

VALUING LEARNING AND QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CONSIDERATIONS OF AN APPROPRIATE ASSURANCE MODEL

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ABSTRACT

The Higher Education sector currently faces a need, in some sectors/disciplines, to direct its actions toward a Quality Assurance (QA) Model that might be better informed and understood in industrial terms. However, there needs to be recognition that Higher Education is a specific environment that has its own competition, influences and trends.

Educational organisations, such as universities and other education providers, are having to adopt generally accepted QA criteria to improve their operations to ensure they are better understood when subject to external scrutiny and validation. However, in a complex environment such as Higher Education, can QA be ultimately reduced to a formula, statistical interpretation and imposed agendas to achieve necessary outcomes? The effectiveness of organisational controls will be dependent on the ability of management to balance the available mechanics (e.g. competencies by way of behaviour and control mechanisms) while allowing for flexibility in areas where discretion is needed to achieve a quality outcome.

The key question to be asked is ... Can traditional QA Models (generally having an industrial origin) be applied in an educational setting? As a complex and continually evolving network of interaction between stakeholders, consumers and industry, the education environment holistically relies on an inter-disciplined skilled workforce. It seeks to guide cohorts towards academic excellence, relying on traditions and values, while developing a skilled workforce for the future. Consideration of an appropriate model of QA in an educational setting may require a re-think. Perhaps an industry model that incorporates the relationship between organisational culture, structure and systems and management practices (behavioural determinants) coupled with obligation Vs. voluntary initiative might a better formula. Seeking to create quality improvement as an outcome, an appropriate model will need to find traction between both academic and business practice, while ensuring an appropriate balance.

Key words: *education objectives; accreditation; leadership; quality; communication; practice; strategy*

INTRODUCTION

The past 25 years has seen a drive to establish a way to ensure the consistency of the quality of Higher Education. In Australia, the Bradley Review (2008) might be regarded as the first to establish a system of Quality Assurance (QA) based on standards and outcomes. Previously, such reviews had generally been based using key universities as a comparison point, and had been carried out by academic peers.

An important starting point to such a discussion is to be able to define the teaching and educating activity process of higher education. Is it an activity that can be seen as a holistic cycle system from which we extract data so we can audit the quality of the activity? Every measure of quality to be applied needs to provide both organisational and individual accountability so that progress can be tracked. There appears to be two broad choices of direction in seeking to provide a quality measure. These can be either compliance driven, that is to say, the measurement criteria are fulfilled - focusing on internal organisational elements that measure organisational performance, or outcome driven - seeking to show that the student has achieved beyond the norms that are laid down in educational terms.

Regardless, in attempting to measure 'quality' in Higher Education should it just be seen as one of a series of accountability measures, relegated to an element as part of a model that lends itself towards statistical analysis? This drive to broader accountability reflects the change in the context in which the Higher Education system finds its place. Where once education may have been seen as a closed community of practice (in some ways perhaps similar to the religious communities of olden times) there now are other stakeholders, especially the communities we seek to serve. So, do we seek for a QA regime that can be monitored and regulated, or for a QA community of functionality? Might there be a QA framework that sufficiently recognises and reflects the academic process?

WHICH INTERESTS DOES QUALITY ASSURANCE SEEK TO SERVE?

While it seems that there is a general level of acceptance regarding the need for QA in the Higher Education sector, perhaps we also need to pose the question regarding whose interests QA seeks to address. Using an industry metaphor, the Management Canon tells that Henri Fayol saw things in a top-down way (work-strategy related), whereas Fredrick W Taylor saw things in a bottom-up way (work-functionality related). Teaching and Learning (and Research) activities are at the core of the HE discipline. It follows then, that QA might be interpreted as a bottom-up activity, rather than an organisational (i.e. top-down) strategic response.

Part of the difficulty arises from clearly identifying which section of the Higher Education system we may actually be referring to. That part of the

system which is focused on skills and task development (that is, the analysis can be focused on how the task is to be accomplished), or a knowledge domain specific approach where there can be many independent specialised knowledge structures rather than one cohesive knowledge structure. Thus, movement in one domain may not necessarily impact on another independent domain.

This means the application of Industrial QA Models in this environment should be approached with caution. For example, in considering the Six Sigma DMAIC Method, that method presumes that problems can be parameterised and quantified and that improvement actions will emerge from discovered relationships amongst the identified variables (De Koning *et al.*, 2008). However, it has certain limitations - the least of which is its generality (De Mast & Lokkerbol: 2012); it fails to consider task-domain specific knowledge. In recognition of this, if we are to seek to consider how QA might be applied to academic processes, then what is needed is to develop a methodology that also evaluates task-domain knowledge.

As just one example, in Higher Education, unlike in industry, students are both the raw material input into the process, the processor of the material and also one of the consumers of the process outcome (which can also include industry, professional and accrediting bodies, and society in general). The transference of industrial management concepts to an educational landscape needs to be expanded to include consideration of the fluidity of the setting. The traditional notion of supply chain relationships only provides, at best, a simplistic understanding in a Higher Education setting. The internal student relationship in a Higher Education setting is more complex - moving beyond understanding the student as being the raw material and the consumer. Students might be seen as neophytes – apprentices absorbing knowledge to learn their craft from staff who already have a recognised mastery of it (Williams, 1993). And lecturers might be seen as being both a supplier of knowledge and a customer of other organisations (e.g. industry) as they strive to validate and improve the subjects they are teaching. The individuals involved (such as the lecturers) need to be also able to make a contribution to the process, thereby also improving it.

This changes the nature and understanding of organisational sustainability. Its purpose moves from a striving for a continuation of the *status quo* to the development of a sustainable continuous dynamic process of co-evolution within a changing environment (Mitleton-Kelly, 2011). Leadership and the creation of a QA enabling environment are necessary but not sufficient, if the changes have not been embedded within the organisational culture through, for example, a different way of working, relating and thinking.

CONSIDERING SITUATIONAL DYNAMICS

At an even broader level of understanding, the Higher Education setting belongs to a system that goes beyond the educational system into which it is situated and brings its own set of dynamics. Goldratt and Fox (1986), in their consideration of system constraints, see systems as being composed of a series of dependent activities. These dependent activities are individually subject to natural variation over time. Because variation occurs within a series of dependent events, when there is inadequate capacity or this capacity is improperly managed, variation stack-up results. When there is one entity that limits the throughput in the system, it is critical to identify this entity or, in Goldratt's terms, the '*constraint*,' in order to effectively manage the system.

Developing this further, and according to Desai (2010), within value networks the emergent and informal constraints imposed by interdependent relationships co-exist with imposed administrative controls. Perhaps, despite being valuable for planning and co-ordination, these administrative controls may not foster learning co-creation, while, within the value networks, the informal emergent dynamics imposed by interdependent relationships, (that is, adaptive leadership and participation), may be crucial for co-creation of organisational emergent learning towards an appropriate QA Model.

Thus, any QA Model to be adopted in a Higher Education setting needs to be dynamic and deep and recognise interrelationships and interdependencies at the broadest level of its operation.

According to Sha *et al.* (2011), the quality movement seems to have matured beyond manufacturing into healthcare, government, service. If so, then the next step in our analysis is to more closely consider Educational and Business Organisations. Such analysis will be undertaken recognising two primary headings. First, to compare the premise by which a business organisation is organisation as predicated and second, to contextualise governance criteria of the business organisation and the educational organisation.

COMPARING THE EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATION WITH THE BUSINESS ORGANISATION

If education is to be seen in the same way as business, it is reasonable to assume that both must therefore be seen in terms of interaction resolution remaining compatible with organisational governance structures leading to positive economic outcomes. It is a matter of organisational economics. All organisation theories have a commonality - they seek to examine the resistance or constraints that may have directly led to negative organisational outcomes.

Traditional '*supply and demand*' labour economics assumes that labour effort is constant - but is this an adequate interpretation of work in an educational organisational setting? Gollan *et al.* (2006), identifies that employers pay for *labour time*, but care about *labour effort*. As a consequence, the understanding of QA models to date may require an approach that more emphasises incentives and motivation, rather than a pure economical-behavioural exchange as a means of determining the involvement of an employee.

Organisational Economics can be said to belong to the larger body of the New Institutional Economics (e.g. Williamson, 1975, 1985). Organisational Economics analyses organisational behaviour as a contribution-distribution interactional exchange that can be governed by various inducements (e.g. employment structures), such as systems of remuneration. The key purpose of incentive structures is to realign self-interests among organisational members in such a way that mutual gains emerge as an interaction outcome.

Key concepts (Williamson, 1985) include:

- Interest equilibration;
- Interest compatibility; and
- Interest congruency

of interacting agents.

There are echoes of Chester Barnard (Barnard, 1938) in this *viz.* his ideas of organisation and co-operation. Gehani (2002), identifies the key constructs and the underlying principles for Barnard's functions of the '*executive*' and organisation as a co-operative open-system. Gehani goes on to say that an organisation learns by accessing the knowledge embedded in its expert human members, or by acquiring new expert members who specialise in the knowledge that the firm did not possess earlier. And as identified by Pasternak and Viscio (1998), the principal challenge facing the '*executive*' wishing to leverage knowledge is to simultaneously facilitate learning, bring about organisational change, and create business value to sustain organisational competitive advantage.

CONTEXTUALISING ORGANISATIONAL GOVERNANCE

Incentive compatibility of governance structures implies that through incentives, management interaction conflict can be resolved even among potentially self-interested agents in a mutually beneficial way. Thus, Organisational Economics approaches interaction conflict strictly as a situational condition that is caused by problematic - 'defective' - incentive structures. But this is also akin to a form of organisational reductionism and presents a problem if looking at an organisation through the more usual or prescriptive approaches and understandings at it seemingly ignores the

many interdependencies that can exist within and external to a workplace. The balance is, as Nemeth (1997) has identified, between creating:

'... unity in the organisation without uniformity.'

Creativity in an organisation is, to a large extent, a product of the necessities facing the individual and the ways in which they cope with these necessities (Markowitz, 1972). Some traditional form must be retained in order to permit creative expression. Only that degree of organisation should be retained that is essential to the creative operation. All that is encumbering should be dispensed with.

The Paradigm of Order (Geyer, 2003) creates a linear pathway that may be considered as an examination of the underlying progression of the management control process, based on influences.

To simplify, the Paradigm of Order can be contained within four understandings:

- Determinism
 - Processes flow along orderly and predictable paths that have clear beginnings and rational ends.
- Order
 - Given causes lead to known effects at all times and places.
- Predictability
 - Once global behaviour is defined, the future course of events could be predicted by application of the appropriate inputs to the model.
- Reductionism
 - The behaviour of a system could be understood, clockwork fashion, by observing the behaviour of its parts. There are no hidden surprises; the whole is the sum of the parts, no more and no less.

Of course, not all phenomena are orderly, predictable, determined and reducible. And phenomena are not finite. Models of Control are not Models of Participation. Participation will lead to accumulation. So, it is at this point that the DMAIC type of model finds its limitations. However, it may also be possible to quantify and develop formulae for the types of event the DMAIC is primarily used for.

In the educational environment, there are multiple accountabilities to a wide range of stakeholders that need to be acquitted, especially where there can also be the issue of government and other (e.g. corporate) funding attached. The practices adopted (especially by regulatory

authorities) tend to extend the concept of accountability, as we are also dealing with the future – we enrol students today for outcomes (for themselves and industry) years hence. Brown and Moore (2001), in viewing accountability in the charitable sector, consider the role of the actor in the equation (the actor being the organisation).

'An actor (whether an individual or an organisation) is "accountable" when that actor recognises that it has made a promise to do something and accepted a moral and legal responsibility to do its best to fulfil that promise.'

This is not too dissimilar to actors in an educational setting. The 'promise' can, of course, be made explicitly to:

- External parties
 - Such as the communities the organisation seeks to serve, future students, future business, or current regulators
- Internal parties
 - Such as organisational management, staff and students.

However, accountability does not necessarily require a counter-party.

According to Haidt (2012), human beings are the world champions of co-operation beyond kinship. This comes about, in the main, through the creation of systems of formal and informal accountability. Humans appear to be adept at holding others accountable for their actions, and they seem skilled at navigating through such a world where people hold others accountable for their actions. So the concept of accountability can range from the abstract (e.g. promoting academic culture in teaching and learning) to the absolute (e.g. fulfilling the students' learnings towards graduate outcomes).

To take this further, to apply an industrial model of QA in an educational setting might see for a conceptual disconnect to arise. Working in an educational environment focuses beyond the simple utilisation of human resource capital utilisation. The behaviour of the human resource in an organisational setting might be considered as a variable factor and therefore not necessarily open to exact modelling.

Organisational culture is often at the core of how employees think and respond to doing their jobs and how effective they are. Once an organisation begins to change its values, goals, focus and direction, it is embarking on culture change, which often brings challenges with regard to employee morale, commitment, and general wellbeing (Coomer, 2007). Hence, employee behaviour (competence) is a core reference variable. This concurs with the work of Ghoshal and Bartlett (1997) who observe that:

'In the end therefore, the power of the behavioural context lies in its impact on the behaviour of individual organisation members.'

CRITIQUING EXISTING UNDERSTANDINGS

Existing QA Models consider control within an organisation as a form of closed linear functionality - a series of interventions that can be interpreted as discrete projects in themselves concerned with job design, productivity management, work flow analysis and design, work measurement etc., and for which some might shirk responsibility towards their 'parts', or alternatively not engage in other 'parts' towards a holistic outcome. Such an approach does not necessarily create an understating of the 'problem' towards possible constraints that may stop one of the human pieces in the 'Model Puzzle' from achieving required results, all things being equal. Further, as a closed system such Models (while seeking to highlight variance between the planned and the actual) do not necessarily allow for variance between organisational performance and relevant external standards (e.g. forms of benchmarking evaluation).

QA Models should align with governance structures and be cognisant of the organisational setting – this to include a forward looking approach that accepts planning as a state of Bounded Rationality. Thus, an appropriate QA Model might also need to consider a range of choices that may be necessary as the organisation tracks towards its future (and this may also include necessary financial strictures imposed from time to time) an approach towards focussed alignment. The Management Canon highlights the existence of legitimate and shadow structures in an organisational setting, yet QA Models to date seem to just rely on quantifiable data (in whatever form) towards determining performance. Surely a better way would be to seek to create an alignment of the formal environment and controls system with the culture and behavioural norms operating? Towards creating an interlinked and integrated reporting Model that is mutually reinforcing and forward looking.

The functionality of Organisational Economics appears to rely as an interlinking between inventive structures Vs. incentive capability - the level of interaction between organisation and agent becomes a situational condition to test out these structures and then to DMAIC it – a situation that would appear not too dissimilar to creating an artificial measuring landscape for the use of a crash test dummy and then to measure the impact response (Wagner-Tsukamoto, 2003). We need to move beyond a limiting and constraining framework which just essentially gives us what we were expecting to find towards an appropriate forwards-improvement mechanism.

Certo and Peter (1991), suggest that effective strategic control depends on the interplay of four variables:

- Organisational Culture;
- Organisational Structure;
- Organisational Incentives; and
- Organisational Information Systems

Such a control structure might provide for both formal control signals, and provide an organisational understanding towards levels of toleration towards incentive on the one hand and risk on the other – level of flexibility toward future change.

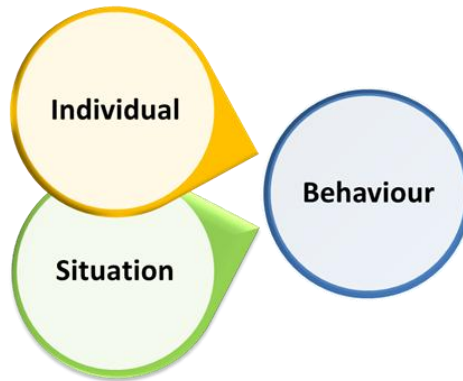
So from the above short consideration, to suggest that there is a direct comparison between the education and business industries would only be applicable if the situational complexities of both were finite – and this is not the case. Thus, the application of QA Models that have applicability in an industrial setting may be practically ineffective in an educational organisation setting as the organisational heuristic underpinnings are otherwise separate and distinct. In an educational setting, to presume that there is a direct cause and effect series of linkages between variables is crude.

COMPETENCE IN THE DOMAIN

So, we move to the question as to whether a relevant QA Model of structure and control can be developed for an educational organisational setting. Shein (1999) sees culture in an organisation as being the structure and control system that might be utilised to generate behavioural standards in employees. Naturally, if it works one way, then it's also going to work the other.

Interactionalism, first understood in terms of interactional psychology, assumes that a person's behaviour will result from a continuous and multidirectional interaction between their characteristics and the characteristics of the situation they confront. More specifically, interactionalism attempts to explain how people select, interpret, and change various situations. Pech (2001) theorises that employee behaviour might be seen through the prism of *Normative Influence*, or the overwhelming need to conform within an organisation for basic survival, creating an organisational culture of conformity, not necessarily leading to any degree of creativity and thus, organisational advancement. Simple cause and effect descriptions of observed or analysed phenomena in an organisational setting is a superficial approach to a complex situation.

Figure 1 An Interactionist Perspective regarding Behaviour in Organisations



Hamel and Prahalad (1990), in their consideration of organisational competence, touch on the subject of organisational culture and persons within it indirectly when they discuss the process of '*unlearning*' as a way of also developing new competencies within an organisation.

Extrapolating Hamel and Prahalad's considerations further and as also identified by Fleury (2009), there are negative connotations with organisational culture that thus might also tie an organisation to a different time, requiring organisational transformation to occur first to then enable development of appropriate competences for the future.

QUALITY ASSURANCE PORTABILITY AND RECOGNITION

International student mobility in Higher Education shows an ongoing increasing trend; it has been growing rapidly and is encouraged by various governments. Portability and recognition within national boundaries already provides a range of difficulties when considering how to recognise educational qualifications from other universities in different jurisdictions. However, once we cross national boundaries with national sensitivities we are confronted with a far greater challenge. In a small way this is addressed by universities establishing campuses in different locations and by sending their own staff to present the courses or training staff in those international locations to present material to the however that does not address the core question associated with portability.

The real risk (Massaro, 2013) is that because it is easier to focus and measure compliance, the effort will be centred around compliance and so the educational outcomes of universities will be left by the wayside and put in the 'too hard basket'. This will be especially true when dealing with international institutions whose focus may be on profitability rather than educational improvement and innovation. Already, such a direction is seen when government regulations cause students to take steps to achieve non-

educational personal goals which relate to their desire further their personal security over their educational achievements. Therefore, and highlighting this context as just one example, any consideration of QA might also need to consider organisational recognition of standards beyond just the academic qualification level that the student is seeking to obtain.

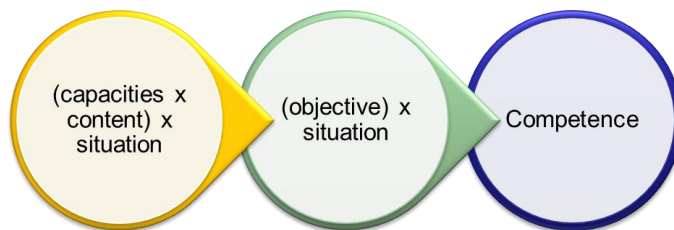
TOWARDS A MODEL OF COMPETENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

When focusing on QA in Higher Education, perhaps a more appropriate Model might be to consider the individual (e.g. lecturer, administrator) within the overall organisational performance towards ascertaining levels of competency – creating a link between QA and competency by which QA might be appropriately viewed.

Halliday (2004) examines the extent to which competence in the workplace might actually be tacit. Halliday argues, for example, that the current designers of vocational qualifications frameworks in the UK, the US and Australasia attempt to specify competence in purportedly precise and objectivistic ways. This also has various pedagogical implications. Competence in the Higher Education workplace might also involve tacit knowledge and wide-ranging understandings that may not be amenable to precise specification.

To demonstrate competence therefore, it is not enough that the objectives are juxtaposed, it is necessary that they interact to form a unified whole. The following Figure well-illustrates the point. It is not only the organisational agent wishing to examine QA, but others, who may interpret whether two instances are related, whether they are related appropriately.

Figure 2 A Model of Competence (Drawn from Payser *et al.*),¹



¹ Peyser, A., Marie-Gerard, F., and Roegiers, X. (2006) 'Implementing a Pedagogy of Integration: Some Thoughts Based on a Textbook Elaboration Experience in Vietnam', *Planning and Changing*, 37, 1&2, 37-55.

Hamel and Prahalad (1990) define the term '*competence*' as being the collective learning in the organisation; the co-ordination of diverse production skills and integration of multiple streams of technologies. Competency in the work domain therefore, must necessarily have a variety of underpinnings:

- Training by competencies;
- Selection by competencies;
- Evaluation by competencies; and
- Remuneration by competencies.

Considering this further, Mills *et al.* (2002) define competence as the manner of how well an organisation demonstrates the performance of its required activities.

Le Boterf (1998) acknowledges that competencies are not themselves resources in the sense of knowing how to act, knowing how to do, or attitudes, but they do lead to mobilisation, integration and orchestration of such resources – and isn't this what QA might be said to be trying to achieve? Competence is only competence when it makes sense within a particular professional context; in other words, something that has specific meaning for that culture.

SOME FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Organisational change involves, by definition, a transformation of an organisation between two points in time. On the basis of content, major changes consist of transformation that involves many elements of structure or those that entail radical shifts in a single element of structure (Barnett & Carroll, 1995). The idea of organisation, however, refers not only to how the elements of a whole are arranged, but also to how such constituents are characterised by the quality of being systematic and/or efficient (Roberts & Armitage, 2006). There is also the landscape to consider. The realisation that organisations are involved in and surrounded by constant change may not necessarily be fully appreciated as a determining factor in traditional industrial QA Models.

Barnett and Carroll (1995) also see a further dimension of organisational change as being concerns in the way the transformation occurs in terms of the speed, the sequence of activities, the decision-making and communication system and the resistance encountered, etc. Researching these factors will involve a focus on the process of change *per se*. Process considerations may be independent of content, or they may be interactive.

It appears that in general, businesses have come to realise the importance of innovation as a key element of survival in a global competitive environment (Hage, 1999). Thus, change for the wrong reasons or change

for change's sake may be a waste of energy, effort, resources and time. This may be true even though the organisation or its leadership may appear to be progressive. But, at what speed should change be undertaken?

To develop strategies for its survival, Greiner and Cummings (2004), suggest that the evolution of organisational development needs to be understood in the context of the major trends that shape them (or it). Such change involves new and increased demands from the economy, workforce, and technology. All of these factors may affect how organisations are managed.

Hannan and Freeman's (1984) '*Structural Inertia Theory*,' takes a slightly differently perspective. The authors suggest that, over time, organisations become increasingly inert as procedures, roles, and structures become well-established. This then may imply that the likelihood of organisational change decreases with an organisation's age and thus QA in such an environment may need a harder edge. However, Structural Inertia Theory also suggests that the likelihood of change increases once a change occurs. This may be due to the inertia '*clock*' being restarted when structures, roles, and procedures are regenerated in the process of change (Amburgey *et al.*, 1993).

CONCLUSION

This paper has moved from considering various QA measurement strategies derived from industrial situations, towards finding them lacking in the degree to which they can be used to evaluate a Higher Educational system whose parameters are far more nebulous and open ended. They are not able to capture the dynamic nature of a Higher Education learning culture.

The basic issue revolves around understanding that the Higher Education system is one that does not strive for the *status quo*, rather it seeks to establish a model of performance that is dynamic, innovative and responsive. So, the concept of accountability might extend from the abstract (e.g. promoting academic culture in teaching and learning) to the absolute (e.g. fulfilling students' learnings towards graduate outcomes).

What has been shown is that there is no easily definable way to create a QA methodology in Higher Education that is totally amenable to measurement for a number of reasons. There appears much scope for further research in this area.

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