Maintaining the momentum or trying to keep up with it? The development of the Evaluation Management System to support the enhancement of learning and teaching at the Queensland University of Technology

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Abstract

The evaluation services of Australian universities usually reside in central academic development units and, as such, serve a number of masters: the government, the university management, the academic staff, students, parents, employers and members of the community (Isaacs, 1997; Hicks, 1998, cited in Southwell, 2003a). Initially, the development of instruments to evaluate teaching in the early 1980's was a 'fringe activity' engaged in by a few enthusiastic academics interested in self-improvement in their teaching (Sweep, Hughes, Nulty, & Southwell, 2005). Since then, both government and universities have increasingly used evaluations of units and teaching as a way of achieving strategic goals. Today, such instruments are "an integral feature of the quality assurance procedures of the university, the subject of university-wide policy, financial targets and public scrutiny" (Sweep et al., 2005). This paper aims to contextualise and describe the recent development and implementation of the Evaluation Management System (EMS) as one of the means to support quality improvement, that is the enhancement of learning and teaching at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), as well as a means to support the need for QUT to respond to the increasing demand by government for quality assurance in institutional teaching.

Keywords

student feedback of university teaching, accountability, quality of teaching

Background and context

A number of strategies have been adopted by the Australian Federal government in order to encourage universities to substantially improve their teaching (Southwell, 2003b). The review of Australian higher education in 2002–2003 led to a reform package, *Backing Australia's Future*, released in May 2003. A key feature of the reform package is the establishment of a Learning and Teaching Performance Fund managed from within the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). To determine their eligibility for these funds, institutions are, among a number of requirements, expected to "demonstrate a strong strategic commitment to learning and teaching through … systematic student evaluation of teaching and subjects that inform probation and promotion decisions for academic positions [and] student evaluation results would be made publicly available on an institution's website" (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005).

Concurrently, the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) reviewed their evaluation processes and their institutional policy in relation to evaluation of teaching and units (Hughes, 2003). This resulted in a new QUT Evaluations Policy that was instituted in 2004 and which required compliance to a set of evaluative activities by all staff involved in the delivery and support of teaching and units. The roles and responsibilities described by the policy specifically mention the teaching staff, the supervisors of teaching staff, the unit coordinator, the course coordinator, the deans and the Teaching and Learning Support Services (TALSS) within QUT. In addition, there were requirements of the types of evaluations employed, their frequency of use and the reporting of these evaluations.

This context provided the impetus for the re-development of the QUT evaluation of teaching and unit survey instruments and the underpinning infrastructure for the evaluation service. As well as this new context there were a number of insufficiencies with the previous system that made the development of the EMS an imperative. The previous evaluations system was not a corporate level system that was supported by hardware, software and personnel in a secured, stable manner. The expectation of the statistical feedback from this system, as an authoritative source of data to be used in compliance monitoring by the faculties, was also a major concern.

The source data feed to the system was not authoritative enough to warrant this reliance. More precise integration by the evaluations database with source data, and engagement of the data providers, was required to meet faculty expectations. One of the new mandates of the policy was that students should be made aware of the outcome of evaluations and the actions taken by staff for improvement as a consequence of the feedback that they had provided. This latter requirement was embedded in a recommendation, which as an attempt to finally close the loop of the evaluation process provided for interpretation, explanation and improvement plans to be revealed to the key participants in the evaluation, the students. Meeting this policy requirement meant establishing a secure online, web-based system.

The Evaluation Management System (EMS)

The evaluation tracking database in use since 1997 was not engineered as an enterprise system and significant risks, such as scalability limitations, security and integrity, were identified with its long-term continued use. In early 2003, an Asset Management Plan (AMP) Information Technology project was established in the Division of Technology, Information and Learning Support to reengineer the Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET)/Student Evaluation of Units (SEU) system that supported the management of all evaluation of teaching and units at QUT. This project aimed to minimise these risks as well as support the new evaluation policy at QUT by developing and implementing the Evaluations Management System (EMS) as an enterprise level system. This name reflects the emphasis now being placed on the self-management role that evaluators and users of student evaluation feedback are being required to take. The new evaluations policy advocates greater communication on, and accountability for, teaching and learning outcomes between faculty members and faculty and students. It places the emphasis for evaluations firmly in the province of teaching and learning and heightens the linkages between teaching and evaluation. There is also a clear message for an incremental approach to evaluation and improvement of teaching and units.

Aims, objectives and features

The aim of the development of the EMS was to support and nurture a teaching community that is enthusiastic about exploring alternative ways of evaluating teaching, reflecting on results and willingly communicating improvements back to students. The primary objective of the project was to provide a robust, integrated, online teaching and unit evaluation management and reporting facility by which users could design, develop, deliver and report on evaluation and improvement relating to teaching and units at QUT.

Secondary objectives were to accommodate the revised and extended suite of standard evaluations that was currently available thus providing greater flexibility to academic staff in what they may evaluate; provide a tiered monitoring and management approach to evaluations in line with the requirements of the new evaluations policy; provide feedback on the results of evaluations and incremental improvements to students through Online Learning and Teaching (OLT) sites; facilitate qualitative as well as quantitative approaches to evaluation in order to develop a culture of continuous improvement and practices and create a system that was primed to integrate with the developing technologies of student and teaching portfolios.

The concept behind the EMS is to help the teacher, wherever possible, through every step of the journey of planning an evaluation strategy, reflecting on feedback, implementing changes, communicating improvements, and re-strategising the evaluation plan. Not all of the intended functionality is available at the time of writing, but the basics of each step of the journey are already in place. The Evaluation Management System is predicated on a Calendar Schedular and a Unit Organiser. The Calendar Schedular has been constructed to allow users to plan individual or school/faculty based evaluation strategies and keep track of all types of evaluative activities that they have undertaken during the recommended (or faculty's) evaluation cycle. With the Unit Organiser the user is able to organise units that are of interest to them in any way they like. For instance, units may be grouped by school, by course or may simply be the units that the user is involved with. If units are organised in this way reporting capabilities may be structured around these groups to give greater flexibility of analysis to faculty management. The actual questionnaire that is administered to students is selected from a bank of templates. The templates, if standard, are pre-populated with the standard questions. To this the user may append questions from the public question databank or create their own for use and storage in their personal question databank. (Most of the questions in the public databank are classified according to QUT's *Teaching capabilities framework*, an initiative that helps teaching staff to identify and work with dimensions and elements of teaching and student learning.) The questionnaires may be printed off for classroom-based evaluation or released online for students to respond to online. The online responses are uploaded to the EMS on the closing date for the evaluation. Summarised, quantitative reports are offered in PDF format, Excel format or HTML. A free-form qualitative online survey tool is soon to be implemented. The EMS has a journaling function for recording any evaluation related exercise, or reflections on feedback, that the user has engaged in. It also has built-in extensibility to allow for foreseeable evaluations management requirements at QUT.

Implementation

While a significant technological achievement, the EMS is only one component of a comprehensive approach to the evaluation of teaching and of units at QUT. An evaluation framework has been developed as the pedagogical framework that underpins the evaluation cycle of units and courses at QUT. The five stages are: (1) Planning and consultation; (2) Implementation and data collection; (3) Interpretation and diagnosis; (4) Improvement; and (5) Journaling and consolidation that occurs throughout the cycle. It is within the context of the Evaluation Policy and the Evaluation Framework that the EMS has been implemented. At the time of writing, 1670 evaluations have completed through the EMS since it was rolled out five months ago. This is similar to the 1689 evaluations processed through the old system in the same time period last year. Seventeen per cent of these evaluations were online surveys. The response rate for the online surveys was measured at 23% compared to the response rate for the paper-based surveys, which were 55%.

Where to from here?

The system that has been reported on in the preceding paragraphs is only the first phase of a longer-term project. Evaluation Services have received funding for the second phase of development of the EMS.

Future plans for increasing the user's engagement with the evaluation process include making alternative type evaluations easy to use and an attractive alternative to standard evaluations; the provision of matrices by which analyses of the results of student feedback may be matched up to staff development opportunities in the university; the development of an extensive suite of reports for faculty management and facilitated reporting of feedback back to students via unit web sites. Building on the responsible use of evaluations in the university also includes investigating the possibility of cross-analytical functions between evaluation feedback and the CEQ/GDS feedback, as well as the possibility of full integration with the CEQ and GDS processes.

Conclusion

Balanced evaluation programs can be developed to serve a range of quality improvement and quality assurance purposes including the identification of aspects of teaching and learning programs that are successful and those in need of improvement. They can provide assistance in informing performance management discussions, in informing decisions related to probation reviews, in support of assertions contained in applications for promotion and the provision of evidence for reporting the effectiveness of teaching and learning grant projects. The Evaluations Management System provides a robust integrated, online tool to help develop and deliver these programs.

The proof of actual and effective completion of the evaluation cycle will be when our teachers stand up here and enthusiastically talk about the various types of evaluations that they have engaged in, their reflections on their students' qualitative and quantitative feedback, their deductions and subsequent plans for improvement that may have involved voluntary participation in staff development offered by the university. Embodied in the ongoing development of the EMS is the hope that teachers will accept this opportunity for managing the analysis of the quality of their teaching. The attendant hope is that the EMS will facilitate communication of analyses and action back to the students who gave the feedback in the first place. It is finally hoped that a self-nourishing cycle of commitment and application on the part of teachers will lead to trust and engagement with the whole process of evaluations by the students.

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