

CHANGE, EVIDENCE AND IMPLEMENTATION: IMPROVING EDUCATION IN UNCERTAIN TIMES – 2007 ANNUAL FORUM

Improving staff practice in criterion-referenced assessment: Implementing change in University of Southern Queensland, Faculty of Business

Abstract

Using the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Faculty of Business as a case study, this paper explores a strategy for improving staff practice of criterion-referenced assessment. There are increasing demands by stakeholders, such as government and business, for Australian universities to demonstrate improved learning and teaching, as well as graduate outcomes. A recent review of assessment practice in the Faculty of Business found that staff generally misuse assessment criteria because of basic misunderstandings about their definition and purpose. These findings are a serious concern for the Faculty. Firstly, because misuse of assessment criteria affects its ability to demonstrate desired learning and teaching outcomes and, secondly, because analysis of recent student survey data in Australia shows a link between the student experience and the quality of assessment practices, particularly highlighting the importance of fairness and transparency in the communication of academic expectations of student performance.

Introduction

Increasing demands from stakeholders relating to the quality of graduates and the student experience have placed greater pressure on Australian universities to demonstrate quality learning and teaching outcomes. A recent Faculty of Business (FoB) survey at the University of Southern Queensland showed that many staff misuse assessment criteria. A review of scholarly literature and existing practices of Australian universities suggested some possible causes for current staff practices within the faculty. These 'barriers' to good practice include: a misunderstanding of the definition and role of assessment criteria and standards; complications arising from different disciplinary articulations of specific learning criteria; and a lack of shared understanding in relation to criteria and standards. Given the nature of these barriers, we have concluded that a key challenge for the Faculty of Business is finding effective institutional processes to successfully implement the necessary changes in staff practice.

This paper will argue that successful implementation requires more than the provision of opportunities and resources for staff development. Quality assurance processes must also be embedded in the operational management of Faculty programs. They must be efficient and be effective in marshalling existing learning and teaching services within the University. The paper discusses three broad strategies we have identified for the implementation of 'good practice' in criterion-referenced assessment: first, we established course review processes, which will function as both an audit and a lever for staff development; second, the Faculty has devolved primary responsibility for assessment quality to discipline-based program management teams who will ensure consistency of implementation, and provide a whole-of-program perspective; and finally, we identified areas of implementation that are core business for the USQ Learning and Teaching Support Unit, and negotiated tailored services which meet the Faculty's staff development needs.

Background

Expectations about teaching practices at university have changed significantly in recent years. With their evolution into more vocationally oriented mass educational institutions, universities now play a central, if vexed, role in the formation of white collar professions (Marginson 2000, p.98). Parallel trends that have shaped new requirements in teaching practice are increasing student diversity, and a greater demand for quality assurance in terms of student learning outcomes, from university stakeholders such as government, business and students themselves. On the business side, this concern is framed within the debate over graduate attributes (ACCI 2002; BCA 2006). For government (DEST 2006) concerns about the quality of university teaching are framed within the concept of the 'student experience' and reflected in their establishment of the Learning and Teaching Fund (LTPF). After two rounds of LTPF funding allocation, universities such as USQ, which have failed to attract any related funding, have an even greater incentive to subject institutional learning and teaching practices to closer scrutiny. The data collection required from universities as part of this process has also specifically highlighted the importance of course design and assessment to student engagement, retention and progression (Scott 2006, viii)

At USQ, responses to calls for improvement in student learning outcomes and assessment practices have come from both the university and faculty level. The Faculty of Business Program Assessment Review and Electronic Evaluation Project was established in response to the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Committee (LTEC) concerns over FoB assessment practices. The Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching)'s office, with the assistance of the Acting Dean of the Faculty of Education, undertook a faculty-wide survey of assessment practices. This Faculty-based review overlapped with University-level investigations. The FoB Project made a number of recommendations relating to the transparency and consistency of assessment terminology and practice within the Faculty. Of particular concern was the issue of assessing higher-order thinking, graduate skills and attributes in undergraduate programs, or whether courses in different years are currently assessing at the appropriate level for students, given their prior cognitive development. This is because, ideally, the development of assessment criteria for course assessment should enable teaching staff to identify their expectations of student performance, including desirable qualities in their work, and the standard or 'threshold' students must reach in order to pass their course. Given the importance of assessment criteria as a means of conceptualising and flagging desirable qualities and standards of student performance at any given stage of their degree program, Faculty findings that showed a general tendency among staff to misuse criterion-referenced assessment were of concern.

Researching the problem

To understand potential causes of current Faculty practices in relation to criterion-referenced assessment, we surveyed available documents on existing university practice within Australia, and available literature on criterion-referenced assessment. This research helped us to identify a number of barriers to 'good practice' in the use of criterion-referenced assessment. Some barriers were conceptual or pedagogical but three, in particular, had implications for Faculty management.

The first barrier was confusion over the meaning of criteria, and the difference between criteria and standards (Harris & James 2006, p.24). This is particularly an issue for degree programs that have an accreditation purpose. A related challenge for academic programs is identifying appropriate learning 'thresholds' at different stages of the degree process (Sadler 2005, p.181; Dunn, Parry & Morgan 2002, np.).

Research (O'Donovan, Price & Rust 2000, p.75) shows that thinking in this area is underdeveloped, particularly in undergraduate programs. Generally, education taxonomies such as *Blooms* (Bloom, Krathwohl & Masia, 1964) or *SOLO* (Biggs 2003) are sometimes used by academic staff as a means of targeting a particular level of learning in their assessment. However, such taxonomies cannot prescribe appropriate learning levels or thresholds for courses at a particular stage of the degree program (Morgan, McKenzie, Roberts & Cochrane 2002, p.8). They are also generic, and do not account for disciplinary interpretations of particular learning outcomes.

The multi-disciplinary nature of many faculties of business, including our own also represents a barrier to good practice in criterion-referenced assessment. Fulfilment of an assessment criterion, such as critical thinking, will require students to demonstrate different learning abilities in different disciplines. For management students, for example, students often demonstrate their capacity to think critically within a decision-making framework, where they are required to solve management problems (Meisel & Fearon 2006; Macpherson 1999; Phillips & Bond 2004). This may not be true of other Business disciplines. From a Faculty management perspective, therefore, it is not possible to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, either to staff development or quality control processes. Instead, any Faculty initiatives would need to be planned at a program, and even discipline, level.

The final barrier to good practice in criterion-referenced assessment was a lack of shared understanding between staff within disciplines. Our research (Price, 2005 p.218; Tan & Prosser 2004) confirmed the Faculty experience that staff often did not agree on appropriate assessment criteria and/or standards. One reason may be that academic staff members are less likely to discuss assessment, preferred ways of assessing and purposes of assessment and, therefore, 'struggle to articulate what they are looking for...because conceptions of quality usually take the form of tacit knowledge (Price 2005, p.218). However, Tan & Prosser (2004 p.279) also claim that power relationships among disciplinary stakeholders can reduce the likelihood of any real disciplinary consensus. Our own survey of staff practice showed that the resulting lack of consensus not only affects the articulation of particular criteria and standards for assessment tasks, but also their format and overall presentation.

To achieve the necessary program and discipline focus, whilst ensuring appropriate levels of consensus and consistency within them, would require that the Faculty go beyond an ad-hoc approach, which provides disciplinary staff with opportunities and resources for professional development. Such an approach relies on staff voluntarism and cannot, therefore, ensure the type of systemic change in practice required. To achieve this, quality assurance processes that allow learning and teaching staff both inside and outside the Faculty to review assessment practices, such as the use of criteria and standards, must be embedded in the operational management processes of its programs (Harris & James 2006, p.24; James, McInnis & Devlin 2002, p.11).

We have addressed this issue by establishing three processes within faculty: first, a course review process, which will function as both a quality control audit and a lever for staff development; second, the devolution of primary responsibility for assessment quality to program management teams, and; identification of areas of implementation that fall outside of the Faculty, such as those which fall within the purview of the USQ Learning and Teaching Support Unit (LTSU).

Course Review Process

In the last two years, the FoB and USQ have embraced the concept of portfolio management as a more focused approach to managing courses and programs. Portfolio management embraces three levels of operation. At the course level, the focus is on the student experience and the extent to which each course meets its objectives and contributes to the various programs of which it is part. At the program level such as the Bachelor of Business or the Master of Business Administration, the focus is on how well the program is performing in terms of University and Faculty expectations and how well it is meeting professional requirements and student career expectations in a dynamic educational marketplace. At the systemic level, the focus is on the strategic implications and operational outcomes of the entire portfolio of programs, courses and educational activity across the Faculty and the University.

It is in this portfolio management context that the course review process offers a means of enhancing the Faculty's assessment practices in general and its approach to criterion-referenced assessment in particular. In relation to university policy, each course shall be evaluated or monitored by the teaching team or discipline team at least once in each year it is offered. For the Faculty, this requirement presents a unique opportunity for course leaders and their teams to develop their own planning and review process from an organisational learning perspective; that is, for each of the 200 plus courses at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels within the Faculty's course portfolio, each team can document their results, strategies and issues relating to current offerings. Over time, these details can stimulate further understanding and collective learning for future offerings.

At the end of semester, a course planning document is sent electronically to the course leader for those courses offered in that semester. Among other things, the course planning document contains semester results for the past three years. This allows the course team to reflect on the trends in those results and any issues that might be identified. This provides a focus for recording the team's approach to assessment and highlighting what assessment methods have achieved the best results over time in the context of changing student cohorts. Each team is encouraged to identify strategies for continuous improvement. In addition, feedback from student evaluation for the semester is provided in the document. This also provides a valuable source of information to the course team in terms of continuous improvement and quality assurance.

This course planning and review process not only reinforces an emphasis on continuous improvement and quality assurance but it also allows each team to develop a diary of its perspectives and approaches to assessment. This also allows new staff in a teaching team to appreciate the history and logic of the assessment methods applied. This process also provides a focus for discussions on quality assurance issues around assessment in general and criterion reference marking in particular.

In relation to the barriers to good practice in the use of criterion-referenced assessment, the course planning and review process provides a formal means of generating discussion and dialogue within the team around criteria and standards. This is central to reaching a shared understanding of criterion referenced assessment and agreement on the appropriateness of its application to specific subject areas.

Program Management Teams

It is also in the portfolio management context that the creation of a program management team structure in the FoB offers a means of promoting a more integrated approach to the Faculty's assessment practices in general and its approach to criterion-referenced assessment in particular. The creation of such a team structure only occurred at the end of 2006 on the recommendation of an external panel that undertook a comprehensive review of the Faculty's operations. Traditionally structured around discipline-based departments, it became clear that programs such as the Bachelor of Business, the Bachelor of Commerce and the Master of Business Administration were not managed effectively due to the resulting fragmentation of accountability for teaching and assessment performance.

The new program team structure is designed to place the responsibility for the performance of a specific program in the hands of a nominated team which includes the program coordinator. Program coordinators are required to liaise with course team leaders with the goal of coordinating a systematic and timely evaluation of courses within a particular program. They are also required to reflect on evaluation feedback with course examiners and others involved in program delivery in order to determine continuous improvements for the program within USQ's existing quality assurance processes, and program accreditation procedures.

The program management team structure also provides a formal means of addressing barriers to good practice in the use of criterion-referenced assessment. Whilst still able to acknowledge its different constituent disciplines, the program team is not subject to the influence of any one particular department. The program team is accountable for the consistent development of graduate attributes, skills and knowledge across the program; within this framework, it evaluates assessment methods across courses, including associated criteria and standards. This evaluation will assess the way each course contributes in the developmental sense to the learning outcomes of each student. The program team structure also provides much needed interface between program and staff development. The latter occurs disciplinary rather than program level because of the importance of disciplinary knowledge, norms and expectations in the interpretation of assessment criteria.

The Role of the LTSU

However, as with the implementation of any learning-based change management process, efficient, targeted use of existing services is a key issue particularly given tight University budgets. USQ has recently centralised its Learning and Teaching Services Unit (LTSU), bringing together staff from learning design, learning development and learning adviser backgrounds. Each faculty is allocated one learning design/learning development staff member and one learning adviser from the Unit; in addition to this, each LTSU staff member has been given leadership of a particular learning and teaching portfolio that reflects a particular institutional policy priority: for example, in assessment or graduate attributes. The LTSU agenda for 2007-2008 includes delivery of workshops on each portfolio within faculty. Any process for addressing staff practice in criterion-referenced assessment would need to marshal existing LTSU resources and policy processes to benefit the Faculty without overstressing learning and teaching staff.

Faculty recommendations, therefore, included consultation with both faculty-based and assessment portfolio staff from the LTSU in the development of discipline-based staff workshops on criterion-referenced assessment and standards. In this we were

able to harness the LTSU agenda on the promotion of good assessment practice within the University to deliver staff development workshops that were tailored to address an identified Faculty need. Discipline-based workshops address two of the barriers to good practice identified by our research. Not only do they acknowledge the different disciplinary requirements, norms and practices, they also create a potential starting point for the development of shared understandings around issues of appropriate assessment criteria and standards.

Other recommendations included Faculty consultation with disciplinary and LTSU staff for the development of a standardised presentation format for assessment criteria; their portfolio leader in Graduate Attributes will be a particularly useful source of expertise for the appropriate articulation and presentation of graduate attributes as assessment criteria. LTSU staff also acted as consultants during the design of the course review process.

Conclusion

Australian universities are required to be increasingly responsive to demands from external stakeholders such as government and business. Given the universities vocational role, such demands are likely to continue, particularly where society continues to require skilled professional employees. Rather than be captive to stakeholder demands universities have been working to develop quality assurance mechanisms, which allow them to demonstrate institutional performance relating to desirable learning outcomes. The Faculty of Business, USQ, process for improving staff use of criterion-referenced assessment reflects an acceptance that the ability to demonstrate institutional attainment of learning outcomes will depend on consensus and consistency, but also, importantly, on disciplinary relevance and fit. For this reason, improving staff practice in this area must become part of the 'way we do things around here', both in terms of professional practice, and Faculty operation.

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