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ABSTRACT

The University of Southern Queensland's Centre for Further Education and Training, which offers distance teaching and training courses to a wide range of mature students, developed a quality assurance framework to guide its efforts to improve the quality of its distance courses for teachers and trainers with little or no training in educational theory or practice. The following elements were selected for the framework: commitment (the intention of all staff to deliver efficient and effective service to students and themselves); systems (processes within the center that help staff offer clients the best possible service); and measurement (quantifiable, observable results highlighting opportunities for the center to improve its products and services). The framework served as a foundation for focusing the product provided to students and the process by which the product is delivered. The following areas were identified as areas for potential improvement: study materials, student/staff contact, student satisfaction, student selection, student throughput, staff qualifications, and staff satisfaction. Plans were then formulated to collect baseline data about each of the identified areas through a series of end-of-semester telephone interviews with staff and mail surveys of current students. (MN)

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Quality Assurance for Distance Education: Concepts and Strategies

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The Centre for Further Education and Training at the University of Southern Queensland offers teaching and training courses, at a distance, to a wide range of mature students. These students are working as teachers and trainers and have little or no training in educational theory or practice. Until very recently, the courses available through the Centre represented something of a unique product offering. Within the last 12 to 18 months, at least three other universities have begun offering degrees of a similar nature. This has placed the Centre in an increasingly competitive environment for student numbers.

On an even larger scale, in attempting to balance improved access and market position with academic standards and fiscal responsibility, all thirty eight Australian universities are embracing Quality Management. It is strongly believed Quality Management will enhance the role universities will play in Australia's future. It is against this background of increasing competition and national imperative that the Centre began examining how to translate intention into action.

Our first task was to generate and agree on a definition of Quality. Although we agreed the pursuit of quality is in the best interest of distance educators and that professionally, we are obligated to provide quality to our students, we were unclear as to exactly what 'quality' meant in our environment. This led to our first challenge as a team.

What definition of 'quality' our students, the university, the teaching community and ourselves would agree upon? Quality is a personal term, defined by the needs and expectations of each individual. This was addressed by Harvey and Green (1993) in their effort at defining quality in higher education. They concluded, 'it means different things to different people, indeed the same person may adopt different conceptualisations at different moments... There are variety of 'stakeholders' in higher education... Each have a different perspective on quality. This is not a different perspective on the same thing, but different perspectives on different things with the same label'.

This definition dilemma clearly highlighted the need for a practical working framework from which to launch our efforts towards Quality Assurance. For this we relied on Fox (1991). He represents Quality Management in the following manner:

Quality Assurance Framework

COMMITMENT

SYSTEMS

MEASUREMENT

Centre *commitment* is an attitude in all FET staff to deliver efficient and effective service to students and to ourselves.

Centre *systems* are the processes within the Centre which help us offer our clients the best possible service we can provide.

Centre *measurement* is quantifiable, observable results which highlight opportunities for the Centre to improve its products and services.

Achieving quality in the Centre requires each of these variables - commitment, systems and measurement - be present and work in unison. Through this a culture of continuous improvement and quality assurance can evolve.

Once we had the framework to work from, conceptually things began to fall into place. The concept or idea of the learner as a customer

helped us focus not only on the *product* we provide the learner but also on the *process* by which we deliver that product. The idea of treating learners and other partners in the process as customers is best described as a culture in which the focus is on continuous improvement. Quality, then, is seeing through the customer's eyes. Sallis (1993) states this very succinctly as, 'Quality is what the customer wants and not what the institution decides is best for them'. Now that we had a definition of quality and a framework for Quality Assurance, a simple, efficient strategy to promote continuous improvement was needed. In the effort to promote this culture or climate of continuous improvement, we took inventory of the Centre's commitment, systems and measurement. The first step in this inventory was the determination of our specific objective. After considerable debate (after all, this is a university!) the project objective became 'to generate baseline data for use in creating benchmarks against which the quality of our offerings will be judged and which will be used to stimulate and quantify future course improvements'. With our objective established, discussions turned to identifying areas within the Centre which could potentially provide opportunities for improvement. Areas for potential improvement were:

Study materials including incidence of error in print and multi media material, timeliness of delivery, relevance of content, assessment practices, etc.

Student/staff contact including accessibility of staff, response time to queries, assignment turnaround, reliability of marking, etc.

Student satisfaction including student feedback on issues of assessment, staff support, course content, study materials, etc.

Student selection including clarity and efficiency of enrolment procedure, clear selection criteria, adherence to equity principles, etc.

Student throughput including attrition rates, intervention strategies, etc.

Staff qualifications including industry and educational background, ongoing professional development, service, research, etc.

Staff satisfaction including input into centre management and development, opportunity for teaching and consulting, professional development, work loads, etc.

Now we only needed to gather and interpret data concerning these areas for continuous improvement. Information was to be gathered in two ways. One, a series of telephone interviews would be conducted at the end of the current teaching semester. Two, a one page questionnaire would be mailed to particular group of students at the end of the current semester.

What about the costs of this quality initiative? It is not difficult to estimate the costs in manpower of the benchmarking project. On the other hand, it is also not difficult to identify the costs of not benchmarking. The real question for the Centre was not what Quality Assurance will cost but what will it cost the Centre **not** to employ Quality Assurance. Given the changing market conditions and our mature, discriminating client group we simply could not afford to ignore Quality Assurance. There is certainly a belief among some, that high quality means high costs; a perception reinforced by advertisers and marketers of high priced products. The Centre team, however, maintain the reverse may be true; that high quality can actually reduce costs. It is commonly agreed that in Australia, up to 1/3 of all work is rework. While this may or may not be accurate, it is certainly fair to say that some degree of work in the Centre is rework. For example, we deal with numerous student queries resulting from inaccurate, unclear or apparently inflexible study requirements. It is our belief that Quality Assurance will help reduce that level of rework. We are confident that Quality Assurance in the Centre for Further Education and Training will not only provide greater 'value added' to our customers but improve our overall operating efficiency as well. Perhaps as importantly, each member of the team believes the effort will improve our professional gratification.

Quality is

an educational issue
creative thinking
driven from the top
long term
leading by example
a way of life

Quality is not

a management fad
fire fighting
driven from the bottom
short term
resisting change
a quick fix

These are the features that as a team we came to understand were central to developing a climate in which continuous improvement could not only evolve but become sustainable. In a very real sense, we accepted this benchmarking exercise as a self inventory of our own values as educators and our ability to work as a team. Everling (1993) reflects this in saying, 'Education works best and provides its own best quality when we understand who our students are according to their own individual desires and social relationships'.

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Autobiographical Sketches

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