Expanding the horizons of university learning through quality management: A comparison of the effects of different evaluative methods on curriculum and accountability

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Quality management initiatives have been introduced into universities both as a means of learning how to improve the education that students receive and as part of an ideological initiative to make universities more responsive to the opinions of students and future employers. A problem occurs because these two uses of quality management are not always mutually compatible. In organisational terms, tensions exist between the requirements of organisational learning and those of accountability, and this may be exacerbated if evaluative measures are inappropriately integrated into the organisational reward system. This paper contrasts the use of Graduate Attributes with Graduate Skills Assessments in quality management from an organisational learning perspective and explores the strengths and limitations of each. Although the internal validity of the Graduate Skills Assessment test has been extensively developed, its impact on curriculum, its acceptability to students, and the practicalities of using the test for benchmarking purposes have received less attention. The method of developing Graduate Attributes through curriculum change processes is well established, but the inherent limitations of this method for quality assurance purposes are rarely discussed. The problem will be addressed using a case study method that describes and analyses the use of Graduate Attributes as a quality improvement tool and the potential considerations for any widespread use of the Graduate Skills Assessment test. The paper concludes that although each approach has some merit, there are dangers if the measures appropriate to quality assurance are permitted to dominate quality management and impede organisational learning initiatives that are essential to authentic quality improvement.

Background

Since 1998, universities have been required to include statements about graduate attributes (GAs) in their Quality Assurance and Improvement plans (DETYA, 2001), while the Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA) have been trialled since 2000 (Gallagher, 2000, p. 30), with the intention that these will be adopted by universities as part of a quality management strategy. The question posed in this paper is how Graduate Attributes and Graduate Skills Assessment should be used within a quality management process that conceives of the university as a learning organisation. This question is important because unless quality measures are used appropriately, mistakes will be made in interpreting data and developing policies (Reed, 1995, p.325).

Introduction

The section that follows will define 'quality management' and outline the implications of a learning organisation perspective for the quality improvement process. The next section will describe the Graduate Attributes approach and its use by Youth Work staff at Edith Cowan University, describe the Graduate Skills Assessment test, assess the practicalities of its use, and explore the potential of both Graduate Attributes and Graduate Skills Assessment measures within quality management. The final sections summarise and conclude the paper.

Definitions

Quality management in education refers to:

> *The management of quality control and quality improvement, and to those aspects of the overall management functions that determine the components of quality policy… (and) the design and maintenance of quality assurance mechanisms. (Harman & Meek, 2000, p.13).*

This definition shows that quality management has two distinct functions of quality assurance and quality improvement. In this paper an organisational learning model of management is assumed, and the terms are distinguished in the following ways. Quality assurance is concerned with the externally focussed accountability functions where the purpose of collecting data is to *demonstrate* to those who are monitoring performance that specified outcomes have been achieved. Quality improvement is concerned with internally focussed individual or organisational *learning* where the purpose of collecting data is to enable *learning* to occur that will inform strategies that deliver genuine quality improvements.

The two quality processes occur independently and their goals may sometimes conflict, especially where attempts are made to use the same data for both purposes. In particular, requirements for data that will satisfy the external demonstration of quality, may suppress the dissemination of data necessary for organisational learning where such data may be potentially damaging to external appearances of quality or embarrassing to the public profile of the institution. The two terms are also not interchangeable because people requiring data for 'public consumption' will seek to present data in ways that always maximise the appearance of quality, irrespective of the underlying reality. People requiring data for monitoring purposes will seek to use the data according to the political exigency of their role. By contrast, people requiring data for learning purposes will seek out aspects of processes that are less than completely satisfactory even when monitored outcomes appear to show that adequate performance has been achieved. From this it can be inferred that quality assurance has only a secondary relationship to the process of *improving* the quality of the education process, while quality improvement has a secondary relationship to *demonstrating* the quality of the education process.

Graduate attributes and graduate skills assessment

Both measures are similar because they treat the student as the 'product' of university education, in contrast to most other measures that treat students as 'customers'. Both measures are also similar because they represent a generic approach to qualities of 'what graduates should be' that transcends both the disciplinary 'silos' and the concept of education as being concerned only with disciplinary knowledge or specific professional skills. In other respects they are very different, because the specification of Graduate Attributes forms part of

a curriculum approach to quality, whilst the Graduate Skills Assessment seeks to measure the outcomes, or cognitive achievements, of graduating students.

Graduate attributes

Graduate attributes relevant to the unique mission of each university, are identified by each institution and consist of a list of 'capabilities' that all students should have by the end of their degree (DETYA, 2001, p. 32). Universities devise their own lists of graduate attributes but are expected to include 'core' attributes described as 'knowledge attributes', 'thinking attributes', 'practical attributes', and 'personal attributes and values'. It is anticipated that the exact nature of these attributes and their application in different courses would be ascertained within each university after consultation with relevant members of the professions or the 'business community'.

The Youth Work team at Edith Cowan University received a small University grant to develop Graduate Attributes for the undergraduate youth work program. The university has as its core values 'Service', 'Professionalism' and 'Enterprise'. These values have been translated into nine curriculum categories to form the Graduate Attributes Framework for the university, within which course specific Graduate Attributes are identified. The process used by the team is set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Graduate Attributes as a curriculum development method

Task	Method
1. Customise university Graduate Attributes Framework	Collation of data from: Field survey; Job advertisements; AQF National Competencies for Youth Work; Academic staff; Current students
2. Identify how the attribute might be enhanced by university education	Staff discussion of how the teaching processes were intended to develop skills, help students clarify values, and provide relevant knowledge
3. Identify where in the curriculum the attribute will be developed	Review the major units proposed for re-accreditation and identify the unit(s) most suitable for the development of each attributes, including the possibility of sequencing the development of attributes across units.
4. Identify assessment techniques that will support the acquisition of graduate attributes	Staff discussion of how assessment processes and topics might be adapted to support students in acquiring and practising relevant graduate attributes
5. Incorporate assessment methods and changes to content into the curriculum	Review existing unit outlines and where necessary make alterations to the content and assessment methods

The Graduate Attributes Framework identified by Edith Cowan University provided a starting point for the project. The process we used required that we customise the Graduate Attributes Framework to suit profession specific requirements for our graduates. The team had already undertaken a research project to find out about potential employer expectations of newly qualified youth work graduates, appendix 3, (Bridgland, Cooper, Kulisa, & Sercombe, 2002). We used this data alongside data gained from field consultations, job specifications from recent advertisements for the kinds of jobs suited to new graduates, the Australian Qualifications Framework National Competencies identified for Youth Work, a survey of youth work teaching staff and surveys of current students, to identify attributes considered

essential for newly qualified graduates. An earlier field survey (Cooper, Love, & Buchanan, 1992) had identified that youth work agencies valued personal qualities that transcended specific skills or competencies, and this was supported by more recent evidence from a variety of sources. Current students were surveyed because many of our students are already in youth work employment.

The next stage in the process required staff discussions to identify how and whether each of the identified 'attributes' could be developed within the context of a university course. This process engaged the team in peer discussions concerning the potential of the course to help students to gain essential knowledge and skills, how the course helped students to clarify their personal and professional values and how (and whether) the course should and could assist students in the development of personal qualities that would help them in their future career.

The third stage of the project was concerned with staff discussions about assessment. Assessment focuses student learning and to some extent the content of teaching that occurs within units. We decided that the best way to consolidate proposed curriculum changes within units was to make changes to assessment tasks and processes. The Graduate Attributes identified for Youth Work will be incorporated initially as a voluntary component, into the portfolios that students are required to produce for their professional assessment. The inclusion of Graduate Attributes into student portfolios provides a way of assessing learning that occurs across several units. The inclusion is initially voluntary, to provide an opportunity to assess whether this approach is acceptable to students and worthwhile in its implementation. In the final stage, the changes to the assessment and content of units were incorporated into the official unit outlines for each of the compulsory units that make up the 'major' in the Bachelor of Social Science (Youth Work).

The strengths of this approach were that it engaged the teaching staff in a comprehensive review of the curriculum and included discussions about the purpose of the degree, its content and its assessment methods. It helped to ensure that the degree, although modular, avoided repetition and built sequentially towards appropriate academic and professional development for students. As a quality improvement method within a learning organisation it has merit as it encouraged staff to seek input from a variety of stakeholders and to discuss content, assessment and teaching methods with each other. A quality curriculum contributes to the quality of the teaching and learning process. If the curriculum is conscientiously followed, if staff have adequate teaching skills, and if the assessment processes are rigorously applied, students should, if they pass the course, have acquired the requisite attributes.

The quality of graduates, however, cannot be assured, simply on the basis that the curriculum of the course is of high quality. From a quality assurance perspective, the adoption of the Graduate Attributes process by itself, cannot guarantee that other factors have not subverted the quality and integrity of the course. The quality of the students graduating will still depend on the capacity of the staff to implement the curriculum in ways that permit quality teaching and learning and rigorous assessment. For these reasons, Graduate Attributes although useful for quality improvement purposes, cannot be used for quality assurance purposes.

Graduate Skills Assessment

In 1999, Kemp, as Minister of Education, announced that the government had commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research to develop a test to assess graduate skills (Kemp, 1999). The test was intended to serve several purposes. It was intended to act as an entry-level diagnostic test that would enable universities to offer appropriate support to poorly performing students, it was intended as an exit level test to assist graduate programs and employers in the selection of applicants. It was intended as a measure that could be administered at entry and exit to allow universities to demonstrate their worth by assessing the value they add to individual student performance. Finally, it was promoted as a test that would allow employers, prospective students, universities and government to compare the performance of students across disciplines and across institutions (DETYA, 2001). The test claimed to assess four different types of generic skills, 'interpersonal understanding', 'critical thinking', 'problem solving' and 'written communication skills'. The results of the pilot study indicated consistent differences between disciplines with arts and law students apparently having higher aggregate scores on three of the four measures than students from other disciplines. Only in 'problem solving' did engineering students fare marginally better than arts and law students (DETYA, 2001).

We have no direct experience of the Graduate Skills Assessment tests, but informal feedback from staff who have experience of the tests in pilot form, indicate that the tests were not popular with students. In the pilot study, students were not required to pay for the tests and at the institution in question only a small minority of students enrolling through special entry schemes undertook the tests, as part of the conditions of their acceptance.

This raises the questions of who would pay for student testing, who owns the test results and why students would choose to participate. If universities want to use the data for benchmarking purposes, then they, not their students, should pay the costs. If this were to happen and the institutions paid for two sets of testing per student (as happened in the pilot, although this was paid for out of research funds), the cost would represent a sizable budget sum that some would argue might be better spent on enhancing other aspects of teaching and learning provision. Further, for benchmarking purposes, institutions would require a high level of participation in testing, something which is unlikely if students themselves dislike the tests and do not recognise them as being personally useful. If the students pay for the tests, then only students who require the tests for the purposes of gaining employment or entry to further study would take the test. For these purposes only the final test would be of value and only those students who expected to excel would opt to take the test. The results would be the student's property and the institution would have no claim to them. In any case, test results from an unrepresentative group, without entry tests, would be of little value to the institutions for benchmarking or quality assurance purposes.

The strengths of these tests are that they offer some students the opportunity of quantitatively confirming the level of their generic skills. This may be especially useful for Arts students. In some circumstances it may offer academic counsellors an additional diagnostic test to determine how best to help failing students to develop academic skills or allow some students to monitor their own progress. The limitations of the test for quality assurance purposes are tied to practicalities of cost and student participation. It seems unlikely to be useable for benchmarking purposes unless government funds are earmarked to cover testing costs and students can be persuaded to participate. The test is not useful for quality improvement purposes within the context of a learning organisation for the following reasons. The pre-test /post-test, at best claims to indicates the degree of improvement in each of the four test areas

over the period of the student's enrolment. The tests cannot give any information about why any improvements occurred or even whether they were related to formal university activities, or whether they were the result of other forms of learning, life experience or maturation.

The data collection requirements and process of the two approaches are very different. It is argued here that quality improvement, *conscientiously undertaken*, would alleviate the necessity for quality assurance. The quality of the whole institution would be as good as it possibly could be, in any given circumstances. From this perspective, the best quality assurance measure is for the institution to support staff who conscientiously undertake quality improvement as an integral part of their daily duties. This forms the philosophical basis of current quality audit processes and is recommended by the Australian Quality Council (Australian Quality Council, 2000).

Quality improvement or quality assurance?

Sometimes quality assurance processes are instituted alongside quality improvement processes, as is the current situation in Australia. This becomes problematic however, if quality assurance is prioritised at the expense of quality improvement. If this occurs, individual and institutional effort may be directed towards finding means of achieving high scores according to the monitoring processes rather than attending to the often time consuming and difficult processes of quality improvement derived from authentic individual and organisational learning. Conscientious quality improvement becomes subverted by attempts to 'beat the system' through devising ways of improving output scores without the necessary attention to fundamental quality improvement. This is most likely to occur when benefits and penalties are attached to the demonstration of outcomes. Currently, individuals are offered incentives such as promotion or continued employment, if they demonstrate good research scores and high levels of student satisfaction with their teaching. Institution may be publicly humiliated if it appears they do not excel on monitored outcomes. This provides a strong temptation for individuals and institutions to be distracted from genuine quality improvement by the more pressing need to *appear* to achieve or exceed the requirements of monitored outcomes, as measured.

Conclusions

Graduate Attributes and Graduate Skills Assessment both have uses and limitations within quality management processes. Within quality management there is a fundamental difference in purpose between quality assurance and quality improvement processes. There is a danger that the priorities of quality assurance can distract from the more fundamental process of quality improvement. This could be countered by conscious institutional efforts to support authentic quality improvement processes. Care should be taken at an institutional level to avoid inadvertently rewarding apparent 'quality' (as indicated by one-dimensional outcome measures) more highly than sustained and integrated approaches to organisational learning and improvement.

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