STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE ACADEMICS IN ASSURING GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

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Assurance of learning (AoL) is a predominant feature in both quality assurance and quality enhancement in higher education. The process may be used for program development, and to inform external accreditation and evaluation bodies. However, there is an obvious challenge in trying to get academic staff to buy into the benefits of the AoL process. This project conducted an audit across 25 Australian Business Schools. The majority of those interviewed stated that academic staff considered AoL to be extra work and viewed the process as a box ticking exercise for external bodies rather than sound educational practice. A change management process is required to promote the necessary cultural change to embed AoL into practice. This paper showcases some of the educational leadership strategies that have been successfully implemented across Australia to foster staff engagement in the AoL process. These include: strong senior management commitment and leadership demonstrating a constant and high level drive for staff engagement until AoL becomes an institutional norm; developing leadership and champions among unit and program level staff, to share practices and promote the benefits that come from engaging in the process; providing professional development opportunities to discuss and resolve difficulties and tensions around AoL; demonstrating success and effectiveness by selling staff on the evidence that AoL makes a difference; and making the process inclusive with academics collaborating in the development and implementation of the process.

1   Assuring Graduate Attributes

Assurance of learning[1] is an important process in educational settings as it evaluates how well an institution accomplishes the educational aims at the core of its activities, whilst assisting the faculty members to improve programs and courses. Universities use the AoL process to provide both qualitative and quantitative indicators of teaching and learning performance for use in the assessment of the quality of award courses (Chalmers, 2008). These indicators of performance are used to guide the strategic directions, priorities, quality assurance and enhancement processes for teaching and learning (AACSB White Paper, 2007). In addition to individual institutional development, assurance of learning is used to provide valid evidence to external constituents such as potential students, public officials, and accreditors, that the organisation is meeting its goals and has built-in strategies for improvement (Ammons & Mills, 2005). The Australian Government has established a new national regulatory and quality agency for higher education, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). TEQSA's primary aim is to ensure that students receive a high quality education at any Australian higher education provider (TEQSA, 2011).

While there is pressure on universities to be able to assure learning to meet all these external requirements, there are pedagogical benefits that can be realised from AoL processes. Graduate attributes are measured through learning outcomes, which are aligned to assessments. Learning objectives in assessments that are well aligned and show development over time allow students to progress in their learning through regular teacher feedback and self-assessment. Establishing clear learning goals for a program aids the student in understanding the standards of skills required for successful completion. Also graduate attributes commonly reflect the professional of future work in that discipline, which helps students to put their academic learning into a professional context, making the educational experience more authentic (Boud & Falchikov, 2007).

Given the ongoing importance of quality assurance in Australian higher education it is important to consider how such processes are implemented. The *B Factor Project* (De la Harpe et al., 2009) concluded that institutional strategies for integrating graduate attributes need to acknowledge the importance of academic staff beliefs. The lack of confidence and willingness to teach and assess graduate attributes may be a key obstacle in institutional initiatives to successfully integrate attributes across the disciplines. Without dealing directly with the beliefs and perceptions of academics, attempts to drive the development of graduate attributes as part of a quality agenda will likely fail. A strategy to engage academics is therefore required to facilitate the cultural change required to embed assurance of learning practice.

2   Cultural Change

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[1] Assurance of learning is a phrase used by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business to refer to the assessment and documentation of program level learning outcomes (AACSB, 2003)

Culture is a powerful element that shapes work processes; it is made up of the values, beliefs, underlying assumptions, attitudes, and behaviours shared by a group of people (Heathfield, n.d., p.1 of 1). Therefore it is best described as the attitudes and behaviours that represent the general operating norms in an environment (Shein, 1990). When an organisational culture is already established, people must unlearn the old values, assumptions, and behaviours before they can learn the new ones (Heathfield, 2009, p.1 of 3). Kotter (2002) suggests the following key strategies to manage cultural change in the workplace

- **Get the vision right**: establish a simple vision and strategy focusing on aspects necessary to drive service and efficiency;
- **Executive support**: senior management in the organisation must support the cultural change in ways beyond verbal support, they must show behavioural support for the cultural change;
- **Build a guiding team**: get the right people in place with the right emotional commitment, and the right mix of skills and levels;
- **Training**: employees must clearly understand what is expected of them, and must know how to actually perform the new behaviours, once they have been defined. Training is useful in both communicating expectations and teaching new behaviours;
- **Reward and Recognise**: people learn to perform certain behaviours through either the rewards, recognition of achievement or negative consequences that follow their behaviour. When a behaviour is rewarded, it is repeated and the association eventually becomes part of the culture;
- **Empowerment**: whenever an organisation imposes new things on people there will be difficulties. Participation, involvement and open, early, full communication are the important factors. Employees need to be empowered to find their own solutions and responses, with facilitation and support from managers, and tolerance and compassion from the leaders and executives; and
- **Communicate for buy-in**: involve as many people as possible, communicate the essentials, simply, to appeal and respond to people's needs.

Cultural change requires the input of others in decision-making (participative leadership). Participation and contributions helps group members feel more relevant and committed to the decision-making process, and to the changes that result (Tannenbaum & Schmitt, 1958).

3   Aim of the Paper

The aim of this paper was twofold:
  i.   The first stage was to identify the main challenges experienced in embedding AoL into practice; and
  ii.   Secondly to showcase leadership strategies that have been successfully implemented as solutions to these challenges.

4   Methodology

This study derives from a larger project funded by an Australian Government Office of Learning and Teaching Grant. The data for the first stage (identifying challenges) was collected via semi-structured telephone interviews. The interviews were conducted by an experienced interviewer and lasted approximately forty five minutes. Each interview was recorded digitally and transcribed for analysis. The sample comprised of Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning (ADTL) (or equivalent) from Business Schools in all Australian Universities. All participation was voluntary and responses were treated as anonymous. The sampling frame was all 41 Australian Business Schools ADTLs of which 25 volunteered to be interviewed for this study. Therefore, the response rate was 61%.

Type of University

Research Focused	Technology Focused	Regional	Other	Total
6	4	6	9	25

Location of University

Australian Capital	New South Wales	Victoria	Queensland	South Australia	Western Australia	Tasmania	Total

Territory							
2	5	6	7	1	3	1	25

The best practice examples for the second stage of the research were collated from a series of eight focus groups. The participants for these focus groups were selected from institutions who demonstrated expertise in embedding AoL into their educational processes. The focus groups consisted of four groups of senior management who reported on leadership strategies in AoL and four groups of teaching academics who reported on the implementation of these strategies in practice. Each focus group used Zing software to capture data in addition to being recorded digitally and transcribed for analysis. Again all participation in the focus groups was voluntary and responses were treated as anonymous.

Types of University

Research Focused	Technology Focused	Regional	Other	Total
0	6	2	0	8

Location of University

Australian Capital Territory	New South Wales	Victoria	Queensland	South Australia	Western Australia	Tasmania	Total
0	2	2	4	0	0	0	8

5 Findings

The interview process in the first stage reported the main challenges with AoL were focused on staff attitudes:

5.1 Staff Time/Workload

The majority of those interviewed suggested that academic staff considered AoL to be extra work, making it difficult to get greater support for the process other than basic compliance. Along with high teaching and workloads was the sense that institutionally AoL was an add on and not valued in terms of remuneration and advancement. Participants emphasised the challenges of securing the time and attention academics for assurance processes when staff are under constant pressure to output research.

5.2 Staff Engagement

Particularly in light of the time/workload issue, staff engagement is the central challenge of AoL. How to foster an understanding and appreciation (as opposed to a tolerance) of AoL processes amongst staff was a challenge many of the participants were directly engaged with. They discussed coming up against: cynicism about the usefulness of assurance processes, a limited understanding of pedagogy and education amongst academic staff, traditional approaches to teaching, staff turnover, and mere compliance to the processes without real engagement. Overall, the participants felt that engagement was more or less a long term challenge, while solutions exist; for the most part anxiety about AoL is dispelled once the processes are in place.

6 Solutions to Challenges

While clearly identifying the challenges ahead of implementing assurance of learning, the focus group participants identified numerous solutions to these problems that they had implemented or were in the process of implementing. These are presented along Kotter's (2002) key strategies for institutional change in the workplace:

6.1 Getting the Vision Right: Changing Institutional Values

For some universities the vision was for AoL was to not be an additional requirement for external process but a "basic educational principle" that all educators should undertake in order to strive for continuous development. In contrast, the institutions who focused on the accreditation aspects of AoL as their main aim found it extremely

difficult to engage staff. For the most part the desired outcome of universities that aimed for institutional change was the integration of assurance processes into the normal work of unit and program coordinators, and the ongoing sustainability of this without constant agitation by ADTLs and teaching and learning staff. As one interviewee summarised, "My goal would be that it just happened as part of everyone's natural thing and it was no fuss, seamlessly across the school." Universities went about this institutional change in a number of ways. Professional development and communications were in part about trying to bring about cultural and institutional change within the schools. While support from influential people in the university was important, for the most part participants emphasised organic change at the level of academics. Attempts to change institutional values included: engaging staff directly with the AoL process, putting together committees with a broad membership at all levels in the faculty, working from the staff that are already engaged to work with the disengaged and the compliant, treating AoL as a change management project, and constant reminders across different forums and mediums.

6.2 *Executive Support: Strong senior management commitment and leadership demonstrating a constant and high level drive for staff engagement until AoL becomes an institutional norm*

Participants talked about the importance of the support of key individuals. These were often people or groups high up in the organisation, with their support acting to indicate the level of institutional support for the approach. At one Queensland University the continuous improvement agenda was strongly driven from the most senior leaders in the university and resulted in a rigorous annual unit reporting process, and evaluation of all units and teaching every semester. At another Business School, engagement began through getting approval for the process at the highest levels of the university, the executives, the dean, the deputy dean, associate deans, and heads of discipline groups. This then followed into a big drive to help build support amongst staff in discipline groups, preceded by this high level commitment to AoL.

6.3 *Building a Guiding Team: Developing leadership and champions among unit and program level staff, to share practices and promote the benefits that come from engaging in the process*

Using participative leadership was an important element of successfully integrating AoL in institutions. One participant described the process as, "... needing a distributed leadership model to be able to make it to work, so it doesn't just rely on one person to be a champion. Let them sow a few seeds, and get a few other leaders around to help them spread it a bit further". One example of how this style of leadership was fostered was through a broad assurance of learning committee that drew on a representative from each of the disciplines involved. This served to not only have staff members responsible for interpreting the results, but to have key staff members enmeshed in the process. These leaders then fostered engagement through interaction with peers, as well as ensuring the process reflected the experiences of the staff involved.

Another university's implementation was initially driven by a university wide policy change to criterion referenced assessment. Assessment champions were identified in each discipline school to guide the implementation of criteria referenced assessment. These assessment champions worked with representatives from discipline school teaching and learning committees and together formed a critical mass to support the discipline leaders in the mapping of learning goals and in influencing colleagues towards the cultural change. The undergraduate and postgraduate program coordinators worked with the discipline leaders for each major in their program. Delegating leadership responsibilities to key people who were able to influence colleagues created buy-in and eased the transition through interpersonal influence.

6.4 *Training - Providing professional development opportunities to discuss and resolve difficulties and tensions around AoL*

The primary means of engaging staff was the use of professional development activities and strategic communication about assurance to staff. Participants emphasised the importance of setting up workshops/professional development as opposed to lectures, and setting up activities as opportunities to develop skills as well as raise concerns. This interactive setting was seen as important in addressing resistance to AoL processes. At one school workshops were held featuring staff that had implemented AoL processes well within their programs/units; presenting the experience of someone who shared the perspective of staff was effective means of fostering support.

One Business School established a Teaching and Learning Team of four teaching and learning consultants and learning designers with a coordinator that has been pivotal to the successful implementation and ongoing staff engagement. They provided one-on-one support to individual academics to explore and improve assessment

practice, development of assessment guidelines and audits of assessment practice. As well as workshops and one to one sessions, participants discussed some of the key resources they had created in order to improve staff engagement in AoL: web based resources, tools to support and streamline the AoL process, development of generic rubrics for undergraduate and postgraduate learning goals, inductions for new staff (including tutors and casual staff) and sponsorship for staff to attend external AoL conferences.

6.5 *Reward and Recognise - Demonstrating success and effectiveness by selling staff on the evidence that AoL makes a difference*

Selling staff on the usefulness and effectiveness of AoL was central to getting engagement, staff need to be able to directly see the benefits in mapping, measurement, and curriculum change in order for them to be invested and spend time on the process. One university used an online program that made it possible for staff to engage with the AoL data directly, therefore academics were able to work with the data themselves and create charts and analysis cutting across many different levels. Presenting the data as a resource as well as the basis for change and decision-making was important for staff engagement.

Participants also talked about the usefulness of taking the initial good-will and buy-in amongst staff and building on it for assurance processes beyond that required by the external bodies, "...what I'll do now is I'll take the behaviour changer and I'll say let's find someone doing this really well and then let's promote it". One fairly innovative measure was using program and unit coordinators who had done AoL well, and having them present at seminars and engage in mentoring and peer support. By recognising these staff members and asking them to share their approach to and experience of AoL, anxiety levels about the process were reduced amongst other academics.

6.6 *Empowerment - Inclusive and making the process inclusive with academics collaborating in the development and implementation of the process*

To address the concerns about workload it was vital that academics were involved in the AoL process so that they see how their unit fit into the larger picture of the program. The emphasis on a participatory process involved sitting down with subject coordinators and having them work through how the graduate attributes and program learning objectives fit into their subject. One institution developed a mapping tool so that subject coordinators collaborated in not only the mapping of attributes across the program, but identifying and resolving issues around the distribution and gaps in the curriculum. While the teaching and learning team facilitated the process, it centred on the involvement of academic staff.

At another School of Business, initial work on mapping was done through workshops where unit coordinators in program/discipline teams were asked informally to indicate which graduate attributes were involved in their assessment tasks. Using Post-it notes, they were asked to map out the distribution of the attributes across assessment tasks through a program or major, from which a number of gaps and overlaps were identified and discussed. The resulting maps from this exercise were developed by the Teaching and Learning team, and then presented back to the program directors and unit coordinators, who were then responsible for any changes.

6.7 *Communicate for Buy-in*

Communications about AoL went hand in hand with professional development activities. The key messages that tended to be expressed were that AoL was a simple process, that should be considered part of normal teaching and learning in fostering improvements in curriculum and student outcomes and that it did not require additional work. Acknowledging the degree of apprehension around AoL processes was important, with participants providing examples of work done in directly challenging perceptions that AoL was complex and time consuming in order to make it less daunting. It was also seen to be important to provide reference material and regular updates on the AoL process, for example, an introduction to AoL guide/handbook, teaching and learning newsletters, websites and AOL sessions at faculty retreats/meetings. Academics were also canvassed for their feedback on the AoL process with this feedback being used to further develop practice.

7 Conclusion

The main challenges faced by the sector in the assurance of graduate attributes are around getting staff engaged with the process and not just seeing it as an extra burden on their time. Some schools demonstrated best practice in this area, but indicated that the process of achieving staff buy-in takes many years and a culture change in the institution.

One participant commented that, "it took me six years to get staff buy-in". Yet most schools agreed that staff engagement is essential to the success of AoL in terms of the ability to improve learning outcomes for students.

The interview data from this study identified two main approaches to implementing the AoL process: a "top down" approach, with senior management controlling the process, and secondly, an "inclusive" approach to the process where academics collaborate in the process. Those institutions who were considered to be more successful at assuring learning had predominantly taken this inclusive approach, employing a participative leadership style.

The need for managing cultural change for effective staff buy-in and adoption of the AoL process was highlighted by the findings of the focus groups. Kotter's (2002) strategies (get the vision right; executive support; build a guiding team; training; reward and recognize; empowerment; and communicate for buy-in) were all evident in the examples provided by successful universities.

A parallel challenge in the AOL process is in making it sustainable. The main viewpoint from this study was the necessity of engaging staff with AoL and embedding the processes in the curriculum. Attempts to minimise or isolate the work of AoL from unit and program coordinators meant that assurance needed to be driven by a few individuals. Sustainability came from efforts to embed assurance into normal teaching work and to have most of the faculty make the connection between assurance activities and continuous improvement. Participants described sustainability in terms of processes becoming fairly automatic, students describing the demonstration of outcomes rather than grades, significant participation by staff in closing the loop processes, ongoing discussions about program level outcomes, and getting assurance into the culture of schools.

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