Title:

Australian University Academics' Undergraduate Distance and Online Course Assessment Tasks: Educational Quality Versus Institutional Governmentality

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Research Questions:

• In what ways are the tasks perceived as celebrating student diversity and promoting democratic understandings of students and academics?

• To what extent are the tasks and their institutional context seen as facilitating accountability by and surveillance of students and academics?
Purpose of the study

We wanted to know the kinds of assessment that a small group of regional academics were setting for their students.

What were the kinds of constraints being experienced by these academics both in terms of institutional constraints and people constraints.

In other words how did these academics negotiate both their workplace and their expectations within that workplace.
The context

CQU is a multi-campus institution with both local and global sites. The university as a business can be divided into a private and a public enterprise.

The student body comprises full fee paying international students and government funding support the public operation catering for subsidised domestic students.

There are hundreds or thousands of kilometres separating campus locations.
CQU is re-conceptualising the image of a university through using technology in the delivery of courses and course materials.

The university began as an Institute of Advanced Education with a focus on teaching rather than research and has a reputation for providing distance education materials for many years.
The study

This is a qualitative study

Data collection consisted

- Textual analysis of five course profiles
- Interviews of 20 academics who had been involved with on-line delivery during Winter term 2004
Four phases to the study

**Phase one**
- Mapped current assessment practices and tasks in undergraduate distance and online courses.

**Phase Two**
- Semi-structured interviews with academics

**Phase Three**
- Analysis phase - textual analysis of course profiles and the interview data
Phase Four

- Writing up of the results and communicating findings

- We see opportunities for ongoing support and networking among a group of academics who are working within institutional constraints and both personal and professional expectations.
Results to date:

Course profiles:
5 course profiles were mapped

- similarities among the profiles were of two kinds,

Educational and bureaucratic

- Differences may have related to respective academics’ perceptions of students needs and interest

However this difference was associated with structure rather than philosophies of assessment.
Results to date:

19 Interview with 20 academics

Highlighted within the two interviews analysed for this paper, were the concerns with student welfare and success and an implicit commitment to celebrating student diversity. Also present was the institutional pressures in the form of growing accountability and surveillance, perceived as constraints to the educational process.
Conclusion:

We see our study as adding to the debate between education (and assessment) as promoting diversity and democracy and/or complicit with accountability and governmentality
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