond Australia only).

The first of these less prominent themes, institutional diversity, was present within the Australian setting at both national and institutional levels but it was not raised by participants from beyond Australia. This theme described participant concerns that excessive prescription would stifle innovation, and that standardisation would gradually follow in the wake of established standards. These concerns are consistent with a body of literature (largely from the school sector) that views prescriptive accountability and high stakes testing as antithetical to diversity, arguing that the outcome of this has been to produce curricular narrowing (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2011; Polesel et al., 2014; Torrance, 2011). On the other hand, and as Zemsky (2011) pointed out, higher education institutions have been remarkably successful at resisting change. Whilst Zemsky was referring to the US setting, document analysis of Australian Government policy texts in this research (refer to Chapter 7) painted a very similar picture of successful resistance from the academic sector.

The second theme with less prominence, present within the Australian setting at the national level only, identified that public confidence in higher education might improve over time if comparative data on learning standards were available to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency for regulatory purposes. If achievable, this could improve accountability as this might reassure the public that standards were being adhered to; it would also threaten to expose low quality higher education providers. The perceived low quality of private providers had been called into question by some participants, and this discourse resonated with Pasura (2014) who identified similar attempts to cast the focus on ‘dodgy’ private providers in the Australian vocation and education setting.

The third theme with less prominence related to the status of teaching versus research, and this was raised only in the perspectives of participants from the UK, the US and the OECD. Current league table rankings mainly focused on research outputs (Marginson, 2014; Rauhvargers, 2011), and this was seen by participants to marginalise teaching and learning. If data on learning standards could be realised, then these data could, in time, be incorporated into ranking calculations, and participants saw potential for the current status imbalance in favour of research to be redressed, at
least in part. There are some movements towards more multi-dimensional approaches to ranking (Coates & Richardson, 2012; Hägg & Wedlin, 2013; Marginson, 2014) and these give increased attention to issues of teaching and learning.

*Propositions relating to the context of outcomes.*

Drawing on the findings of this research in the light of the literature, these themes relating to longer term policy outcomes were synthesised into four propositions as outlined below. These propositions have relevance to the policy settings studied in this research (i.e. Australia, UK and US); they also have relevance to the activities of the OECD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Propositions 12-15: policy outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. Social justice may be improved, if comparative data on learning standards are able to demonstrate that the standards achieved in non-elite institutions are, in fact, equivalent to those in elite institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Institutions may become increasingly reluctant to enrol students with specific needs, and this may lead to greater stratification within the sector if institutional quality is to be judged on the basis of learning standards achieved by students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Whilst sharply defined learning standards may facilitate a closer focus on assessment practices, their presence may also narrow the curriculum and reduce academics’ freedom and autonomy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. If the evaluation of learning becomes separated from the teaching and learning process through external and/or independent testing of learning standards, this may paradoxically weaken quality.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Ideology and power: A key integrating theme across policy contexts and settings

The discussion thus far has presented an analysis of the complex themes associated with accountability and quality policies relating to learning standards, and their implications for assessment in higher education. Across the Australian policy trajectory and in settings beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD) a key integrating theme was ubiquitous: the theme of ideology and power.

In the following subsections, this key integrating theme is examined further. As previously, the policy trajectory study of the Australian setting takes centre stage, given the primary focus of this research. The relevant points of resonance and difference in the perspectives of policy actors from the UK, US, and the OECD are also drawn into the discussion.

Ideology and power.

Drawing on the dual theoretical frameworks of critical theory and poststructuralism in a hybrid approach (refer to Chapter 4), this study revealed the intertwined nature of ideology and power with respect to learning standards, highlighting in particular the dynamic nature of power relationships.

Taking first the issue of ideological stance, some participants argued that learning standards could (and should) be measured, whilst for others the notion that learning standards could ever be ‘measured’ was vigorously rejected. A small number took a more cautious approach, seeing learning standards to be measurable, but only within certain disciplines and only to a limited extent.

Earlier in this thesis, Chapter 3 discussed a number of ideological tensions between positivist and interpretative approaches to learning standards. Within an interpretative paradigm, standards are seen to emerge from consensus-building activities, with students’ achievement appraised through assessment practices aligned to matters of ‘judgement’. Conversely, the assumption that learning standards are able to be specified and measured is aligned more to a positivist approach (Bloxham & Price, 2013), and the dominance of this ideological stance was visible in all of the settings (Australian, UK, US, and OECD) studied here.
With respect to the issue of power, this study established that some groups (notably governments) and a limited number of individuals held considerable power in processes of quality policy text production whilst others did not. However it was also the case that as policy processes unfolded, these groups and individuals gained or lost power over time.

The intersecting dynamics of ideology and power can be expressed on two continua, as outlined in Figure 10.1 below. It should be noted from the outset that this representation should not be taken to infer a dichotomy in either case. A number of illustrative examples are offered in the following paragraphs to show the utility of this analytic device, and to highlight how these intersecting continua were highly nuanced.

![Figure 10.1 Actor power and ideological stance towards learning standards](image)

The findings of this study indicate that the policy elite of the Australian Government would be located in Quadrant A of Figure 10.1, given their high power and persistent view that learning standards could (and should) be measured. In contrast, the UK policy elite participants in this study were located in Quadrant B, also with high power but with a belief that learning standards were not measurable, instead favouring processes of consensus building and judgement to appraise standards within cognate disciplines. A small number of academic participants would be located in Quadrant C, with relatively low power and a belief that standards could be measured. The majority of the Australian, UK and US academics in this study would be located in Quadrant D, owing to their relatively low power and rejection of the notion that standards were
measurable. However, whilst their individual power was low, at times this group was collectively able to exert considerable influence on some policy processes.

Changes in ideological stance were not a feature within the Australian setting. For example, despite giving ground on the use of various indicators over the period of this study, the Australian Government stuck doggedly to the notion that learning standards could and should be measured. This contrasted with the different approach taken by the UK Quality Assurance Agency, which had embarked on a similar process to create disciplinary benchmark standards, but these had been re-cast as benchmark statements by the time of their publication (Rust et al., 2003). Essentially, the Australian Government was seeking to advance an approach based on measurement, one that had previously been rejected in the UK setting.

As outlined earlier, these quadrant groupings should not be taken to be mutually exclusive. They are based on intersecting continua, and their interrelationship was highly nuanced. For example, some participants were less powerful than the policy elite, but they were not considered to have low power. In terms of ideological stance, some participants saw learning standards to be measurable but only in certain areas within some disciplines. Other nuances also existed. To illustrate, one very senior Australian Government official expressed a personal view that standards could not be measured, but went on to pursue ‘objective’ comparative data for the lever of power it would provide. Similarly, some institutions were seen to argue for comparative measures of learning in order to gain competitive advantage by demonstrating that their students’ achievement of learning standards was equivalent or better than those students from more prestigious institutions. Overall, whilst ideological stance appeared to remain static, power flows were highly dynamic, forming and reforming, ebbing and flowing with varying intensity at different times. Any attempt, therefore, to locate policy actors using Figure 10.1 could only be a ‘snapshot in time’ given these dynamic policy processes and the nuanced nature of the two continua.

**Examining dynamic power relationships: the ‘glo-na-cal’ agency heuristic.**

The dynamic power relationships revealed in this study are further examined using the ‘glo-na-cal’ agency heuristic advanced by Marginson and Rhoades (2002). Forces of globalisation are exerting considerable influence on policy processes across global to
local levels (refer to Chapters 3 and 4) and it is therefore appropriate to draw on this heuristic with its focus on the global, national and the local (hence ‘glo-na-cal’).

This heuristic (or versions of it) have been employed in a number of policy analyses. For example, Välimaa (2004) and Vidovich (2004) drew on this heuristic in Finnish and Australian higher education settings respectively, as did Costa (2011) in her study of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2014b). Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009) cited the heuristic’s recognition of the dynamic and complex interactions between multiple dimensions as a positive strength, as did others (Saarinen & Ursin, 2011; Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013). Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009) further observed that the local, national or global level was itself created and reified through power dynamics and practices, a view consistent with poststructural approaches to actor agency (Simons et al., 2009). In short, the heuristic has been a useful tool for policy analysis (Vidovich, 2013) and it provides a lens through which relationships from global to local can be subjected to closer inspection.

Marginson and Rhoades’ (2002) heuristic examines power relationships through four dimensions. These are: **reciprocity**, which describes the multidirectional flows of influence; **strength**, which describes the intensity of the influence; **layers and conditions**, which collectively describe the setting; and **spheres of agency**, which refers to the ‘reach’ of the power dynamic. Two meanings of the word ‘agency’ are adopted in the heuristic. The first use of the term refers to agencies as organisations or as human agents; whilst the second refers to the ability (agency) of these individuals/groups to act within their domain. Taking each of these four dimensions in turn, power relationships revealed in the policy analysis conducted in this study are examined in the following subsections.

**Reciprocity.**

With respect to the first dimension of reciprocity (directional flows), there were expressions of power both downwards and upwards. The Australian Government was influenced by powerful global pressures, and there was evidence of both uncritical policy borrowing (Ozga & Jones, 2006) and policy learning (Alexiadou, 2014; Lingard, 2010; Vidovich, 2013) from other countries. In turn, the Australian Government brought its influence to bear on national policy processes and these downwards
pressures were countered by national groups and institutions (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010; Lingard & Rawolle, 2009), who sought to fend-off intrusion or turn it to their advantage. An interesting finding of this study related to the presence of horizontal, or ‘sideways’ reciprocal power flows which were also identified within the Australian national level. For example, the Australian Government was in effect being challenged through the work of the Higher Education Standards Panel, which wanted to completely revise the various approaches to learning standards (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2014).

At the start of the period delineated in this research (which spanned from 2009 to 2013), downwards expressions of ideology and power (i.e. from the national to the institutional level) in the Australian setting were seen to be minimal, as policy definitions had been broad and ownership of learning standards was to be vested with the higher education sector. However, tensions were raised immediately after the Australian Government revealed details of the proposed indicators and funding. Some of these pressures emanated from responses to consultation processes, potentiated by the media who had picked up on the theme of ‘toxic’ regulation (Craven, 2010). As Rawolle (2010) pointed out, the effects of such ‘mediatisation’ can significantly impact on policy processes. The collective action of actors at the national (non-Government) and institutional level subsequently generated a significant upward influence that eventually forced the Australian Government to delay and then ultimately abandon its proposals to use various indicators.

In addition, from time to time, actors who were located outside Australia also exerted an influence. For example, the president of the non-profit organisation responsible for the Collegiate Learning Assessment wrote an article for The Australian newspaper in which he highlighted the risks of taking a performance indicator that had been originally designed as a quality improvement tool and then using it for quality assurance and performance funding (Benjamin, 2010).

**Strength.**

The strength (intensity) of power flows varied at different times in policy processes, which were highly dynamic (Ball, 2012a). The power of the OECD and organisations which constructed rankings of higher education institutions was seen to be increasing
in general terms (Marginson, 2014; Martens & Jakobi, 2010; McGaw, 2008; Sellar & Lingard, 2013b). Nevertheless, the OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project which commenced in 2010 started to lose strength from late 2012. This project had been positioned as a potential vehicle for the inter-national comparison of learning standards in higher education, with some similarities to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment which compared learning standards in the school sector. However, AHELO rediscovered some of the limitations of the Australian Graduate Skills Assessment and the American Collegiate Learning Assessment in that the design of the test instrument was contested, students were reluctant to participate and incentives were needed. Furthermore, the project proved to be costly, and ultimately there was no clear indication that it would continue in the light of its equivocal results (OECD, 2013).

The expression of power by the Australian Government was strong in the early stages of policy processes analysed in this research. This strength was expressed through assertively written policy texts (Reid, 2009) which heralded the introduction of accountability measures and funding levers (DEEWR, 2009a). However, this diminished in the face of stiff opposition from the higher education sector, and document analysis of selected policy texts showed considerable change from ‘harder’ to ‘softer’ discourses of accountability as the higher education sector’s collective agency grew. These policy foci on ‘hard’ measures of accountability were resisted, and by late 2014 it appeared that these harder measures were to be dropped by the Australian Government, at least for the foreseeable future.

As Zemsky (2011) pointed out, policy processes are highly dependent on contribution and cooperation from the sector. The lack of sector cooperation was a substantial problem for the Australian Government, and the imposition of external performance indicators to ‘measure’ generic learning standards was roundly resisted. Furthermore, the Australian Government had no capacity to create definitions of disciplinary learning standards other than through a process of active engagement with the academic community (Woodhouse, 2010).

In this respect the strength of power expressed by the Australian Discipline Scholars waxed and then waned. There was an initial expectation that this group would have ownership and control of the disciplinary threshold learning outcomes, and therefore
for a time they held considerable power in terms of ‘setting the standard’ for a number of disciplines. However, the Scholars’ work did not yield measurable threshold learning outcomes (i.e. learning standards), and their power waned considerably in the light of two developments. The first loss of power occurred when some of the Scholars’ peak bodies refused to endorse and adopt the threshold learning outcomes. In no small part this was because of a fear that to do so would facilitate closer scrutiny, possibly creating a lever of power that could be used by the Australian Government or institutions against the peak bodies and their members. The second (and more severe) loss of power occurred when the Higher Education Standards Panel elected not to draw the threshold learning outcomes established by the Discipline Scholars into their proposed changes to the legislative framework (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2013). However, an Australian Government participant argued that this was an appropriate decision, given that definitions of learning standards could become ossified if they were enshrined in legislation.

**Layers and conditions.**

Across the Australian policy trajectory (and in the perspectives of participants from the UK, US, and OECD), there was considerable attention given to the lack of a ‘level playing field’ between different higher education institutions. In this respect participants highlighted a stark contrast between the powerful elite research-intensive institutions at one extreme, and the comparatively weak private providers at the other. Here, power and status were claimed by institutions partly in terms of the perceived quality of the learning standards achieved by their graduates (Marginson, 2011b). However, others sought to redress that balance of power by supporting independent tests of standards (even though they saw standards as unmeasurable) for the power-levelling influence this could wield. In the Australian setting, proposed direct measures of learning were eventually replaced by an Employer Satisfaction Survey (Department of Education, 2014c). However, this approach may serve to perpetuate long-standing perceptions of quality, and, as Marginson (2014, p. 46) remarked, “status becomes a circular game in which power makes itself”.

The conditions under which policy processes played out were also subject to ‘steering’ by the policy elite. Australian participants commented adversely on ‘closed’ (i.e. by invitation only) consultations. Similarly, participants from the US pointed to the
selective appointment of people to key committee positions, a technique which served to attenuate certain voices (such as academic researchers) in policy discussions.

Whilst these relatively unsophisticated techniques are readily recognised (Trounson, 2010b), this research provided further insights into the more nuanced ways in which policy processes were steered. For example, critical discourse analysis of Australian Government policy documents suggested that the careful framing of consultation questions had established the parameters of the discussion in such a way that attention was directed towards the question of ‘getting the choice of indicator right’, drawing attention away from the more vexed issue of whether learning standards were, in fact, amenable to measurement and quantitative comparison.

_Spheres of agency._

The sphere of agency (or ‘reach’) of the OECD and the producers of higher education rankings was seen to be large and diffuse (Exley & Ball, 2014; Martens & Jakobi, 2010; Rubenson, 2008). Within their respective national settings, the sphere of agency enjoyed by governments was also considerable. Interestingly, however, the analysis within this study revealed that the extent of this sphere of agency in part depended on institutional policy actors. For example, in the Australian setting, those working in the field of quality at a senior level within institutions saw their sphere of agency expand for a while. This was because they were able to draw on the fear of an unknown new regulator for the sector and incoming measures of learning standards as political levers to secure funding and power, albeit that which was tied to the Government’s policy interests. Their sphere of agency started to contract following the demise of various performance indicators.

Notwithstanding the above, individual academics were seen in this study to be relatively powerless and largely uninvolved, which is a highly problematic outcome considering their central role in the actualisation of policy initiatives (Ball, 2009; Zemsky, 2011). In fact, there were suggestions that academic agency would become diminished in the light of increasingly externalised measures for accountability purposes. The changing nature of the academic role was highlighted, as was the potential impact of technologies of accountability that would cleave the evaluation of learning from teaching. Essentially, core professional identities were seen to be under
threat, as technologies of accountability were having a profound impact on the nature of the academic endeavour (Ball, 2003, 2009; Bottery, 2006, 2009).

**Insights from network theory**

Network theory focuses on the fluidity of individual/group power relationships and it is considered here in the light of the substantial fluidity that was revealed in the findings of this study. The preceding discussion has drawn attention to the messiness of policy processes (Ball, 2012a) and the highly dynamic nature of power relationships across all of the settings studied. In particular, within the Australian policy trajectory the points of demarcation between the national/institutional levels were imprecise. As Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009) suggested, the boundaries implied by the identification of levels proved to be neither static nor nested.

There were two examples of this limitation that were encountered in this research. First, the Australian national level proved to be more complex than might be inferred from a first reading. Even though this level had been subdivided into the Australian Government and non-Government bodies for the purpose of this research, in practice matters were more nuanced. For example, not only were there tensions between the Australian Government and the higher education sector, this research identified tensions in power relationships both within and between departments of Government. The complex and at times difficult three way relationship between the Australian Government, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, and the Higher Education Standards Panel is an example *par excellence* of this issue.

Second, the allocation of Australian participants to national or institutional levels of policy processes gave insufficient attention to the multiple memberships and former experiences of policy actors. For example, some participants straddled both levels in terms of their institutional position and national role with respect to learning standards. One of these participants worked for a private higher education provider, but was also involved at a national level with key projects relating to learning standards that were being undertaken in public universities. Participants also spanned across Government/non-Government boundaries, such as the case of the former employee of the Australian Government who now worked in a university, possessing a
set of experiences and a network of connections which gave both insight and agency in policy processes.

Taken together, this suggests that power relationships across and between levels are imprecisely differentiated, and becoming increasingly so given the expanding numbers of policy actors involved and their mobility (Ball, 2012a; Exley & Ball, 2014; Vidovich, 2013). To this end, network theory is being increasingly drawn into contemporary policy analysis (Ball, 2012a; Saarinen & Ursin, 2011; Shiroma, 2014). Essentially, a policy network consists of a group of actors, linked by their direct and indirect contacts with one another, who share an interest (but not necessarily an agreement) in an area of policy (Ball, 2012a). As a theoretical approach, network theory is consistent with critical theory and poststructuralism (Peters, 2003; Peters & Humes, 2003) both of which have a deep concern with issues of power relationships, albeit conceived differently in each case.

Network theory is no panacea for policy study, however. For example, Frankham (2006) observed that the language of information technology permeates discourses relating to networks, drawing on metaphors of flow, connection and communication, perhaps implying notions of community and consensus where in reality there may be none. As Ozga (2009) pointed out, network approaches may give the false appearance of deregulation, participation and equality, whilst in reality the centre remains in firm control of the data and decision making processes. Furthermore, although network maps (or ‘sociograms’) may visualise the reciprocity and strength of relationships between actors, nodes and groups, they tend to say little about the precise nature of the relationship (Ball, 2012a).

Network maps may not adequately differentiate and emphasise the global, national, and local, thus conceptions of ‘level’ remain useful for policy analysis (Cantwell & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009; Vidovich, 2013). Whilst advocating the role for network theory in policy analysis, Ball (2012b) made a similar point when he warned of the danger of creating flat ontologies, pointing to the need to understand and analyse fine grained nuances of the setting and its historicity - layers and conditions, in Marginson and Rhoades’ (2002) terms. In short, network approaches to policy analysis risk underplaying the role of the state (Shiroma, 2014), a position reminiscent of early
critiques of policy analytical approaches that accorded too much weight to either the state or to global pressures (Ball, 1998; Dale, 1999; Lingard, 1996; Vidovich, 2013).

Combining analytical frameworks for policy analysis

The discussion thus far has suggested that both policy trajectory studies and network analyses have a contribution to make to policy analysis, and it is recognised that these approaches have both utility and limitations. In this final subsection, these two approaches are brought together to generate an alternative way of conceptualising policy analysis to draw on both of their strengths. This combination integrates the concept of ‘level’ (from policy trajectory studies modified to include global to local levels), with the recognition that agencies and agents are interconnected in complex ways (characteristic of network theory). This integration may offer a more detailed rendition of messy policy processes by calling attention to the complex interrelations between actors (such as the complex interrelationships between different agencies of the Australian Government, for example). Figure 10.2 depicts this combination, applied to the policy influences within the Australian setting examined in this research. (If required, refer to the List of Abbreviations.)

Figure 10.2 Combining analytical frameworks: policy trajectory levels and networks relevant to this study
This diagram illustrates a selection of key agencies and agents, connected within a network but depicted in such a way to render the global to local settings apparent. In this diagram the national level is split into Government and non-Government domains, showing a number of groups and organisations deemed to be significant to quality policy processes relating to learning standards. The influence of Marginson and Rhoades’ (2002) ‘glo-na-cal’ agency heuristic is visible, through the rendition of connecting lines within the policy network that show both reciprocity and strength of the relationships, using line diameter and arrow size as symbols of directional flow and power.

This approach would appear to offer a number of advantages. It draws together the strengths of network visualisation (from network theory) and renders this across the levels (global to local), which illuminates power relationships for further analysis using critical and poststructural theoretical frameworks. This approach shows connections between policy actors, and depicts how some agents and agencies straddle a number of levels, such as the Australian Discipline Scholars or the various reference groups that arguably spanned both institutional and national levels. It is able to represent the interrelationships between actors within a particular level (such as the complex Australian national level that included both Government and non-Government groups).

Overall, the approach could be extended (to include many actors) or simplified (to show fewer actors) as appropriate to the research intentions. It would, with modification, be able to show how spheres of agency extend into other areas, such as the example of the policy actor in a higher education institution who also has influence at a global level through their membership of an OECD committee.

However, this approach is still not able to fully depict the dynamism of changing relationships over the period delineated in this study, and thus it represents only a ‘snapshot in time’. This is an important point to recognise, given the central role of time and place in policy processes (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Overall, this combined approach was considered to have utility when considering power relationships in this study, and it may have relevance and value in other areas.
Concluding remarks

The first section of this chapter focused on the four contexts (influences, policy texts, practices/effects, outcomes) of the Australian policy trajectory, examining them alongside the perspectives of policy actors from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD). An examination of the themes arising from analysis of the interview and document data in the light of the literature generated a total of 15 theoretical propositions. The second section of this chapter examined the key integrating theme of ideology and power, drawing on the ‘glo-na-cal’ agency heuristic offered by Marginson and Rhoades (2002) to analyse dynamic power relationships. The third section of this chapter explored the limitations of the policy trajectory approach, and identified a number of advantages (and some disadvantages) associated with network theory. This led to the integration of the two approaches in order to synthesise a new combination of theoretical framings that may prove helpful in future policy studies.
Chapter 11: Future directions and conclusions

Introduction

This final chapter moves beyond the specific findings of this study to examine ongoing policy developments and to identify implications for quality policy development and future research. The first section traces a number of rapid policy evolutions following the completion of data collection in May 2013. The second section draws together three key implications for the development of quality policies relating to learning standards. The third section identifies a number of implications for future research, spanning: policy analysis; quality policy relating to learning standards; and learning standards themselves. The fourth and final section within this chapter draws together the conclusions of this thesis.

Continuing policy evolution in the Australian setting: beyond empirical data

The debate over Australian Government quality policy relating to learning standards continued after the period of data collection (August 2012 – May 2013) concluded, and substantial contestation was still present at the time of thesis submission in December 2014. These more recent developments serve to underscore the dynamic nature of policy processes, and they highlight the ongoing tensions associated with accountability and quality policies relating to learning standards.

May 2013 to September 2013: under the Australian Labor Government.

Shortly after data collection concluded, the Australian Government’s attention turned to focus on the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and in particular the issue of regulatory burden in response to growing dissent from the higher education sector. In May 2013, the Australian Government signalled the intention to conduct a review of TEQSA as part of its action plan titled Assuring quality while reducing the regulatory burden (Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education, [DIICCSRTE], 2013).

The Secretary of DIICCSRTE wrote to the Chief Commissioner of TEQSA to “seek advice about any immediate actions that can be taken to ameliorate concerns in the sector
about red tape” (Lee Dow & Braithwaite, 2013, p. 63). In response, the Chief Commissioner of TEQSA pointed out that the agency’s regulation of higher education was of critical importance in maintaining a high degree of international and domestic confidence in the quality of the Australian sector. To address the issues of perceived heavy-handedness, TEQSA set out 30 actions already taken, scheduled, or planned in order to reduce the regulatory burden on institutions (Lee Dow & Braithwaite, 2013).

Professors Lee Dow (a former Vice-Chancellor of the research-intensive University of Melbourne) and Braithwaite (from the Regulatory Institutions Network at the Australian National University) were commissioned by DIICCSRTE to undertake a review of “regulation and red tape impacting the sector” (Lee Dow & Braithwaite, 2013, p. 62), and to consider whether a model of ‘earned autonomy’ was warranted. Within a model of earned autonomy, providers with histories of excellence and track records of achievement would be largely exempted from regulatory oversight.

Consultations were held with various representatives of the higher education sector over a two month period between June and July 2013. In all, over 40 consultations were held with higher education providers, stakeholder representatives and individuals. A further 60 written submissions were received (Lee Dow & Braithwaite, 2013). Many responses were generally critical of TEQSA’s approach to regulation, and the broad principle of regulatory reduction was welcomed. Universities Australia argued that ‘earned autonomy’ should be presumed for all universities, recommending that consideration should be given to the removal of the quality assurance function from the role of TEQSA. Detailed quality assurance of universities was seen as unnecessary, they argued, because of the high level of competition in the market (Universities Australia, 2013).

Published in August 2013, the Review of Higher Education Regulation made 11 recommendations (Lee Dow & Braithwaite, 2013), which included: a reduction in the scope of TEQSA’s functions to that of regulation; a reduction in the number of commissioners; and the delegation of functions previously limited to commissioners to those lower in the organisation’s hierarchy. The review recognised and endorsed the principles of ‘earned autonomy’, attributing this position to the strong track record of Australian universities. Lee Dow and Braithwaite (2013) also identified the quality and relevance of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and the Higher Education
Standards Panel as key factors crucial to the success of any approach based on notions of earned autonomy. However, they also observed that better coordination between the Higher Education Standards Panel and the AQF Council was needed.

The publication of the *Review of Higher Education Regulation* (Lee Dow & Braithwaite, 2013) was roundly welcomed by the research-intensive institutions and others, but this welcome was not universal. For example, the Australian Technology Network cautioned against ‘removing the Q [Quality] from TEQSA’, asking: “if we strip out quality assurance from TEQSA how can we safeguard the quality reputation of the Sector?” (Australian Technology Network, 2013).

**September 2013 to October 2014: under the Australian Coalition Government.**

In September 2013 the Coalition Government was elected under Prime Minister Abbott. One month later, the new Education Minister (Pyne) issued a formal Ministerial Direction to TEQSA (Australian Government, 2013). This legislative instrument instructed the Chief Executive Officer (i.e. the Chief Commissioner) of TEQSA to undertake a number of deregulatory actions. TEQSA was required to consult with and seek advice from a new Advisory Council, and to reprioritise its activities.

Significantly, this aspect of the Ministerial Direction served to severely curtail TEQSA’s ability to undertake activities relating to quality assurance. To illustrate, the directive required TEQSA to reprioritise tasks and simplify processes in terms of its core activities in provider registration and course accreditation, “only working on sectoral quality assessment activities if TEQSA has surplus resources after fully achieving the above tasks and priorities” (Australian Government, 2013, p. 3). Furthermore, TEQSA was required to report to the Minister on how resources had been allocated against these priorities, and to submit detailed reports on progress against defined measures on three specified occasions. Given that a number of participants in this study had pointed to the damaging consequences of increased bureaucratisation and information reporting, this was a deeply ironic outcome for TEQSA.

TEQSA responded to the *Review of Higher Education Regulation* (Lee Dow & Braithwaite, 2013) and the Ministerial Direction (Australian Government, 2013) by launching a ‘reform agenda’ in October 2013, opening a consultation with the sector based around two discussion papers, both of which set out to cut ‘red tape’ and
reduce the level of bureaucracy. The first paper focused on revisions to the Regulatory Risk Framework; the second on reforms to regulatory approaches and processes. By the end of the consultation period (which ran from October to December 2013) a total of 51 written submissions had been received. TEQSA published a consultation summary report for each discussion paper in February 2014, outlining the responses to comments and actions that would be taken to address concerns (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2014).

In February 2014 the Coalition Government put forward a Bill under Minister Pyne. This Bill called for a radical shakeup of the fledgling TEQSA with far reaching implications for the Agency including the termination of all existing Commissioners, the addition of new powers of delegation to TEQSA staff, and the instigation of new procedures to facilitate appeals against decisions. The Bill proposed the removal of the quality assurance function of TEQSA, and suggested that provider registration periods should be extended. Following a second reading of the Bill in Parliament, it was referred to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee for review.

In May 2014, the Australian Government announced in the 2014-2015 budget that an independent organisation would be contracted to administer three national higher education surveys: the University Experience Survey, the Graduate Outcomes Survey and the Employer Satisfaction Survey. Results from these surveys would be known as the ‘Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching’ (QILT), and these would be placed on a new website replacing the previous My University website. The purpose of these indicators was to “help to ensure adequate information is available for students to make informed decisions about their study options” (Australian Government, 2014, p. 91). The expenditure allocated for this initiative was suppressed in budget papers as this was subject to a competitive tender process.

In September 2014, Lane (2014c) reported in The Australian that the Chief Commissioner of TEQSA had now been on leave for seven months following Minister Pyne’s attempts to restructure the agency. A further article reported that the AQF Council had now been disbanded, without any public announcement being made (Lane, 2014a).
Towards the end of September 2014, the Australian Government confirmed that the contract for the administration and publication of the three QILT surveys had been awarded to the Australian Social Research Centre. This indicator suite would “provide information on the student experience and employment prospects, enabling Australia to benchmark performance against the United States of America, United Kingdom and New Zealand” (Department of Education, 2014c, para. 7).

In November 2014, a spokesperson for Minister Pyne announced that TEQSA would not be stripped of its quality assurance function (Lane, 2014d), as part of a last-ditch attempt to secure Senate support for the Bill before the parliamentary summer recess. This move was successful, and the beleaguered Bill was finally passed on the 4th December 2014. At the same time, Minister Pyne announced that the Chief Commissioner of TEQSA had resigned (Lane, 2014b).

Taken together, these developments highlighted ongoing and substantial contestation in quality policy processes relating to learning standards within the Australian setting. Power relationships between key stakeholders remained highly dynamic. Importantly, a considerable reduction in the power of TEQSA had been signalled at the point of thesis submission in December 2014. However, even though TEQSA had been widely seen to be heavy-handed, this reduction in power was not universally welcomed. In particular, whilst the research-intensive institutions welcomed the move, other institutions saw great dangers in reducing regulatory oversight in a rapidly changing higher education sector. Furthermore, plans to introduce direct measures of learning had now been shelved by the Australian Government, to be replaced by a new suite of indirect ‘measures’ of learning based on surveys. Overall, there were multiple rapid policy reversals during the period spanned by this research, suggesting that policy was being made ‘on the run’. However, the Australian Government’s persistent interest in the establishment of comparable quantitative data on institutional quality remained clearly visible throughout.

**Implications for the development of quality policy**

The findings of this research have highlighted three key implications for the development of quality policy relating to learning standards, and these are advanced
below. Each has been derived from the findings of this research, and they find support in the literature (Foley & Goldstein, 2012; Shavelson, 2010).

**Balanced performance indicators.**

This study has illuminated a number of consequences for assessment practices, the higher education sector, and for governments if learning standards are too narrowly conceived and ‘measured’ within a high-stakes accountability framework. The risks associated with heavily weighted indicators are well documented (Bird et al., 2005; Foley & Goldstein, 2012; Frolich, 2011; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2008; Hursh, 2008, 2013; Moodie, 2011b; Nichols & Berliner, 2008; Wall et al., 2014).

In the Australian setting, the work of the Discipline Scholars focused on a diversity of generic and discipline specific outcomes (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010), but proposed performance indicators within quality policies did not. If students’ achievement of learning standards is to be used as an indicator of institutional quality (and this research has indicated that there are strong arguments for not doing this), the first implication is that indicator development should strive for balance across both disciplinary and generic outcomes. However, given the difficulties inherent in their specification, the second implication is that learning standards may only be comparative in a qualitative sense.

**Intelligent accountability.**

Whilst it is recognised that processes of accountability serve different masters (Burke, 2005; Shavelson, 2010), this research has highlighted the multiple tensions between processes that seek to assure or ‘prove’ quality and those that seek to improve it. However, an adequate response may require more than a simple rebalancing of quality assurance and quality improvement, given that the neoliberal policy terrain defines both purposes (Wall et al., 2014). Furthermore, as Enns (2014) pointed out, the demise of neoliberalism as a shaping force in education is by no means imminent.

However, it may be possible to advance alternative conceptions through approaches that aim to foster “intelligent accountability” (Foley & Goldstein, 2012, p. 10). For example, comparative rankings, if created, could be held confidential to the institutions concerned. If adopted in quality policies relating to learning standards, this
approach could attenuate some undesirable effects on assessment practices by reducing the threat of perverse consequences arising from public exposure. More broadly, there are signs that the Australian Government may adopt this approach in future, given that institutions remain de-identified in the recent publication of University Experience Survey comparative data (Department of Education, 2014b). However, this approach may not prevent the generation of rankings from data contained within the public domain such as the new Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching website which is due to fully replace the My University website by August 2015 (Department of Education, 2014c).

Policy learning from settings other than the UK and the US.

This study observed, at various times, both policy borrowing and policy learning (Adie, 2014; Alexiadou, 2014; Lingard, 2010; Ozga & Jones, 2006; Vidovich, 2006, 2013) with respect to quality policy relating to learning standards. Participants often drew comparisons with developments in the UK such as the projects to devise benchmark statements (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2012). Also cited were experiences gained from national and inter-national comparative testing in schools, such as that undertaken in Australia (Caldwell, 2012; Chilcott, 2011), the US (Hursh, 2013; Nichols & Berliner, 2008) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2014b).

A similar tendency to focus on the UK, the US and the OECD was also observed in the Australian literature. However, in Brazil, national large scale testing in higher education had been introduced as early as 1996 (Schwartzman, 2010) before being refined and then eventually dropped. The implications of this study suggest that there is an argument for policy learning from this particular setting given its direct relevance to the policy processes examined here.

Implications for future research

This research has highlighted a number of implications and opportunities for research in the domains of policy analysis; quality policy relating to learning standards; and learning standards themselves. Each domain is taken in turn in the following subsections.
Policy analysis.

A particularly important avenue for future research would be to examine the impact and ongoing ramifications of the OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project (OECD, 2013). Given the “remarkably similar” (Rizvi, 2014, p. 21) ways in which diverse higher education systems have responded to processes of globalisation, comparative research into quality policies relating to learning standards across a range of different national settings would be of particular value. More broadly, future research might also direct attention to the growing role of the OECD as a nodal point in globalised policy processes (Bøyum, 2014; McGaw, 2008; Rubenson, 2008).

Furthermore, this study has highlighted three specific research opportunities for policy analysis. First, in the Australian setting, policy processes largely ignored international students despite them comprising some 27% of the student population (Department of Education, 2014a), thereby indicating a gap in policy analysis. Second, a number of tensions within and between various departments of the Australian Government were identified in this research, and these policy processes occurring within governments warrant further investigation. Third, this study revealed deep tensions between equity and quality in policy aspirations, and further research should analyse emergent quality policy strategies that purport to improve support for equity groups, such as those contained within the 2014-15 Australian Budget (Australian Government, 2014).

Finally, whilst processes of globalisation have occurred within a neoliberal landscape, the two concepts should not be treated as synonymous (Olssen & Peters, 2005) and some have called for an uncoupling of the two concepts. For example, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) observed that neoliberal globalisation has weakened social justice, but they proceeded to argue that it was neoliberal ideologies rather than globalisation per se that were problematic. Despite the enduring power of neoliberal ideologies, there are signs of a growing commitment to socially democratic aims (Enns, 2014; Spies-Butcher, 2012). To this end, a new imaginary is needed, one which recognises that humans are “social and cultural beings, as well as economic ones” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 201). Further research should therefore seek to recognise and challenge the powerful framing effect of the current neoliberal paradigm (Wall et al., 2014) when
examining the educational values embedded within policies in order to advance more democratised conceptions of globalisation.

**Quality policy relating to learning standards.**

At a national level, there is a need to scrutinise more fully the nature and role of researcher ‘expertise’ in quality policy text production. Quality policy initiatives are more likely to be rejected, subverted or ignored if policy processes appear to exclude the academic community (Shavelson, 2010), and the voices of practising academics and students were conspicuous by their absence in the policy processes studied in the Australian, UK and US settings discussed here. Given their central roles in the accountability triangle (Burke, 2005), this is highly problematic. Whilst there is some evidence to suggest that researchers do not participate to any significant extent in processes of policy text production (Denniss, 2006), the early involvement of this group may help to secure a more theoretically sound and politically stable outcome. Future research should examine ways in which collaborative, ethical and value-based practices in policy development can be fostered.

At an institutional level, research attention should focus on the increasing ‘disconnect’ identified in this study between academic (teaching) staff and institutional quality processes. Committed leadership, significant professional development and astute change management would be required to improve perceived academic freedom whilst still maintaining institution-level accountability data.

As Foley and Goldstein (2012) pointed out, data on quality should be accompanied by ‘health warnings’ with respect to their technical limitations, but this may make interpretation difficult for the intended audience. More broadly, there is a need for further research to examine the assertion that the provision of data on various aspects of institutional quality will, in fact, help prospective students make an informed choice.

**Learning standards.**

This study has highlighted the need for learning standards to be owned by academic disciplines, and future research should focus on methods by which such disciplinary ownership can be strengthened. It would appear that the development of consensus is vitally important given Wittgenstein’s (1953) point that ‘rules’ do not specify their own
interpretation, a view borne out across decades of research into the reliability of assessment practices (Alderman, 2009; Bloxham, 2009; Bloxham & Price, 2013; Brown, 2010a; Newstead & Dennis, 1994; Sadler, 2014; Yorke, 2008).

If, as this research has suggested, the precise codification of standards is a futile exercise (Sadler, 2014), how might learning standards be adequately drawn into broader judgements of quality given the general agreement that standards of some sort are needed (Massaro, 2010)? Current and widespread approaches to the specification and verification of learning standards have been criticised as being time/resource intensive, of uncertain value (Bloxham, 2009), and open to local re-interpretation (Knight, 2002b). However, approaches that focus on building a community of assessment practice (Bloxham & Price, 2013) and notions of assessor ‘calibration’ (Sadler, 2012) are currently gaining prominence in the Australian setting.

Within Australia, projects are extending the foundational work of the Discipline Scholars, producing and evaluating approaches that assure learning standards and develop consensus through social moderation (Krause et al., 2014; Watty et al., 2014). These Australian projects received praise in a recent article in the UK *Times Higher Education* where it was also claimed that the UK was now lagging behind Australia in the development of learning standards (Rust, 2014). All of these developments and interactions present opportunities for further research into the development of learning standards and the assessment practices that underpin them.

**Conclusions**

This research analysed accountability and quality policies relating to learning standards, and their implications for assessment across four ‘policy trajectory’ contexts (influences, policy texts, practices/effects and outcomes) within the Australian setting. To complement and extend this research, perspectives from participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, US, and OECD) were drawn into this study.

A qualitative approach was adopted, framed by the dual theoretical perspectives of critical theory and poststructuralism in order to examine complex and evolving power relationships in policy processes. Data collection included interviews with policy actors, and many participants were elite policy actors in their respective settings. Their
privileged positions and sophisticated level of engagement with quality policy, learning standards and assessment practices provided highly valuable insights. Extracts from five key Australian policy documents were subjected to critical discourse analysis, which were triangulated with interview data.

The findings of this research generated 15 theoretical propositions, revealing the key integrating theme of ideology and power. The dynamic fluidity of power relationships was observed in all of the settings studied, and this pointed to the constant state of flux in policy processes (Ball, 2012b). Rapidly increasing pressures associated with processes of globalisation appeared to be driving policy processes forcibly and future policy settlements may become more transient as a consequence.

Quality policies across a number of settings have sought the ‘holy grail’ (Massaro, 2013) of comparable learning standards. The findings of this study suggest that this remains a wicked problem (Knight & Page, 2007) without a simple solution. The multiple tensions between oppositional ideologies (i.e. measurement versus judgement of learning standards) are likely to persist, as will the tensions between quality and equity in policy aspirations. This study extends a body of literature that suggests these complex problems with learning standards may be too difficult to ‘solve’ through approaches that draw too heavily on ‘measures’ of learning.

However, recent developments suggest that Australian policy processes are entering a new epoch characterised by increased deregulation and financial austerity under the Coalition Government elected in 2013. New legislation has been proposed, the effect of which is likely to substantially change Australian quality policy relating to learning standards. Paradoxically, this may encourage institutional-level assessment practices to flourish, facilitated by the conciliatory stance taken by the Higher Education Standards Panel. This advisory body had proposed a policy position that would, if accepted by the Minister, locate the ownership and control of learning standards firmly with the higher education sector.

Emergent assessment practices based on judgement that rely on the building of consensus through calibration, with learning standards verified and developed through inter-institutional moderation activities may offer a more valid approach. These practices may allow trust to thrive in an environment decoupled from high stakes
technologies of accountability. However, there remains a risk that standardisation of assessment tasks may gradually follow, thereby threatening diversity.

To sum up, by December 2014 a more enduring policy ‘settlement’ with respect to learning standards was within reach, approximately five and a half years after the release of the landmark policy document *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009). However, this was perhaps more capitulation than settlement, in that the Australian Government had now shelved attempts to introduce direct measures of learning in favour of a suite of surveys (Department of Education, 2014c). This essentially represents a retreat from the difficulties of establishing quantitatively comparable learning standards in higher education.

This thesis closes with a comment from a member of the policy elite in the UK, which succinctly expresses the substantial difficulties associated with the use of students’ achievement of learning standards in comparative measures of institutional quality. Quoting a colleague they held in high esteem, this participant observed that “the standard of student achievement is only really fixed in relation to individual students, in relation to a particular piece of work, at a particular point in time. And to my mind that’s the ultimate wisdom in this area” (UK1).
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Appendices
Appendix A: Timeline of events (Australian policy text production)

Whilst this timeline focuses primarily on the Australian setting, it also includes significant events that took place in the UK, US and within the OECD. Significant events occurring in other parts of the world (notably Europe and Brazil) are also included. These developments were of relevance to Australian policy processes. Selected extracts from publications annotated with a * were subjected to critical discourse analysis (refer to Chapter 7).

This timeline is presented in reverse date order.

Dec 2014  
**SUBMISSION OF THIS THESIS**

May 2014  
Australia: In the 2014-15 Budget, the Government announced that an independent organisation will be contracted to administer three surveys. These surveys will comprise the University Experience Survey, the Graduate Outcomes Survey and the Employer Satisfaction Survey. These are to be published on a new website, titled Quality indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT). This will replace the existing My University website.

February 2014  
Australia: Minister Pyne put forward a Bill, calling for a far reaching restructure of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, including the termination of all existing Commissioners and the removal of the quality assurance function.

October 2013  
Australia: Education Minister Pyne issued a Ministerial Direction to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency to reprioritise tasks, requiring the Agency to only work on sector quality issues when it has completed provider registration and accreditation.

September 2013  
Australia: Election of the Coalition Government (PM Abbott)

August 2013  
Australia: Publication of the *Review of Higher Education Regulation* (Lee Dow & Braithwaite, 2013). This proposed a reduction in the scope of the regulation, and endorsed principles of ‘earned autonomy’ for Australian Universities.

May 2013  
Australia: The Australian Government set out to ‘cut red tape’, in *Assuring quality while reducing the higher education regulatory burden* (DIICCSRTE, 2013).
May 2013  END OF DATA COLLECTION IN THIS RESEARCH

March 2013  Australia: The Higher Education Standards Panel released a consultation paper titled Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes * (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2013). This cast disciplinary standards as ‘learning outcome statements’. Extracts from this document were analysed in detail (Refer to Chapter 7, Policy Document 5).

December 2012  OECD: Phase Two of the Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes project AHELO completed. The final report (OECD, 2013) suggested that it is unclear whether the project will continue.

August 2012  START OF DATA COLLECTION IN THIS RESEARCH

June 2012  Australia: Publication of Development of Performance Measures (Advancing Quality in Higher Education Reference Group, 2012). This report argued strongly that the Collegiate Learning Assessment was not fit for purpose and should be dropped. In place, an Employers Satisfaction Survey was proposed.

December 2011  Australia: The Australian Government released the policy consultation paper Assessment of Generic Skills * (DEEWR, 2011a). This clarified that the Collegiate Learning Assessment will be an Australian version of the test. Extracts from this document were analysed in detail (Refer to Chapter 7, Policy Document 4).

July 2011  Australia: The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act (Australian Government, 2011b) was passed into law.

June 2011  Australia: The Australian Government released Developing a framework for teaching and learning standards in Australian higher education and the role of TEQSA * (DEEWR, 2011b). Extracts from this document were analysed in detail (Refer to Chapter 7, Policy Document 3).

January 2011  OECD: Phase Two of the Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes project started, including the administration of tests and questionnaires in participating institutions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 2010</td>
<td>Australia: The work of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council’s project focusing on Learning and Teaching Academic Standards concluded with a publication of the final report (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2010</td>
<td>Australia: The Australian Government consulted with the sector on updated performance indicators, with reward payment offered for participation in the development of the Collegiate Learning Assessment of generic skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2010</td>
<td>OECD: The Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes project design specification was published, including guiding principles for ‘assessing global graduate capability’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2010</td>
<td>OECD: Phase 1 of the Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes project commenced with 15 countries and 150 institutions participating. The project sought to develop assessments of generic skills (critical thinking; analytical reasoning; problem solving; and written communication) in economics and engineering. It drew on the Collegiate Learning Assessment as the basis for assessing generic skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2009</td>
<td>Australia: Publication of <em>An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding</em> (DEEWR, 2009a) which proposed performance indicators and reward funding. Extracts from this document were analysed in detail (Refer to Chapter 7, Policy Document 2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2009</td>
<td>Australia: The Australian Learning and Teaching Council awarded $2 million for the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project, which established Discipline Scholars, charged with the development of disciplinary Threshold Learning Outcomes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| August 2009   | UK: Following a high profile debate about academic standards in the UK, the Government Select Committee reported that: “the system in England for safeguarding consistent national standards in higher education institutions is out-of-date, inadequate and in urgent need of replacement. The current arrangements with each university responsible for its own standards are no longer meeting the needs of a mass system of higher education in the 21st century with two million students. Given the amount of money that the taxpayer puts into universities it is not acceptable, as we found during our inquiry, that Vice-Chancellors cannot give a straightforward answer to the simple
question of whether students obtaining first class honours degrees at different universities had attained the same intellectual standards” (UK House of Commons, 2009, p. 5).

August 2009

Australia: Publication of the Australian Universities Quality Agency commissioned ‘environmental scan’, titled *International trends in establishing the standards of academic achievement in higher education* (Harris, 2009).

May 2009


May 2009


May 2009

Australia: *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* * *(Australian Government, 2009) was released, with 5.4 billion allocated to support Higher Education and research over next 4 years. This landmark policy paper is positioned as a ‘comprehensive response’ to the Review of Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008). Extracts from this document were analysed in detail (Refer to Chapter 7, Policy Document 1)*

May 2009

Deputy Prime Minister Gillard announced the formation of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Gillard, 2009). All tertiary education providers (public and private) will be regulated by this body.

May 2009

**START OF PERIOD DELINEATED IN THIS RESEARCH**

2008

Australia: Publication of the influential *Review of Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008). This made 46 recommendations, including the “development of a set of indicators and instruments to directly assess and compare learning outcomes; and a set of formal statements of academic standards by discipline along with processes for applying those standards” (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 137).
2008 Australia: The Australian Government established a Review of Higher Education, commissioning former Vice Chancellor Denise Bradley as Chair of the group.

2008 Australia: The Australian Universities Quality Agency appointed a further expert group to develop ways of measuring and reporting on standards of academic achievement.

2007 Australia: Election of the Labor Government (PM Rudd)

2007 Australia: The Australian Universities Quality Agency convened an expert group to produce a ‘framework for standards’.


2007 US: The Association for Colleges and Universities embark on a 3 year project to develop Valid Assessments of Learning in Undergraduate Education, partly in response to the Spellings Commission proposals.


2003 The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) is invited by Bologna signatories to ‘develop agreed standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance’.

2003 Brazil: Following a change of Government, the national test of exit standards (Provão) is scrapped, replaced by a National Exam of Student Achievement. This attempted to measure ‘value-added’ by testing students in first and final years.

2002 Australia: An additional 25 items are added to the Australian Course Experience Questionnaire, forming 5 new scales and giving 10 scales plus an Overall Satisfaction Item. Three scales defined as ‘core’ (Good Teaching Scale, Generic Skills Scale, and the Overall Satisfaction Item), the remaining scales being optional.

2002 US: In the school sector, the ‘No Child Left Behind’ Act is passed into US legislation. This establishes measures and targets for progress, based on standardised testing. Penalties apply to those institutions that fail to demonstrate ‘Adequate Yearly Progress’.

2001 Australia: Audits of quality commence under the auspices of the newly formed Australian Universities Quality Agency.

2000 US: The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) is released by the Council for Aid to Education. This is a standardised test of learning, designed for use in quality improvement purposes.

2000 UK: Subject Benchmark Statements are released. These defined the abilities and skills that would be expected of a graduate. (They were originally cast as ‘benchmark standards’.)

2000 The European ‘Tuning’ Project started as a project linking the Bologna Declaration to the education sector, later morphing into a ‘process’ with a set of tools.

1999 Australia: Minister Kemp criticised the lack of external review, pointing to the difficulties of comparing Australian standards with other countries (Kemp, 1999)

1999 The signing of the Bologna Declaration in June 1999 by ministers from 29 countries, signalled the intention to work towards easily readable and comparable degrees organised in a three cycle structure (BSc, MSc, PhD) where outcomes are defined for each.

1997 UK: Publication of the *Higher Education in the Learning Society*, This observed that expansion of student numbers had strained existing quality assurance arrangements, arguing that
“institutions need to be more explicit and publicly accessible about the standards of attainment required for different programmes and awards” (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997, section 10.64).

1996 Brazil: The Ministry of Education introduced a National Assessment of Courses for Brazilian higher education, known as the Provão. This was a national test of exit standards in higher education for graduates of certain disciplines.

1993 Australia: The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) began in 1993, surveying students completing in 1992, using a 24 item Questionnaire.

1991 Australia: Announcement of $76 million to be distributed to Universities that opted in to the quality programme under the auspices of the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

1988 Australia: In the White Paper (Dawkins, 1988) policy statement that followed the 1987 Green Paper, student satisfaction was among a number of measures of institutional performance in a list of output based KPIs including completion rates, relative staff levels and research output.

1987 Australia: The Dawkins Green Paper (Dawkins, 1987) proposed that funding for universities be linked to institutional performance.

1986 Australia: Calls are made for improved measures of achievement and quality indicators in Quality Measures in Universities (Bourke, 1986)
Appendix B: Participant information form

08 August 2012

I write to introduce Mr Jon Yorke, a PhD candidate enrolled at the University of Western Australia (UWA), and to seek your consent to participate in research being conducted by the Graduate School of Education at UWA. The research project is entitled ‘Contemporary and emerging assessment policies and practices in Australian higher education’.

I would like to invite you to take part in this study of academic standards and assessment within the current Federal Government policy context characterised by the formation of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency and the introduction of new institutional indicators such as the collegiate learning assessment (CLA). The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of these changes (both experienced and predicted) on assessment practices within institutions, in order to contribute to our understanding of policy contexts and outcomes.

If you agree, Jon would like to conduct a single interview with you of approximately 45 minutes at a time convenient to you, which will be recorded and transcribed for analysis. Recorded data will be held separately to your name and contact details. Interview data will therefore only be identifiable by the researchers, and your participation will remain confidential. Interview transcripts and voice recordings will be securely stored and held confidential to the researchers. The researchers will be pleased to provide you with a copy of the transcript if you wish. Participants will not be identified in any publications that may arise from this research, including the thesis itself.

You are free to withdraw from the research at any time without prejudice in any way. You do not need to give a reason or justification for withdrawing. If you withdraw, the record of the interview and any unprocessed data will be destroyed, unless you agree that the researcher may retain and use the information obtained prior to your withdrawal.

If you would like to participate, please complete the consent form attached and send it in the stamped addressed envelope to Jon Yorke, or if you would like to discuss any aspect of this research, please contact Jon in the first instance using the contact information below.

Yours sincerely,

Winthrop Professor Lesley Vidovich (Coordinating Supervisor/Chief Investigator)

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Appendix C: Participant consent form

PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM (PCF)

Contemporary and emerging assessment policies and practices in Australian higher education.

This research project is investigating the changes arising from the Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System policy which was released by the Federal Government in 2009. This policy includes the formation of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), the development of academic standards and the introduction of new institutional indicators such as the collegiate learning assessment (CLA). A key focus of this research is the effects of this policy on institutional assessment practices.

In addition to the analysis of key documents, interviews will be conducted with individuals and groups who have influenced, or are influenced by, the development of academic standards within the overall framework of this new policy.

CONSENT FORM

I (the participant) have read the information provided and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I may withdraw at any time without reason and without prejudice.

I understand that all identifiable (attributable) information that I provide is treated as strictly confidential and will not be released by the investigator in any form that may identify me. The only exception to this principle of confidentiality is if documents are required by law.

I have been advised as to what data is being collected, the purpose for collecting the data, and what will be done with the data upon completion of the research.

I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published provided my name or other identifying information is not used.

Signature ____________________________

Name ____________________________ Date ____________

(Please note that, as the PCF is not a contract between parties, it is not necessary that the researcher counter-sign the form. Nor is it necessary to have a witness to the participant’s signature.)

Approval to conduct this research has been provided by The University of Western Australia, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures. Any person considering participation in this research project, or agreeing to participate, may raise any questions or issues with the researchers at any time. In addition, any person not satisfied with the response of researchers may raise ethics issues or concerns, and may make any complaints about this research project by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at The University of Western Australia on (08) 6488 3703 or by emailing to hreo-research@uwa.edu.au. All research participants are entitled to retain a copy of any Participant Information Sheet and/or Participant Consent Form relating to this research project. The Ethics Approval Number is RA/4/1/5385.
Appendix D: Interview questions (Australian participants)

These questions were used as the basis of semi-structured interviews (refer to Chapter 5) which were conducted with all Australian participants. Additional questions were asked of those Australian participants that were also ALTC Discipline Scholars, and these are listed in Appendix E.

Interview Questions

1. What have been the most significant influences on what might be termed the ‘learning standards movement’ in Australian HE policy over the last ten years or so? *(Follow-up – why have they been influential?)*

   a. Is there any evidence to suggest that Australian policy has been influenced by the UK? *(Has the UK been influenced by Australian policy developments?)*

   b. Is there any evidence to suggest that Australian policy has been influenced by developments in the US? *(Has the US been influenced by Australian policy developments?)*

2. How significant is the work of the OECD in Australia?

   a. What sort of impact do you see the OECD AHELO project having?

   b. What do you think are the strengths and potential weaknesses of the growing OECD role in HE policy globally?

3. The ‘Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System’ policy arose in response to the Bradley Review of Higher Education. Who was involved in constructing or influencing the part of the policy that speaks to learning standards? Why was it needed?

4. How was the policy constructed? Were processes transparent? Was there consultation? Was there opposition? *(Probe for fairness, struggles/compromises and the level of opposition along the way. Who was consulted? Who hasn’t been consulted?)*

5. Over the last 2-3 years Australian Government policy has evolved - especially in the area of learning standards and performance indicators where a number of proposed outcome indicators (such as progression rates) were dropped. *(If needed, remind that the specific indicators were progression rates, use of CLA, use of Australian version of CLA.)*

   a. What caused the policy reversals re performance funding?

   b. Do you think policy development was too ambitious?
6. What have been the responses to the Australian Government’s policy focus on learning standards as quality measures?  

(Probe for responses from groups/unions at national level and institutions.)

   a. Have certain groupings of Universities (such as Go8, ATN, etc.) responded differently to others?

7. If students’ achievement of learning standards is to be used as a measure of institutional quality, how might this affect institutions’ local assessment policies and practices?  

(Probe as required for advantages, disadvantages, unintended consequences.)

8. What do you think the main challenges will be for government and for institutions?

9. How do you see the role of TEQSA in respect of learning standards?

10. Equity is another discourse that often accompanies ‘quality’ in educational discourses globally (such as the OECD). Do you think equity and quality go together or are they in tension? Has equity entered into discourses of assessment policy and learning standards in Australia?

11. Who is likely to benefit from the use of learning standards as quality measures? Who might experience no benefit? Who might be adversely affected?  

(If needed, remind that those interested include governments, institutions, teachers, students and other groups such as parents and employers)

12. Where do you think the learning standards movement is heading, and what do you think of that?
Appendix E: Additional interview questions for Australian Discipline Scholars

Appendix D describes the semi-structured interview questions that were used as the basis for interviews conducted with all Australian participants. These additional questions were asked of the Australian participants who were ALTC Discipline Scholars (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010).

Additional Interview Questions

1. The ALTC Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project has played a role in the development of learning standards. Can you summarise the project and describe your role within it from your point of view? 
   *Probe as required for issues, agreements, disagreements, compromises.*

2. What do you see as the longer term outcomes of the LTAS work in your discipline? What sort of impact has it had? What do you see as the future of that work?
Appendix F: Interview questions (UK, US, OECD participants)

These questions were used as the basis of semi-structured interviews (refer to Chapter 5) which were conducted with all UK and US based participants and the former senior official within the OECD.

Interview Questions

1. In relation to the [UK/US/OECD] what have been the main influences on what might be termed the ‘learning standards movement’? Which specific influences have been most important and how have they operated? *(Explain if needed that this might be key people, groups, or reports and so on.)*

*(Probe for influences global and/or international; national; and institutional. Explore why they were powerful.)*

2. How significant has the influence of the OECD been? *(If significant)* Why do you think it has become significant?

Do you think that the OECD’s role in global education policy trends is a good thing or not? *(Probe for explanation.)*

3. Australian HE policy makers have been interested in the American CLA and the OECD AHELO Project. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of each?

4. With reference to the learning standards movement, what have been the key assessment policies relating to learning standards in the [UK/US] and in essence what are they about?

5. Who was involved in constructing the most recent of these policies and why was it needed? *(What role did they play?)*

6. When and where was the most recent policy developed? Over what period was it developed?

7. How was this current policy constructed? Were processes transparent? Was there consultation, and if so, with who? *(Probe to see if there were there any struggles/compromises along the way.)*

8. What have been the responses to these assessment policies relating to learning standards? Do different groups such as [Russell Group/Ivy League as appropriate] respond differently to other groupings? Is there a hierarchy of responses to mirror the hierarchy of universities?
9. How will the use of learning standards as quality measures affect institutions’ local assessment policies and assessment practices? What advantages and disadvantages do you see? Any unintended consequences?

10. What do you think the main challenges will be for government and institutions?

11. Equity is another discourse that often accompanies ‘quality’ in educational discourses globally (such as the OECD). Do you think they go together or are they in tension? Has equity entered the discourses in assessment policy and learning standards?

12. Who is likely to benefit from the use of learning standards as quality measures? Who might experience no benefit? Who might be adversely affected? (If needed, remind that those interested include governments, institutions, teachers, students and other groups such as parents and employers)

13. Where do you think the learning standards movement is heading, and what do you think of that?