Developing and promoting a systematic approach to refining teaching and learning both onshore and offshore in the Business higher education setting.

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Abstract

Universities are increasingly recognising the importance of ensuring the quality of teaching and learning across their study programs. In demonstration of commitment to fine teaching and learning practices the Division of Business at an Australian university has implemented their strategic plan in relation to obtaining quality student feedback and staff development. This undertaking was timely considering government demands for accountability in the form of quality assurance as part of the funding package, and the promotional advantages with regard to the informal rankings of performance (examples displayed in the Good Universities Guide and Asia, Inc.) and the demands of employers. In response to these trends in increasing accountability the Business Division in 2000/2 established a systematic quality assurance mechanism called the Unit Effectiveness Project (UEP) to obtain feedback from students regarding their perceptions of the learning experiences in their units. Data from the Unit Experience Questionnaire (UEQ) is returned to Unit Controllers in the form of a report. These data provide the basis for refinement of units and teaching through a collaborative team process that involves Unit Controllers, teaching colleagues and a Teaching and Learning Coordinator to examine the report and develop a strategic plan to refine the unit. These planned and implemented refinements are then re-examined in the following UEP evaluation cycle. While the administration of the survey has been implemented relatively easily onshore (at the Australian campus), implementation offshore involved different issues and problems. Negotiating the development of an instrument that met the requirements of both the Australian University and Partner quality assurance mechanisms was a challenge, and the need to establish a systematic professional development program was an emergent issue that is outlined in this article.

About the Author:

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Background

The Division of Business at Curtin University of Technology has implemented the teaching and learning strategic plan in obtaining quality feedback from students in order to refine the teaching and learning occurring in units. The instrument selected as the most appropriate was the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) in capturing student perceptions of the learning experiences within individual units. The CEQ was deemed ideal as it is used nationally and internationally as an indicator of graduates’ perception of their course (a Department of Education, Science and Training – DEST instrument). The CEQ instrument incorporates five scales namely, good teaching, clear goals and standards, appropriate workload, appropriate assessment and generic skills. The CEQ was superficially modified by referring to ‘the unit’ rather than ‘the course’ and uniformly using ‘the staff member’ rather than ‘the lecturer’ or ‘the tutor’ as this has the potential to create confusion. The modified instrument was referred to as a Unit Experience Questionnaire (UEQ). An advantage to using a pre-existing questionnaire was that it could be utilised for comparative purposes with previous data (national and local benchmarking). The UEQ is administered by an independent department within the division. Data, both quantitative and qualitative, are processed and reports generated. The reports are sent to the unit controllers of the units surveyed. The heads of school receive the reports for the units within their own school and the Executive Dean receives a summary report on the Divisional results. Unit Controllers are encouraged to hold a meeting with their tutors to discuss the student feedback. The divisional Coordinator of Teaching and Learning is available to work with the Unit Teams to make sense of the feedback, identify positives of the units, aspects that could be refined and to develop an appropriate plan if required. This process was proposed with the view to create learning communities in the schools across the division. These learning communities comprised of unit teams would be focused on promoting collegial discussions on teaching and learning issues in order to respond to student feedback.

Literature review

Professional development focused on the deficiencies of teachers or lecturers, where the lecturer attends workshops to be ‘fixed up’ or provided educational knowledge and skills from an external ‘expert’ is largely outdated (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Brandt, 1994; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). Unfortunately, this paradigm of professional development still exists in universities and schools; although a shift to a more collegial approach is gaining momentum. Sparks and Hirsh (1997) indicated that that staff development ‘not only must affect the knowledge, attitudes, and practices’ of individual teachers it also must alter the ‘cultures and structures of the organizations in which those individuals work’ (p. 1-2).

Professional development activities that incorporate collegial interaction and reflection, focuses on teaching and learning, and exploring teaching ‘models’ and strategies that will support increases in student learning are identified in the literature as the most effective in increasing student achievement (Fullan, 2001; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Joyce, Weil & Calhoun, 2001). The obstacles to professional development that incorporates the previously mentioned aspects within a Business university context are time constraints, teacher overload, and lack of expertise in teaching and learning.
Frequently the cycle of reflective teaching, that includes, planning, teaching, and evaluating, is not being closed (Barry & King, 1998). Non-closure or completion of the cycle is when lecturers are undertaking the planning and teaching, but unfortunately the evaluation of the teaching and learning is not carried out. Alternatively, evaluation of the unit and teaching is carried out but lecturers are not using the feedback from students as a reflective mechanism that can focus their efforts to implement refinements and developments to the unit material, learning experiences and assessments. An additional concern is that students are not routinely informed of lecturers’ engagement in the cycle of good teaching and may assume that their teachers are not responding to the students’ feedback. Students’ lack of understanding of teachers’ efforts may result in a lack of motivation to continue to provide the feedback.

**Research methods**

A phenomenological approach whereby the researcher was involved in the process and ‘connected to the phenomena being studied’ was utilised. Lecturers’ perceptions were obtained through formal and informal feedback. Formal feedback was obtained through open-ended questionnaire and informal feedback was collected in meetings with lecturers (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). The research was experiential and qualitative and attempts to describe lecturers’ response to the implementation of professional development opportunities for them in the offshore institutes. While the broad methodological category was phenomenology, this overall method was supported by the use of other forms of data collection, such as, participant observation/notes and journal-keeping related to telephone conversations and email communication in order to promote the accuracy of accounts and stimulate recall (Gall et al., 1996).

A questionnaire was sent by email to all participants in the workshops. The sample comprised a total of thirty-five part-time offshore University lecturers who are currently based in Hong Kong and Singapore respectively. A total of nineteen surveys were returned to the University for analysis (N=19). This represents a response rate in excess of fifty percent (54%). The number of returned surveys, however, was not large enough to allow for the data to be analysed statistically as the results would be unreliable. The qualitative comments related to lecturers’ perception of value of the workshop are the focus of this article. Additionally, lecturers discussed their views of the workshop opportunities during and at the conclusion of the workshop both as a collective group and as individuals after the workshops and during meetings with the Coordinator of Teaching and Learning.

**Results**

**Lecturer perception of the Unit Effectiveness Project**

Lecturers frequently indicated they felt uncomfortable with the implementation of the Unit Experience Questionnaire (UEQ). Their discomfort was linked with concerns about ongoing employment opportunities with the institution for which they were teaching. This was a valid issue for them as unlike the Curtin lecturers from the Australian campus, the local lecturers were reemployed on the basis of a ‘reasonable’ rating on the ‘Good Teaching’ scale. One of their concerns was the subjective nature
of a ‘reasonable’ rating which was usually dependant on the personal judgement of the administrator of the program. The lecturers indicated that this was sometimes a less that desirable or valid method of employing ‘good teachers’ as personalities and administrative conflicts tended to influence administrators’ decisions.

In terms of obtaining quality student feedback, many (60%) of the lecturers were satisfied that the Unit Experience Questionnaire was an effective instrument. Unfortunately, most (80%) indicated they had little ‘power’ or ‘control’ over their teaching, content and the assessments and therefore felt hamstrung to respond to student feedback. Contact between the local lecturer and the Curtin Unit Controller (UC) was variable, with some (30%) stating they usually met with the UC colleague when they were in the country to undertake their intensive teaching and/or corresponded via phone and email. Lamentably, over a third (39%) of the respondents in workshops stated they shared little or no communication with Unit Controllers and indicated this had a detrimental affect on their teaching. Some even stated that local administrators of programs discouraged contact between the on and offshore teaching colleagues. Most stated they were under pressure to address all the content of the units within the allotted time. They felt that the amount of content required precluded any teaching other than didactic or transmissive strategies. Many (78%) stated that student-centred teaching strategies did not work for students in the Asian culture. Concern was frequently voiced by the lecturers about the standard of the students coming into the courses and questioned the validity of accepting student feedback as a reliable measure of teaching and learning experiences.

**Lecturer perception of the professional development workshops**

Between twenty to thirty lecturers attended the first round of workshops in the Singapore institutions with eight to fifteen lecturers attending the Hong Kong workshops. Staff response to the provision of workshops was very favourable with many (88%) indicating they found the opportunity to share ideas, see strategies demonstrated and discuss their teaching-related concerns with an educational specialist and colleagues most worthwhile. Interaction between colleagues in the workshops was high in Singapore and only slightly less in Hong Kong. Interaction increased as the workshop progressed and colleagues’ familiarity and comfort with each other increased. Most the lecturers in Singapore indicated that they wanted more professional development activities. They felt it was important to network with colleagues to discuss their teaching and approved of, and appreciated the Australian university instituting a systematic approach to the professional growth of their offshore partner teaching staff. They also indicated that it would have been inappropriate to implement a quality assurance mechanism such as the Unit Effectiveness Project without likewise implementing a teacher-support process. Workshops provided a forum for lecturers to address context specific concerns with students, literacy levels and requirements, and contextual teaching issues. While solutions were not always readily identifiable, lecturers frequently indicated they felt less isolated and more confident in their own teacher-efficacy when they perceived they were not the only ones struggling to deal with the varied problems.

**Lecturer perception of individualised assistance**

This aspect of the professional development was the hardest to advertise. Administrators were initially acting as the conduit of information to offshore lecturers and the reliability of this was unclear. The opportunity to meet one-to-one with the
Coordinator of Teaching and Learning was advertised in the workshops. In the initial visit only four lecturers in Singapore and two in Hong Kong sought a meeting. These lecturers were relatively new to teaching and appreciated being able to discuss their teaching, the university expectations, the format of the units and unit outlines, to examine their own UEQ report and identify strategies they could use to overcome the concerns of students. Even though only a few lecturers took up the option to have an individualised meetings, most in the workshops indicated that providing that option was important for lecturers who are shy, less confident or have matters of a confidential nature to discuss. All of those who had a meeting with the Coordinator of Teaching and Learning expressed considerable relief and felt reassured, and satisfied with the outcomes achieved. Many discussed administrative concerns which had negatively impacted on their teaching or the students.

**Conclusion**

Instituting a professional development program for offshore lecturers was perceived by them to be an important support mechanism. It was also interesting that they interpreted this initiative to be a demonstration of ‘good faith’ from the Australian university and crucial in building more positive relationships between teaching colleagues. They frequently perceived themselves to be very vulnerable and having access to the Coordinator of Teaching and learning as reassuring in being able to ‘explain what really is happening within [their] situation’.

There appeared to be a cathartic effect in providing the opportunity to call a one-to-one meeting between the offshore lecturer and the Coordinator of Teaching and Learning from the University. Those lecturers who chose to have an individualised meeting were frequently anxious/concerned and, in some cases, very distressed at problems that had arisen, how they had been treated by their own administrator, the unit controller, or the university and/or were unclear about what the procedure was for various aspects of teaching. Many sought information or clarification on the items in the UEQ reports and ideas on how to overcome problems identified by students and this was reassuring that the process was providing assistance. This demonstrated the need to provide this ongoing professional development support to offshore lecturers.

Ongoing professional development appears to be producing a positive affect on the culture within the offshore partner institution, in that the networking opportunities and interaction that results from the workshops coupled with having access to specialist support has resulted in offshore lecturers feeling more included and valued as a staff member for the Australian university. As university reputation is an important aspect of marketing in offshore situations this aspect of improved culture is clearly a highly desirable outcome to the professional development program.

As a result of discussions with lecturers an online discussion forum as a form of networking and academic dialogue is also being explored by the department of Academic Development.
Bibliography


Detail regarding the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) available on the Department of Education, Science and Training website:

Detail regarding the Unit Experience Project (UEP) available on the Curtin Business School website: