

How to Pull Yourself up by Your Own Bootstraps

Faculty Review as a Method of Implementing Quality Assurance

Barbara O'Connor and Andrew Codling

Abstract

Following Carrington Polytechnic's mixed experience of quality assurance through departmental review by external panels, based on fairly generalised terms of reference, the polytechnic implemented a new style of quality assurance through self study and peer review at a faculty level. This paper highlights the features that are common to self study and peer review operated in other countries, notably America and the Netherlands. While previous literature discusses the use of this approach to quality assurance at institutional and program levels, this paper serves to strengthen the use of this approach by demonstrating its flexibility to operate successfully at the level of faculty evaluation. The paper draws heavily on the pilot review of the Faculty of Humanities at Carrington Polytechnic conducted in 1992, and highlights important aspects that contributed to the successful implementation of faculty review. The experiences gained should assist others who are considering their own approach to implementing quality assurance.

Introduction

Carrington Polytechnic was established in 1976 and has grown rapidly to become one of New Zealand's larger polytechnics, with a 1993 enrolment of approximately 15,000 students (4500 EFTS¹). The polytechnic offers a wide range of vocational and professional academic programs from entry level through to bachelors degrees and post graduate qualifications, with a particular focus on programs associated with the natural and built environment. The polytechnic is organised into seven fairly autonomous facilities, each comprising a number of departments. Prior to 1991, each department was subject to periodic review by a small team of external evaluators, which produced a report recommendations relative to generic terms of reference. In 1991, a new internal review process was developed to operate at the faculty level, based on the principles of self study and peer validation. This new approach was used in a pilot study review of the Faculty of Humanities in 1992, the outcomes of which have lead to modifications of the process for future faculty reviews.

Background

In common with a world-wide trend in education, New Zealand educational organisations are paying increasing attention to quality. This is occurring both centrally and at the level of the provider. Within this environment, there were a number of factors which impinged on Carrington Polytechnic's choice of a new quality assurance system. Foremost of these were the events surrounding the introduction of the Education Amendment Act, 1990. Prior to this Act, the predominant mode of quality assurance was via the "control mode", emanating from a central bureaucracy. This largely operated at the program level, on an ad hoc basis, with significant attention to inputs, not processes and outcomes. In this environment, as has been commonly experienced, the parameters for evaluation were often unclear, and systems and recommendations were imposed without regard to organisational culture. A new central education authority, the New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA), was established under the Act, with a mission to "promote improvement in the quality of education and training ... through the development of a comprehensive, accessible and flexible National Qualification Framework" (NZQA, 1993). While NZQA

¹ Equivalent Full-Time Students.

has, at least until recently, carried out accreditation at program level, early in its inception it articulated a paradigm shift for its future approach to quality and accreditation.

With respect to quality, NZQA signalled its intention to become an audit authority, with the prime responsibility for quality management and monitoring being shifted to the provider. Thus, it intended a role similar to other international central authorities, such as the Dutch Education Ministry (VISNE,² 1990) and the British Academic Audit Unit (Gorton and Partington, 1993). Furthermore, NZQA made it clear that it would follow a nominalist approach by defining quality as “fitness for purpose”, leaving the institution free to develop and utilise a system best suited to its own needs. It is also indicated a move towards institutional accreditation, rather than program accreditation, with the concomitant requirement for the institution to do its own self study as a prerequisite for the process.

As a second factor was the ISO 9000 movement and its potential application to education. Until recently its orientation was particularly suited to manufacturing, not services. It was perceived to involve a preponderance for paper-based systems and procedures, with major emphasis on non-compliance, and its credibility with academics was low and seen to be counterproductive, a point also highlighted by Sallis and Hingley (1991). While international progress has subsequently been made with the interpretation of ISO 9000 to education, there is still no one accepted interpretation of the standard by certified accreditors within New Zealand. Thus there are a limited number of educational institutions following this route at present. Carrington also took cognisance of the Total Quality Management movement and its requirements. While TQM principles were compatible with Carrington Polytechnic’s own culture, the long term nature of its implementation was perceived as a drawback at the time of consideration. Remember, too, that an alternative to departmental review was being investigated, not the wholesale introduction of new corporate management philosophy. That is not to say that TQM will be ignored in the future (or ISO 9000 for that matter). Indeed, as will be shown in the sections to follow, faculty review incorporates some of the essential features of TQM; for example, a culture of continuous improvement, empowerment of staff to be self-critical, shared responsibility and team work, and improvements in staff morale, commitment, and motivation (Hill and Taylor, 1991). TQM could well be a natural progression from faculty review.

The Carrington Polytechnic Context

Prior to 1991, Carrington approached quality assurance by a process of departmental review. This was undertaken by an external panel which was given fairly generalised terms of reference. These were essentially a check list of issues to be investigated. The department under review was required to furnish extensive information pertinent to these terms of reference, and departmental staff and students were required to be available for interview during the panel visit. The outcome of the visit was a comprehensive report to the Chief Executive. This report usually contained detailed, and often prescriptive, recommendations on the future activities of the department. Such an approach had considerable limitations, not the least of which was a progressive loss of confidence by the staff of the polytechnic in the validity of the process and the imposed nature of the outcomes it produced. It became something to be endured and feared rather than looked forward to, and, more importantly, lead to the suppression of information that could be interpreted as critical of the department under review. In short, as experienced by others, (Acherman, 1990), it was impossible to stimulate improvement in a threatening environment. There was therefore a clear need to revise the process, and to adopt an approach to quality assurance which focused on:

- continuous quality improvement rather than quality control;
- self evaluation and responsibility planning improvement; and
- the widespread support and involvement of all stakeholders.

Not only were improvements of systems and procedures wanted, but also improvements to the teaching and learning environment, staff morale and customer satisfaction. The other overriding consideration was to avoid a huge expensive paper shuffling exercise, with a report that gathered dust, a factor also considered important by the Dutch Universities (Westerheijden, Weusthof, Frederiks, 1992).

² Vereniging van Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten (Association of Co-operating Universities in the Netherlands).

The visit to New Zealand in 1991 by Dr John Peterson, Executive Director of the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, California, USA, proved to be a catalyst which provided Carrington with the conceptual basis for an alternative approach. The USA has operated a very successful quality assurance system since the 1950s, whereby educational institutions are accredited by their respective accrediting commissions. The cornerstone of their system is *quality improvement*, operated via a *partnership* model involving self study by the institution followed by validation by a team of external peers. An adaptation of this model which operates at the level of the program has also proven to be successful in Dutch Universities (Acherman, 1990). An additional feature of the American model was its efficiency and apparent low cost. With this catalyst, combined with the accreditation approach of NZQA, Carrington therefore adopted the principles of the American model of self study and peer review and adapted the process to suit its own environment. While the Dutch Universities had modified the model to operate at a program level, Carrington introduced the self study at faculty level. The major reason for this was the relative autonomy given to each of the faculties at the polytechnic - each has its own operational culture, best suited to its respective customers. As has proved to be the case, each of the faculties will have quite different issues to develop plans for. Carrington Polytechnic adhered to the "standard approach" used by the Americans, rather than the "checklist approach" adopted by the Dutch. To create the drive towards full institutional improvement, a common set of standards rather than the random use of checklists was considered essential. Also, Carrington offers programs across all levels of the national qualifications framework (From preliminary studies to post-graduate qualifications), with each faculty having a different mix of programs at different levels. Some uniformity in self evaluation was therefore necessary to ensure consistency.

Components of Faculty Review

There are four essential components of Carrington Polytechnic faculty review:

- the standards;
- the faculty self study; and
- the peer validation of the self study; and
- the accountability to the Academic Board.

The Standards

An acceptable definition of the faculty review concept. Their major purpose is to enable the faculty to evaluate its policies and operations against established benchmarks. To be effective, they must also have a beneficial influence on continuing professionalism and approaches to teaching (Elton and Partington, 1991). It is noteworthy that in the context of faculty review, the standards have quite a different interpretation to those associated with the ISO series. In the latter, the standards convey the notion of compliance. For Carrington Polytechnic, eight standards were originally established for the pilot review, and these were extensively revised and reduced to six major standards in the light of the experience gained from that review. The revised standards are:

Standard 1:	Faculty purpose, planning, integrity and effectiveness
Standard 2:	Educational programs development, delivery and evaluation
Standard 3:	Student services and the learning environment
Standard 4:	Faculty and Staff
Standard 5:	Faculty resources
Standard 6:	Leadership and integration

Each of the standards comprises a number of elements, written to reflect the notion of "good practice" (Acherman, 1990). The breadth of coverage indicated by these standards reflects the comprehensive nature of the faculty review process, one of the original requirements. It is not surprising that the usual dilemmas were faced when writing the standards. Should they be:

- measurable or non-measurable?
- prescriptive or descriptive?
- generic or specific?
- systems-based or holistic-based?

A substantial body of opinion exists to suggest standards should be measurable. Perhaps this stems from years of specifying performance indicators or a previous emphasis on compliance. It became clear though that measurable standards pose difficulties, particularly when addressing questions about the effectiveness of the learning process. Much activity associated with the learning process is intangible and the service quality literature is replete with the problems associated with measuring intangibility. Mattson (1991) was one of the first service quality researchers to propose the use of a perceived ideal standard against which experience can be compared. Paramount to Carrington Polytechnic was the need to develop standards for both demonstrating and improving the quality of faculty provision, a need also reported by Sallis and Hingley (1991). Given that educators stress the value of “reflective learning” to their customers, it seemed as if a similar paradigm could be utilised in the context of faculty self study. Thus a mixture of measurable and non-measurable standards were written, particularly in relation to the concepts of “academic freedom” and “meeting the obligations of the Treaty of Waitangi”.³ The inclusion of quantitative and qualitative standards was vindicated during the pilot faculty review.

It was clear very early in the writing of the standards that they must be descriptive and generic rather than prescriptive and specific. For example, a standard in relation to staffing reads “each category of staff is sufficient in number to provide effective teaching, research, support services, learning resources and administration” (Carrington Polytechnic, 1993a). This is in contrast to the approach taken, for instance, by AACSB⁴ where a similar standard includes a designed percentage of student hours taught by full-time staff, and a designated percentage of doctorates in degree awarding faculties. In the Carrington context, there were two main reasons for the following descriptive pathway:

- a recognition that there may be more than one way to achieve a desired outcome; and
- the fact that the faculties have quite different cultures and deliver education at quite different levels (for example, not all faculties offer programs at degree level).

While there is considerable merit in following a systems-based approach, Carrington was keen to include standards that looked at effectiveness as well. Thus the standards comprise a mix requiring evaluation of policies, systems and outputs. In relation to the current emphasis on a systems approach, both within New Zealand and internationally, there is another factor to consider. The systems model appears to be based on the assumption that “if the processes are right, then results must follow, provided the raw material is good” (Acherman, 1990). This assumption is also at the crux of the ISO standards, and may well be valid in a manufacturing context. However, some empirical research into this assumption would be timely in relation to the provision of education. The doubts about the validity of this assumption provided another reason for writing the standard to encompass an holistic view. However, it became clear during the pilot that an imbalance of these categories existed. The peer validation panel spent the majority of time with managers, discussing policies and systems, when it was expected that lecturers, students and the classroom would be a major focus of the validation process. As a result of this, more output oriented standards were included in the revised standards for the 1993 faculty review process. The standards reflect most aspects that the Dutch have highlighted in their checklist approach. They also encompass most of the criteria suggested by Elton and Partington (1991) to form the basis of standards.

The Self Study

This is seen as the heart of the process. At Carrington, each faculty is scheduled to undertake a self study on five yearly cycle, with the standards forming the basis for this self evaluation. The faculty must describe how it meets the standards in its own context, and how it plans for improvement in quality and effectiveness. Thus, the self study is serving the same purpose as in other international settings (van Vught and Westerheijden, 1992; ACCJC,⁵ 1990b). For this to occur, it is important that the faculty has sufficient time to do the self study (six months at Carrington) and that there is no penalty for being self-critical. Above all else, a climate must be created for a **candid** self-study to be undertaken. A good self study must be honest, fair and accurate, and not seen as a public relations exercise. There must also be a culture of evidence for what is written in the self study. This will generally be found in the supporting documentation that will be assembled in conjunction with the self study report. Carrington recognised

³ The 1840 Treaty established between the Crown and the Maori people of New Zealand.

⁴ American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business.

⁵ Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges.

that creating the climate for openness and honesty would not be easy in the short term, especially given the often unpleasant consequences of previous departmental inspectorial reviews. There were three important factors that assisted in the change. One was to emphasise the ownership and confidentiality of the self study report to the faculty doing the review. It is their document, to be released as they see fit. The second major contribution to the climate and attitudinal change was the carefully planned and implemented training program provided for potential peer validation panel to members of the polytechnic (albeit external to the faculty). Once the system has been operating for a little longer, and widespread confidence is gained, the polytechnic is likely to expand membership of the validation panel to include external representation.

The extensive involvement of all stakeholders of the faculty also assisted with creating an open and honest environment. The Faculty of Humanities involved academic staff, allied staff, students (past and present), industry representatives, and other faculties served by their programs, as well as the local community in a series of analytical focus groups. This provided very powerful and constrictive feedback to the faculty, as well as contributing to the ownership of the report and its plans. The faculty also commented on the worth of having a period of time for faculty wide discussions about its education policies and operations. The self study culminates in a report written by the faculty. This must be an objective of faculty performance relative to the established standards. There are three key elements to the report for each standard:

- a descriptive summary of what the faculty actually does with respect to the standard;
- a self appraisal of the adequacy of this performance in meeting the standard;
- a plan of action for future improvement of this performance.

Overall, the report should endorse the strengths, address the issues perceived as weaknesses, and plan realistically for the future. In this respect, Carrington has followed very closely both the American and Dutch models (ACCJC, 1990a; VSNU, 1990; van Vught and Westerheijden, 1992). What was soon evident was that the faculty did not have to wait until the completion of the self study report to implement change. There were several instances during the pilot review of the Faculty of Humanities of plans being implemented while the self study was being undertaken. Thus change had often occurred before the validation process. Experience of this happening certainly enhanced the benefit of the self study in the eyes of faculty members. In spite of this, the faculty did make particular comment on the necessity to allow sufficient time to develop realistic plans, if the self study is to achieve its true potential. Notwithstanding this aspect, the self study from the pilot was honest, portrayed the actual state of affairs, and achieved appropriate balance between description and appraisal.

Peer Validation

Peer validation is the third essential component of Carrington Polytechnic faculty review process. A validation team comprising staff from other sectors of the polytechnic, including teaching, management, and allied staff representatives, is assembled for each faculty review after a thorough training program. Training of validation team members was identified very early in the development of faculty review at Carrington as an essential component of the overall process. Interestingly, it is one aspect that is seldom identified in the literature on peer review. The training program for the pilot review took place over two days and concentrated on developing the participants' attitudinal change to the concept of review. The program guided members through the whole self study and validation process and provided opportunities for specific relevant skills development. 25 staff attended the initial training program, and even those not selected for the validation team gained a positive impression of the new review process, and became unofficial "ambassadors" for the process in their own faculties. Good team selection was considered critical, and it was decided that it should be based on the following requirements:

- competence
- relevant working experience
- absence of personal conflict
- ethnic diversity
- gender balance
- previous validation experience.

The intention was that selection as a validation team member would be regarded as prestigious and as a significant professional development activity. Certainly, this was the result of staff experience from the pilot review. One of the other positive outcomes of team membership was the extent to which team members took back to their own faculties new ideas and views on current issues gathered from their detailed study of the faculty under review. A pervading renewed spirit of cooperation and collegiality was the consequence. For the pilot review at Carrington, a team of ten members was assembled. This large team allowed each team member to have a primary responsibility for validation the self study relative to one of the eight original standard, plus an independent chair and an observer without specific standard responsibility. An incidental benefit of a large team was that it mitigated against bias. The team spent three days with the faculty, and during that time conducted numerous group and individual interviews, visited classes, attended meetings, and generally became familiar with the activities of the faculty relevant to the standard for which they had prime responsibility. The sole role of the validation team is to validate the self study. To achieve this it must confirm that:

- all aspects of the standards are addressed;
- the assessment of performance against each standard is accurate; and
- proposed plans for future improvement are appropriate.

The validation team is also required to call attention to problem areas inadequately recognised by the faculty itself, and to “reinforce and extend the faculty’s commitment to its continuing pursuit of excellence”. (Carrington Polytechnic, 1993b) The validation team should not investigate or fact find in areas not covered by the standards. It should certainly not to be sidetracked by personal agendas or side issues. In practice this is not easy, as there is a natural tendency for team members to respond to comments made by faculty members which may not be supported by others, nor be relevant to the standard under consideration. The end result of the validation team is a succinct report which addresses each of the standards in turn. The report comments on the validity of the self study, and in particular on the appropriateness of the faculty’s own plans for improvement. It contains suggestions that will assist the faculty to improve, and a small number of recommendations for specific action, if they are required. These recommendations should not be prescriptive, and should focus on what is required, rather than the specifics of how it is to be done. The “external credibility” component of review is achieved by peer validation. Peer validation is not review, that is done during the self study. The validation process is a check that the self study is an accurate reflection of the current state of the faculty. The underlying objective is to assist the faculty in its own search for improvement, in other words to “hold up a mirror to the faculty”. (VSNEJ, 1990, p 28) Validation should therefore not be prescriptive, or it risks becoming an external review with imposed requirements totally counter to the fundamental philosophy of the process itself.

Accountability to the Academic Board

When the validation report is complete, the final responsibility of the peer validation team is to write the “General Statement for Future Action”, and submit this statement, with the validation report, to the Academic Board. The “General Statement for Future Action” will typically be one of the following:

- That the Faculty Self Study and proposed actions be fully endorsed.
- That the Faculty Self Study and proposed actions be endorsed, with the additional requirement of an interim report of specific issue(s), to be completed after x months and submitted to the Academic Board.
- That the Faculty Self Study and proposed actions be partially endorsed, with the additional requirements of an interim report and team visit to review progress on specific issues(s), to be completed after x months with both the interim report and team review submitted to the Academic Board.
- That the Faculty Self Study and proposed actions not be endorsed, and the Academic Board recommend appropriate action to the Chief Executive. (Carrington Polytechnic, 1993a)

There is therefore a strong “third party” accountability inherent in the faculty review process. This addresses the criticism of a lack of accountability which is occasionally levelled at the self study concept.

Benefits

The pilot review of the Faculty of Humanities did cause change. More importantly, the faculty had ownership of the change because it had written its own plans to improve areas of current weakness that it had identified through the self study process. What is more, because of the extensive involvement of a large number of faculty members, there was widespread ownership of the outcomes. Another important factor, and one not often highlighted, was that there were no surprises to faculty members. The self study report of the Faculty of Humanities has not gathered dust since its completion in 1992. While it is too early to comment on the implementation of all the plans for improvement contained in the self study, the faculty has reported that it has:

- extended its planning horizons by writing its own vision;
- appreciated the opportunity to develop its own vision;
- influenced its future direction by appraising its strengths and weaknesses;
- a real will to make the plans happen (even knowing that it does not do another self study for five years).

In addition, the faculty, in its own analysis of the review process, has identified that the review has:

- helped to unite what has traditionally been a somewhat disparate faculty;
- created a far better informed staff;
- increased and improved the profile of the allied staff;
- increased understanding of the faculty by staff from other areas of the polytechnic.

While faculty review will continue to be an integral quality assurance vehicle within Carrington Polytechnic, the strength of the process also provides other benefits:

- as the process of self study and validation is likely to parallel what is required by NZQA for general accreditation, Carrington has the advantage of experience gained through faculty review;
- it provides the all important feedback loop required for evaluation of the quality management systems currently being developed to comply with NZQA requirements;
- the concept is compatible with the principles of TQM and flexible enough to be extended to incorporate additional TQM elements;
- it assists with underpinning the systems approach associated with ISO 9000 certification;
- it is capable of being extended to provide a common sector approach for institutional accreditation in the New Zealand environment.

Conclusion

The concept of self study and peer validation is central and critical to the success of Carrington Polytechnic's faculty review process. Neither of these elements can exist successfully without the other; it is an “all or nothing” deal. For Carrington this was a new approach to review, after being somewhat conditioned to believe that the only way to gain an objective evaluation of performance was by some external agency, and that this external input was the only means of achieving credibility for the outcomes.

Self study peer validation requires a significant shift from this perception. It requires a belief that a faculty is in the very best position to make judgments about its performance, providing an appropriate atmosphere exists in which those judgments can be made. It has long been realised that self criticism is potentially more powerful than external criticism in bringing about constructive change, and this is at the heart of the self study concept. It also increases the trust of professionals in the process (van Vught Westerheijden, 1992). However, self study involves more than just self evaluation, it also involves planning

for improvement, and it is this element that is often omitted in external reviews. The concept of self study and peer review has been shown to be robust and flexible enough to operate successfully at several levels. While previous American (institutional application) and European (program application) examples have appeared in the higher education literature, this case study adds a new dimension by discussing its successful use at a new level - that of faculty. It also demonstrates most of the common elements highlighted in the European higher education environment by van Vught and Westerheijden (1992), namely:

- an aim of improvement via self evaluation;
- a mechanism of peer review; and
- a peer review report which provides accountability to an independent third party.

The one element missing in the Carrington Polytechnic context is the possible relationship between outcomes of the review process and (government) decisions about funding.

References

ACCJC (1990a) *Handbook for Accreditation and Policy Manual*, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association, California.

ACCJC (1990b) *Guide to Institutional Self Study and Reports to the Commission*, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association, California.

Acherman, H A (1990) "Quality Assessment by Peer Review: A new Area for University Cooperation". *Higher Education Management*, vol. 2, no. 2 (170-19 1).

Carrington Polytechnic, Auckland (1993a) *Handbook for Faculty Review: Policy and Procedures*.

Carrington Polytechnic, Auckland (1993b) *Handbook for Peer Validation Team Members*.

Elton, L and Partington, P (1991) *Teaching Standards and Excellence in Higher Education: Developing a Culture for Quality*, Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom (CVCP). Occasional Green Paper no. 1.

Gordon, G and Partington, P (1993) "Quality Audit, Assessment and Control in Higher Education: Development and Issues". University of Strathclyde: Unpublished paper.

Hill, F M and Taylor, WA (1991) "Total Quality Management in Higher Education". *International Journal of Education Management*, vol. 5, no. 5 (4-9).

Mattson, J (1991) "A Service Quality Model Based on an ideal value Standard". *International Journal of Service Industry Marketing*, vol. 3, no. 3(18-33).

NZQA (1993) *Quality Management Systems for the National Qualifications Framework*, New Zealand Qualifications Authority.

Peterson, P and Schnelker, B (1992) *Strengthening the Accreditation Process* The Academic Senate for Community Colleges, California. May.

Sallis, E and Hingley, P (1991) "College Quality Assurance Systems". *Mendip Papers*. Bristol: The Staff College, Coombe Lodge. (1-15).