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**A QUALITY ASSURANCE APPROACH TO THE PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A
LEARNING AND TEACHING STRATEGY FOR
MULTI-CAMPUS, MULTI-MODAL UNIVERSITY**

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ABSTRACT

One of the responses to the 1997 Academic Audit of Massey University was the creation of a Learning and Teaching Plan (LTP). The Plan acts as an interface between the strategic context and intent of the University as represented in University's Charter and Strategic Plan 2020, as well as the Education Amendment Act and Functions and Procedures Manual of the Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP), and the practice of learning and teaching at Massey University. The LTP was developed in 1998 using extensive consultation with University staff and students and is an overarching framework of objectives from which a number of new initiatives have been instigated.

Implementation of the LTP involved the development of a corresponding Operational Plan (LTOP). The LTOP has evolved in 1999 as the quality assurance mechanism for the LTP. Discussions with staff and students considered pivotal to the achievement of LTP objectives resulted in the identification of appropriate indicators, areas for further investigation and additional efforts required for the monitoring and implementation of the LTP.

The introduction of LTP and LTOP has assisted the University to consolidate a set of shared objectives related to learning and teaching. Another benefit has been the creation of a network for information gathering. The next step in the process is developing appropriate processes to disseminate information from the LTOP to staff and students of the University. A web-based approach to reporting is currently under investigation.

At this early stage, it would be premature to set targets or goals for the learning and teaching objectives. Instead, a period of information gathering is required to examine where the University is in relation to the objectives, in addition to whether we are gathering the correct information for the correct purpose.

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INTRODUCTION

New Zealand tertiary institutions are operating in an environment that is changing rapidly. At a time when universities must respond to increasing student numbers and decreasing government funding, the public concern for accountability and quality in tertiary education is growing (Woodhouse, 1999). The release of documents describing the development of the Quality Assurance Authority of New Zealand (QAANZ) and associated Quality Validation Bodies (QVBs) (White Paper, 1998, QAANZ Pre-establishment Team, 1999) are evidence that the importance of quality in education cannot be understated.

Maintaining and improving academic quality is an organisational problem requiring a systemic and systematic approach in order to identify solutions. Various forms of Quality Management have been proposed and tested as a solution, but the diverse experiences of the United States of America, United Kingdom, Australia and elsewhere have demonstrated limitations in the models. International experiences have shown that peer review and government inspection, evaluation and regulation are insufficient for ensuring academic quality (Harman, 1998). Similarly, the translocation of manufacturing-based quality assurance models and the use of immature Total Quality Management paradigms in educational settings have not been entirely successful (Koch and Fisher, 1998). This can be attributed, in part, to the absence of a suitable definition of academic quality and academic quality improvement in higher education.

The White Paper (1998) describes quality in education as “fitness for purpose” thereby encouraging tertiary institutions to focus on the development of outcome-oriented systems that adequately cater to the needs of all stakeholders. For example, graduate profiles are now a requirement for all new university programmes (CUAP, 1998) and the specification of graduate attributes and learning outcomes are becoming more prevalent.

Specifying outcomes and objectives of an institution, programme or paper is essential for facilitating clear communication between the institution and external stakeholders such as government, community interest groups and industry. Of equal importance are the systems in place to ensure the quality of educational delivery to students as informed consumers and paying clients of the university.

For a multi-campus, multi-modal University such as Massey, quality assurance systems for learning and teaching assume greater importance. Distinctive campuses must retain enough autonomy to respond to regional demands. However, if the University is to remain an integrated organization all divisions must share the vision, mission and ethos of the institution.

CLARIFYING UNIVERSITY GOALS – REVISITING FIRST PRINCIPLES AND FILLING THE GAPS

The role of the university is ‘critic and conscience of society’, acting as a ‘repository of expertise’ concerned with ‘advanced learning’ where ‘research and teaching are closely interdependent’ (Education Amendment Act, 1990). These key functions of the university are often simplified to three activities that are more quantifiable – research, teaching and community service.

In an environment oriented toward outcomes, achievement of the simplified university functions has been easily reported. Research outputs are counted, community service activities described and teaching occurs. However, revisiting the Education Amendment Act of 1990 it is apparent that broader thinking is required if we are to ascertain whether the universities are fulfilling their defined roles. For example, what

is meant by 'advanced learning'? How do universities ensure that research and teaching are 'closely interdependent'? More importantly, how can universities hope to report their achievement of these goals if there are no clear definitions of the concepts?

The New Zealand Universities established an Academic Audit Unit (AAU) in 1994. The AAU was charged with the responsibility of "reviewing each university's mechanisms for monitoring and enhancing academic quality and standards, and to comment on their effectiveness in relation to the institution's stated aims and goals" (AAU, 1996). Thus, the AAU checks that the quality systems support the university goals, but if the goals are not operationally defined, it is impossible to effectively investigate whether appropriate quality systems and quality assurance mechanisms are in place.

The AAU conducted the first Academic Audit of Massey University in 1997. The Audit Panel observed that "the concept of learning was not well addressed" and "there was no systematic approach in place for the University or Department improvement of learning" (Massey University Audit Report, p.19). The Audit Report also stated that "an Academic Plan for teaching, course and assessment strategies will be critical to success" (p.16).

During 1998 and 1999, Massey University has attempted to address the perceived gap in its strategic direction by the development of a Quality Advancement Programme (1999) that included the creation of an Academic Plan. Cognisant that research and community service functions are unpacked into various categories that enable some measure of their quality to be established, we have endeavoured to identify learning and teaching goals that embody the key roles, as well as the academic direction of the University. Accompanying the learning and teaching goals are a variety of qualitative and quantitative indicators that will assist in mapping our progress toward the objectives.

DEVELOPMENT OF A LEARNING AND TEACHING PLAN FOR MASSEY UNIVERSITY

The Massey University Learning and Teaching Plan (LTP) was initially developed by a small workgroup and revised in consultation with many staff and students. The LTP was then subject to the University pathways for policy approval and officially adopted in the latter part of 1998.

The LTP acts as an interface between Massey University's Charter and Strategic Plan 2020, as well as the Education Amendment Act (1990) and the New Zealand Vice Chancellors' Committee on University Academic Programmes - Functions and Procedures, and the practice of learning and teaching at Massey University. In other words, the LTP outlines the key areas of learning and teaching that Massey University is committed to enhancing through quality assurance. Specifically, the Plan includes statements of intent with regard to Institutional, Staff and Student Responsibilities, Educational Programmes, Support Services and Facilities and the Interdependence of Research, Learning and Teaching.

During the initial stages of the LTP development, there was general agreement that the University could not progress the learning and teaching goals without generating, distributing and embedding a variety of support procedures throughout the Institution. Accordingly, an overall Academic Plan that indicated future developments in support of the LTP was outlined. For example, Codes of Practice for Curriculum Development and Assessment were deemed essential for the University to promote consistency in two areas fundamental to teaching practice. The Codes were developed concurrently with the LTP, as was a proposal for the systematic review of academic programmes.

The LTP emphasises that learning and teaching at the University involves the active participation of both staff and students and consequently, the responsibility to ensure that learning and teaching occur in the most efficient and effective manner is shared. An important part of the LTP is the inclusion of statements

regarding the rights and responsibilities of the Institution and its staff and students in the learning process. Arguably, this has been the first step toward clarifying the dynamic relationships that exist between the University, staff, students and external stakeholders.

Sirvanci (1996) describes the relationship between students and the university as a very complex one because many aspects generally associated with customers do not apply to students. For example, students do not normally pay the full price for the service received and are required to prove merit and eligibility. Based upon these criteria, students do not fit the classical understanding of a customer.

At times, students may play a combination of roles in relation to the institution by being both customers and co-producers. Throughout their association with the institution, the student is the customer of services such as admissions, enrolment, library and student services. As they become more involved in research, they can be co-producers of knowledge and more active contributors to the learning process.

Lindsay (1993) proposed that students are just one of many stakeholders who all may have different needs and expectations of the education system. Satisfying the important stakeholders requires the organisation to have well defined processes and provide the resources and environment wherever possible.

Adding to the complexity of the university-staff-student-external stakeholder relationship is the concept that the situation may change over time. For example, the undergraduate student is largely lead and controlled as a recipient of educational services and is perhaps closer to being a customer in the conventional sense. The post graduate student, however, could actually be co-producing research for a third party who is an external customer of the University. In this case, the student is aligned more closely with the role of a supplier.

The Plan explicitly reflects a view of learning as a cooperative process with staff and students as co-producers of learning and knowledge. The view is also reflected in the title of the plan with the focus on 'learning and teaching' to endorse learning as the outcome supported by teaching as a process.

STAGE TWO: THE LEARNING AND TEACHING OPERATIONAL PLAN

In order to ensure that the quality principles stated in the LTP were supported by quality assurance mechanisms, a Learning and Teaching Operational Plan (LTOP) followed development of the LTP as a means of evaluating progress toward goals.

The LTOP began as a set of basic indicators roughly aligned to the goals of the LTP and known to be available from University reports and central databases. However, much of the information required to adequately evaluate progress toward LTP goals was not readily available and a network of information sources was identified. Consultation with the network resulted in some additional indicators but overall, was more useful for identifying where information could be found.

The intention is to publish LTOP reports biannually so that areas of good practice can be identified in addition to areas for targeted improvement. At this early stage of development, it would be premature to set targets in relation to the learning and teaching objectives. Instead, a period of information gathering is required to examine where we are in relation to the objectives, in addition to whether we are gathering the correct information for the correct purpose. Armed with the knowledge that the information sought is appropriate, sufficient and accurate, Massey University can proceed with the identification of targets and the implementation of action plans to achieve set goals.

CURRENT STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

The approval of the LTP and LTOP signified the beginning of a continual cycle toward quality improvement. Implementation of the LTP is already underway with many new initiatives such as the Codes of Practice and a Teaching Skills Development Programme. It was originally thought that a 1998 LTOP report would have been completed by this time but the process has been hindered by deficiencies in the University information systems.

A significant amount of the data required is not readily available from the central database. In fact, a lot of time has been spent finding pathways to generate the information. For example, prior to the LTOP there was no method of determining student progression and attrition rates at the University level and interrogating the database to yield this information has been a complicated exercise. Another problem is that some of the information sources do not report their progress at regular intervals, instead the information must be sifted from meeting minutes and ad hoc reviews.

However, we are now at the stage where we can begin the generation of the 1998 and 1999 LTOP reports. Consistent with the Massey University Quality Advancement Programme principle of full disclosure, it is proposed that the reports are published on the Massey University Website so the information is accessible to all staff and students of the University and can be browsed by external stakeholders.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

The LTP informs and directs the University learning and teaching activities and through the common standards that will be developed in accordance with the Plan, the University hopes to produce consistent learning and teaching outcomes irrespective of the delivery mode or Campus location.

The LTOP Reports are expected to be a valuable information source for staff, students and external stakeholders providing a mechanism for identifying and sharing good practice as well as a means to target areas for improvement. The LTOP also signifies the development of a system for institutional research, targeting an area that has previously been undirected at Massey University.

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- Information about the Massey University Quality Advancement Programme can be found at <http://quality.massey.ac.nz/>