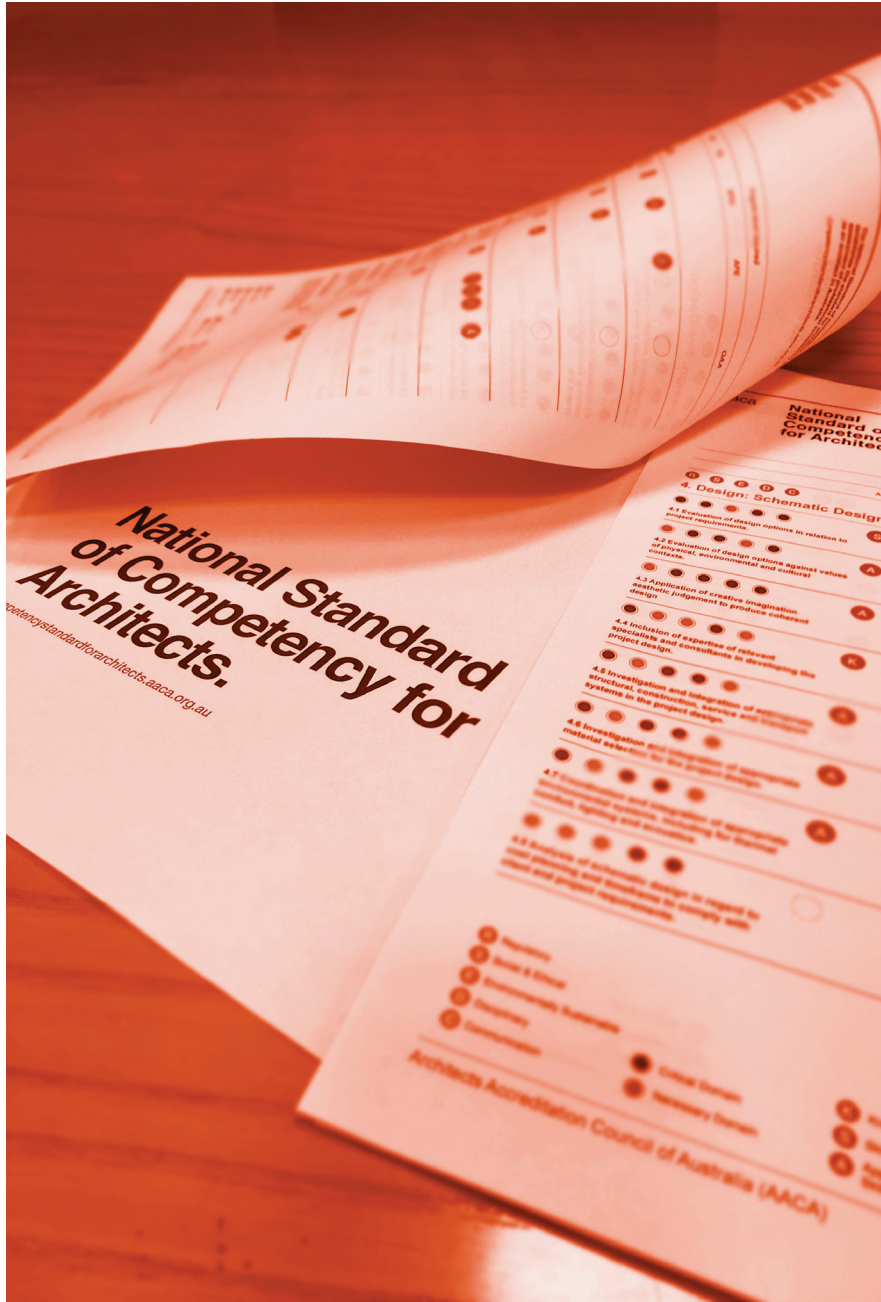*How we learned to love the...*

National Standard of Competency for Architects.

A primer on standards
by the NSW Architects Registration Board 2017

"The Standard describes what is reasonably expected of a person who can demonstrate the standard of skill, care and diligence widely accepted in Australia as a competent professional Architectural practitioner."

-National Standard of Competency for Architects (2015)

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As an authority whose remit and knowledge spans from the accreditation of courses, to the registration of architects and oversight of their continuing professional development, we have a unique role – and we think, a responsibility – in developing a learning loop in the profession, one that brings focus on the present, and looks intelligently to the future.

That's why we aim to be a leading resource on documenting shifts in education and practice, starting with the Standard that impacts fundamentally on those activities. This primer is the first in a series of ongoing discussions that we invite you to be a part of.

Standards can be exasperating.

Is there anything else that is written down explicitly, impacts on everything we do, and still manages to bore, baffle or frustrate the profession so much? The National Standard of Competency for Architects sits unassumingly at the core of all architectural knowledge, extending its reach to education, pathways to registration, and the ongoing learning of architects.

We think it's an astonishingly powerful and influential document, and yet hardly anyone talks about it. This is the first article in a series that discusses the standards and regulations in Australia that impact on the practice and education of architecture, and openly questions the future of those regulations.

So, what is the Standard?

It is really just a measure of an architect that is adopted by *other* frameworks, procedures and regulators to structure and assess the competency and status of an architect as a professional. Or more crudely: the shortest possible list of the (seventy) things an architect knows and does.

It's not surprising then that the Standard is a reference at all stages of an architect's experience. The Architecture Program Accreditation Procedure measures architectural education against a selection of relevant Performance Criteria; all pathways to registration require the demonstration of criteria described in the Standard; and the continuing professional development of architects expects constant reflection and learning within the Standard.

That all sounds pretty important, so how long have we had this Standard? Well, not that long actually. It emerged in the 1990s from a national campaign led by the federal government to establish coherent and coordinated competency standards for all professions in Australia. So, in a crowd of nurses, vets and engineers, architects took the opportunity to formalise their status as an eminent profession, and enthusiastically set up a Steering Group to take on the work.

After extensive research and broad consultation, the first National Competency Standards in Architecture was published in 1993 by the Architects Accreditation Council of Australia (AACA), detailing the Performance Criteria that architects would satisfy under four broad units of Design, Documentation, Project Management (now Project Delivery), and Practice Management.

In her historical account of the AACA, *Institutionalising National Standards* (2015), Kirsten Orr highlights how a number of agencies informed the development of the first Standard, principally the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition who commissioned the Steering Group, and published influential papers on how competencies and standards could be conceptualised and assessed in Australia.

Changing Standards

To this day, whenever changes occur to the Standard, they are always consciously made with an eye on the contemporary regulatory settings of higher education, and professions. Considering this careful and intentional design, the format and language of the Standard should be taken seriously.

In her analysis of differences between the 1993 and 2008 versions of the Standard, Orr identifies a number of new terms in the updated Standard, such as "demonstrate", "evaluate" and "explore", and notably "interpret" and

"research". These last two are important because they specifically appeared as distinguishing characteristics of a Masters degree described by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) in 2007, justifying the inevitable shift to the '3+2' model of education that would unfold in the following years. Combined with the considerable breadth of Performance Criteria, this definitively positioned architects as the eminently qualified - and regulated - built environment professionals in Australia.

If previous editions of the Standard have forecast changes to qualifications, what could the 2015 Standard signal for educators and practitioners?

Forecasting change

There were two clear changes that are worth reflecting on: the first was the delivery of the Standard through an Interactive Framework that acknowledges and accommodates the range of ways the Standard is used; The second were changes to its structure and content that reduced its overall complexity, and introduced important new language to the Standard.

The delivery of the Standard through a digitised Interactive Framework reveals for the first time its agility in a range of contexts. Where previously the Accreditation Procedure and the Architects Practice Examination were the default applications of the Standard, the new Interactive Framework shows how the Standard can be used in a range of ways, including the Overseas Qualifications Assessment, the Locally Experienced Practitioner program and the National Program of Assessment. This suggests two interesting trajectories for the Standard: firstly, that architects and regulators might *interact* with their Standard more than ever before; and secondly, that the Standard now has the regulatory capacity to enable diversity in the profession.

The content of the new Standard has changed in important ways as well. The optimisation of the 4 Units, 9 Elements and 70 Performance Criteria has been uncontroversial, eliminating repetition and simplifying the overall structure. What's more interesting is the introduction of new language that makes explicit ties to contemporary professional and educational discourse.

The introduction of five overarching Knowledge Domains (Regulatory, Social & Ethical, Environmentally Sustainable, Disciplinary, and Communication) are significant in two ways. Firstly, they show how Performance Criteria can apply across multiple areas of architectural knowledge, supporting the interpretive, complex and integrative qualifications of architects. Secondly, this terminology is now consistent with contemporary professional discourse, providing a coherent and transferable language for architectural knowledge that will be particularly useful in the growing interdisciplinary nature of practice and regulation.

Educational relevance of the Standard is also explicitly reinforced by introducing terminology from the AQF, clarifying that each Performance Criteria is assessed against Knowledge, Skills and Application at potentially different stages of learning toward Registration as an architect. Coding the Performance Criteria in this way provides clarity for education providers, but in doing so, it also reveals latent educational responsibilities beyond schools that remain unclaimed.

We have work to do

Given the nature of architectural standards, are we happy that they reflect – or maybe even forecast – evolutions in the practice of architecture?

Criticisms of the Standard suggest that in particular it has failed to keep up with increased global mobility and specialisation of architectural practice and knowledge. Considering these exact issues have been voiced for the last 70 years in Australia, is this the right framing of the issue?

A wider perspective of standards that includes the AQF and the Higher Education Standards Framework (2015) should reassure the profession that any Graduate of a Master of Architecture degree in Australia can apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate "autonomy, expert judgement, adaptability and responsibility as a practitioner," with "creativity and initiative to new situations in professional practice." If education providers are equipping graduates for the futures of practice in this way, we might ask – how is the profession? With the Standard already adapting to a number of uses, could it be instrumental in reinvigorating the ongoing learning of architects?

We think we're beginning to love the Standard. Is there anything else that is so carefully researched, integrated, written down explicitly, impacts on everything we do, and still manages to bore, baffle or frustrate the profession so much?

I'll admit, it might not be the healthiest relationship... but, can we at least talk about it?

Being the lead learner

This primer shouldn't be read in isolation, in fact a number of key articles and documents contribute to this conversation, and all of them have informed this primer. If you are interested in joining the conversation, these are a good place to start:

Institutionalising National Standards: A History of the Incorporation of the Architects Accreditation Council of Australia (AACA). Kirsten Orr (2015)

Strategy and Design Thinking: Why architects need strategic thinking. Peter Raisbeck (2017)

Establishing Competency-based Standards in the Professions. Research Paper No. 1 (1990) National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition

National Competency Standards: Policy and Guidelines (2nd Edition, 1992) National Training Board

The National Standard of Competency for Architects. (2015) www.competencystandardforarchitects.aaca.org.au/about

Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015. Department of Education and Training, Australian Government

Australian Qualifications Framework (2013) www.aqf.edu.au

Salon on Standards

August 9, 2017

To develop this conversation, we have invited three expert voices to the table, who bring considerable experience from their profesional, educational and regulatory backgrounds.

Professor Kirsten Orr is the Head of School at the University of Tasmania, a Registered Architect, and is active in research and reviews of architectural standards.

Dr Peter Raisbeck is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Melbourne, and writes regularly on issues confronting architectural practice and regulation.

Melonie Bayl-Smith is a Registered Architect, Adjunct Professor at the University of Technology Sydney, and ARB Board Member and Examiner.

This discussion will be documented, and a podcast of the Salon will be available shortly after the event. If you'd like to join the discussion, you can reach out to us **HERE.**

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