

How course developers/coordinators and teaching staff play the game of accreditation: observations of the schools of Health and Education of an Australian public university.

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Bigger picture

Involvements of government

In Australia, there are three levels of government, Commonwealth, State and Local.

In Australia, most universities are public universities with most domestic undergraduate students funded by government. Yet, self-funded undergraduate students, mostly overseas students, are allowed and sometimes are encouraged. Postgraduate courses are usually self-funded except in few disciplines.

Follow English tradition, in Australia, all universities are granted 'Self Accrediting Authority' to individual courses. And the universities are expected to critically monitor their own performance.

Yet, during the mid 1980s, the Commonwealth Government funded major discipline reviews to determine the standards of individual disciplines and to improve quality and efficiency in universities. I would consider it as a *Standard Establishment phase*.

In 1991 the Commonwealth Government moved from the discipline review approach to a whole of institution approach to quality assurance. It announced a comprehensive set of measures to enhance the quality of higher education teaching and research. Those universities able to demonstrate a high level of quality assurance in the context of their missions and goals were provided with extra funding. I would consider it as a *Rewarding phase*.

In 2000, the Commonwealth Government endorsed an independent audit body - The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) to take the responsibility for auditing the quality of Australian universities. AUQA conducted audits of the activities of Australian universities in Australia and off-shore on a five year rolling cycle. The process involved a self-assessment and a site visit. Audit reports contained commendations, affirmations and recommendations for universities to act upon. Sometimes, extra funding is given for improvement. I would consider it as a *Warning phase*.

Since the establishment, most other higher education institutions have to obtain accrediting course-by-course from the State Governments.

From early 2012, a new agency, The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, takes over quality assurance and regulatory functions for all Australian higher education institutions.

A new Qualification Standards, Australian Qualification Frame (AQF) is intended to be implemented in 2015.

Registration bodies

In Australia, the practitioners of some professions need to get registration from some government accredited independent registration bodies before they can practice in those professions. In the past, almost all registrations are state-bounded. In the recent years, more and more national registration bodies are accredited by commonwealth government. The most common way of allowing for registration is by finishing a course accredited by the registration bodies. In addition, while the practitioners of some professions do not need to get registration to practice, some courses still want to be accredited by the professional councils/societies for endorsement.

Quality assurance mechanisms of the university I was working

In order to maintain the status as public university and receive government funding, the university tries her best to meet the Standards set by the government and follow the comments of Audit reports of the Government or the endorsed Audit bodies.

A university-wide quality assurance audit unit is set up to check the quality assurance in all levels. This unit produces all university-wide quality assurance policy documents and spot-checks the implantation of the policies in different venues. In addition, almost each year, a thematic audit topic is announced and all relevant administrative or teaching units need to make the necessary changes to meet to the requirement within a year. For example, in a year, it was announced that all prescribed textbooks should be published within five years unless strong reasons can be given to support the usage of older textbooks and 80% or more of the referencing materials should be published within the last five years. In another year, it was announced that in the subject descriptions for the students, all learning objectives need to congruent with the learning outcomes. In additions, all learning outcomes must be assessed in the assessments and all assessments must relate to the learning outcomes.

Quality assurance mechanism is set up at cost-centre level (functional administrative offices/departments, academic faculties/schools) and academic discipline level (departments/teams). In teaching and learning aspects, it is required that teaching & learning committees are set up at both faculties/schools and departments/teams level. All relevant teaching staff are the members of these committee and each committee should held at least five meeting in a years. As such, a teaching staff will attend at least 10 teaching & learning committee meetings a year. It is also required that external advisory committees are set up at both faculties/schools and departments/teams level and these committees should meet at least once a year.

Teaching staff are required to attend the relevant external advisory committee which means a teaching staff needs will meet the external advisors at least twice a year. It is required that minutes must be taken for all these committees and circulated to all relevant members and supervisors. Therefore, teaching staff have very sufficient amount of chances to discuss the quality assurance issues in teaching and learning. In addition, all course information which will be distributed to the students are required to be reviewed annually and all amendments need to be approved by a university-wide committee. Each subject also needs to fill a subject description form which needs to be approved by the relevant faculties/schools teaching and learning committee as well as a university-wide committee.

Furthermore, a university-wide unit is set up to conduct student evaluations of the subjects, the teaching staff and the courses. This unit also conducts surveys on graduate, alumni and employers as well as monitors the media reports on the university.

I would say this university has very good mechanism in quality assurance.

How course developers/coordinators and teaching staff play the game of accreditation from registration bodies

As mentioned above most courses which lead to registerable qualifications in education and health need to be accredited by the registration bodies of the relevant professions. Usually the courses are accredited for 3 to 5 years each time.

The author was teaching in a small public university in Australia. One topic I was in-charge was a core (compulsory) subject for all master level courses in Schools of Health and Education. Another topic I was in-charge was a core/elective subject for many undergraduate level courses in School of Health. As such, I was involved in the quality assurance and accreditation process of many different courses in these two schools.

From the involvements, it is observed that while most academia consider that quality assurance is important and should be integrated in all aspects of teaching and learning, not just for accreditation. As there are plenty of quality assurance activities performed, very few academia consider the process of accreditation as a serious exercise of quality assurance. Yet this is still a task needs to be completed.

In this university, usually the course developers/coordinators are responsible for accreditation and quality assurance activities. It is observed that many course developers/coordinators hire outside consultants to write up the required documents for accreditation if funding is available. While one or two teaching staff meetings for the development of these documents will usually be called upon, involvements of the teaching staff are often tried to be kept to minimal both by the course

developers/coordinators and the teaching staff themselves. It is because as the academia have plenty of opportunities to know and discuss the changes in the profession as well as the academic trend and have made the change already, the writing of self-review reports is mainly the collection of relevant information and editorial work. Why external consultants are used because the previous experience was that if internal administrative staff was the major workforce for these tasks and if two or three courses needed to submit the documents around the same time, conflicts might arise. Also, there is consensus that using external consultant is more cost-effective than employing delicate staff to do this work.

Furthermore, in many occasions, once the accredited certificates received, the documents will be put aside and the course developers/coordinators just amend the courses as they consider as suitable. Teaching staff seldom refer back to these documents and new staff may not even know such documents exist.

Final remark

If a good university-wide quality assurance is established and implemented, accreditation from registration bodies is mainly some paper work and reception of site-visits. Using external consultants to help the can be a good option.