

Accreditation and quality in higher education curriculum design: does the tail wag the dog?

Denise Wood, Greg Auhl, Sally McCarthy

Division of Learning & Teaching, Charles Sturt University, Australia.

Abstract

Increasingly, the higher education sector is driven by sets of standards that describe quality – internal institutional standards that consider curriculum, teaching and delivery to students and external standards from both the sector and the professions that describe expectations, content, skills and attitudes that curricula must address to support graduate outcomes. Quality is the focus of these requirements, and yet quality in higher education remains a messy problem, with no clear framework (Kundu, 2016) and numerous variables that confound the problem. We ask what comes first: the external standards that accredit a university to provide education for a profession, or internal standards that focus on quality teaching and learning opportunities. The paper presents a short case study that highlights the challenge for course leaders pressured to meet industry requirements, and the impact this has on their awareness and capacity to design a transformational curriculum for students. We conclude that it is the difference between an aspirational course, whereby quality is focussed on the learning design for transformational student experience, and a compliant course, where quality is focussed on meeting static requirements.

Keywords: *quality; accreditation; curriculum design.*

1. Introduction

In the last decade in Australia, there has been an increasing focus on the quality of higher education in response to the Bradley Review (2008) and to changing community expectations (Lawson, 2015). This reflects the international higher education context where there has also been an increased demand for measuring and reporting quality (Lawson, 2015; Kundu, 2016). The Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) is the national body charged with assuring the quality of higher education in Australia. The sector is replete with sets of standards that offer defining criteria for measuring the quality of student learning and experience, teaching, administration and student achievement. As well, Australian universities have been provided with sets of accreditation requirements by the professions that are reflected in course profiles. These have become more formalised over time, and are an important reference point in all curriculum design processes and the driver for professional accreditation, assuring graduates employment in the profession. Since 2015 the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) has driven the design, governance and delivery of courses across Australia, ostensibly providing a single set of quality indicators and benchmarks that all institutions must address.

Quality is a vexed concept – both in its definition and in its demonstration as dependent evidence that meets standards, despite the fluidity of the sum of variables, both concrete and ideological that are possible. Across the last three decades, quality has been increasingly measured through frameworks and standards that set benchmark expectations and can be ‘ticked off’ to provide evidence of quality. These are at both institutional level and program level and have promoted debate around the definition and then measurement of quality in higher education. Successfully meeting the described standards impacts on reputation, funding, marketing and enrolments.

In this paper, through a case study, we explore the relationship between accreditation and quality in the context of curriculum/program design through its impact on those designing a curriculum. *Is the tail wagging the dog?* We argue that depending on accreditation standards may put quality learning at risk. We explore the impact when course leaders feel pressured to meet the needs of their stakeholders and wonder what may be lost in the process. We ask, does this relationship between accreditation requirements and learning design aspirations create a dynamic that assures us of quality, or does it encourage a compliance mindset, with the ticking of boxes being the main outcome?

2. The challenge of seeking quality

While historically education institutions did not enter the industrial debate around quality (Kundu, 2016) there is an increasing amount of literature that engages seriously with the concept of quality in higher education. In a comprehensive literature review Kundu (2016)

cited six definitions of quality in higher education that encompassed a consistency of variables including cost, performance, inputs and outputs and resources. He also identified a plethora of frameworks, approaches and perspectives around quality that led to a conclusion that quality in higher education cannot be fully determined without a common framework, and a greater amount of theorising around the concept of quality. Kundu then offered a framework of defined critical success factors (p. 29-30) which he argued would help to resolve the conundrum.

2.1. External accreditation processes for quality

Harvey and Williams (2010a, 2010b) critically reviewed articles over the lifespan of *Quality in Higher Education* to discern what was being said about issues of quality. External processes and factors were the focus of their first article (2010a) and internal processes the second (2010b). Accreditation is valued despite concerns about its efficacy as a quality assurance process in the HE context. Overall, it was noted that external accreditation did not necessarily lead to quality improvement of curriculum and learning programs. The following points emerged:

- auditing, or reviewing quality against external factors is of benefit at an institutional level but not so much at a program level,
- accreditation standards tend towards fixed statements of expectation and control while quality in education is dynamic and relative, emerging responsively to learners, teachers and research,
- there is a need for a balance between accountability and improvement, between compliance and responsiveness and,
- the growth of agencies with accrediting frameworks that drive the design and development of programs in universities is concerning, and has created a pressure to accredit all aspects of education.

These points are made in the context of increased competition among institutions and the need to market a product that best meets the needs of the 'customer'. Marketing, and the meeting of demand for international connections are new factors in the design of curricula. The importance of nurturing a reciprocal and open partnership with accreditation agencies or boards, with the profession and with students was highlighted by Jalal, Buzdar and Mhosin (2017) in their examination of the relationships between accreditation boards and university academics. They found that the stronger the relationship, the more successful the sharing of quality expectations and related changes. Transparency of design and cognizance of the professional world provide opportunity for curricula to connect with the needs and demands of the professions.

2.2. Internal accreditation processes for quality

The reality of the quality-intense context outside of universities impacting on what happens inside the institution has not always been met with enthusiasm by those in the academy who question the intrusions of quality assurance measures into their autonomy and academic freedom (Harvey & Williams, 2010b). Harvey and Williams could not confidently say that there was confirmation that quality assurance systems had enhanced the sector.

Quality processes and assurance systems internal to the individual universities and developed by individual universities were described in the journal articles to be:

- a burden on top of other workloads,
- rituals that were not part of regular academic activity and that challenged the link between intention and practice,
- intrusive and critical, imposed by administration for reporting,
- unsupported by professional development and so contributing to stress,
- bound in measures of student performance and success without acknowledging the impact of student history and capabilities, and
- coloured by the inclusion of student measures of satisfaction that included service factors as well as teaching factors.

While there were facets of teaching that contributed to quality learning (eg professional development, peer review systems, reward and recognition, wellbeing) literature reviewed by Harvey and Williams (2010b) suggested that the measurement of quality in teaching and learning as defined by each institution was not as effective as imagined due to a culture of academic freedom in the faculties. However there are definitions of quality that have been expressed with a focus on teaching and learning. Others (cited in Kundu, 2016) identify student transformation as a measure of quality, describing this as having evidence that students show an increase in their capacity to not only receive knowledge but to produce critical or original perspectives and innovations as graduates.

Harvey and Williams (2010a, 2010b) concluded that while there has been an improvement in terms of transparency, documentation of processes and curricula, and an internalisation and standardisation of quality assurance processes in university environments, there has also been much debate and discussion around the concept of quality. The challenge of defining and measuring quality is not resolved but rather identified as an ongoing question to be pursued.

3. The evolution of a definition of quality: where might it be going?

Before such a focus on sector and institutional quality assurance and the expectation of visible and accountable quality learning in higher education quality was personalised, resting on the individual academics responsible for the units they taught (Thomson, Auhl, Hicks, McPherson, Robinson, & Wood, 2017). The focus of curriculum development was at unit level and an overall curriculum was patched together from a collection of units, with or without a defined pathway through. Such a ‘jigsaw puzzle’ (Thomson et al, 2017) approach led to idiosyncratic and diverse experiences for students that posed a risk to quality offerings. Concomitantly, each institution offered its own approach to the design and structure of its curricula steeped in their culture and thus providing students with a unique learning experience towards graduation. The process of learning in higher education was perceived as being the gathering of information from those in the role of expert and reproducing it in order to perform in a profession (Frenk, Hunter & Lapp, 2015). A curriculum was not defined but rather emerged as the student moved through their time of study.

In more recent times exponential change has occurred in most fields and professions, and in the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education. Complexities including globalisation, the online world of knowledge and expertise, messy and unpredictable problems in all fields and the speed of technology development play out in the design of curricula that produces graduates able to perform in such a world (Frenk et al, 2015). Graduates need to be able to ‘untangle vast amounts of information and extract and synthesize the knowledge necessary for population-based decision making’ (Frenk et al, 2015, p. S110).

More complex learning and social environments create an imperative that academics improve and develop their teaching and work in a more collaborative way to design curricula that are pedagogically diverse and relevant in the current climate. There is a risk to quality teaching when academics are not provided with specific development of teaching skills and understanding (Harvey & Williams, 2010b). Such pressures in environment and expectation sit alongside the quality driven context where quality remains a central tenet for employment, funding, marketing and aspiration.

4. Curriculum design as the foundation of quality programs

Frenk et al (2015) argued that quality higher education into the future must adapt to meet the needs of the political and industrial context. They described a renewed process of whole-of-curriculum design driven by the challenges of the current education and professional context and quality expectations. Its five principles focused on connected curricula offering deep and surface learning, flexibility to allow personalised pathways and aspirations to

offer students levels of learning from foundational, formative to transformative learning. They aspired to meet both the external standards required in the profession of their graduating students and a set of internal standards driven by an institutional requirement to raise the valuing of teaching for all academics in a culture that required a balance between research and teaching.

Similarly, in the quest to be assured of quality in student learning, Lawson (2015) proposed a whole-of-curriculum design process that demonstrated connections between units focussed on student assessment and its alignment to the course learning outcomes, and scaffolded learning and connectedness across units. The process relied on shared understandings of the course learning outcomes and a preparedness to explore how the teaching in each unit contributed to the student development, and linked to earlier and later learning. The whole of course design was completed before the work on individual units.

Thomson et al (2017) described a design based on collaborative, outcomes based curriculum development. The process integrated the standards of the profession with university sector standards to inform the course learning outcomes. It then followed a process of establishing what students need at graduation and then working backwards to design the curriculum to meet these needs. Key to the process was the collaboration that brought together the course team to design a curriculum that was scaffolded, aligned and purposeful.

Quality curriculum design was the focus for these authors. Designing curricula is a process of the field of education and while accreditation standards can influence the decisions about content and skills and have led to improvement in the quality of learning in higher education (Harvey & Williams, 2010b) the challenge remains in terms of what comes first – an aspiration for quality learning in response to the scholarship of learning and teaching, or a compliant curriculum that meets the requirements of a profession?

5. The case study

In this section of the paper we present a short case study that illustrates our question.

5.1. Context

Our university is set in a dispersed regional setting across nine campuses in

Australia. It aspires to meet the needs of the communities where it is located and to provide employable graduates who will move into the regions and support the professions locally. There is a commitment to offer quality learning in a regional context. As an Australian self-accrediting university it must demonstrate how it assures the quality of the teaching and learning it provides to TEQSA. As a self-titled ‘university of the professions’ it is imperative that the courses also meet the set of quality indicators and expectations for each profession

served by its profile to achieve professional accreditation. This has led to a situation where course academic leaders are highly accountable for courses achieving accredited status with the external group, and less overtly pressured to consider the quality of the learning design.

5.2. The Case

During 2018, nine programs underwent the CSU course design process. The courses were long standing courses on the university profile that have been accredited consistently for a number of years. There was considerable pressure to meet the accreditation standards set by the relevant accreditation agency. All nine of the courses under review were required to meet the same set of standards. The design process began with an analysis of the context for the degrees, the areas of risk evident in the course, the feedback and professional responses to the course, and an analysis of the needs of the profession. This was followed by an integration of the sets of standards that drive the courses: those from the profession, the CSU graduate attributes and Australian Academic Qualification Framework (AQF) standards into a single set that translated to course learning outcomes. Following this, the design team considered the assessment outputs that would provide evidence of addressing the standards across the course. From this, unit level assessments were either constructed or adapted from existing tasks, and unit outcomes, teaching and learning strategies and syllabi were developed. Using CourseSpace, a bespoke design tool, alignments were constructed and the course was then reviewed for its design; a matrix of accreditation standards was drawn out based on the alignment.

During this process of review it became obvious that there were two different approaches to the process in the community of course leaders involved. All course leaders were well experienced academics with a long term involvement in the profession; the supporting learning design experts had considerable experience in both spheres. The first approach was highly dependent on the language and detail given in the accreditation documents, and time was spent analysing where the evidence was, and constructing descriptions, tasks and outcomes that mimicked the style and wording of these documents. The leaders did not deeply engage in the initial phase of design/review, expressing high levels of anxiety around the professional accreditation requirements that would be found in units. Little time was left for alignment mapping or a course level view of the way the subjects worked together to transform student understanding of teaching and learning. The second approach was more holistic with an eye kept on both the standards expectation and equally on what it meant for student experience. These leaders focussed on the way assessment offered authentic experience, how concepts were learned across the course with increased complexity and what some of the ‘big picture’ understandings were to support student growth. The defining of evidence to meet the course learning outcomes was deemed as important to present a picture of how students would develop across the course. Mapping to the accreditation requirements happened as the work was done, but without undue pressure to replicate the

standards in language or format.

The salient learning in this case study was in the impact quality expectations had on the course leaders and the trust they placed in their own experience. Those following the first approach spent many hours reviewing, amending, checking and adjusting the language and descriptions in the individual units in the course. They had little time for educational leadership, consultation with teaching academics or to overview the course as a whole. Those utilising the second approach maintained a holistic picture of the course, led the team through changes and made fewer adjustments to show where standards were addressed. They appeared more confident to map based on their own expertise. Their experience of quality development was more holistic and enabled them to consider how the course would transform student understanding of teaching.

The case study highlights the impact high dependence on accreditation requirements had on the quality design of a curriculum. It illustrates the following considerations for designing quality curricula in higher education:

- approaching a curriculum design with quality learning in mind requires time to collaborate, listen to different viewpoints, have blue-sky thinking, connect research evidence and challenge status quo,
- trusting experience and research allows future thinking to contribute to the design, rather than simply responding to what is the ‘now’ in a profession and
- after a quality design process, alignment with standards becomes a cognitive, analytic and creative task that validates the design thinking.

6. Conclusion

This paper explored the relationship between quality and accreditation processes in higher education. From the exploration we believe that if accreditation standards force compliance then the tail is wagging the dog. A compliant program meets the baseline expectations of stakeholders, assuring them that graduates meet their needs but it does not guarantee a program of quality learning experiences. However, if the curriculum designers utilise their expertise, knowledge, skills and integrity to design an intentional program that provides students with the capacity to not only consume knowledge for their future, but to produce new knowledge that brings about change in their future then the dog is wagging the tail. Such a program aspires to change students beyond providing them with base information and skills, resulting in an assurance that they will make a difference in their world, which is an indicator of quality learning.

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