

Benchmarking Archaeology Degrees in Australian Universities¹: The Project in Brief

Aims

A major challenge identified for Archaeology teaching and learning in Australia is the perceived shortcomings in archaeological qualifications, which are variously seen as inconsistent and/or not suited to the goals of students or employers (See Figure 1). How can Archaeology as an academic discipline improve this situation? This paper briefly outlines a successful grant application to the Carrick Institute's Priority Projects scheme for a two-year research and development project to focus on negotiating a list of achievement standards and broad learning outcomes for Australian Honours graduates, thereby articulating and changing perceptions of archaeological qualifications. This will benefit the archaeological community nationally by making explicit, for the first time, the outcomes of Australian Archaeology degrees.

	Employers	Students	Academics
Problem	Not vocational enough	Not clear what the qualification makes them fit for	Not consistent enough between universities
What do we want to achieve?	'Work ready' qualification	Qualification suited to their career goals	Qualification standards that are clearly articulated and monitored
Benefits?	Confidence in qualification and its professional standard	Confidence to choose relevant qualification components and experiences	Confidence in nature and level of learning outcomes all students should demonstrate

Figure 1: Some current perceptions of archaeological qualifications (See AA 61)

Rationale

A shared network of understanding within the discipline, which sets out the nature and level of student learning outcomes, is essential for developing common expectations of Archaeology graduates, both nationally and internationally. To address the problem of assuring comparability, a set of Archaeology achievements will be defined in terms of both generic and subject-specific abilities, at different benchmarked standards. 'Benchmarking' refers to the disciplinary community, through dialogue and consensus, drawing up a set of general expectations about the standards for the award. This project will focus on the four year Archaeology program, mostly commonly called Bachelor Honours, because this is regarded as the fundamental level of achievement required for entry to the profession and higher degree research.

Standards need to be monitored across universities, yet there is currently no process which does this. A submission to the Department of Education, Science and Training

(DEST) enquiry into Higher Education (James et al. 2002: 2) stated:

The higher education system currently lacks adequate and explicit mechanisms for knowing about the standards of degrees. This has come about as the informal conversations that once guided notions of standards within disciplines have been eroded by pressures on academic work, the changing nature of disciplinary bases, and the sheer diversity and complexity of the current system. The traditional standards or 'touchstones' of the academy need to be more systematically articulated and disseminated.

The experience of individual teaching staff and their dialogue with each other is central to this process.

What will the project do?

The project plans to achieve its purpose through implementing processes by which the discipline of Archaeology in Australia as a whole, with the direct involvement of many teaching staff, can discuss, endorse and participate in the standards building process as an ongoing discussion (see Figure 2).

The benchmarking process should:

- Focus primarily on archaeology
- Provide a forum for on-going consensus and dialogue, building on standards within academic communities
- Lead to the articulation of an archaeology-based assessment framework including broad criteria for learning outcomes and levels of achievement
- Focus on assessment and grading
- Be concerned with how standards are defined and monitored across the whole range of student achievement
- Develop an assessment framework which recognises and accommodates course diversity.
- Generate public documents describing learning criteria, levels of achievement and assessment.
- Enhance teaching and learning through articulation of clear goals and expectations.

Figure 2: Elements of the benchmarking process (After James et al 2002)

The project will build on current university offerings. Key groups in the process are the Benchmarking Partners and Benchmarking Associates.

Benchmarking Partners

All of the current providers of Archaeology Honours degrees, that is, degrees that include 'Archaeology' in their title and of which approximately 50% of the degree is comprised of Archaeology units, have been invited to participate. There are ten institutions which currently offer Archaeology Honours degrees: ANU (Archaeology and Anthropology); UNE; University of Sydney; University of Queensland (Sociology and Anthropology); James Cook University; Flinders University; University of Western Australia; LaTrobe University; Melbourne (Classics and Archaeology); and Monash University (Archaeology and Ancient History).

The role of the Benchmarking Partners will be to:

- take part (either directly or through a nominee) in a benchmarking survey and associated workshops
- provide feedback on project materials (standards) as they are progressively articulated in the project
- communicate with their own academic units on progress and outcomes of the project.

Benchmarking Associates

Representative associates from ANU (Archaeology and Natural History), University of Southern Queensland, Southern Cross University, Macquarie University, Monash University (Geography and Environmental Science), University of Adelaide and the University of Auckland, which also offer Archaeology units but not full Archaeology Honours, have been invited to participate in the project as Associates.

The role of the Benchmarking Associates will be to:

- take part (either directly or through a nominee) in benchmarking workshops on an optional basis
- provide feedback on project materials (standards) as they are progressively articulated in the project
- communicate with their own academic units on progress and outcomes of the project.

How will the project aims be achieved?

The processes of collaborative development and review will be organised and maintained through the formation of project work teams.

Benchmarking Team

Overall project planning, management and reporting will be carried out by the Benchmarking Team of Wendy Beck (Project Leader) and Catherine Clarke (Project Officer) who will, under the general coordination of the project officer:

- carry out detailed planning, analysis and document preparation
- liaise with and survey the benchmarking partners, which are the ten Australian institutions offering specialist Archaeology programs
- disseminate widely to stakeholders, including students and employers, project documents and other information relevant to teaching and learning in Archaeology honours programs.

Advisory Team

Members of the ANCATL (Australian National Committee for Archaeology Teaching and Learning), a subcommittee of the Australian Archaeological Association, will form a project advisory team, supporting and maintaining commitment to the process. Their role is to:

- provide scheduled feedback on project plans and directions
- participate in scheduled team meetings for the project
- assist with research in selected areas as mutually determined with the Benchmarking Team

- liaise with professional bodies and agencies on project aims and progress for the Benchmarking Team
- generally assist the Benchmarking Team to build and maintain interest in and support for the project in the archaeological community and associations.

A dedicated WebCT-based project site has been set up for teams to communicate easily with each other. Team membership and liaison will ensure that academics, students and professional archaeologists, as well as the professional Archaeology organizations in Australia are included in the process.

Project Outcomes

By project end, it is planned that the following outcomes will be achieved:

- A disciplinary benchmark which will collocate nationally agreed standards for Australian Archaeology graduates will be produced and widely disseminated as a public document.
- General guidance for the articulation of appropriate teaching and learning outcomes, especially assessment, to achieve comparability will be produced and made available to the discipline.
- Guiding processes for sustainable cross-institutional standards development and evaluation in the discipline of Archaeology, which should prove transferable to other disciplinary contexts, will have been articulated.

References

Australian Archaeology V. 61, December 2005, Special Volume: Teaching, Learning and Australian Archaeology, edited by Sarah Colley, Sean Ulm and F. Donald Pate.

James, R, McInnis, C., & Devlin, M. 2002, 'Options for a national process to articulate and monitor standards across Australian universities'. *Submission to the Higher Education Review, No. 11*.

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