A model for driving large-scale quality learning in higher education

Kelly E Matthews*, Deanne Gannaway* and Peter Adams^  

As the ‘assessment movement’ for quality learning (QL) in higher education (HE) gains momentum, university priorities are shifting from quality assurance to quality enhancement (Ewell, 2009). This shift compliments the evidence-based approach used by academic developers and the central role of data (evidence) in the scholarship of teaching and learning (TL). This offers a unique opportunity for academic developers to influence QL, and contribute to institutional requirements for accountability, where the role of evaluation is becoming prominent, as institutions need to be able to document student learning outcomes. Patton’s utilisation focused evaluation model is widely used amongst evaluation experts. This model is applicability to academic developers working on large scale curriculum reform in HE. The central premise of U-FE is ‘actual use by intended users’ and as such, the evaluation process is situational with the evaluator working closely with the users to develop the appropriate methodology for data collection and reporting so that results are actively used (Patton, 2008). Academic developers can work with curriculum reformers to develop and implement an evaluation strategy. The academic developer operates as the “evaluator”, working closely with academics to determine the curricular goals and the strategies for collecting meaningful data to inform on-going curricular implementation. This study explored the following research questions:

1. How can a UF-E approach drive QL during HE?
2. What benefits do academics gain from participating in this approach?
3. What changes in practice occur that enhance QL as a result of this approach?

Mixed methods were employed (Creswell, 1994). Data for this study was primarily collected using an online survey of academics participating in the UF-E approach. For triangulation purposes, data from observations of UF-E meetings, document analysis and informal interviews were also used. The study took place at a research-intensive university over a 2 year period and included 34 academics teaching into the Bachelor of Science. Ethics was approved by the Behavioural & Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee.

The response rate to the online survey was 85% (n = 29). All of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the UF-E approach was helpful with 97% (n = 28) indicating it had improved the quality of their course (subject). Open response questions reflect academics appreciation of being a part of the evaluation process that allowed the, to collect data that was meaningful. The value of on-going meetings with other academics around TL was also evident in the written comments. Observations revealed that academic staff continually showed up to meetings and actively debated, discussed, and shared experiences and practices around QL. Observable changes in practice from 2008 and 2009 were documented with 93% of survey respondents writing examples of changes to their TL practices as a direct result of participation in U-FE process.

http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/occasionalpaperone.htm