Reframe QUT's Evaluation framework: A case study of planning, policy and positioning leading to educational best practice

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Every university in Australia have a set of policies that guide the institution in its educational practices, however, the policies are often developed in isolation to each other. Now imagine a space where policies are evidence-based, refined annually, cohesively interrelated, and meet stakeholders’ needs. Is this happenstance or the result of good planning? Culturally, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) is a risk-averse institution that takes pride in its financial solvency and is always keen to know “how are we going?” With twenty years history of annual reporting assuring the quality of course performance through multiple lines of evidence, QUT’s Learning and Teaching Unit went one step further and strategically aligned a suite of policies that take into consideration the needs of their stakeholders, collaborate with other areas across the institution and use multiple lines of evidence to inform curriculum decision-making. In QUT’s experience, strategic planning can lead to policy that is designed to meet stakeholders’ needs, not manage them; where decision-making is supported by evidence, not rhetoric; where all feedback is incorporated, not ignored; and where policies are cohesively interrelated; not isolated. This may be deemed ‘policy nirvana’, however, QUT has positioned itself to demonstrate good educational practice through Reframe, its evaluation framework. Best practice has been achieved through the application of a theory of change and a design-led logic model that allows for transition to other institutions with different cultural specificity. The evaluation approach follows Seldin’s (2003) notion to offer depth and breadth to the evaluation framework along with Berk’s (2005) concept of multiple lines of evidence. In summary, this paper offers university executives, academics, planning, quality assurance and policy staff an opportunity to understand the critical steps that lead to strategic planning and design of evidence-based educational policy that positions a university for best practice in learning and teaching.

Keywords: policy, evaluation, planning, higher education, information technology management, pedagogy
Introduction

Every university in Australia has a set of policies that guide the institution in its educational practices, however, the policies are often developed in isolation to each other. Imagine a space where policies are evidence-based, refined annually, cohesively interrelated, and meet stakeholders’ needs. Is this happenstance or the result of good planning? In January 2011, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) began a project to review its approach to evaluating units of study and teaching. The key aims of the project were to: promote staff and student engagement in evaluation processes; address negative feedback from students and academic staff; improve student survey response rates; and ensure alignment between the overall evaluation system and the intent of QUT policy (Alderman, Towers & Bannah, 2012). The project was initiated in response to criticism of the then current system of evaluation, which had been in place since 2007.

Culturally, QUT is a risk-averse institution that takes pride in its financial solvency and is always keen to know “how are we going?” With a twenty-year history of annual reporting that assures the quality of course performance through multiple lines of evidence, QUT’s Learning and Teaching Unit went further and strategically aligned a suite of policies that take into consideration the needs of their stakeholders, collaborate with other areas across the institution and use multiple lines of evidence to inform curriculum decision-making (Towers, Alderman, Nielsen & McLean, 2010).

Purposeful literature review and environmental scan of national practice

The Reframe project team undertook a literature review that was purposeful in relation to the needs of the QUT project. From this review of a decade of literature, the focus appeared to be on the investigation of practical and critical issues relating to student feedback surveys (Alderman, Towers & Bannah, 2012). Furthermore, there was a recurring theme within the national and international literature on student feedback surveys, the ways in which they are used and the roles of other supplementary models of evaluating learning and teaching. Well published authors such as Abrami, Marsh, Theall and Feldman recommend that a student feedback system should be more than just a centrally delivered survey with the intention to deliver a fair and equitable evaluation that would support professional development for faculty academic staff (Abrami, Rosenfeld & Dedic, 2007; Marsh, 2007; Theall & Feldman, 2007).

With respect to the environmental scan of national practice, the scan undertaken by the project team in 2011 supported those previously undertaken by Barrie, Ginns and Symons (2008) and Davies, Hirschberg, Lye and Johnson (2007, 2010). All universities in Australia survey students for feedback on their learning and each instrument was idiosyncratic to its own institution (Alderman,
As a result of this purposeful literature review and environmental scan of national practice, QUT believed the idiosyncratic nature of the national practice gave permission for QUT to be different, thus a decision to broaden their evaluation system was made.

**Methods**

As regards methods, best practice was achieved through the application of a theory of change and a design-led logic model that allowed for transition to other institutions with different cultural specificity. Underpinned by the action research methodology and in keeping with QUT’s culture and real-world focus, the project team adhered to the QUT endorsed model of quality improvement cycle of Approach, Deployment, Results and Improvement (ADRI). The project team then adopted Seldin’s (2003) approach to change which offered depth and breadth to the evaluation framework along with Berk’s (2005) concept of multiple lines of evidence. Although the detailed explanation of the approach to change adopted for Reframe is published in another publication (Alderman, Towers, Bannah & Phan, 2014), the following offers a brief outline of Seldin’s evidence-based, practice-led process approach through the six steps to change together with Reframe strategies.

1. **Step 1:** Examination of the givens – triggers for change
2. **Step 2:** Selection of a development group – the project team (and reference group)
3. **Step 3:** Further review of institutional evaluation policies and practices
4. **Step 4:** Re-evaluation of our organisational context – our shifting needs
5. **Step 5:** Development of a redesigned program – REFRAMING our evaluation system
6. **Step 6:** Usage of open communication – the roadshows

The design-led logic model, illustrated in Figure 1, reflects the three stages of a design-led project: stakeholder engagement and discovery (Alderman & Melanie, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c); product design (Alderman & Melanie, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c); and dissemination and delivery (Alderman, Bennett & Phan, 2014a, 2014b; Alderman, Phan & Bennett, 2014). The butterfly image was deliberately adopted as the logic model for Reframe to give exaggerated importance to the first and third element. Through the literature review, stakeholder consultation and the experience of its members, the project team wanted to emphasise the importance of giving time and opportunity to mature ideas and concepts into the three phases equally for the ultimate success of the project.
The project team invested in a two-year collaboration and engagement phase, one-year in the product design phase and by the end of 2014 would see the end of the two-year dissemination and communication phase. Literally, the butterfly design was to remind the project team and stakeholders that without all three phases undertaken over a set period of time, the project simply ‘won’t fly’. The outline of the butterfly was handwritten text to remind the project team of the different activities that occurred during each of the three phases. The three phases of the design-led project are described below.

- Collaboration and engagement: Literature review, environmental scan, theoretical concept and executive support.
- Product design: Development of Reframe: QUT’s approach to evaluation.
- Dissemination and communication: Communication Plan, training, target audience and ongoing improvement.

**Strategic evaluation through scholarship**

Apropos strategic evaluation through scholarship, one of the issues when undertaking a project that is quite distinctive and perhaps considered ‘cutting edge’ is how to determine ‘how is it going?’ Table 1 below outlines the range of artefacts that the project team invested in throughout the five-year period of the project. This does not include the annual ongoing investment in a formal
communication plan (Alderman & Bennett, 2014); rather it demonstrates the commitment to rigour and external peer review through formal publications, conferences, awards and external review.

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Table 1 Record of Reframe engagement in scholarship

This table presents evidence of the project team’s commitment to model good education practice through scholarly publication of each phase, ongoing stakeholder engagement together with dissemination and communication of the overall project and associated outcomes. For example 2014 alone, the Reframe Protocols were modified on 15 separate occasions and each modification represented a change that was triggered by stakeholder feedback.

Early indicators of success

Pertaining to early indicators of success, there were a number of early indicators of success that went beyond the very welcome ‘absence of unresolved complaints’. For example, previously the student comments were only used by the academic staff members engaged in a teaching role whereas now with Reframe, QUT is utilising all data collected through the survey instruments in a more strategic manner. Throughout 2013 and 2014, the Vice-Chancellor had access to and read every student comment associated with the Pulse (formative survey conducted in weeks 4 to 5 of a semester) and Insight (summative survey conducted in week 13 to 16 of a semester) within one week of each surveys’ closure. The Vice-Chancellor read these comments to ascertain if there were any immediate themes or concerns that fall under institutional responsibility rather than individual academic staff member’s responsibility. As a result of this activity in May, 2013 the Vice-Chancellor identified lecture capture as a strong theme within students’ Pulse comments, a new policy on
mandatory lecturer capture was introduced and in early 2014 this policy was implemented university-wide.

A second example of early success was through engagement with a range of stakeholders across the institution. In 2013, evaluations@qut.edu.au, the email account dedicated to Reframe enquiries, received and responded to approximately 3,500 enquiries whereas in 2014, engagement had grown to over 5,400 enquiries. Workshops to support the implementation of Reframe were well attended with opening numbers exceeding places available. Over 500 members of academic staff had voluntarily attended a Reframe workshop in 2014.

A third example was where the Faculty of Law had taken a particular approach to performance planning and review for academic staff and strongly embraced Reframe: QUT’s Evaluation Framework as an opportunity to support academic staff in their evaluation of courses, units, teaching and student experience. Under the leadership of the Assistant Dean (Learning and Teaching), this commitment was demonstrated through (i) implementation of a collaborative three-pronged approach to performance planning and review for academic staff in 2013-2014 between the Assistant Dean (Learning and Teaching), Assistant Dean (Research) and Heads of School; (ii) a commitment to universal peer review of examination papers to embrace a broader view of collegial peer review; (iii) specialised workshops delivered by the Learning and Teaching Unit to meet the varied needs of academic staff within the Faculty of Law; and (iv) identified good practice within QUT Business School and the adoption of this practice to support unit coordinators in responding to student feedback. This faculty-wide approach offered consistent support to academic staff while providing the executive with an opportunity to cross-pollinate ideas for teaching, research and service activities amongst staff.

A final example of this success was through both internal and external recognition. The Reframe team was recognised through an invitation to present a keynote address on Reframe in 2013 at the Australian National University, the receipt of a QUT Performance award in 2013 and a national award ‘ATEM/Campus Review Best Practice Awards for Unipromo Information Technology Management’ in 2014.

Comparison to the national quality agenda for learning and teaching in higher education

In QUT’s experience, strategic planning can lead to policy that is designed to meet stakeholders’ needs, not manage them; where decision-making is supported by evidence, not rhetoric; where all feedback is incorporated, not ignored; and where policies are cohesively interrelated, not isolated. While many may call this ‘policy nirvana’, QUT has positioned itself to demonstrate good educational
practice through Reframe, its evaluation framework. When Reframe: QUT’s approach to evaluation and the associated interrelated policies are viewed through a national lens, as evidenced by a national award, QUT has developed a broad approach to evaluation that is holistic and supportive of stakeholder needs and considered best practice.

Figure 2 illustrates the different policies that QUT have in place to support academic staff in their teaching role who contribute to the quality of the student experience in higher education. With the implementation of Reframe, each of these policies were analysed to determine their alignment and interrelated nature of their intent.

Figure 2 Strategic planning to position policy to support best educational practice

The author’s doctoral thesis documents and theorises the consequences of the 2003 Australian Government Reform Package focused on learning and teaching in Higher Education during the period 2002 to 2008 (Alderman, 2014). This was achieved through the perspective of program evaluation and the methodology of illuminative evaluation. The findings suggest that the three national initiatives of that time, Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF), Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), and Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), were successful in repositioning learning and teaching as a core activity in universities. Through analysis of the Government’s pursuit of quality in higher education, the author ascertained that there were four
main elements that support the quality agenda in higher education in Australia (Alderman, 2014). These main elements are accountability, performance, improvement and investment and they offer a way to reflect on an institution’s approach to quality that is reflective of good practice and meets the needs of the stakeholders who may each approach quality from a different standpoint.

When applied to a higher education institution such as QUT, these elements manifest themselves through policies that support, guide and reinforce good practice in teaching. At QUT these are: (i) accountability is those condition under which an academic staff member will conduct themselves and offer a safe learning environment supported by the institution’s policies that is conducive to student learning; (ii) performance is when the institution provides opportunities for academic staff to engage in teaching capacity building and offers supervision that offers both guidance and monitoring; (iii) improvement is where good teaching practice is recognised and rewarded through learning and teaching awards and promotion; and (iv) investment is where academic staff invest in their teaching profile and in the discipline of higher education through scholarship and research into learning and teaching. For a line supervisor, it is possible to have a conversation with an academic staff member engaged in a teaching role and discuss these eight elements of quality, from safe environment conducive to learning around to learning and teaching grants in a progressive manner. In these discussions, not only is it important for the academic staff member to demonstrate engagement but also for the line supervisor to offer opportunities that support the academic’s engagement.

Therefore, at the end of 2014, the project team considered that the planned five-year investment of time and energy was successful in positioning QUT to be leading in education evaluation best practice.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper offers university executives, academics, planning and quality staff an opportunity to understand the critical steps that lead to strategic planning and design of evidence-based educational policy that positions a university for best practice in learning and teaching. The message to government and institution executives in higher education is that to embark on a project for the purposes wide-spread organisation change takes time and it also takes the executive to be steady and realistic in the manner in which they support such projects.

There were lessons to be learned from this case that should inform future government and institutional policy-makers. This case study of planning, policy and position which led to educational best practice demonstrated the significance of time for the successful implementation of Reframe:
QUT’s evaluation framework. The five-year investment of time by QUT was backed up by strong executive support, consistent project leadership, a clear logic model, dissemination strategies and strong stakeholder engagement throughout the three-phased project. All government and institutional policy-makers would benefit from following the methods outlined in this paper to ensure that future policy design, development and implementation was well received and understood across all stakeholders.

References


