

## FRAMING THE FUTURE OF FET: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, QUALITY ASSURANCE AND LIFELONG LEARNING IN FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Catherine H. Arden, P. A. Danaher & Mark A. Tyler  
University of Southern Queensland

### ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates options in redesigning the further education and training teacher education programs at the University of Southern Queensland in relation to student engagement as influencing quality assurance. Critical understandings of lifelong learning are proposed for framing FET futures that maximise student engagement and quality assurance in the programs.

### KEYWORDS

further education and training – quality assurance  
– student engagement – teacher education –  
University of Southern Queensland

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is one of a series (see also Arden, Danaher & Tyler, 2005; Danaher, Tyler & Arden, 2007; Tyler, Arden & Danaher, 2006) interrogating options in redesigning the further education and training (FET) teacher education programs at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Australia. The common denominator in the series has been an ongoing struggle to negotiate among multiple and often competing pressures on those programs while pursuing possibilities for creating alternative, resistant and hopefully transformative futures for FET learners and educators alike, which is crucial if they and others are to drive maximum benefits from those programs.

The purpose of this paper is to accept the challenge articulated by Coates (2005) for Australian universities to focus directly on student engagement indicators as potential influences on the assurance of quality in higher education (see also Coates, this volume). The authors take particularly seriously Coates's contention that mechanisms currently employed to determine the quality of Australian higher education provision fail to take account of student engagement "with the kinds of practices that are likely to generate productive learning" as well as the extent to which institutions "are providing the kinds of conditions that... seem likely to stimulate such engagement" (p. 35), and take up his call for a "more holistic understanding of the student experience" that emphasises the "direct educational benefits of beyond-class experiences" (p. 29).

This challenge has particular resonances with FET curriculum, which is focused on distance and online education for adult learners. The people who enrol in these FET programs are adult learners seeking a change in their vocation. They have chosen teaching or training as the focal point in their vocational repositioning. They bring with them prior learning from past professions or trades and enrol in either USQ's Bachelor of Further Education and Training or Bachelor of Education (Further Education and Training) degrees, the latter being a course whose pathway leads to teacher registration in Queensland. These programs are delivered within the context of lifelong learning in ways that are often marginalised in comparison with traditional, campus-based teacher education programs (Harreveld & Danaher, 2004). In an attempt to address the challenge of finding ways to maximise student engagement and quality assurance that simultaneously take account of these context specific characteristics and articulate with faculty - and university - wide discourses and practices, the paper deploys a variation on the vision for student engagement and quality assurance propounded by Coates (2005) that is informed by critical understandings of lifelong learning and quality assurance in higher education as conceptual resources for revisioning the FET teacher education programs at the authors' university. This discussion is important if the programs are to fulfil their potential for enhancing the lifelong learning opportunities of stakeholders in those programs.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The authors have previously elaborated a model for interrogating the three key elements of leadership, quality and technology as they are envisaged and enacted in the curriculum of the USQ FET programs (Danaher, Tyler & Arden, 2007). This model is centred on the tripartite interdependence of curriculum, educators and learners and is focused on the crucial processes of making meaning, performing practice and

transforming. In relation to this paper we highlight the aspect of quality. As noted in Figure 1, the spotlight is on the vital organising

question posed by the model “How do we define and evaluate quality?”.

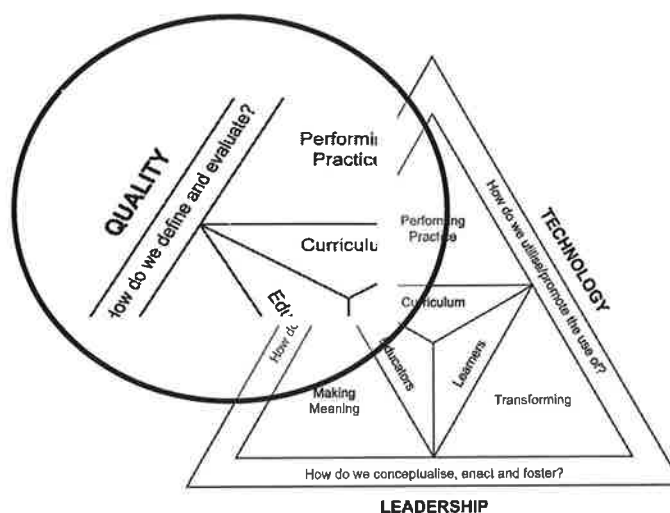


Figure 1. Spotlight on quality: Conceptual framework for interrogating curriculum leadership, quality and technology in the USQ FET programs (adapted from Danaher, Tyler & Arden, 2007, p. 81)

There are several possible approaches to defining and evaluating quality in education, including the currently dominant managerialist discourse about quality, whereby “people compete as educational consumers and producers” (Gouthro, 2002, p. 334) and various critiques of that discourse (Rowan, 2003). The emphasis placed here is on the intersection between two fundamental markers of curriculum quality: student engagement and quality assurance. For the purposes of organising this paper these markers are dealt with in separate sections; this is for ease of discussion and not meant to dilute the interdependence that exists between the two concepts.

#### Quality – Student Engagement

A particularly fruitful line of thinking about student engagement derives from Biggs’s (2003) argument about the need to bring into greater alignment learning objectives, teaching styles and assessment tasks and his identification of three levels of teaching as assimilating, accommodating and educating as focusing respectively on what students are, what teachers do and what students do (p. 124, as cited in Sanderson, 2006, p. 2). The third level in particular – teaching as educating and focusing on what students do – resonates strongly with highlighting and seeking to enhance student engagement in the activation and enactment of learning (and also with a commitment to curriculum quality and its assurance).

Coates (2005) posits a link between emphasising student engagement and constructivist assumptions about the sociocultural contexts of learning, learner agency (if not autonomy) and the responsibility shared by learners, their teachers and many others for the achievement of those learners. For Coates:

*...student engagement is concerned with the extent to which students are engaging in a range of educational activities that research has shown [i]s likely to lead to high quality learning. Such activities might include active learning, involvement in enriching educational experiences, seeking guidance from staff or working collaboratively with other students. (p. 26)*

It follows from Coates’s (2005) valuing of student engagement that he is critical of contemporary approaches to quality assurance in university learning and teaching that fail to consider, let alone privilege, such engagement. He contends that a key corollary of the absence of a national measure of student engagement is that “...there is too much emphasis on information about institutions and teaching and not enough emphasis on what students are actually doing” (p. 26), thereby linking his focus on student engagement with Biggs’s (2003) evocation of the third level of quality teaching. Coates elaborates specific processes whereby this absence can be redressed, concluding with the timely caution that “...institutions would need to develop approaches to manage and enhance student engagement without having ultimate control over students” (p. 35).

The above conceptual framework has elicited some potentially useful ideas about student engagement. These ideas can inform the task of facilitating those phenomena in the FET programs at USQ, thereby framing the programs' future as contributing substantively to students' and educators' lifelong learning. How this might be done is taken up in the next subsection of the paper.

### Student engagement and the FET programs

To suggest that USQ is endeavouring to reposition itself within the increasingly market driven and competitive environment of higher education at the expense of focusing on a more liberal notion of higher education is possibly moot, yet the attention paid to student engagement appears as a particularly high priority, possibly because greater engagement means increased student retention and this fits with managerialist notions of how universities should operate. According to Scott (2005, p. v), widely ranging pressures on universities at local, national and international levels make a compelling case for "each university to optimise the quality of every student's experience in order to remain sustainable". Certainly, the concept of 'the student experience' has taken centre stage at USQ, exemplified by initiatives such as the appointment of a Dean of Students and the promotion of strategies for increasing student retention rates by the university's Learning and Teaching Support Unit.

Whatever the motives of the university, we contend that in our FET programs attention to student engagement is in sharp focus. Our challenge is to move this attention towards programmatic reality.

Krause (2005) reminds us that even though student engagement "has emerged as a cornerstone of the higher education lexicon" (p. 3) its conception is variable. Ainley (2004) notes the difference in conceptualising student engagement, which lies in the two research perspectives of the person and the situation. From a person perspective, engagement is viewed as a set of characteristics or dispositions that predispose the student to engage or disengage. From the situation perspective, the focus is upon the variables within students' contexts that either support and increase engagement or *vice versa*. As our collective perspectives are somewhat orientated towards the liberal notion of education (see Arden, Danaher & Tyler, 2005), we endeavour to 'look both ways' at student engagement, which is congruent with our claim of holism in the introduction to this paper.

Noted in many quarters are the challenges for universities as they endeavour to understand the attitudes and expectations of the Y, X and baby boomer generations. In our FET programs teaching and learning are undertaken in distance and online modalities by mature aged students (mostly from the X and baby boomer generations) who are endeavouring to reinvent themselves as teachers for the vocational education and training and secondary education sectors, and as professional trainers. What are the challenges faced by us and our students in relation to student engagement?

Krause (2005) suggests that universities have tackled the issue of engagement through an involvement paradigm: 'we just have to get them involved' appears as part of the rhetoric. This, she claims, treats engagement somewhat unproblematically and denies the lack of consistency between the online marketing of universities and "the reality of [student] experience once they are enrolled" (p. 10). What resonates with us is Krause's call for extending the concept of engagement to include the phenomenon of inertia – used by Krause to describe the tendency of some students to remain passive and/or resist being an active participant in study activity and university life – as well as an acknowledgement that engagement is a 'battleground' for some students, particularly those who are employed (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). For these students, "university study runs the risk of simply becoming another appointment or engagement in the daily diary..." (Krause, 2005, p. 8) or a distasteful and boring chore that must be endured for the end reward, as opposed to an enriching social learning experience. Other barriers to engagement identified in the literature that have particular relevance for FET students include battles with the 'tyranny of distance' and the digital divide (Danaher, Tyler & Arden, 2007) which can be exacerbated by the lack of connect that these X and baby boomer generations have with the technology (Joan-Dwyer & Pospisil, 2004) that is so often quoted as the saviour for distance learners. Krause suggests that we need to help students develop "'armour' to win [this] engagement battle" (p. 10).

How have we responded to this challenge thus far? What occurs in relation to student engagement in our FET programs is a proactive emphasis on establishing relationships at the beginning of the first year of enrolment through contact with the program coordinator, resulting in a personalised program of study negotiated by direct communication through face-to-face interview or over the phone and augmented by

email contact as follow-up. Once this initial contact is completed, engagement then becomes the realm of the various course coordinators. Curriculum focused attempts to deal with the issue of engagement include implementing the suggested outcomes from our 2006 FET forum (Tyler, White, Arden & Danaher, in press) in relation to embedding information technology literacies, curriculum relevance and authentic assessment. It is acknowledged that we could do more – yet the pressures of neoliberalism and managerialist notions of ‘doing more with less’ (supposed efficiency gains) and ‘sharing the pain’ of ‘budget accountability’ have resulted in a reduction in our capacity to be responsive to students’ needs. In the next section, we explore the concepts and practices of quality assurance in higher education and present possibilities for leveraging our capabilities to maximise student engagement.

### Quality – Quality Assurance

Revisiting the organising question proposed by our model – *Quality: How do we define and evaluate?* – provides the starting point for an analysis of current and prospective quality assurance practices and an examination of the extent to which they can support efforts to enhance student engagement. USQ’s current policy on evaluation defines evaluation of quality as:

- the systematic consideration of stakeholders’ views and benchmarking activities about the quality of programs and the courses that comprise the programs; and
- the aggregation, analysis and interpretation of students’ feedback on their perceptions of the quality of the courses and the teaching of them, to inform judgements about program quality and relevance. (USQ, 2005, Section 7.5.1)

### Quality assurance and the FET programs

In relation to the FET programs (and others at USQ) the instrument used to elicit feedback on experience of a particular course in a program from students undertaking external studies, which constitutes 100% of the FET programs’ student cohort, is the “Student Evaluation of Distance Learning and Teaching” instrument, or SEDLT, which comprises 18, seven-point Likert scale items clustered into four sections: teaching and assessment; learning outcomes; support and administration; and an “overall” satisfaction with the teaching materials used in the course. Aggregated results by semester and faculty for the last three years are posted to the university website in accordance with DEST requirements.

This is complemented by the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) administered at a national level, based on the work of Ramsden and Entwistle, (1981, 1983) and Biggs (1987, 1992) (as cited in Scott, 2005), as well as a variety of benchmarking activities that contribute to the institution’s overall quality assurance and continuous quality improvement cycle.

As noted in the preceding section, the notion of student engagement has emerged as an important measure of quality in tertiary teaching and learning settings. According to Scott (2005), student engagement and student retention are closely linked, with retention being seen as an indicator of engagement, along with high levels of class attendance and participation, interaction with staff, fellow students and learning resources, providing enthusiastic and positive feedback about their course experience when asked and being willing to “spend additional ‘time on task’” (p. 1). An analysis of the above indicators of quality and student engagement reveals a strong focus on the traditional ‘on campus’ mode and transmissive approaches to teaching and learning that characterises much of the discourse about quality teaching and learning within a faculty of education. Interestingly, Scott’s (2005) meta-analysis of the “components of their university experience that students identify as most engaging them in productive learning” (p. vi) is based on data drawn from 14 Australian universities which he sees as being “generally representative of the Australian higher education sector” on variables of “size, type, mode of operation (for example, from single to multi-campus delivery); location (state, country and city) and stage of development” (p. vi). Significantly, mode of study (that is, on campus, external, web) is not mentioned, and a closer look at the list of participating universities reveals only three that could be considered to be regionally located with an external student enrolment that significantly exceeds the on campus enrolment, as is the case with our university and in particular our FET student cohort. This raises the question of how relevant established measures and indicators of quality and student engagement are for the external student cohort, and in particular FET students, and highlights the need for more inclusive and holistic definitions of student engagement and quality assurance that are more in keeping with understandings about teaching and learning that are less institution-centric and more closely aligned with critical understandings of lifelong learning.

## CONCLUSION

Grace (2006) reminds us of the need to enact "a critical social pedagogy of learning and work that provides a holistic approach to engaging in lifelong learning in today's neoliberal, pragmatic milieu" (p. 1). This paper's account of our efforts to maximise student engagement and broadly based quality assurance in the USQ FET programs has confirmed both sides of Grace's equation: the increasingly managerialist Australian higher education context that makes it even more important to uphold critical understandings of lifelong learning.

From the above analysis of quality assurance and student engagement in relation to the USQ FET programs, the following critical questions emerge to guide us in subsequent phases of our work:

- Challenging Scott (2005), to what extent do current measures of course and program quality in higher education – and in particular student engagement – accurately reflect the needs and circumstances of students enrolled in distance education programs at regional Australian universities?
- Following Coates (2005), what kinds of conditions are likely to enable, facilitate and stimulate the kind(s) of engagement(s) that distance learners value in their tertiary studies, and to what extent is the current operating climate of the university conducive to the provision of those conditions?
- Drawing on Krause (2005), to what extent are our conceptualisations of quality as specifically related to student engagement measures a reflection of an outdated ideology based on institution-centric expectations and conceptualisations of teaching, learning and quality assurance?

A possible way forward, then, for maximising student engagement and quality assurance in FET programs is to adopt and promote understandings of student engagement and quality that align with critical understandings of lifelong learning such as the crucial role of inequitable socioeconomic backgrounds in framing life chances and worldviews. Returning to the question posed in the model presented in our conceptual framework – *Quality: How do we define and evaluate?*, the authors propose a framework for conceptualising and evaluating quality informed by critical understandings of lifelong learning that recognises, acknowledges and challenges the contexts in which learners, educators and institutions exist and act. In doing so,

*engagement* is defined in terms of what the learner is doing, experiencing and achieving – that is, how learners are engaging in the curriculum in order to achieve their lifelong learning goals – as well as what the teacher is doing, experiencing and achieving – that is, how the teacher is engaging with the learner and the curriculum. *Curriculum* is conceptualised broadly and holistically as the synergy between formal and informal learning and the student's lifeworld. *Quality* is defined in terms of the institutional and system factors that contribute both to the conditions under which educators can design and facilitate relevant, meaningful, authentic and transformative learning experiences that lead to the attainment of learners' goals and to the conditions under which learners are expected, required, encouraged and supported to engage with these learning experiences. Educator and learner engagement is both the measure of and the requisite for quality. Institutional and system factors can serve both to support and to hinder such engagement.

As Coates (2005) has made clear, including student engagement in quality assurance policies and practices raises "complex substantive, operational and political issues which travel to the heart of ideas about university education" (p. 35). Yet pursuing those issues wholeheartedly is crucial if university students' lifelong learning journeys are to be fully engaged and of high quality. Certainly such a wholehearted pursuit is central to framing the future of FET at USQ in ways that are individually and collectively transformative rather than institution-centric.

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