Leadership and Assessment: Strengthening the Nexus
Case Study

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OVERVIEW

The *Leadership and Assessment: Strengthening the Nexus* Project aims to build the capacity of a group of cross-disciplinary leaders in effective assessment practice. While there is a substantial body of literature on leadership in higher education and a wide literature base on assessment in higher education, there is a dearth of research, and therefore literature, on the nexus between leadership and assessment. This project aims to contribute to the scholarship of both leadership and assessment, and the scholarship of leadership *of* assessment.

A Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology underpins the project. This project, which is in its first phase, has three participating departments from one Australian metropolitan university: Computing, Health and Chiropractic, and Law. As well as being cross-disciplinary, the project model is multi-level, working at the unit, program, department and divisional levels.

This case study focuses on the role of the PAR methodology in directing the project's pathway, especially in supporting and developing the scholarship between leadership and assessment in Higher Education.

Several issues will be discussed. These include the formation of the multi-level "Leaders in Effective Assessment Practice" (LEAP) group and the role of critically reflective practice and regular reflective sessions in the process of developing the scholarship, and leadership, of assessment in participating departments.

This case study relates to the third online conference theme of *institutional strategies for assessment*.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

Three departments, located in a Sydney (Australia) metropolitan university, are currently participating in the *Leadership and Assessment: Strengthening the Nexus* Project. Each of the participating departments offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In common, each discipline has a requirement to follow a professional accreditation process. Classes are offered on a semester basis, with two semesters a year, however, a summer programme is also available.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE AND RATIONALE

A feature of this two year project is that of developing practitioners who are an empowered group of leaders in effective assessment practice. The leaders (who are known as **Action Research Enablers or AREs**) from each of the three departments joined the project due to their high level of interest in teaching and learning, but specifically their interest in assessment. In the first phase of the project the AREs are working together to develop tools to undertake an assessment profile in their respective departments. University student course evaluations and individual unit and departmental student evaluations have consistently indicated the students' dissatisfaction with assessment

practices. This student feedback has been a motivator for the project. While guidelines for assessment have been developed by the university, no assessment policy has been developed at the organisational level, although assessment policy may exist at an ad hoc level at departmental level.

In this project, the university intends to develop assessment leaders who will promote and support the strategic and systematic development of assessment and feedback within their community of practice and throughout the institution. This is the aspect of the project that makes it so interesting, a focus on the nexus between leadership and assessment, where traditionally these two areas have been separate.

A **Participatory Action Research (PAR) model** has been adopted as the methodological framework for the project. This approach was adopted as it provides the opportunity for the AREs to develop different assessment strategies tailored to their departmental needs. A strength of the approach is its inherent flexibility in allowing the evolution of each level of the project in a direct response to time and context specific requirements.

A PAR model also stresses **collegiality**. The AREs are each supported by an "*influencer*" in their department, either a Head of Department, Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching) or Dean of Division. There are two benefits to this arrangement. The AREs have a supportive colleague, located within their own department and, equally important, a champion for enhanced assessment practice.

The Action Research Enablers meet monthly at a supportive and strategic forum and together form the '**Leaders in Effective Assessment Practice' (LEAP) group**, a collegial support network. It is anticipated that this group will be able to positively influence departmental, institutional and ultimately, sectorial thinking on assessment.

These leaders in assessment are also **supported with regular workshops and forums** facilitated by the project team. Experts have facilitated workshops on Participatory Action Research and on leadership, while the national funding body for the project (Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching) has provided forums and workshops on assessment and on leadership.

A critical part of the action research cycle is that of reflection. Each assessment leader has been asked to maintain a critically reflective diary of the process of developing leadership in assessment. One very successful support mechanism provided to these developing leaders has been the **structured reflection sessions**. These sessions are facilitated by the research manager who uses two semi-structured questions as a prompt for the AREs to verbalise their reflections from the past month. An example of a question asked is "Reflecting on your role as a Leader in Assessment in your department, what have been your experiences over the past month?", after which they may be prompted to elaborate upon positive and challenging experiences. This support provides each ARE with a regular and systematic opportunity to consider the praxis of theory and action and to journal the process of capacity building in leaders of assessment. Each session is digitally recorded and the data collected from these sessions will be used to develop a model outlining the process of strengthening the capacity of developing assessment leaders in higher education.

To provide baseline data for the project each ARE has collected copies of every unit, or course, outline for each unit taught in their department. This provides data on current assessment practices. A means was then explored to assist in creating a succinct summary of the data provided by these outlines. Firstly, the AREs have concentrated their efforts on modifying an **assessment matrix tool** (originally developed by RMIT an Australian University – refer to http://www.carrickinstitute.edu.au/carrick/webdav/site/carricksite/users/siteadmin/public/Training%20Manual%20Final%20Dec%2006.pdf).

Since the tool's development the AREs have mapped out assessment in their departments, resulting in a colourful visual representation that is proving to be an excellent initiator for

department level discourse on current assessment understandings and practice. How each ARE initiates this conversation on assessment is flexible as each ARE is adopting a strategy in response to their individual department needs and context. This development of context specific strategies is an important part of each ARE's growth as a leader.

The next step will see the AREs collecting more details from the unit co-ordinators (academics responsible for writing the curriculum, including developing the assessment tasks). Additional data will include the role played by formative and summative assessment, details on feedback inclusive of timing and an examination of the alignment of outcomes, content and assessment. A tool to facilitate this process is currently under development. When this step has been completed each ARE will have produced an **assessment profile** of his or her department's assessment practices and understandings. It is anticipated that the profile will provide the foundation upon which each department can undertake the change process of developing aligned assessment (Biggs, 2003). The other significant anticipated outcome is the development of assessment policy that itself aligns with the university's teaching and learning plan and informs the development of an organisation wide policy.

Future project phases will see a refinement of the leadership and organisational development model and a roll out to other divisions, through the further engagement of members from other cognate areas to the LEAP group. This will be followed by an institutional rollout and dissemination of findings to the Sector.

EVALUATION

An external evaluator has been engaged to conduct a formative evaluation of the project. However, given the adoption of an Action Research framework for the project, the external evaluator has come to view her role more akin to that of a participant observer. She can not be detached from the project if she aims to evaluate the process as well as the project's outcomes. Consequently she attends and actively participates in steering committee meetings, in the cyber community of practice and selected project workshops. A definite collegial approach has been adopted as the draft evaluation plan has been discussed at meetings and will be further collaboratively developed using the website, where all project members can have input.

FACTORS CRITICAL FOR SUCCESS

During the commencement of this project, developing the capacity of leaders in assessment, several factors have been identified as critical for success. These factors have been discussed in the case study and are now summarised as the requirements of having.

- Self-selected project participants (AREs) with a passion for teaching and learning, and particularly assessment;
- Participation of influencers who provide higher-level support and strategic dissemination of project details at a divisional level;
- Funding to allow teaching release time for AREs who can then participate in leading assessment within their departments;
- A Participatory Action Research methodology that encourages critically reflective practice and provides the flexibility that allows the project to cater to each department's contextual needs;
- Ongoing support for project participants including regular forums for the LEAP group, workshops, reflection sessions and a cyber community of practice;
- A dedicated research manager to co-ordinate the project, particularly supporting the AREs.

Support for this project has been provided from the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training. The project has completed six months and will continue to run until July, 2008.

REFERENCES

John Biggs (2003): *Aligning teaching for constructing learning*. The Higher Education Academy. http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record&section=generic &id=477. Retrieved 26th March, 2007.

Please reference as:

Re-Engineering Assessment Practices in Scottish Higher Education (REAP) is funded by the Scottish Funding Council under its e-Learning Transformation initiative. Further information about REAP can be found at http://www.reap.ac.uk