

## Frequent Asked Question – Defining ‘satisfactory course progress’

### Question:

*The National Code requires providers to define ‘satisfactory course progress’. But the wording used in the Code seems to relate more to VET and Higher Education providers, rather than providers in the Schools sector (e.g. it refers to percentages and units of competency).*

*How do schools write a meaningful definition?*

### Answer:

Once a provider has given consideration to the minimum academic benchmark under the National Code, the provider has the autonomy to decide what ‘satisfactory course progress’ means for its own institution. There will consequently be many different definitions of what is considered ‘satisfactory’, even when comparing providers from within the same education sector.

Because the achievement of satisfactory course progress is a mandatory condition of the student visa, it is essential that the school’s definition be both realistic and meaningful. The definition needs to be clear and upfront so that overseas parents and students understand the expected benchmark to be achieved. School administrators and staff (particularly those who make decisions about when to offer formal intervention, or when it is compulsory to report a student for breach of visa condition) will also want to feel that they are on ‘solid ground’ if action needs to be taken. This confidence can only be achieved with a well-worded definition that clearly articulates what ‘satisfactory course progress’ means.

When writing a definition, providers should aim to specify their school’s ‘line in the sand’ between satisfactory and unsatisfactory course progress. The information below is intended to guide providers towards the development of a course progress definition that is clear, compliant and appropriate to the school’s setting.

### ***Overseas expectations versus domestic expectations***

How are decisions about satisfactory course progress made for the school’s domestic population? Can these academic benchmarks be similarly applied to overseas students? Are there curriculum co-ordinators who can offer some wording advice about how to communicate the school’s definition? Remember, providers can work with approaches that already exist within the school. Beyond meeting the minimum course progress requirement set under the Code, there is no expectation to create something that’s different for overseas students.

### ***Different year levels, different benchmarks***

Is the school’s ‘line in the sand’ the same for different year levels, or do the various cohorts operate off different academic benchmarks? If the benchmark is the same across the school, then a single well-worded definition will suffice. But if differentiation between year levels is desired, then it will be necessary to prepare multiple course progress definitions and communicate these within the policy.

For example:

- In the **primary school**, many providers wish to recognise the great variations in learning progress observed in students whilst still in their early years of study – and particularly where English may not be the first language. Schools might therefore seek a much broader definition of satisfactory course progress e.g. requiring the overseas student to sufficiently meet QCAA curriculum requirements thereby allowing them to progress to the next year level of education. Other primary providers, however, might have more specific academic expectations of their students. Under the Code, this is possible so long as the benchmark is measurable, clearly defined and communicated to parents, students and school staff.
- For **junior secondary** students, the absence of any particular ‘certificate outcome’ might mean that a school prefers to adopt a broad definition of satisfactory course progress - similar to that described for primary students above. Or perhaps, given the increased age of students in these year levels and their progression towards the senior years, the school might want to be more prescriptive in its definition. Some schools, for example, decide that students must achieve at least a passing grade in all core subjects studied in each semester. Others might specify a certain percentage or number of subjects that have to be passed.
- In the **senior school**, course progress definitions must at least be consistent with the minimum requirements that allow a student to progress towards the qualification for which they are enrolled and for which the parent has paid fees i.e. successful attainment of a Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE). To give students the best chance of obtaining their QCE, schools will most commonly require a sound achievement across all subjects studied in each semester.

### ***Incorporating an ‘effort’ component on top of the course progress definition***

If desired, additional wording relating to classroom effort can be included in the course progress definition to cater for those students who have tried hard but have struggled to meet the academic benchmark specified by the school. Definitions which give added consideration to effort are most appropriate for the primary and/or junior secondary year levels (i.e. where there is no certificate outcome at stake).

A school might choose to include an ‘effort’ clause where there is a belief that given some additional time and support, younger students could reasonably be expected to catch up to the required level of achievement. It can be used as a support tool for those students who may have taken a little longer to settle in, or who have experienced some short-term personal struggles which have impacted upon their studies.

If a school wants to include effort as a component of its course progress definition, it must still specify the academic ‘line in the sand’ first, and then articulate the other qualities that will be considered under ‘effort’. These qualities need to relate specifically to the student’s *academic* studies and must be of a nature where evidential records will be available to support decision making around ‘effort’. Completion of all homework tasks, on-time completion of assignments, and active participation in classroom activities are common areas of ‘effort’ where teachers will typically maintain records of student performance and which can be used to support a decision about course progress. Other qualities, such as student behaviour and attendance, are dealt with separately under the National Code, and must not be included in a provider’s course progress definition.

### ***Giving consideration to ‘effort’ – how it works in practice***

Schools can only give consideration to a student’s ‘effort’ if specific wording has already been included in a published course progress policy which has been shared with all overseas parents and students. Schools cannot decide to add an effort component at the end of a semester as a means to avoid reporting a student for a breach of the course progress visa condition. This would result in a significant compliance breach for the school.

Under the Code, schools will assess course progress at the conclusion of each study period and once the end of semester reports have been finalised. It is at this time that schools will be looking to identify any students who are either:

- a) 'At risk' of breaching the course progress visa requirement, or
- b) Required to be issued an 'Intention to Report' letter for failing to meet the course progress requirement over two consecutive semesters.

Once reports are available, overseas students must first be assessed against the school's academic benchmark – as specified within the course progress policy. It is only where a student fails to meet this benchmark that consideration can then be given to classroom effort as a measure of whether the student is deemed 'at risk' or required to be issued a notice of 'Intention to Report' letter.

The practice of using 'effort' as the deciding factor in the assessment of a student's course progress should be viewed by schools as the exception rather than the rule. Students must not be allowed to routinely fail the academic benchmark and become accustomed to relying on a report of 'good effort' in order to maintain their enrolment at the school from one semester to the next. This is particularly important as students get older. In fact, whenever the school has had to rely on an assessment of 'effort' to make a decision about a child's course progress at the end of a semester, full fee paying parents should be contacted as a matter of priority. It is essential that parents be fully aware of course progress issues so that have opportunity to make informed decisions about their child's educational prospects within the conditions of a student visa.

### ***'Effort' and senior secondary courses***

The closer overseas students get to their senior secondary years the less leeway there should be for them to use 'effort' as a measure of course progress. Since there is very limited scope for an effort component to be included in a QCE course, it is essential that a history of academic failure in the junior years (coupled with good effort) not cause full-fee paying students and their parents to be misled into thinking that they are on track for success once they enter into Years 11 and 12.

### ***The drawbacks of considering 'effort'***

**Administrative burden:** Gathering feedback from multiple teachers in relation to effort could be a significant administrative burden. This would particularly be the case for students in Junior Secondary studies where there are typically large numbers of teachers involved in a student's education. If a school finds itself investing considerable time and energy at the end of each semester trying to gather information about students' effort it may be appropriate to review:

- The use of 'effort' as a component of the course progress definition;
- The strength of the College's entry requirements policy and selection process for overseas students

Lowering the school's academic benchmark is generally not recommended.

**Loss of clarity:** A 'black and white' definition of satisfactory course progress which focuses on a specified academic outcome at the end of each semester is preferred by some schools because it offers staff absolute clarity at key decision making points i.e. the 'at risk point' and 'reporting point'. Such schools recognise the substantial and ongoing support that they already offer to overseas students throughout the academic year and see this as sufficient to allow students to achieve the required benchmark. On the strength of the support offered, they view any student who happens to fail to meet the academic benchmark after 2 consecutive semesters as being eligible for reporting in PRISMS (pending the outcome of the relevant appeals process/es).

***Further considerations:***

Aside from a clear course progress definition, providers are also encouraged to appreciate the significant benefits associated with first implementing a strong application and enrolment selection process for overseas students (as required under Standard 2). By setting appropriate academic and English language benchmarks and ensuring that these are adhered to during the selection process, providers can be more confident that they are enrolling students who are suitable for the intended course of study. In doing so, providers at the same time are taking steps towards minimising the chance of ever having to report an overseas student for a breach of the course progress requirement.

---

For further information please contact the International Quality (Schools) Unit either via email at [cricosreg@det.qld.gov.au](mailto:cricosreg@det.qld.gov.au) or telephone on (07) 3513 6748.