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# **Institutional Support for Quality Learning and Teaching — What's Missing?**

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## **Abstract**

*Universities are increasingly focusing attention on the quality agenda and its impact on their standing and success. Institutional responses to enhancing and assuring the quality of learning and teaching and the overall student learning experience typically focus on developing plans and policies, implementing systems, creating organisational structures and roles, and devising special initiatives. As AUQA Audit report commendation and recommendations show, the effectiveness of these responses varies across the sector. A number of factors may impact on the success or otherwise of these approaches. Drawing on our experiences and the literature on learning and teaching in Higher Education and on change management, we suggest that a crucial factor often overlooked is the values and beliefs that academic staff have about quality and the impact of these on their engagement with institutional efforts to respond to the quality agenda. Addressing this oversight has important implications for maximising institutional efforts aimed at quality learning and teaching.*

*Keywords: academic staff beliefs about quality, learning and teaching improvement, managing change*

## **1. Background**

The quality of learning and teaching is now being taken seriously across the Higher Education sector both nationally and internationally. The key drivers for this increased focus include a growth in student numbers and a more diverse student body, a view of the student as customer, a rise in internationalisation and global competition, a reduction in government funding, and an increased demand for accountability (Harvey, 2006; Marginson, 2006). In addition, universities have recognised the importance of improving and evidencing quality for both institutional reputation and standing as well as for long-term sustainability.

There are many ways in which universities, both in Australia and internationally, have responded to the quality agenda in order to demonstrate their commitment to quality enhancement and assurance of learning and teaching. For example, universities have developed learning and teaching strategies (Gosling, 2004; Newton, 2003); introduced performance review and student feedback systems (Anderson, 2006), created special roles to support learning and teaching such as Associate Deans, Teaching and Learning (Marshall, 2007) and quality officers (Hodgson & Whalley, 2006), and established institutional support, and recognition and reward mechanisms (Ramsden & Martin, 1996). In addition, universities have designed and implemented numerous special initiatives to address learning and teaching quality, including incentive schemes such as the Teaching Performance Index (Asmar, 2004), learning and teaching grants (Chang et al., 2004; Radloff, de la Harpe & Wright, 2001), special projects focussing for example on developing generic skills (Crebert, 2002; de la Harpe & Radloff, 2000;

Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004), formal tertiary teaching qualifications, such as the Graduate Certificate of Higher Education (Dearn, Fraser & Ryan, 2002), and learning and teaching fellowships. The AUQA Good Practice Database (<http://www.auqa.edu.au/gp/search/index.php>) provides numerous examples of good practice in learning and teaching from Australian and New Zealand universities.

Many of the ways that universities have responded to assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching have been commended in AUQA Audit reports. An analysis of the 24 AUQA Audit reports available as at January, 2006, identified 125 commendations of a total of 328 (38%) that focused on processes, activities or initiatives aimed at supporting student learning and enhancing teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (de la Harpe & Radloff, 2006a, 2006b). These commendations yielded 133 separate statements, across six categories of learning and teaching. However, AUQA Audit reports also indicated that there are many areas related to learning and teaching where universities need to address quality issues. A further analysis of the same 24 AUQA Audit reports, identified 220 recommendations of a total of 431 (51%) that related to learning and teaching with an average of nine, and a range of three to fifteen, recommendations per university (Carmichael, 2006). Table 1 provides a description of the categories and the number of commendations and recommendations for each category.

Table 1: Number of Commendations and Recommendations by Category

Category	Commendations	Recommendations
Quality: Related to systems and processes aimed at quality assurance for learning and teaching	35	76
Teaching: Related to professional development, learning and teaching roles, and initiatives including incentive schemes, fellowships and projects	31	32
Social: Related to institutional climate and activities that encourage and support student engagement	30	30
Intellectual: Related to activities that support student intellectual engagement	18	27
Curriculum: Related to program structures and mode, and the design of courses including learning resources	13	33
Physical: Related to resources and infrastructure that support student learning	6	21

A comparison of the number of commendations and recommendations shows that AUQA Audit reports identified considerably more areas of learning and teaching requiring improvement (220) as areas of good practice (133). Carmichael identifies a unifying theme for improvement from the AUQA reports, namely that there is a need for more consistent implementation of quality processes such as closing the loop with student feedback, assessment moderation and validation, and consistent application of standards with clearer delegation of responsibility for action. As Carmichael (2006, p. 8) concludes, “[i]n a nutshell, this review...suggests that there is a need for more ‘quality systems thinking’ by academic planners, and more systematic deployment of such plans is needed to assist staff to teach more effectively, and ultimately for students to learn more productively.”

## **2. Factors impacting on quality efforts**

There are a number of factors that may negatively impact on universities' efforts to address the quality of learning and teaching and to implement innovative ways of achieving quality learning outcomes. Learning and teaching are complex activities that take place in complex contexts. Enhancing the quality of learning and teaching takes time and effort to achieve. Efforts to achieve quality outcomes require dealing with multiple interdependencies within and outside of the institution. Further, there are many and often competing priorities facing universities such as maximising performance in the Research Quality Framework process and in international university rankings and league tables, and in ensuring ongoing financial viability and long-term sustainability. These factors may detract from efforts to address the quality of learning and teaching.

Universities have for a significant number of years had to manage with reduced government funding for their core business of learning and teaching, research and innovation, and community engagement. Therefore, many have needed to both diversify their sources of revenue and to seek additional funding wherever possible. Such revenue raising activities can put pressure on quality. Moreover, there are competing demands for whatever resources are available and the resources that are directed to assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching, may be allocated to activities that do not result in the intended outcomes.

Universities may put more effort into the development of plans, policies, processes, structures and systems for quality learning and teaching than on their implementation and review. Further, these may not be sufficiently aligned to support quality learning and teaching. For example, processes may undermine policies which in turn, may not support good practice, organisational structures may not have kept pace with changes in plans and policies, systems may be poorly developed, and the data needed for assuring and enhancing quality may be invalid, out of date or difficult to access. Finally, a culture of evidence may not be well developed throughout the institution.

Universities are often described as inherently conservative and resistant to change. Their culture is seen as individualistic and competitive as opposed to team based and collaborative, characteristics typically needed for creating and supporting quality learning environments. In addition, change management processes are often not well understood and systematically applied and there may not be enough staff who are able and willing to take on the leadership and management roles required to bring about change. Indeed, evaluations of learning and teaching innovations demonstrate a lack of effective change management which leads to difficulties with dissemination, take up, and sustainability of projects thus limiting their impact (de la Harpe & Radloff, 2006c).

Finally, universities are showing signs of change fatigue and, as a result, staff have limited energy and enthusiasm for undertaking additional and /or innovative activities to support learning and teaching and assure quality.

## **3. Academic Staff Values and Beliefs**

Working as both academics and in learning and teaching leadership and support roles for a number of years has reinforced for us the importance of the factors outlined above. However, reflecting on our experiences and the research literature, we have come to believe that a crucial factor, often overlooked in discussions on implementing the quality agenda, is academic staff values and beliefs about quality and the importance of these on the success or otherwise of such efforts. As Newton (2002, p. 50), points out, the perspectives of academic staff who are the "‘front-line’ actors engaged in implementation of policy" is often neglected when implementing a quality agenda. This oversight is significant given that the values and beliefs that academic staff have regarding quality, have a major impact on their engagement with institutional efforts to respond to the quality agenda.

Academic staff are or should be key players in enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. However, they may have beliefs about the quality agenda, in particular, what quality means and how it is best achieved, that may be at odds with those of university 'management', external agencies such as audit bodies (QAA in the UK, AUQA in Australia) and governments, thus making their role in implementing the quality agenda problematic. The typical view of quality that these groups espouse is derived from definitions developed and used by business and adapted to higher education during the 1980s and 1990s and focuses on meeting requirements of external stakeholders (Harvey & Newton, 2004; Vidovich & Currie, 2006). External stakeholders such as accreditation and auditing bodies focus on the quality of programs of study and on the institutional quality of processes and outcomes, respectively. For these stakeholders, quality is associated with accountability which is demonstrated primarily through compliance and control (Harvey & Newton, 2004). In addition, institutions are sensitive to the views of students especially in the context of global competition between universities and develop quality systems to manage the 'customer' relationship which typically emphasise compliance to policies and procedures. The result of this approach to quality by institutions is that by the mid 1990s, as pointed out by Henkel (2000), 'quality' was associated with 'bureaucratisation', 'educational orthodoxy' and 'conformity'. In our experience, such negative perceptions of quality are held by many academic staff.

In contrast to the institutional approach to quality assurance in terms of compliance and control, academic staff are more likely to view quality in terms of academic standards (Anderson, 2006) or transformation of the learner (Watty, 2006). The prevailing view of academic staff is that quality assurance involves self and peer assessment and self improvement. In other words, it is based on professional autonomy and trust that all academic staff are engaged in this process voluntarily as part of academic work (Laughton, 2003). Moreover, academic staff complain that the externally driven managerialist view of quality results in additional workload, gamesmanship, and box-ticking without achieving the desired outcomes (Anderson, 2006; Harvey, 2006).

These differing beliefs about quality influence academic staff reactions to institutional efforts to address quality (Anderson, 2006; Jones & de Saram, 2005; Newton, 2002). For instance, academic staff when faced with the requirement to contribute to quality assurance or enhancement activities may respond by not complying, paying lip service to or sabotaging the activity (Laughton, 2003). Another way they may respond is by coping with, shaping or subverting the quality agenda (Newton, 2002). As Jones and de Saram (2005, p. 48), note, "[i]t is relatively easy to develop a system and sets of procedures for quality assurance and improvement on paper. To produce a situation where staff on campus 'buy into' this in an authentic and energetic manner is much more difficult".

#### ***4. Reactions to Values and Beliefs***

In our experience, attempts to respond to and manage academic staff beliefs about quality and their role in assuring and enhancing quality learning and teaching have often been inadequate or even counterproductive. Senior managers and those responsible for implementing quality policies and processes may ignore or downplay staff reluctance to implement policies and make changes to learning and teaching practices; they may perceive (or pretend) that staff resistance is isolated to a few 'recalcitrant' individuals rather than being widespread; they may try to work around reluctant academic staff by shifting responsibility to other staff such as quality officers, directors of teaching and learning, curriculum designers; they may attempt to increase 'central control', for example, by making more top down decisions and/or centralizing activities such as curriculum design; they may redesign initiatives ie restart, or refresh failing initiatives; they may reduce expectations and accountability or even abandon implementation of the initiative or process altogether.

It is not surprising then, that the research on the impact of implementing quality assurance and enhancement initiatives shows that there is little evidence that such initiatives have resulted in improved learning and teaching practices and the overall student learning experience (Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Laughton, 2003).

### **5. Moving forward**

If we are serious about using the quality agenda for improvement and not just for compliance and accountability, we cannot ignore the values and beliefs that academic staff have about quality and how these may differ from university management and external stakeholders. Nor should these differing values and beliefs be regarded as an obstacle to be worked around but rather as a problem to be solved. Neither a purely managerialist compliance approach nor an entirely collegial *laissez faire* approach are likely to achieve the goal of quality learning and teaching to which all stakeholders aspire. We need to focus our change management efforts on finding a new language to describe quality and a new way to implement quality processes that result in shared understanding and ownership of the quality agenda and a commitment to collaborative action. Specifically, academic staff and university managers need to engage in genuine discussion about the quality agenda with the aim of finding a common language for talking about quality, and agreeing on a definition of quality and on actions to enhance quality that reflect the values of each. Further, both groups need to agree on the kinds of institutional recognition and reward systems associated with enhancing quality that should be in place and see the value of these for their own professional identity and career advancement. Finally, both groups need to acknowledge that, while each may take on different roles in improving the quality of learning and teaching, both need to accept collective responsibility for institutional quality assurance processes and outcomes.

This approach is easy to describe but in our experience, the hardest thing to implement especially in the current Higher Education context. Why? Because achieving engagement, dialogue and collective action requires serious reflection on past and current practices by all parties (government, audit bodies and universities) responsible for designing, implementing and managing quality systems and process. It requires that we engage with the relevant research literature and identify and build on good practice. Further, it requires that we have high degrees of empathy and social intelligence (Goleman, 2006). Finally, it requires that we take responsibility for undertaking this work in a sustainable way. The challenge for all of us is to see this problem as an opportunity to re-engage with renewed energy in building a shared understanding, ownership and commitment to quality. It is only then that efforts to enhance the quality of learning and teaching are likely to be successful.

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