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Delivering higher and vocational education: Can an institution's course management system be constructively aligned with a foot in both camps?

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Abstract: *In recent years efforts have been made to enhance the quality of program audits to give reasonable assurance to regulators, satisfy all the standards of the institution, as well as attending to the needs of the students and the industries into which they will enter. The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA, 2005) ‘...acquires knowledge of a range of good practices that are transferable throughout the sector’ (par1). These benefits flow through to all institutions that wish to implement sound strategies and embrace quality processes in their course management systems. How can we effectively accommodate all of these requirements in the institution and is curriculum more important than other elements? Managing tertiary educational programs requires a balance in meeting the expectations and requirements of all stakeholders in regard to quality assurance. This paper will examine some of the problems facing planners, academics and managers as they negotiate auditing processes and align policies and curricula to educational outcomes. It shifts the spotlight onto the institution, and in particular the course management system, its strategies, processes and the role it plays in organisational change. This discussion takes place in the tertiary education sector, where there is a mixture of industry-led vocational training and university higher education. Can an institution successfully have a foot in both camps?*

Keywords: *Quality; curriculum; constructive alignment; learning outcomes; course management*

Tertiary sector education

Can an institution effectively deliver a combination of vocational and higher education learning? If reports from the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA 2003) that: ‘Worldwide, the education and training systems within countries are converging’ (p16) are correct, then perhaps engaging students in learning in the future will result in some blend of the two delivery modes. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF 2004) is now promoting the development of closer connections between the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector and higher education. The AQF states: ‘The development of structured arrangements to link qualifications across the sectors represents a key process in building closer inter-sectoral relationships’ (par1).

This tertiary part of the educational experience has a mix of adults, young and not-so young, at various stages in their life long learning journeys. Dator (2004) asked the question: ‘What is the purpose—the social function—of education?’ He referred to the distant past when people learnt without teachers, consciously and unconsciously, by experimenting and ‘playing around’ (p1) a good deal of the time. Furedi (2004) passionately argues that education needs to be realigned to ensure there is ‘a public sphere in which intellectuals and the general public can talk to each other again’ (p21). As far as Furedi is concerned, the university should be a place where the enlightenment values of objectivity, scientific method and absolute standards are vigorously upheld. Jaivin (2002) refers to the importance of educational institutions not only dispensing relevant information to students but also encouraging them to challenge, debate and evaluate these data so that they can turn it into lasting knowledge.

Background to the case study

The International College of Tourism and Hotel Management is accredited by Macquarie University to deliver the Bachelor of Business Degree, majoring in either Hospitality or Event Management or International Tourism. Macquarie’s interdisciplinary approach provides the perfect platform for the association with International College of Tourism and Hotel Management, as both institutions share a mission to produce sought-after graduates who have the skills to meet the challenges of this millennium. International College of Tourism and Hotel Management also enjoys an academic joint venture with the international “César Ritz” University Colleges of Switzerland, the United States of America and Croatia. This is enhanced by the strong partnerships that the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management has with some five star international hotel chains, many of which now rely on these graduates to fill their junior management positions. The Bachelor degree is available to students who have successfully completed their diploma to the required standard at the end of all level two units. To date this diploma has been awarded by the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management under the auspices of the Vocational and Educational Training Department of Education. The International College of Tourism and Hotel Management now has over 700 students with approximately 45 teachers.

The set of units offered in the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management diploma program, while primarily focusing in the first levels on the applied or practical skills associated with the hospitality, event and tourism industries, also have a sprinkling of more rigorous units that is a deliberate strategy to introduce the students to the more rigorous methods of learning favoured in higher education. Students then enter the workplace for nine months of industry training, reinforcing many of the skills they have mastered in their early units of study. This policy is adopted because there is a need for education that prepares students for the real world (Ramsden 1992). When they return to their program they can integrate their work experiences into their new studies. Towards the completion of the diploma a more theoretical approach is adopted with industry-based case studies, analysis, simulations and group work. The final year of the degree program presents the higher education level units where the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management teachers have to engage students in more scholarly pursuits. Students are encouraged to foster deeper analytical thinking and critical appraisal techniques, and ideas that are researched and progressed into a study of the key issues in hospitality and tourism organisational policies and procedures within a global society. Effectively, the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management spans both the VET and higher education sectors. It is a higher education provider and a registered training organisation (RTO) in the VET sector where there is an emphasis on competency.

Competencies and curriculum

Competencies are used specifically in the VET sector and one of the biggest providers of this education is the New South Wales Department of Education, under the banner of Technical and Further Education

(TAFE). The head of Business and Administration programs at NSW TAFE John Irvine (personal communication August 13, 2003) stated that: “The units of competence are then taken by the TAFE course developers and translated into curriculum”. This is the method used by the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management to design and develop many of the curriculum units delivered in the diploma program, and would be classified by Leinhardt, McCarthy Young and Merriman (1995) as professional knowledge, being functional and applied. This is in contrast to university knowledge that these same authors state is declarative, abstract and conceptual.

Over the last few years the debate about competencies in the VET sector has ignited. Kramer (2003) asks: ‘What are key competencies and how should they be tested?’ There does not seem to be any current research that helps answer this question. In ticking the ‘competency box’ are we really sure that in a different context the student will still display the necessary skills to overcome a new set of problems? What part did rote learning play and has the knowledge gone deep enough to be lasting? If these industry specific competencies are vital, do they depend on the teacher who assesses the competency, on the curriculum or on the policies of the institution? Kramer also stated that as well as being competent, the VET sector should ensure that its students are ‘learning to pay attention to detail, to concentrate, have accuracy in all work, persistence, patience and an enjoyment in solving problems’ (par7). These are highly desirable generic skills that perhaps should be reinforced across all educational sectors.

The course management system

As well as ensuring competency in vocational areas, the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management (ICTHM) must deliver units that are matched to the standards required for awards in higher education. Many of these units are modelled on the Macquarie University equivalent units and although the aims and objectives are clearly set in the unit outline, the teacher plays a much more participative role in constructing the topic details, building performances for understanding (Biggs, 2003) and assessment tasks that emanate from the learning material.

As a provider spanning both the VET and university systems, the ICTHM has focused on the development of rigorous quality evaluation and development processes. In this context the overall notion of ‘course management’ is used to focus on developmental activities. There have been many challenges: the examination and redesigning of program structures, curricula, teacher development practices and supporting organisational factors. Careful planning, constructive alignment and monitoring is required for this course management system to be functional and effective as it sits in the middle of the two main tertiary education sectors; VET where the curriculum is prescriptive and imposed and university where the curriculum is generated by the lecturer, often in a large and diverse setting. Details of the processes of audit need to be well understood, program self evaluation carefully documented and regular quality action planning carried out along with professional development for faculty. The course management system highlights the need to have scholarly activity that is mixed with proficiency and training. In other words, ensuring the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management has the quality and flexibility to have an educational ‘foot in both camps’!

University versus vocational curriculum

University teaching curriculum is generated by the lecturer and perhaps still further developed in the classroom (Patrick 1998). Many subjects are considered free standing with the student able to select, to a certain degree, their preferred learning pathway. Additionally, some curriculum pathways are generated by departments to prepare students for a particular career. In this context the curriculum becomes an element of the constructive alignment paradigm (Biggs 1996) where each of the elements must be in tune with each other if the outcomes of the program are to be achieved. Dator (2004), when praising

the International Space University's educational programs, states that the curriculum is firmly based on the 'Three I's: It is Interdisciplinary, Intercultural, and International' (p12).

On first examination of the VET curricula, it is possible to state that the principle of alignment (Biggs, 2003) sits comfortably with the 3P model – Presage, Process, Product. In the vocational educational system the teacher is used as an interpreter and facilitator in the learning process, supporting the proposition made by Patrick (1998) that teachers are cultural agents. The difference is that the VET curriculum is prescriptive and imposed, fixed outside the classroom, quite the opposite of university curriculum. ANTA dictates the competencies that must be achieved in the vocational units in the program, and the teacher, while an expert in that discipline, must attest to the students' abilities and skills. ANTA (2003) stated that the workplace was becoming an increasingly important part of vocational education and training and students would gain valuable and lasting knowledge through collaboration with fellow workers and the networks they foster. Ashton and Sung (2001) suggested that the opportunities for learning on the job were enhanced in many organisations where employees worked in teams, fostered networks and participated in shared projects. Perhaps this is a strength of the VET sector.

The challenges of building the capacity to change

The International College of Tourism and Hotel Management has examined ways in which courses can be managed to extract the best outcomes for teachers, learners and the institution. In any system, one of the main elements is the teaching environment and this plays a pivotal role in managing the course system. Biggs (2003) argued, for constructive alignment to be effective, all the critical components of this model must be in balance. Although Biggs was examining the paradigm in the teaching context, its application to a course management system is ideal, as the teaching context simply becomes just one part of the whole environment. Teachers react in various ways to the course management system and the structure must be balanced without smothering initiative and creativity in curriculum pedagogy. To achieve this, the system requires a framework that takes the student from 'developmental competence' to expertise involving extended abstract thinking, in a similar way to the 'SOLO Taxonomy' model put forward by Biggs and Collis (1982).

The International College of Tourism and Hotel Management set about streamlining the processes that form the course management system. It developed an overview of the whole program from which the standard unit outlines were linked to the specific objectives (see Figure 1). From these outlines were developed the detailed schemes of work, given out to each student in the first face-to-face class of the term. Brodeur (1986) and Lowther, Stark and Martens (1989) consider the teaching curriculum as an informal learning contract while Altman (1989) and Dixon (1991) believe it is a binding document as far as assessment, evaluation and grading is concerned. This schemes of work working document and learning contract contains all the information about the unit that the student needs to know at the very start of the term and leaves the student in no doubt as to what is expected of them. It therefore meets the claims of these researchers that it is both an informal learning contract and a binding document for assessment. Teachers are encouraged to take full responsibility for their schemes of work by making sure they constantly update topics, source current readings and develop innovative assessments in preparation for the next teaching term. The teacher may find an excellent new assessment resource, new reading or journal article or other such material, and can work on updating instructions, assessment tasks, assessment criteria and other information. The document is a work-in-process, well researched, updated and evolving, ensuring currency and relevance.

To be a creditable part of both the higher education and VET sectors there were many issues to be addressed including, standards, curriculum, graduate attributes and the teaching/research nexus, all of which make managing courses so vitally important to partnerships with providers nationally and

internationally (Trofino, 1993; Goodman, Sproull & Fenner, 1990; Milan & Munt, 1992). International College of Tourism and Hotel Management had to learn lessons from audits, from other institutions, accrediting agencies and AUQA auditors: Lessons on how to combine vision with pragmatism, design curricula and assessments within the framework of a sound course management system. If this can be done it leads to an institutional atmosphere that captures an innovative and holistic vision of education, adding significantly to the learning objectives of each unit in the program.

This is an area to which the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management has paid a great deal of attention in the last three years, designing and developing a system of policies and procedures that cover the curriculum details, the teaching methods used, assessment and reporting methods, classroom management and the whole learning environment. The major task has been to ensure all these elements are constructively aligned and are working as they should. The course management system needs to be constructed in a way that sets out a seamless learning pathway from vocational to higher education.

Teaching and learning

The International College of Tourism and Hotel Management has implemented a policy that supports faculty to meet the requirements of higher education teaching alongside the development of a course management system that operates in an environment where industry requirements could be addressed in the curriculum pedagogy. Ramsden (1992) claims that the three most important attributes for student learning under the direct control of the teacher are: the aims and objectives, assessments and teaching methods. These are not linear but rather are intertwined and together they provide the framework upon which student learning is based. Dator (2004) placed great emphasis on teaching quality in higher education, recounting the early days in his career some fifty years ago when his mentor William H Danforth would instil in the group of young teachers the need to remember that good leads to better than best, 'never let it rest, until your good is better, and your better best!' (p5). It is apparent that Danforth's teachings made an indelible impression on Dator, who stated: 'That is quality education! Danforth dared us to do everything as well as we can, and we did' (p5).

Researchers have stated that effective teaching practices are required if the needs of the learner are to be satisfied (Knowles, 1990; Kolb, 1984; Boud, 1981). There is also the complication identified by Gardner (1993) that teachers must plan for a range of intelligences among their students and this is an element that applies to both vocational and higher education systems. To overcome this difficulty, most teachers vary the way they teach, some aspects are kept fixed and others are varied (Runesson, 1999), and this creates a space of variation (Marton & Booth, 1997; Bowden & Marton; 1998) providing a window of opportunity for deeper learning. Perhaps it could be argued that the chance for variation may be greater in the vocational sector because of generally smaller class sizes. Lecturing at university, often to very large numbers of students, tends to limit the 'improvised conversation' that Biggs (2003, p83) describes as crucial for good interactive teaching.

In research carried out on the university teachers' understanding of their discipline in the context of teaching and in relation to how students understand the material being taught, Patrick (1998) stated: 'Teachers are positioned as cultural agents, making curriculum - not merely interpreting and more or less effectively putting into practise a curriculum that had been fixed outside the classroom' (p.282). In the context of the course management system, aligning all the working parts may be made more difficult if, as Patrick believes, the curriculum goes with the teacher into the classroom and is researched in that context. One might pose the question: Does this mean that in the higher education sector there may be less opportunity for course managers to align curriculum to constructively fit into the whole picture?

Jerram (2002) stated that in her attempt to formulate an environment in her university teaching where all types of learning could take place she 'deliberately chose to take a vocationally focused approach, with an emphasis on employability outcomes' (p.72). Perhaps this is not an isolated experiment and there are other university teachers who constructively align their teaching methods to the needs and wants of the working students. We would expect however that university or higher education teaching will stretch the student with in-depth research and critical analysis.

In 2003 New South Wales TAFE put together a set of case studies which exhibited innovative ideas and excellent teaching practices in the VET sector. In some TAFE case studies there are varied styles of teaching that lead the learners to seek a greater knowledge of the material allowing them to experience a much deeper understanding of its value and application. Throughout these studies are themes representing workplace problems that provide opportunities for students to question and reflect upon the skills they are acquiring for industry. It is evident in all of these cases that the students learn best when they are motivated, engaged and feel what they are learning is relevant to life skills. These cases also highlighted the need for learners to work collaboratively with both the teacher and industry mentors and to take responsibility for their own learning. All these suggestions would seem to be in line with the proposition made by Tyler (1949) that students will learn from their own activities, not from those of the teacher.

Conclusion

An institution needs to conduct regular self-assessment to ensure there is quality and good governance, in this way it can turn the audit into quality outcomes that become pervasive and educationally focused (AQUA, 2004). Well monitored course management systems will benefit not only the institution but also society as a whole. The International College of Tourism and Hotel Management course management system addresses both practical and scholarly education weaving professional knowledge into functional applications. Although there is some teacher input into the development of the relevant VET subjects for the diploma levels, they nevertheless have clearly defined sets of learning outcomes that have been pre-ordained by the ANTA. The Industry Advisory Boards within ANTA set the learning objectives for each dedicated core unit in the diploma program around which the curriculum document is developed. In the final year of the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management programs the curricula are tied closely to the Macquarie University equivalents and the teacher has more freedom in the design and delivery of the topics and the way assessments are constructed.

Dator (2002) concluded that as far as higher education institutions were concerned, these institutions should be researching and teaching to produce a humane and sustainable world, where the quality of teaching is mirrored in the quality of the graduates. Once again, teaching is noted as a vital element in the delivery of courses and the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management has used the constructive alignment principle to develop the framework of its course management system that embodies these elements. From the lessons learnt it has instituted professional development programs that ensure all teachers receive adequate education in the design and delivery of learning material. The objectives, assessments and teaching methods are intertwined to assist the students' experiences to be deep and meaningful. Most of all, the curricula retains links with the real world while at the same time retaining flexibility that allows ideas to be expanded and explored.

It is vital that curricula are planned, managed and controlled so that individual unit syllabi are not ignored or abandoned by teachers who take academic freedom to its extreme and immerse themselves in their own vested interests without taking into consideration the whole program of study (Salemi and Siegfried, 1999). The fast pace of technology has increased the need for amendments to curricula as designers frantically try to keep pace with innovative digital advances that often become crammed into an already overloaded unit syllabus. In some cases this has led to hastily drawn up programs that attempt

to cover even more material in often diminishing timeframes. Many departments also face pressure to alter curriculum from a rigorous theoretical framework to specified applications in an attempt to suit the market (Millmow, 1997). To avoid these difficulties the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management now keeps a portfolio for each unit in the curriculum where changes can be documented, ensuring transparency and accountability and explanations as to why, when and how the unit was changed.

For program objectives to be achieved the course management system must be sound and effective. If an essential element is missing from the system then the quality of educational outcomes will suffer. This supports the proposition that course management systems need to foster an educational environment that allows the best quality curricula to be developed and delivered, constructively aligned to all the other necessary elements. The system also has to be flexible enough to foster an environment where students can experience deep understanding of the object of their learning. Perhaps one of the most poignant phrases was made by Tagore in 1936 when he said: 'That education is a living, not mechanical process, is a truth as freely admitted as it is persistently ignored' (cited in Dutta and Robinson, 1995 p323).

An institution can deliver both vocational and higher education with its curricula if the course management system is constructively aligned within an environment where each of the elements is not only aware of the others but actively complementary and synergistic.

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