Quality assurance and quality development
What will make a difference?

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Abstract: Quality assurance, using a continuous quality improvement cycle of monitoring performance against goals and working for improvement, is essential to quality education at a distance. Guidelines and benchmarks are available to assist universities to identify areas of activity that should be monitored and to define quality practice. In a dual mode institution with on- and off-campus students in the same courses, it is important to ensure that attention is paid to distance education outcomes among other competing priorities. Such quality assurance processes, however, may not adequately foster the knowledge building we desperately need to develop and extend good practice in online and distance education. Quality development, through such means as encouraging innovation and in-depth critical analysis of areas of strategic interest and concern, can be seen as a complementary process equally important to quality education at a distance.

Key words: administration, policy

1. INTRODUCTION

What can or should university management do to help ensure the quality of learning experiences of distance education students, and in particular to ensure that the use of online technologies and facilities enhances those learning experiences? Universities are challenged to demonstrate the quality of their academic programs and services in circumstances where government funding has been declining, student:staff ratios have increased and there are strong pressures on academics to expand their non-teaching efforts in research and commercial activity. A recent report commissioned by the government (Anderson, Johnson, & Saha, 2002) documents the negative impact of these developments on the morale of academic staff in Australian universities.

Thus we face the rapidly developing online world in less than ideal conditions, yet university leaders see online opportunities as strategically important for keeping their courses relevant and expanding their educational markets. This is particularly the case in dual mode institutions that seek to build on their strength in distance education.

Deakin University provides a context to consider how, what and whether initiatives of the university management can foster improvements in the quality of online and distance education. I will argue a distinction between routine aspects where a level of quality can be guaranteed by prescriptive policies and standards and by the monitoring of progress and compliance, and the far less clear cut task of designing and facilitating learning experiences for particular groups of students that lead to good learning outcomes using resources and facilities that are constantly evolving. Best practice is continually being defined and redefined.

2.   SOME INFORMATION ABOUT DEAKIN

Deakin University was established in the 1970s as a regional university in Geelong, Victoria. One of its roles, stated in the Deakin University Act, was to offer courses by distance education, and the new university set about establishing a reputation for quality, particularly of its learning resources and library services. Subsequent mergers with colleges in the early 1990s have resulted in a much larger university with four principal teaching campuses, located in Melbourne, Geelong and Warrnambool, and 29,512 students. In 2002, 42 percent of these students were distance learners and a further 12 percent of students were combining on- and off-campus study.

An important, and unusual, feature of Deakin is the integration of distance education into not only the faculties but also the administrative and academic support divisions of the university. There is no separate distance education unit that provides or coordinates distance education services. Distance education does not happen at the margins.

Online developments at Deakin began early. All students have had computer accounts since 1987. Starting in 1990, the university packaged applications to facilitate electronic communication and file sharing. Since 1998, this has taken the form of the Deakin Learning Toolkit, a CD-ROM provided to all students and also accessible online, which contains information, software, tutorials on the use of some programs and services, and hot links to university websites. The university has a policy that all students must have access to a computer and the internet and has set the goal that by 2005 all units will have a basic online component with information,

learning resources and communication facilities. In 2001, 27 percent of units required online access for learning resources, communication or both.

Distance education and online developments at Deakin have traditionally been facilitated and supported by a central infrastructure with boosts from internal and external project funding. They have resulted in large measure from the initiative and creativity of people throughout the university. The last three years have seen these brought under the umbrella of the university's teaching and learning plan, the implementation of which led to creation of a new senior executive position of Pro Vice-Chancellor (Online Services) to oversee and coordinate online developments and a range of infrastructure initiatives including redesign of the university's website and acquisition of a new learning management system. A policy on online technologies in courses and units, containing principles as well as prescriptions, and a code of good online practice have been approved by the Academic Board. Online teaching and learning now have an important place in the University's strategic plan and annual operational plan.

In tandem with these developments, the university is preparing for an audit in 2004 by the newly established Australian Universities Quality Agency. Initial steps involved documentation and review of existing policies, practices and documentation, including the identification of gaps, and affirmation of a learning organisation approach to quality in the university. Deakin is committed to a continuous quality improvement cycle for all its activities.

Elsewhere (Calvert, 2001, p. 2), I listed the following challenges for Deakin:

> The problems and issues surrounding [the development of online resources and facilities] are not unique to Deakin but reflect particular qualities of this University in its time and place: (a) how to provide facilities that are accessible and easy to use; (b) how to help staff shift from their customary practices to use the online facilities to create rich and engaging learning environments; (c) how to structure support for this transition; (d) how to focus strengths and assure quality to create a sustainable future.

3. CONCERN FOR QUALITY IN ONLINE AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

For distance education, the 1990s were the decade of quality. In Australia at the beginning of the decade, the government commissioned its newly established National Distance Education Conference to prepare a report on quality and standards in distance education (Nunan & Calvert, 1992).

Conferences of the Australian and South Pacific External Studies Association in 1991 and the International Council for Distance Education in 1995 (Sewart, 1995) had quality as their theme. One of the books in the Commonwealth of Learning's Perspectives on Distance Education series was on quality assurance (Deshpande & Mugridge, 1994).

This interest in quality on the part of distance educators coincided with the rapid expansion of distance education, sometimes in a climate of public and academic suspicion about its quality, and with the institution in some countries of institutional quality audits. It is perhaps these factors that have also spawned the development of guidelines on best practice and quality assurance, for distance education and more recently for online learning. Examples include: an Australian list of indicators of quality assurance of distance education (Nunan & Calvert, 1992; reprinted in Perraton & Hülsmann, 1998); guidelines from the Quality Assurance Agency in the United Kingdom on quality assurance of distance learning (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 1999); Canadian guidelines for e-learning endorsed by a number of national and international agencies (Barker, 2002); and two American publications, one a set of benchmarks from a policy institute (Phipps, Merisotis, & Harvey, 2000) and the other a set of good practice guidelines from a consortium of accrediting agencies (Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2001). These provide a rich base for examining themes considered pertinent to online and distance learning as well as recommended quality assurance processes and quality benchmarks. In varying degrees, they were sources for the development of Deakin's code of good online practice. Rowena Sinclair, in her chapter in this volume, and Frydenberg (2002), using different examples, provide analyses and summaries.

4.   QUALITY ASSURANCE

The Australian Universities Quality Agency defines quality assurance as:

The policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced. It includes checking that the [quality control] procedures are in place, are being used and are effective. It requires actions internal to the organisation, but may also involve actions of external bodies. It includes course design, staff development and the collection and use of feedback from students and employers.

4.1 Quality assurance issues in online and distance education

When the decision was taken to develop a code of good online practice for Deakin University, some people questioned the need, pointing out that the university's academic policies apply to all forms of teaching and learning. Others suggested that we should start with a code of good practice for teaching and learning in general. The view prevailed, however, that in moving more and more to the use of online environments which were relatively unfamiliar to many staff and students, we needed to set out some principles of good practice.

The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (2001, p. 1) explained its reason for producing guidelines thus:

> The Good Practices, however, are not new evaluative criteria. Rather they explicate how the well-established essentials of institutional quality found in regional accreditation standards are applicable to the emergent forms of learning; much of the detail of their content would find application in any learning environment.

The various sets of guidelines referred to above are organised in different ways, but they have considerable commonality in the themes they cover. These can be taken to reflect areas perceived to require special attention when students are studying online or at a distance:
– institutional commitment in the form of planning, system design, management, policy and budget;
– course design including content, technical quality, teaching and learning strategies and appropriate uses of technology;
– course presentation including the processes of teaching and learning, comprehensive services and service standards;
– student support including enrolment management, advice, counselling and assistance;
– communication with students including comprehensive information services and opportunities for academic communication and interaction;
– student assessment including authenticity, relevance, integrity and parity with other modes of learning; and
– staffing including academic qualifications, online and distance education skills, and provision of staff development and support.

Taken together, the guidelines provide an exhaustive list of topics about which questions might be asked in a quality review. Assessing how well an institution is doing, however, is a matter of judgement supported by evidence.

In the seven areas of consideration distilled from the various guidelines, Deakin can claim to have infrastructure, services and processes in place that address the needs of students studying online and at a distance. In a quality assurance exercise, the challenge is to ensure that these are being monitored and evaluated for effectiveness, and that when performance falls short of expectations, measures are taken to institute improvements.

Some factors of particular importance in online and distance education are amenable to cursory review and routine monitoring: the provision of formative feedback through a series of assignments, assignment turnaround time, the percentage of course materials sent out on time, reliability of access to online environments and student satisfaction with off-campus library services, to give a few examples that have long been discussed in distance education circles.

In the area of course design and presentation, Deakin uses several sources of data to monitor performance. Student evaluation of units is required, and a set of core questions addresses areas of importance arising from policy. Data are available on course performance including student progress, retention and completion rates. The university also participates in an annual national survey of recent graduates that provides an assessment of their course experience and information on employment and further study since their course completion.

In addition, the university has a policy of internal accreditation. New courses undergo an approval process involving an accreditation panel which includes external members and extensive documentation on specified aspects of the proposed course. Existing courses undergo review for continuing accreditation at least every five years, and their review includes measures of course performance. The accreditation guidelines contain checklists derived from policy to ensure that all important aspects are assessed.

4.2   Challenges in a dual mode institution

On the face of it, the combination of initial approval, regular monitoring and periodic intensive review, if they are combined with action where warranted, should serve to ensure the quality of online and distance education. In practice, however, there is a possibility that online and distance education performance will be overlooked in a university that integrates it with on-campus education.

First, it is necessary to ensure that, in the breakdown and analysis of information about course performance, online and distance education students are considered as a specific group. Although postgraduate coursework programs frequently are offered either on or off campus, undergraduate distance education students are almost invariably in programs

that also contain on-campus students. Furthermore, besides distance education students, the university has an interest in other identifiable groups, including international and first year students.

Second, the quest for good practice in online and distance education competes with other priorities for teaching and learning. Currently these include the development of graduate attributes, international and culturally inclusive curricula, the first year experience and experiential learning. Faculties are challenged to demonstrate compliance with policies that have been introduced during the last two years in each of these areas .

Third, members of accreditation panels are not chosen for their expertise in online and distance education. While they may be asked to review information about the performance and outcomes of distance education students, or to comment on the appropriateness of the mix of online and other technologies, their assessment does not necessarily reflect expert knowledge.

Fourth, attention to the results of performance monitoring may lead to efforts to improve existing processes and practices, and not to considering whether they are the right ones. This is of particular concern if we consider that online teaching and learning presents new opportunities for rethinking processes and also requires new practices. In its gradual introduction, we risk importing old ways of thinking, whether from traditional distance education or classroom teaching, and adapting them without sufficient reflection to the new learning environments.

In summary, while monitoring compliance with policy and performance against targets and benchmarks is an important element in ensuring minimal levels of quality (Ewell, 2002, p. 165), it may have little more than marginal impact. Online and distance education competes with other teaching and learning priorities for the attention of faculties. There is a risk that, with this approach alone, improvements will be limited to tinkering at the edges. This is especially the case when academic staff are under stress with increasing workloads and accountabilities.

4.3   Staff commitment

The view that quality assurance processes may have limited impact and support is substantiated by other sources. In their review of academic work in Australia, Anderson et al. (2002, p. 42) commented on academic staff perceptions of quality initiatives:

> Among the many comments on the quality question it was difficult to find much support for the concept. It must be noted however, that very few academics would have had any experience of [the Australian Universities Quality Agency] and the negativity refers in the main to

internal quality exercises, or perhaps memories of the three annual rounds of [the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education] in the early 1990s.

Newton (2002), writing about quality assessment in the United Kingdom, has documented how academics cope with the onerous demands of quality monitoring and reporting and how individuals and institutions have learned the 'impression management' strategies necessary to fulfill requirements (pp 42–44). He notes:

> ...the 'implementation gap': the difference between planned outcomes of policy, or preferred definitions, and the outcomes that emerge through the implementation process. In the context of the NewColl research, the gap was between what was designed into and expected of the quality system (the desire to reconcile 'accountability' and 'improvement') and what, at ground level, in a particular organisational context, prevented this from being achieved. (pp 47–48)

Newton was concerned that, when policy is being formulated and implemented, careful consideration be taken of the perceptions and circumstances of the academic staff who are charged with the implementation. Trowler (1998, pp 97–98), in his study of change processes surrounding the implementation of new higher education policy, criticised the dominant theoretical approaches derived from 'the managerialist model [that] sees academics as passive victims of change rather than contributing to it, albeit in ways unforeseen and perhaps unwanted by senior managers'.

5.   QUALITY DEVELOPMENT

Gordon (2002, p. 103) commented that 'institutions can readily be tempted to adopt tactical responses to summative external assessments and audits of the quality of educational provision' and that 'these may succeed, especially in the short term.' He argued that 'well-constructed approaches to quality assessment and audit should encourage ... deeper and embedded strategic responses from institutions, departments and programmes rather than a culture of passing a specific test.' Strategic approaches have the potential to encourage enhancement and transformation and thus are critical to quality development of online and distance education.

Gosling and D'Andrea (2001, p 11) have defined 'quality development' more narrowly as 'an integrated educational development model that incorporates the enhancement of learning and teaching with the quality standards monitoring processes in the university.' They see a major role for educational development units in combining curriculum development with

quality assurance to complete the quality loop. In their view, this approach has the potential to turn quality assurance into 'a positive and non-punitive, professional' exercise. While the marriage of educational development and quality assurance may work in some contexts, the approach appears to perpetuate the perception of academics as passive recipients of received wisdom about learning and teaching rather than generators of good practice.

5.1 Fostering innovation

New developments in online and distance education are typically viewed by universities as innovation. Hannan and Silver (2000, pp 114–115) concluded from a study of several universities in the United Kingdom that teaching and learning innovation is fostered in conditions where: innovators feel secure, are encouraged and recognise the need for change; teaching and learning has high status that is reflected in policy and practice; 'colleagues and people in authority show an interest in disseminating the outcomes of innovation'; and resources and educational development support are available. Innovation is obstructed by: policies and plans that 'preclude individual initiative'; 'excessively bureaucratic procedures'; and 'quality assessment procedures or other procedures that inhibit risk-taking'.

With respect to innovation, several initiatives at Deakin can be seen as enabling:
– teaching has parity with research in the university's promotion policy;
– a strategy in the university's strategic plan concerns recognising achievements in teaching and learning and this is elaborated in the teaching and learning plan;
– central academic professional development funds are targeted for strategic developments in teaching and learning;
– an online fellowship program provides release for selected members of academic staff to work on individual projects and contribute to the dissemination of good practice.

5.2 Deep engagement

Ewell (2002, p 165), in his review of American developments in quality assessment, comments on 'deep engagement' as an adjunct to compliance strategies in institutional self-studies:

> …institutions should not only be held accountable to minimum standards but should also engage in extended, meaningful, and broadly participatory examinations of their own operations and effectiveness.

He takes the view that, if deep engagement is to form part of the quality assessment process, 'the "compliance component" must be radically streamlined' if the burden on institutions is not to be increased, and also that 'deep engagement...is at its best when it allows the institution to examine a particular question or issue that its members themselves want to look at' (pp 166–167).

To what extent is Deakin undertaking deep engagement? The university's teaching and learning plan can be seen as an agenda for identifying issues, examining them in depth and initiating change. It is essentially strategically focussed on issues of importance to the university at this time. During the life of the last plan, implementation involved detailed examination of issues and the development of sometimes radical strategies to address them. Monitoring the outcomes of changes will continue for some time.

With respect to online and distance education, the tasks set out for the next triennium include:

- improving progress and retention of distance education students;
- ensuring that the infrastructure and support for online and distance education are aligned to identified student needs;
- renewing our focus on state of the art pedagogy and curriculum design for students who are not studying in face-to-face mode;
- ensuring that off-campus programs meet the same quality standards as on-campus programs regardless of the medium used;
- researching online pedagogy, establishing standards and frameworks for staff development and using experience to continuously refine online teaching and learning strategies and practices; and
- establishing sustainable procedures for maintenance and revision of digital learning resources that ensure currency.

6.   CONCLUSION

Quality assurance, using a continuous quality improvement cycle of monitoring performance against goals and working for improvement, is essential to quality education at a distance. Guidelines and benchmarks are available to assist universities to identify areas of activity that should be monitored and to define quality practice. In a dual mode institution with on- and off-campus students in the same courses, it is important to ensure that attention is paid to distance education outcomes among other competing priorities. Such quality assurance processes, however, may not adequately foster the knowledge building we desperately need to develop and extend good practice in online and distance education. Quality development, through such means as encouraging innovation and in-depth critical analysis

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