This paper will explore the complexities involved in the design and implementation of a quality management system used in an international context. The system was created to meet the demands of establishing uniform standards across a number of international sites under the auspices of RMIT English Worldwide, based in Melbourne, Australia. It incorporates a number of key elements designed to ensure quality delivery across this site, including teaching and assessment materials, as well as guidelines, policies and procedures for the operation of partner institutions and delivery of the materials there. This paper will describe some of the key challenges involved in the creation of this and attempt to highlight some of the issues with regard to evaluating compliance with quality standards, which have arisen in the implementation of the quality management system.

Background

RMIT English Worldwide (REW) is part of the commercial arm of RMIT University. The REW English language program is a fully packaged English curriculum and delivery system primarily designed for learners on a pathway to post-secondary education in either TAFE or higher education. It is being delivered in Melbourne as well as in a number of international partner institutions.

The program covers five levels from Pre-Intermediate to Advanced with 200 hours of classroom and 50 of supervised independent learning at each level. Successful completion of the English for Academic Purposes at Upper Intermediate or Advanced levels fulfils the English language requirements for direct entry into RMIT University - TAFE Division and higher education programs respectively.

When the program is delivered in an international context, partner institutions are provided with
- the curriculum and course materials (including computer-mediated learning materials)
- all assessments
- product training and ongoing academic and operational support
- teacher recruitment and placement services (optional)

In addition to REW Melbourne, there are currently six partner institutions offering REW courses in the Asian region; students at four of these six partner institutions are currently on a pathway into RMIT University.

The Need for Consistent Quality Standards

Being able to achieve uniform quality standards is crucial for both business and academic reasons. Helen Thomas in her paper *The arguments for the meaning of quality* states that “to demonstrate quality is an imperative for keeping business going” (2003: 235); establishing a reputation for quality and high standards across an increasing variety of delivery sites protects the REW brand and contributes to the further growth of the network of partner institutions. In addition, on an academic level consistent quality standards are also imperative to ensure student mobility from one REW site to the other, as well as demonstrating to the university the validity of REW assessments in the context of the direct entry scheme.

However, in his influential paper *TESOL as a service* John Walker problematizes the notion of the possibility of achieving a consistent quality of the learning process: “Although an English language provider may strive for homogeneity in the service provision, it is unlikely to eventuate, particularly in the area of learning” (1998, p. 31). The question, therefore, is how can consistency of quality standards and the intangibility and individuality of the learning process be reconciled.

David Crabbe in his paper *The Quality of Language Learning Opportunities* asserts that “quality can be sought both in the product - the achievement of specific objectives – and in the process…”(2003: 10). The
difference, Crabbe alludes to here, is, for example, whether to accept the delivery of the standard 200 contact hours per course by a well-qualified teacher as sufficient evidence of quality or whether to further examine the way in which these contact hours were delivered.

Mainly for reasons of practicability REW has met the challenge of achieving uniform quality standards across an increasing variety of geographical locations, organisational structures and academic schedules by focussing on achievement of learning and operational objectives rather than the process in itself.

The REW Quality Management System

Quality, according to Helen Thomas (2003: 240) is both “fitness for purpose” and “fitness of purpose” which she defines as doing what we say we do, as well as having relevant learning outcomes.

Table 1 below sets out how the Products and Services REW provides to its partner institutions relate to quality standards and processes.

The column labelled Input lists the core product and associated documents, which govern its use (through operations and delivery guidelines) offshore.

It would exceed the scope of this presentation to go into details about the quality standards and procedures governing the development of curricula, textbooks and assessments. I would like to note, however, that the development of these materials address both of Helen Thomas’ definitions of quality:

Fitness of purpose Needs analysis and NEAS accreditation standards ensure that learning outcomes and assessments are relevant to further study. Example: Introduction of an additional five weeks of English for Academic Purposes in response to university feedback

Fitness for purpose The “curricula and their delivery enable students to achieve the intended aims” (Thomas, 2003:239) Example: Drafting and trialling assessments before publishing ensure that only learning outcomes contained in the curriculum are tested

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input</th>
<th>Standards</th>
<th>Quality Processes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>NEAS Accreditation</td>
<td>Product Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curriculum &amp; Teaching Materials</td>
<td>RMIT Training Service</td>
<td>Ongoing support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessments</td>
<td>Quality Manual and Service Standards</td>
<td>Student Evaluation</td>
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<td>Delivery</td>
<td>Syllabus Guides</td>
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<td>Assessment Policy &amp; Procedures</td>
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Table 1 REW Products, Services and Quality Standards and Processes

The Operations Manual is part of the contractual arrangements with a partner institution outlining the management and operational requirements of a partner program including school facilities (e.g. specifications for computer laboratories or independent learning centres), roles and responsibilities of key staff (e.g. key administrator) and nature and frequency of communication between REW (e.g. monthly report) and the like.

Finally, a number of documents guide the delivery of the materials, most importantly the Assessment Policy and Procedures. This because the REW assessments are high stake particularly at Upper Intermediate and Advanced levels as they determine whether a student can proceed into further education at RMIT.

At the core of the REW Quality Management system is an accreditation-type inspection and auditing scheme, which is supplemented with support mechanisms such as product training and the availability of academic and operational advice by the Melbourne-based Academic and Operations Managers – International Programs.
The quality of both Operations and Delivery is measured against Standards, which are contained in the Audit Manual – International Operations and are reproduced below. The REW program audit is an evidentiary process. This means a partner institution needs to show evidence that is relevant and sufficient for a critical assessment about the extent of a partner’s compliance with the quality standards.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Effective Program Management Systems</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Teaching Staff</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Quality Program Delivery Systems</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Management of Assessment and Moderation</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Materials and Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Effective Administrative and Record Management Procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Student Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Partner Facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Student Recruitment &amp; Promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Program Review &amp; Evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the moment only two standards relate to what is termed Delivery in Table 1 (Standards 3 and 4) while the rest focus on operational matters. As alluded to earlier with reference to John Walker’s and David Crabbe’s papers, the reason for this is related to the difficulty of measuring the learning process as it happens in a classroom, in an Independent Learning Centre or indeed in a professional development context.

In REW’s case, it is expected that the measurement of achievements of specific objectives set out in these standards, will allow inferences about the quality of the process.

Examining one standard relating to the implementation of the REW assessments can serve as a meaningful example in this context, given that REW assessments are high stake as outlined above and therefore quality assurance is crucial in this context.

Standard 4.4 covers the moderation process:

Standard 4.4  Moderation Process
The Partner complies with RMIT English Worldwide moderation procedures, including conducting moderation workshops and the use of specimen kit as provided by RMIT English Worldwide.

The Key Administrator, in consultation with the REW Program Consultant, schedules moderation sessions prior to assessment and all teachers participate. The moderation sessions should follow the guidelines as set out in the RMIT English Worldwide Assessment Policy. Samples of student assessment (writing and speaking tasks) are forwarded to RMIT English Worldwide on request for quality assurance purposes.

Examples of evidence of compliance:
- At least one assessor workshop per quarter scheduled as part of professional development plan.
- Moderation schedules for each scheduled assessment phase
- Emails or other documentation demonstrating correspondence with RMIT English Worldwide, Melbourne regarding outcomes of moderation sessions

As can be seen above, to demonstrate compliance with the standard, it is sufficient to provide evidence that the rater workshops and other moderation processes (e.g. double and triple marking as stipulated in the assessment procedures) have taken place, and that the outcomes from those events have been communicated to REW Melbourne.

This system has the advantage of, in a practicable way, moving closer to the overall aim of consistency of learning outcomes by attempting to enforce a uniform approach to marking assessments: the same moderation processes take place across all partner institutions and the outcomes (marked samples of assessments) of the moderation processes are centrally audited at REW Melbourne.

However, what the standard and the accompanying evidence do not measure is, how exactly the rater workshops are conducted, or whether the samples audited are indeed representative. Therefore, while compliance to the standard is currently achieved through a prescribed approach to the moderation process, there is sufficient room for variation in the actual implementation at each partner institution to cast doubt on whether consistent outcomes will be achieved.
A Case Study

I’ll now look briefly at the case study of one of our six partner schools.

The centre is attached to a university in a major South-East Asian city. It has been operating since 2001. Like many English language centres in the region its student numbers are volatile, fluctuating over the last couple of years from 150 to 400.

I have conducted three different audits of the centre over the last 18 months:

Audit 1: June 2002
Audit 2: October 2002
Audit 3: September 2003

Andreas also conducted a follow up visit to the second audit in April of this year.

During the first audit the main area of concern, which emerged, was one aspect of delivery namely, the quality of assessments carried out at the centre, specifically in the subjectively rated areas of speaking and writing. This was an issue I tracked in subsequent audits.

Below is a summary of the progress made by this school in relation to its assessment practices:

Audit 1:
1. No evidence of in-house professional development in assessment moderation.
2. Lack of teacher agreement in the marking of speaking and writing was confirmed in two workshops designed to raise awareness about both inter and intra rater reliability (conducted by me). This workshop highlighted how different teachers were operating not only in relation to how harshly or leniently they were marking but with their interpretation of the various rating scales.
3. Two of the strategies we employ to monitor assessments in our overseas partner schools are firstly, to ask that they send us a small random sample of marked scripts and audiotapes of writing and speaking performances so that we can check that they are being rated at the appropriate levels. Secondly, all final results must be sent to Melbourne to be approved before being released to students. This provides us with the opportunity to examine the pattern of scoring in each class to see if there are any irregularities including for example, all students receiving a similar final result or else to many students at the lower or higher end of the range from 0 – 100%.

This particular site was neither submitting samples of student work nor even reporting any results to Melbourne at this point in time.

Audit 2:
1. Evidence that several in-house professional development sessions devoted to assessment had been conducted along the lines of the workshops I had previously conducted during the first audit.
2. Samples of student performance were beginning to be sent through to Melbourne together with the lists of students’ final results, albeit somewhat inconsistently.

Follow up visit:
Further moderation workshops were conducted by Andreas.

Audit 3:
1. Still limited PD in assessment moderation. The PD co-ordinator appeared to be still lacking in confidence in the delivery of such sessions.
2. More consistent reporting of results to Melbourne (inc submission of marked samples).

3. Evidence of highly variable pass rates at each level over time which appeared to be at least partly linked to the high turnover in teachers.

Discussion

Assessment is a crucial area for REW. As previously suggested by Andreas, students who complete our English for Academic Purposes at Upper Intermediate level are able to gain direct access to RMIT University TAFE programs and those who have completed a further 15 weeks of EAP at Advanced level are able to enter higher degree programs.

One of our major concerns is that our current audit procedures don’t adequately capture the process of the delivery of assessment. This includes such considerations as whether students are given opportunities to familiarise themselves with the format of the test, the conditions under which they are administered, what kind of rater moderation is used in as part of the assessment process and who carries out the assessments including what kind of previous experience they may have with assessment. In relation to this last point one question we have is whether teachers should mark their own students for high stakes purposes. Can a teacher be both a learning facilitator and judge? This is an age-old question with no simple answer. Another problem is the high turnover of teachers at the centre. On my third visit there recently there were only a handful of teachers who had been there when I first visited a little over a year ago. This means that a great deal of effort has to be made to induct new teachers into the delivery of assessment especially an appreciation of the relevant standards of performance expected at each level. This is what might be called the RMIT English Worldwide ‘culture of assessment’.

Conclusion

To sum up, we believe that quality in assessment delivery includes:

1. High quality assessment tasks, which have been rigorously trialled and revised to ensure their validity and reliability. This is the responsibility of the home institution, the RMIT English Worldwide Melbourne centre.

2. Focused rater moderation. We have recently implemented a new procedure whereby immediately after a writing or speaking assessment is carried out the relevant teachers gather to moderate a set of samples before finally carrying out their assessments.

3. A set of specimen materials, which provide marks and clear justifications for samples of student work. One of the problems we have found is that teachers new to the RMIT English Worldwide culture of assessment often require very clear guidance about standards of student performance whereas more experienced REW teachers are more content with regularly comparing their own ratings with the consensus mark (or group score) for a piece of work which emerges out of a moderation session. It is important that teachers make this transition from being reliant on the specimen materials to comparing their ratings with the group scores, as they will regularly need to participate in moderation sessions as part of the assessment process where the group score is taken as the ‘true’ score.

4. External moderation to ensure that standards are uniform across various sites. This includes the submission of a small random sample of marked scripts and audiotapes of writing and speaking performances to Melbourne so that we can check that they are being rated at the appropriate levels. In addition, all final results must be sent to Melbourne to be approved before being released to students.

In more general terms, we believe that the greatest challenge in managing quality locally and globally is in monitoring the quality of the delivery of both courses and assessments. Assessment is particularly problematic because it often plays a very poor second to the curriculum in terms of teacher attention. Most pre-service courses provide little or no training in this increasingly important area and in my experience, teachers do not always want to take on the extra burden of responsibility, which the role of ultimate judge brings with it. Language teachers will continue to need ongoing professional development in assessment if they are to carry it out professionally.

Finally, it is should be noted that student results per se cannot be used as a measure of the quality of assessment and course delivery given that student progress hinges on a large number of psycho-social well as institutional factors. Perhaps the most ignored of these factors in discussions around language learning is
language aptitude, or, more simply, whether an individual is a good language learner. This may well prove to be the most influential factor in determining the success of individual learners.

Bibliography


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Mr Andreas Pohl is the Academic Manager – International Programs at RMIT English Worldwide (REW). He has been involved in the teaching, coordination and management of TESOL programs in a variety of post-secondary settings both on- and offshore for more than a decade. In his current role he manages all academic aspects of program delivery at REW partner-institutions off-shore, including development and implementation of programs and assessment tools, as well quality management systems and processes.