

6-18-2012

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Recommended Citation

Shelley Kinash, Trishita Mathew, Romy Lawson, James Herbert, Erica French, Tracy Taylor, Cathy Hall, Eveline Fallshaw, and Jane Summers. (2012) "Australian higher education evaluation through assurance of learning" 8th International conference on evaluation for practice: Evaluation as a tool for research, learning and making things better. Pori, Finland. Jun. 2012.

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Australian higher education evaluation through assurance of learning

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The authors acknowledge research funding awarded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (now Office of Learning and Teaching) Strategic Priority Fund.

Abstract

A collaborative research project conducted by five Australian universities inquired into the philosophy and motivation for Assurance of Learning (AoL) as a process of education evaluation. Associate Deans Teaching and Learning representing Business schools from twenty-five universities across Australia participated in telephone interviews. Data was analysed using NVIVO9. Results indicated that articulated rationale for AoL was both ensuring that students had acquired the attributes and skills the universities claimed they had, and the philosophy of continuous improvement. AoL was motivated both by ritualistic objectives to satisfy accreditation requirements and virtuous agendas for quality improvement. Closing-the-loop was emphasised, but was mostly wishful thinking for next steps beyond data collection and reporting. AoL was conceptualised as one element within the larger context of quality review, but there was no evidence of comprehensive frameworks or strategic plans.

Universities worldwide are watching Australia to see the process unfold and the outcomes revealed, as bold new reforms are recreating higher education evaluation. In order that the Australian context might be used as a global case study of education evaluation, this paper begins by describing stakeholders, documents and reforms in higher education. The paper then proceeds to describe the outcomes of a research project whereby twenty-five Australian Business Schools shared their approaches to education evaluation and closing-the-loop through assurance of learning.

The first significant entry on the evaluation reform timeline was the 2008 publication of what is colloquially referred to as the *Bradley Review* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, Scales, 2008). Many of the recommendations from this *Review of Australian Higher Education* necessitated a reform of the higher education evaluation system. As follow-on from the review, the 2011-2012 Australian Budget included the formation of the *Advancing Quality in Higher Education* (AQHE) initiative (Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations Australia, 2011).

In December 2011, AQHE distributed three Discussion Papers to diverse stakeholders in the higher education sector, with the response deadline set midway through February 2012. The paper titled *Development of Performance Measurement Instruments in Higher Education* (Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations Australia, 2011) is an overview document, outlining processes and describing the evaluative context. Embedded throughout the discussion paper, three main purposes of education evaluation reforms are described; these include accountability, consumer choice through transparency and comparison, and performance improvement. The discussion paper posed multiple questions for sector response, raising such issues as centralisation versus institutional administration of evaluation, balancing parsimony with complexity, and avoiding harm from misinterpretation and de-contextualized results.

Table 1*Key stakeholders, documents and reforms in Australian higher education*

Key terms/bodies in overarching Australian higher education
Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008)
Advancing Quality in Higher Education (AQHE)
MyUniversity Website (myuniversity.gov.au)
Discussion papers released by AQHE
Development of performance measurement instruments in higher education
Review of the Australian graduate survey
Assessment of generic skills

Another of the AQHE discussion papers, titled *Review of the Australian Graduate Survey* (Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations Australia, 2011) identified, discussed and queried reform options for existing and proposed surveys, primarily of graduates. The content of this paper implied that one efficacious approach to evaluating higher education is to survey graduates a few months after their ceremony. The evaluative information sought is whether the graduates are employed in their discipline of study and their post-study perception of their university experience, specifically learner engagement, teaching and support, and educational development (Radloff, Coates, James, & Krause, 2011). The key problem of this evaluative approach is the diversity of graduates and destinations. For example, the educative experience cannot be considered the independent variable leading to unemployment of domestic students returning to regional remote Australia, or international students to countries with low socio-economic status. In addition, evaluating higher education on the basis of early graduate employment socially constructs universities as performative manufacturers of employees (Marginson, 2009).

As compared to the other discussion papers, the third and final, titled *Assessment of Generic Skills* (Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations Australia, 2011) presented the most contentious approach to higher education evaluation. This approach suggests consideration of a single test to assess the skills of students in the final stages of their respective degrees as a reflection of the value-added by their university education. Further, the approach suggests that universities will be ranked and compared through a public *My University* website (Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations Australia, 2010). Sector responses to the proposed evaluative strategy query the feasibility, reliability and validity of this approach to education evaluation (Gora, 2010; Thorpe, 2011). Specifically, there are concerns about how Australian universities will be compared; will all universities be ranked on a single scale? Will similar institutions be compared? Furthermore, how will similarity or likeness be determined and who will determine the groupings? Stakeholders also questioned the usefulness of an over-simplified score to employers and graduates (Devlin, 2010). In other words, fitness of purpose may not hold for the evaluative approach, any more so than the validity of a summation score purported to reflect quality of the respective universities.

The discussion papers described above reflect the context of higher education evaluative reform in Australia. It is clear that evaluating quality in higher education is in a state of flux and that an enforced standardized process of evaluation is likely. There is widespread sector discomfort with the approaches proposed to date (Devlin, 2010; Thorpe, 2011). In summary of the context of Australian higher education evaluation described above, graduate

employment may not be a valid and reliable measure of learning and teaching quality. Neither can a test adequately measure generic exit skills of students and link these back to causal factors of learning and teaching through a given university. There is widespread dissatisfaction with the proposed means of education evaluation. The as yet unresolved question is how to efficaciously measure the quality of university education and thereby make improvements to benefit stakeholders.

This paper addresses Assurance of Learning (AoL) as an education evaluation alternative. AoL is becoming one of the most frequently discussed topics in tertiary education today (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Martell & Caldron, 2009; Smith, Meijer, Kielly-Coleman, 2010). In the context of education evaluation, AoL refers to the capturing, monitoring and evaluating of data indicating student achievement related to specific program goals. AoL is gaining popularity as an emerging means of informing quality assurance in tertiary education through developing systems and processes for capturing and monitoring direct measures of learning achievement as related to generic cross-disciplinary attributes and program specific learning goals. AoL serves as a recursive means of explicitly depicting, evaluating, developing and enhancing university teaching and learning, as the processes include defining operational program goals (Gardiner, Corbitt, & Adams, 2010) and ensuring there is a strong interconnected relationship between the articulated learning outcomes and means of assessing their attainment (Biggs & Tang, 2007).

This paper reports and analyses the philosophy and motivation for AoL addressed in the first phase of a multi-faceted research study conducted by a collaboration of five Australian universities. The first phase collected data from personnel in business schools of twenty-five Australian universities; business was selected as the phase one discipline because AoL is salient for experts in this key content area due to AoL's inclusion as a factor in Association to Advance Collegiate School of Business (AACSB) accreditation (AACSB International Accreditation Coordinating Committee, 2007; AACSB International Accreditation Quality Committee, 2007).

The relationship between higher education *evaluation* and *quality assurance* is that the former is the process and the latter is the intended outcome. The research project described in this paper addresses both. This paper focuses on the intended outcome of AoL while an upcoming paper will focus on the process. The key question of this inquiry is:

- What are the philosophy and motivators for assurance of learning?

The sub-questions addressed in the analysis are:

- Is AACSB accreditation the driver or a by-product of quality assurance in Australian Business schools?
- How developed are plans for 'closing-the-loop' in assuring learning and thereby applying the results of evaluation to curriculum and quality improvement?
- To what extent is assurance of learning addressed in the context of a larger process of quality review in which other service components are addressed?

Method

Data was collected via semi-structured telephone interviews. The interviews were conducted by an experienced interviewer and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The sample comprised Associate Deans Teaching and Learning (ADTL) (or equivalent) from Business Schools in all

Australian Universities. The participants were recruited through the *Australian Business Dean's Council Teaching & Learning Network*. All participation was voluntary and responses were treated as anonymous. The sampling frame was all 41 Australian Business Schools ADT&Ls of which 25 volunteered to be interviewed for this study. Therefore, the response rate was 61%.

Table 2

Description of participating universities by type and location

Type of University							
Research	Technology	Regional	Other	Total			
6	4	6	9	25			

Location of University by State							
ACT	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	Total
2	5	6	7	1	3	1	25

Analysis

All interviews were taped and transcribed. Data was analysed at two levels using NVivo9, a qualitative data analysis software. In the first instance, open coding was undertaken to identify general themes. Following open coding, axial coding was undertaken where relationships within general themes (sub-themes) were identified. Two co-authors undertook both open and axial coding independently and then discussed and reviewed the results and agreed on the themes presented.

Results

The four main themes to emerge from full analyses of the complete data set of interview transcripts, listed in descending order of strength of theme, were graduate attributes; AoL; challenges faced; and, general suggestions by the university representatives on the AoL process. Within these four overarching themes, several sub-themes emerged. This paper reports on the analysis of the data from the AoL theme. The other three themes are addressed in other papers. The axial themes relating to the open theme of AoL were: context of AACSB, closing-the-loop, and quality review.

Processes of AoL Currently in Place

In order to contextualise the philosophy and motivation for AoL, it is important to provide a brief description of the way in which Australian business schools are operationally defining the process. There were a number of approaches used by universities to assure learning, such as specific tools developed by or for their university, designing capstone subjects, employing moderators and/or external assessors, development of rubrics, random sampling of student assessments, coordinating review teams, hosting workshops for staff, benchmarking against other universities, and creating curriculum maps. Methods will be described in detail in an upcoming paper.

Underlying Philosophy and Motivators for AoL

There were two main underlying philosophies of AoL as portrayed by the respondents: ensuring that students had acquired the attributes and skills the universities claimed they had; and the philosophy of continuous improvement. In relation to the first rationale of accountability, a representative participant comment was, "The question is: are our students

learning what they should be learning and do we have evidence that they are learning those things. So what should a business graduate look like?” Regarding the second theme of continuous improvement, another respondent stated, “we see AoL as being fundamentally a strategy for continuous curriculum improvement. So the link to the exercise of AoL is not productive unless it indicates something about how you have changed the curriculum in response to that.” The results of the two rationales of accountability and development are consistent with what is written in the literature regarding why universities participate in AoL. Kai (2009) articulated the objectives of higher education evaluation as “ensuring and improving quality” (p. 39).

While these philosophies describe the ideological reasons for administering AoL, another theme of the interviews was the practical or business reasons. While several university representatives acknowledged that they were driven to put AoL processes in place by external bodies such as Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), or Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), they also stated that such processes were robust educational practices and married well with their philosophies of continuous improvement and ensuring that their graduates had the capabilities that they claimed they had. As succinctly stated by one university representative, “well, it’s a quality management logic. You know if you say you’re going to give qualities, then you need ascertain whether you’re doing it.”

AACSB as Driver or By-product

Several respondents emphasised that AACSB accreditation provided the initial impetus and leverage for AoL processes. With AACSB as the initial driver, other programs and faculties took on the journey and AoL data collection and mapping extended beyond that required specifically by and for the accrediting body. Other respondents explicitly stated that AACSB was never a driver and was always a by-product. “If we are successful at something like AACSB that’s a by-product it’s not the purpose or the intent. So really fundamentally I feel it’s a moral and legal obligation that we have that we fulfil the promises or the contract that we enter into with our students.” Some respondents explained that accreditations form a subset of the data that they collect under the umbrella of AoL. “The only accreditations we really focus on are professional body accreditations that have their own set of elements that they want us to look at around generic skills.” Most respondents emphasised that the main driver for the AoL process was the “growing accountability of universities.”

Closing-the-Loop

Respondents articulated that they were primarily collecting data regarding student performance on learning objectives within each program and that they were using this data to improve the program and the process. For example, one respondent stated that they used this data to “...look at what’s actually happening, are we scaffolding enough; have we given enough support; do we need to add additional modules that people can access and students can access to help them with skill development?” Another respondent explained that their university had two rounds of AoL and then a program review every five years, where curriculum changes took place. This respondent emphasised that changes could not be made based on just one observation. Closing-the-loop was considered an important exercise for most universities in the sample as summarised by one respondent, “the link to the exercise of AoL is not productive unless it indicates something about how you have changed the curriculum in response to that. So in a sense closing-the-loop!” Whereas sentiment strongly emphasised the importance of putting action plans into place as a follow-on from the AoL analysis, few respondents were able to describe the actual processes that they put into place.

They remained occupied by the process of AoL and closing-the-loop was largely aspiration rather than achievement.

AoL in the Context of Quality Review

While most respondents did not explicitly list other standards of quality in universities in addition to AoL, other components of a quality framework were implicit in many of the statements. For example, a number of respondents underscored the importance of equivalence of delivery of courses across campuses as an aspect of quality. Another example of an alternate aspect of quality in universities was an expressed concern of one respondent in regard to the English language proficiency of international students. This university had created a screening instrument for all new students to undertake and based on the results of the instrument, students would be directed to undertake a particular course. Another respondent explicitly stated “the key issues are the AoL process, the qualifications of the faculty and increasing the number of full time faculty that are doing the teaching.”

Discussion

One of the resounding discussions on Australian campuses is whether to wait for clear directions from the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) as to what quality data they will require, or develop and follow-through on an institutional process design in hopes that the required data has been collected when the audit information is requested. One analogy is that of audit/accreditation as *driver* or *surveyor*. Universities who conceptualise audit/accreditation as *driver* will collect and map the information articulated by the respective authority. The metaphor of *surveyor* suggests that instead of being passenger to another’s journey, the university will determine its own course of action, and provide the required responses for any accreditation from a larger data set collected for their own quality agenda. Respondents in this research acknowledged interplay between higher education evaluation/audit driving and surveying their AoL endeavours.

As another means of expressing this duality, the respondents involved in this study expressed a combination of ritualistic and virtuous motivations in this decision process. AACSB accreditation held the authority and provided the leverage to develop and follow-through on rigorous AoL processes that many knew they should be undertaking anyway. These results are consistent with the results of other research studies. Menassa, Safi, and Chaar (2009) situated their research in Lebanese business schools. They conducted 88 face-to-face interviews/questionnaires with stakeholders from six universities. The authors interpreted the data to indicate that quality improvement was a concern that extended before and beyond accreditation and that the primary rationale for AACSB achievement would be to enhance international recognition and marketing.

The analysis of the research with Australian university representatives reported in this paper confirmed some of what has been shared previously in opinion papers in the higher education literature. Templin and Blankenship (2007) articulated the dilemmas of the relationship between quality assurance and quality improvement as a series of questions and responses. One of the questions was, “do we need accreditation to conduct self-study or gain insights from external constituents or to improve our lot?” (p. 151). Their response was simply “indeed not” in that institutional research and quality enhancement would occur with or without accreditation. They asked, “do we have to be accredited to maintain excellence or professionalize our programs or students?” and replied “probably not” (p. 151). They posed the question, “does it assure quality and improvement?” and “does it lead to a data set or portfolio from which we can learn about the effect of our accredited professional preparation

programs?” (p. 151). The authors were not as specific about the response to these questions. Their analysis implies that accreditation/audit is not the driver of change, which would happen anyway because universities are committed to quality enhancement. However, accreditation/audit does provide the buy-in power of externally mandated and/or defined expectations for ongoing data collection, mapping and reporting.

In addition to confirming previous research on the relationship between higher education evaluation and advancing the student learning experience, the research described in this paper has added to the debate about assuring quality. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that respondents firmly conceptualise AoL as only one aspect of the higher education quality agenda. This research study has identified the quality concerns of Associate Deans outside any process of AoL. This research contributes evidence to support views of AoL that were previously theorised rather than empirically researched. Gora (2010) provided a critical and sardonic metaphor in response to his self-posed question, “But what is this mysterious entity called ‘quality’?” His metaphorical response was, “on closer inspection this grand assurance exercise turns out to be a four lane highway leading to a cowpat” (p. 77). Gora’s description of the elements of quality assurance echoes a list of key themes that emerged in the research respondents’ interviews about education evaluation. “Much of it boils down to a calibration of publications, grant acquisitions, information systems, qualification and program accreditation, teaching performance and learning outcomes” (p. 77).

The salience of multi-faceted quality review for respondents is both affirming and symptomatic of the recent activity in the Australian higher education sector. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations website which hosts the TEQSA website includes documents describing five types of standards. Each of these is a different component of higher education quality assurance. The *teaching and learning standards* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011) are the category most in keeping with the concept of AoL. These standards are in the process of consultation and development. Discussion questions posed to stakeholders include such text as, “It is proposed that teaching standards and learning standards are conceptually distinct and therefore require consideration as separate sub-domains for TEQSA quality assurance and regulatory activities. Are there any problems with creating two sub-domains of this kind?” (p. 7). The *provider standards* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011) include such headings as financial viability and safeguards, corporate and academic governance, and management and human resources. The *qualification standards* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011) address such elements as “articulation, recognition of prior learning and credit arrangements” and that “certification documentation issued is accurate and protected against fraudulent use” (p. 2). To date, the only notice regarding *information standards* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011) on the TEQSA website is that “they are intended to act as a guide to information-sharing between providers and their key stakeholders, especially students.” Similarly, the TEQSA website states that the *research standards* are at the “initial stage of development” and that they will likely link to the “Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.” The further development and communication of the standards will no doubt impact the ways in which Australian universities collect, document and report data to assure learning and other components of quality assurance.

Conclusion

Assurance of Learning (AoL) as a means of higher education evaluation is a process of collecting, mapping, compiling, reporting, and processing data about learning, teaching, curriculum, and pedagogy. Some of the key components included in AoL are learning outcomes, assessment, graduate attributes, enrolment statistics, and completion rates. AoL, in the context of education evaluation, is conducted for the dual purposes of accountability and continuous improvement. Various combinations of processes are used to inform on quality, such as rubrics, curriculum maps, sampling, staff workshops, benchmarking, teams, and data collection tools as part of the process of assuring the learning. Notably, AoL leaders are hard-pressed to articulate a comprehensive depiction of AoL that is transparent and significant for three reasons. First, there is no agreed-upon definition or guidelines for higher education AoL. Second, while there is a clear sector-wide message from Australian national higher education authorities that education evaluation, including the development of performance measurement instruments, is expected, and that it is incumbent upon universities to collect and report quality assurance data, no clear definitions, process, standards and guidelines have been established and communicated. Third, the leaders are inconsistent on the topic of what is driving their focus on assurance of learning.

Despite the levels of uncertainty in evaluating quality in higher education, Australian universities are not in holding-mode waiting for further instruction. There is a nation-wide commitment to quality improvement and widespread agreement that AoL offers a means to that end. Respondents in this study agreed that audit and accreditation provide leverage for challenging processes, but are not always the driver. Universities are also committed to closing-the-loop by ensuring continuous improvement of programs and the next steps are to cover the change processes and quality improvements revealed through the analysis of data collected in the name of quality assurance.

There are two limitations in this study. The first is that the participant pool was drawn only from Australian business schools. Business schools have a particular slant on AoL because it is a defined component of AACSB accreditation. This limitation will be addressed by further research in the next phase of the research project that includes expanding the participation to disciplines beyond business. A further limitation is that the data reported in this paper was collected through a retrospective self-reporting survey. The concern is that the respondents recall and self-select at the time of the interview and some aspects may be overlooked or forgotten. Research on AoL in Australian universities within the described research project is ongoing and involves further surveys and collecting quality assurance artefacts including tools, frameworks and rubrics to address limitations and ensure rigour.

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