Immersing a Faculty in Assessment: Making an organisational cultural shift

Introduction

Enhancing assessment practices and embedding new approaches to assessment within teaching and learning practices requires more than professional development for staff — it also requires a process of organisational change and development. The case study below is an example of how processes for organisational change and professional development were married at the Queensland University of Technology’s Faculty of Business.

The QUT case study is an excellent example of how a sustained focus on assessment issues can provide the vehicle for discussion of the wider curriculum and the quality of student learning. It provides a useful blueprint for considering how a similar change process could be undertaken in other settings.

A case study of the Faculty of Business at Queensland University of Technology

Jennifer Radbourne, Assistant Dean, Faculty of Business
Duncan Nulty, Higher Education Evaluator, Teaching and Learning Support Services

Since 1998 the Faculty of Business at Queensland University of Technology has been achieving an organisational cultural shift in relation to teaching and learning. This shift has been driven by immersion in issues to do with the improvement of the assessment of student learning.

There have been four principal phases in this process:

- a review of the assessment policies and practices in the Faculty (1998-9);
- the adoption of a Learning and Assessment Accountability Model (2000);
- a twelve month placement of a higher education assessment consultant in the Faculty (2000); and,
- a large grant funded teaching and learning development project involving curriculum integration through a case study and significant development of student assessment techniques in the Faculty’s eight core units (2001-2).

While the review alerted the Faculty to the need for change and the two projects that followed addressed the change, the cultural shift in the organisation over four years (1999 to 2002) has been marked by a combined ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approach. Decisions made at the leadership level were promoted such that individual academics and teachers were encouraged to take responsibility for student learning and the reflection and assessment that occurs in their classroom.

Throughout this period, assessment became the focus for all the Faculty’s teaching and learning seminars, workshops, grant proposals, discussion and goals.

Excerpt from James, R., McInnis, C. and Devlin, M. (2002) Assessing Learning in Australian Universities. This section was prepared by Jennifer Radbourne and Duncan Nulty.
The Assessment Review (1998-9)

A pre-requisite for immersing a faculty in assessment is the existence of a broadly felt need for improvement. The immersion process began at the Faculty of Business with a collection of genuine needs that had been voiced in various forums such as the Faculty Education Committee, Examiners' meetings and the Faculty Academic Board. There was a range of concerns which all focussed on the assessment practices, procedures and policies employed in the Faculty. These concerns were not only realised at the senior level but influenced the assessment activities of academic staff in the Faculty through the normal course of their work.

The Assessment Review Working Party expressed concern at ‘the variety of practices across the Faculty, many without pedagogical justification, and the misinterpretation of policies and guidelines’. In particular the working party identified ‘the critical need to confirm the link between assessment and learning objectives’.

The review resulted in a report, which made 41 recommendations relating to thirteen different areas of assessment.

- Learning and assessment
- Formative and summative assessment
- Marks for participation
- Group assessment
- Supplementary assessment
- Late submissions
- Methods of assessment
- Grading student performance
- Workload
- Support for students with special language needs
- Feedback and turnaround
- Hurdle requirements
- Plagiarism

The review process itself was both lengthy and consultative. A research assistant conducted a literature review, a survey of the assessment practices of Business faculties across Australia, and collection of much internal data from policy documents and unit/subject outlines. Critically, the review began the process of generating a discourse within the Faculty which related to the issues under consideration.
Responding to the recommendations of the review in an effective way presented the next significant challenge. Quite apart from the number of issues to be addressed, it was recognised that an effective response should target development in all three of the following areas:

- the academic programs,
- the staff who deliver those programs, and
- the organisational policies within which those programs and staff work.

**The Learning and Assessment Accountability Model (2000)**

A well integrated multi-layered methodology was proposed which would work from both the top down and the bottom up. The top-down part of this was captured in an assessment accountability model (see below). This model was expanded to include bottom-up initiatives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff Development Initiatives</th>
<th>Organisational Structure</th>
<th>Organisational Development Initiatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attending and participating in teaching and learning activities, establishing teaching awards and teaching &amp; learning grants.</td>
<td>Teaching and learning culture, assessment practices and curriculum practices</td>
<td>Leadership, direction, advocacy for value of learning and assessment, investment in strategies, review and development of funding mechanisms and organisational structures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegial debate and active participation in the development of resources that support the implementation of policies</td>
<td></td>
<td>Policy development, Planning strategies, Monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting peer support Development of teaching resources Rewarding good practices Facilitating workshops for particular staff groups and problems</td>
<td></td>
<td>Implementation and action, Testing, development of initiatives Mentoring, guidance, peer review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills development, Teacher /learner relationships, attending staff development workshops, reflecting on own teaching strategies, auditing each unit outline for assessment and learning links.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging in scholarship or formal study of teaching and learning, Responsibility, Innovation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While the review in itself was comprehensive and offered a wealth of data for the Faculty, its principal impact lay in implementation, change in practice, and an acceptance of new policies. It had to have acceptance, support and drive from the Faculty’s senior management, that is, the Dean, Heads of Schools, Faculty Academic Board and the Faculty Education Committee.

From the outset the Dean expressed great confidence in the implementation project and in achieving the desired outcomes. This support was both philosophical and financial. The Faculty’s position in the university, in the business community and with the professions was seen to be enhanced by the new emphasis on assessment. Performance indicators in quality of teaching, student satisfaction, attrition rates and course completions could be improved by such a project. In addition the Dean’s career has been through the Faculty, and her in depth knowledge of course content, teaching strategies and earlier debates about examinations, provided the leadership to achieve the desired outcomes. Top down initiatives usually incorporate a more ‘public’ profile, and focus on funding implications, reporting and approval processes, and management. ‘Bottom up’ initiatives can secure reflection, change, trust, peer support and project credibility more quickly. Both strategies were worked on simultaneously, relying on the “intersection” to foster the greatest change.

The Assessment Consultant (2000)

In order to achieve significant and lasting change in the academic programs, the staff development imperative was clear. The Faculty decided to seek the services of the university’s Higher Education Program Evaluator whose professional background included experience of academic staff development, curriculum design, policy and resource development, and particularly student assessment.

The University agreed to a half time placement in the Faculty. The assessment consultant enabled the Faculty to support individuals and teams in developing innovative and systematic approaches to assessment, and provided a major step forward in staff development.

The method used to develop the knowledge, understanding and skill of the academic staff was to engage them in activities that focussed their attention on particular aspects of the units they taught in the Faculty’s courses. Thus, ostensibly, the target of this initiative was not the staff themselves. This helped a good deal in practice since it was much less threatening to target the course or the unit than the person responsible for it.

A range of approaches were taken.

- “Talk about teaching” seminars
- One-on-one unit curriculum review consultancies
- Interviews with “core unit” coordinators
- Targeted staff development workshops in schools
- Development of written papers providing guidance and examples on particular assessment issues
- Dissemination and feedback on the project at the AUTC effective teaching forum in 2000
- Regular reports and discussion of issues at the Faculty Education Committee

Resistance to change and open criticism of the processes were juxtaposed with genuine reflection, gratitude, curriculum development and pockets of support throughout the Faculty. The consultant was involved in several strategies to ensure an across faculty cultural shift to value assessment as a tool for effective student learning.
Organisational Development

The Assessment Review carried several implications for changes to policy and practice. Furthermore, the Faculty as a whole has itself been the subject of a regular review (which is standard for all faculties in the university). This review also made recommendations with implications for policy and organisational structure. The work of the assessment consultant presented an ideal opportunity to debate policy and enact procedural changes. Top-down initiatives which related particularly to improving assessment practices occurred during this period.

- Review and revision of the roles, responsibilities and membership of the Faculty’s committees — especially the Teaching and Learning Committees and Faculty Education Committee.
- Setting up a number of working parties of Academic Board to review policy and practice in relation to, for example, cheating and plagiarism and assessment ‘hurdle’ requirements.
- Developing a Faculty-specific guide to help staff to write Unit Outline documentation in line with university requirements and good pedagogy.
- Conducting an assessment conference to promote greater awareness and uptake of good assessment practices from within the faculty (in particular) and from elsewhere. The conference included papers from all faculties in the university, but particularly from academic staff in the Faculty of Business.
- Involvement of Professor Tom Angelo (from the USA) as both a keynote speaker at the conference, and as a staff developer contributing workshops and consultancy to staff interested in pursuing the development of their assessment practices.
- Establishing a website consisting of assessment related resources.
- Seeking and winning funding for a large teaching and learning development project focussing on achieving greater integration between the eight "core units" for the undergraduate business degree. The grant of $150,000 over two years plus significant in-kind contributions from the Faculty, involves further development in aspects of student assessment.

Teaching and Learning Project (2001-2)

This final and ongoing phase focuses on embedding the teaching and assessment of generic attributes in the eight Faculty core units. In a Faculty with 7000 students and an annual intake of about 1500 into these first year core units, this project exposes a significant number of students and staff to the new regime. The methodology aims to ensure that students and staff will continue to emphasise learning through best practice assessment for their entire course.

The strength of the project has been the critical process of staff reflection and development in teaching, and the responsibility assumed at all levels for achieving the project outcomes. Middle managers who are responsible for workload allocation and resourcing, senior managers (Dean and Assistant Dean) who provide leadership and advocacy, unit coordinators who develop curriculum and instruct tutors, and teachers who embrace strategies for effective learning, have all shown strong commitment to the project.
Conclusion

Through a combination of reviews, policy examination, staff placement and staff development, and a major teaching and learning project, the Faculty of Business at QUT has been "immersed" in assessment for four years.

For staff in leadership positions in other higher education institutions wishing to manage an effective process of reflection and change in a Faculty or Department, the following critical success factors have been identified.

- an expressed need for action
- a formal review producing evidence of areas of strength and weakness
- a strategic view of the impact of effective assessment in teaching and learning
- engagement by people at all organisational levels
- ownership by teaching staff
- a commitment to staff development
- leadership and advocacy for the outcomes
- access to expertise in assessment
- events to profile the ‘immersion’
- ongoing resources for support of all facets of the activity
- university-wide and senior-level recognition of the activity and achievement.