Quality management and the web-enhanced learning space: Report from an on going case study

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While quality assurance is often spoken of in terms of a single institution-wide approach, the diversity of spaces, places and players signals that reality is more complex. This paper reports on an on-going case study conducted within an action research framework of a middle-sized Australian university concerned with quality assurance in regard to supporting the learning of campus-based students using online environments. The tensions that arise between the need to foster the spread of enthusiasm and skill and the need to monitor and record, and between top-down and bottom-up approaches are considered. Five broad dimensions of quality assurance are identified. Recognition and support of diversity in strategy to both meet local needs and to achieve university-wide standards are considered.

Keywords: elearning, case study, quality assurance, blended learning, higher education

Introduction

Quality assurance for campus-based university teaching with online components is a story of both place and space. The Australian Catholic University (ACU) is not a simple place; neither are its teaching and learning spaces for over 15,000 campus-based students. Although four faculties might seem manageable, they are represented on all six campuses of the university (located in three states and the ACT), with the schools and courses within them sometimes state-specific and sometimes national in scope. Campus-based students are not always campus-located, as the curricula of professional programs in particular include professional practice in work-place environments, and the personal lives of students increasingly include substantial work, family and/or commuting commitments.

ACU's commitment to flexible learning addresses not only these contextual issues but also recognition of the value of flexibility in teaching and learning strategies for learning outcomes (ACU 2008a). This has led to the requirement that all units of study have an online component, located within the University's learning management system. For students attending on campus, their units are to be 'web-enhanced'. What does this mean? What quality assurance issues and mechanisms emerge? Which should be prioritized in the ACU context? This case study contributes to the growing but still limited literature on quality assurance of online components of campus-based teaching, and is situated within an action research framework. It reports work in progress of the 2009 cycle combining top-down (central committee) and bottom-up (faculty internal) approaches aimed at establishing faculty-relevant initiatives to answer these questions and meet university-wide objectives in quality assurance for blended learning. Out of scope of this paper are the contributions of centrally provided infrastructure and technical support, and professional development, all of which also contribute to quality assurance.

Background

'Web-enhanced' at ACU includes all campus-based teaching with an online component. This contrasts with other institutions which use more than one category to describe and distinguish uses of online strategies with campus-based teaching (Milne & White 2005), ACU's definition of web-enhanced mode is a face-to-face unit provided [at least] with an electronic repository of unit materials, together with a facility for communication among academic staff and students (ACU 2008a). This broad catch-all offers two separate sets of challenges. Conceptually, web-enhanced is problematic on two fronts. First, understanding what might be happening in both place and space is unclear, as it comprises all forms of

student participation wherein the students meet face-to-face with their teachers at least once although more typically on a weekly basis. Second, the category embraces practices ranging from the repository use of an online web presence to strategies truly integrating classroom- and online-learning activities (an environment with 'learning activities that involve a systematic combination of co-present (face-to-face) interactions and technologically-mediated interactions between students, teachers and learning' according to Bluic et al., 2007: 242). Practically, while a unit is delivered to a campus-based cohort, it may need to have assessments and outcomes moderated across the University where the same unit is delivered on different campuses by different teaching teams with different views on and experience in technology-supported teaching and learning.

ACU has a set of policies and procedures around student-centred, constructively aligned flexible teaching and learning (ACU 2008 a,b,c) which were outcomes of the first cycle (2007-2008) focused on establishing university principles and policies. While there is a central coordination role for the quality assurance of fully online units (digital technology-supported distance learning), responsibility for quality assurance of web-enhanced units rests wholly within the faculties.

Both internal review processes and a 2008 report on ACU from the Australian Quality Assurance Agency (AUQA), an external auditing body, indicate that quality assurance (QA) processes are poorly understood and not consistently implemented within faculties. This suggests that both areas for improvement and areas of current good practice are going unrecognised. This in turn means the faculties (and the university) are hampered in both their attempts to improve the quality of their blended offerings and their efforts to encourage and disseminate emerging good practice. It also means that the University's (and faculties') own processes in this area need review.

The challenge then is how to develop and implement an improved QA process for blended learning which includes recording and reporting on improving quality of practice around the University (required by external bodies and senior managers) while maintaining the more important focus on improving quality practice. Newton (2000) points out academic staff can interpret QA processes as simply reporting exercises and this becomes a demotivating and disillusioning experience for them. Avoiding this is crucial given the pivotal role of individual academics in achieving desired QA outcomes, a role recognised in university policy documents which acknowledge these outcomes can only be achieved when 'people are expert, *enthusiastic* [our emphasis], skilled and well-supported, and learning experiences are designed to engage the learner by means of multimodal approaches. Teaching staff have the responsibility for the design, development, implementation and evaluation of units and courses in flexible teaching and learning and Faculties are responsible to support the alignment of practice' (ACU, 2008a).

Unpacking 'quality' for web-enhanced units

Quality is a multi-dimensional construct with stakeholders holding varying views about its dimensions and their relative importance. Numerous sets of principles, standards and checklists have been published (Milne & White 2005). ACU's top-down/bottom-up approach aims at achieving understanding, ownership and relevance in a framework of assurance, not assessment. Communication channels are both formal (committees including representatives of central services and faculties) and informal (telemeetings usually but not always convened by the National Online Education Coordinator). Ground work for the 2008-2009 cycle drawing on both published work and the lived experience at ACU has so far identified these dimensions for incorporation in quality improvement processes.

1. *Technological environment:* Appearance, accessibility and usability - What message about the university, the course, the unit does the LMS site present? Can all enrolled students use it equitably and easily?

2. *Constructive alignment*: Curriculum design with alignment of learning outcomes, activities, assessment and graduate attributes (Biggs, 2001; Fresen, 2007; Wood & Friedel, 2008). Without proper alignment, resources can be wasted, energy dissipated and overall student outcomes can fall well below what was expected (Hase & Ellis, 2001). The purpose of the online component for student learning is included here.

3. *Communication and transactional presence:* Clear and coherent instructions to students on what they are expected to do, why they should do it, how and when it should be done is essential in any teaching and learning environment. Teacher, student and institutional presence (Shin 2003) in the online environment depends on the educational design.

4. *Student satisfaction:* How can student perceptions of their eLearning experiences assist in improving quality? (see Ellis, Ginns & Piggott, 2008).

5. *Risk management:* Risk management (including concerns for student privacy and safety) and quality assurance related to online teaching are relatively new concepts in higher education (Reid, 2003; Oliver, 2001; Herrington et al, 2001) and are often not considered in practical holistic quality assurance frameworks (Fresen, 2007). The Hanover Research Council (2009) has suggested that practical areas such as educational design and use of multimedia could productively be the focus of risk minimisation activities within faculties.

Although various benchmarks for course design, delivery and learning outcomes exist, (see for example the National Education Association or the Australasian Council or Open and Distance eLearning) these are rarely systematically applied nor related to risk management procedures (NEA, 2000; ACODE, 2007).

Monitoring and improvement

In any quality assurance system there are both prospective and retrospective practices. Prospective practices already in place for web-enhanced units include online templates and diverse professional development opportunities for staff. By May 2009 each faculty had a Faculty eLearning Coordinator (FeLC) in place. Although faculty strategic expectations of the role vary somewhat, a common purpose is a focus on the web-enhanced learning environment within the faculty and as it relates to university-wide expectations. Some baseline data on the student experience (Kazlauskas et al. 2009) is already available to inform a more concerted effort. (and, interestingly, has *inter alia* highlighted students' valuing the repository function and convenience provided by online unit sites). Practically, during 2009 each FeLC has commenced with a variety of exploratory studies in faculty-appropriate ways to determine what web-enhanced teaching and learning currently look like, identify dimensions of concern, and achieve other faculty-appropriate outcomes. The diversity of faculty priorities and approaches is demonstrated by these initial procedures and findings:

Faculty A observed a significant increase in the number of web-enhanced units in Semester 1 2009 compared with Semester 2, 2008. Further work is needed to determine whether this increase was facilitated by dissemination of new documentation focused on anecdotally known common technical barriers (e.g. uploading unit outline documents in required PDF format) to support staff in creating quality web-enhanced units. A retrospective random audit of 12.5% of the Semester 1 2009 web-enhanced units indicated quality in terms of perceived student technical utility (e.g. navigation and accessibility) and pedagogical opportunity (e.g. online participatory activity) was compromised. Having identified strengths and weakness in current Faculty practices the Faculty is now looking to integrate existing University and Faculty quality procedures with new faculty initiatives.

Faculty B conducted a preliminary audit of Semester 1, 2009 web-enhanced units using a navigation- and professional appearance-based framework which revealed some need for an improvement of web-based skills at this level. This simple but effective first step has gained the attention of the faculty about the 'face' that it presents to students through its online units and what might be done to improve this.

Faculty C has begun to document existing practice both in terms of the sites delivered to students and in terms of the processes and conversations surrounding their development and construction. It is increasingly at the level of these surrounding conversations that the faculty is starting to focus its QA activities with the intention of building a more structured and identifiable community of practice around blended learning with clearer roles for staff, better scaffolding to support them and clearer and better documented communication channels.

Faculty D has identified that whilst there is a web-enhanced presence for all units in line with ACU policy it is apparent from a 2008 university-wide student survey that there is little being offered that is interactive (Kazlauskas et al. 2009, p.18). A 2009 needs analysis conducted by the FeLC also identified that insufficient assessment design options, particularly in using technology-supported strategies to address an increasing assessment workload associated with increased student numbers.

The outcomes of this preliminary work are already providing valuable insights into the way things work, or don't work, in this environment, and are informing faculty-appropriate strategies which align with university-wide goals expressed in both the policies already mentioned and the University's 2009-2011 Strategic Plan (not yet released for public viewing). The environment offers faculties both opportunities (e.g. curriculum change, appointment of enthusiastic new staff)) and constraints (e.g. substantial staff

turn-over and workload issues) in the development of these strategies. Honoring faculty diversity and achieving institutionally consistent reportable outcomes may be a challenge.

Conclusions

Use of web-technologies in teaching and learning for campus-based students encompasses a broad continuum of approaches, from repository to active learning space. Quality assurance consequently must be founded on an understanding of its key dimensions, a portfolio of strategies to address them, identification of which are likely to have the most beneficial outcomes, and clarity in who is responsible. The development of suitable QA processes particularly at the faculty level must by definition be an iterative and evolutionary process which is why a model based on action learning cycles is the one currently favoured.

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