360-degree Feedback on Courses: Needs Analysis for Comprehensive Course Review

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Abstract

Curtin University of Technology is currently implementing Annual and Comprehensive Course Reviews through the Curriculum 2010 (C2010) initiative. In Annual Course Review, the focus is to analyse course performance and identify initiatives for improvement. Comprehensive Course Review (which occurs at least every five years) includes an analysis of the entire academic program for an award; its regulations, structure, currency of the curriculum, quality of teaching and learning, management, fieldwork, projects and work experience, and so on. Two tools are focal to managing this review process: the Needs Analysis and the Curriculum Map. The latter facilitates review by highlighting three features: (1) the course learning outcomes (and how they map to professional competencies and the university’s graduate attributes); (2) unit information (alignment of the syllabus, unit learning outcomes, assessment tasks and learning experiences) and (3) an overview of exactly where each graduate attribute is contextualised, embedded and assessed in the course (Oliver, Jones, & Ferns, 2007). This paper explains the process for compiling and using the Needs Analysis which facilitates management of the review process. The Needs Analysis captures a 360 degree perspective from key stakeholders: current students, recent graduates, employers and industry experts, benchmarking partnerships. It seeks to answer key questions including: How might this course change and why? How can strengths be maintained, and issues addressed?

Keywords

Course review, needs analysis, quality

1. A review of the literature

Martin (2003) reported on key themes following AUQA review of nine institutions in 2002 and identified a number of areas of academic organisation and process in which the higher education sector requires improvements. The main issues which related to teaching and learning were in the areas of quality assurance and performance monitoring, evaluation of curricula and professional development. In particular, room for improvement was identified in the integration of quality assurance and planning, especially in the systematic use of performance indicators and external benchmarks to measure and monitor progress. In the area of teaching and learning, the main areas of concern related to evaluation of curricula during review and accreditation processes, provision for student evaluation of units and teaching, and lack of uniform standards across departments and schools. Professional accreditation was seen as helpful but not as a replacement for a robust, in-house course review process. Perceived shortcomings were inconsistent evaluation of teaching and units, monitoring of results, clarity around resulting improvements and communication with students about the outcomes of the accreditation process. Most institutions did not have a mechanism for ensuring achievement of graduate attributes, or consistency of standards across units, campuses and teaching modes (such as distance, flexible, on-line and face-to-face learning).

Course review is essentially a benchmarking exercise. The ultimate goal of benchmarking is to provide relevant stakeholders with information about the quality of their processes and outcomes compared against internal or external standards, and in so doing identify opportunities for improvement (Alstete 1995). Two definitions assist understanding: benchmarking is “a process to facilitate the systematic comparison and evaluation of practice, process and performance to aid improvement and regulations” (Jackson 2001, p219), and “the process of continually comparing the performance of an organisation (or part of it) against the performances of others, with the intention of using the outcomes of the comparison for the
purposes of improvement” (Yorke 1999, p79). Benchmarking activities, including course review, have become significant tools in the management and improvement of educational quality and standards in higher education (Jackson, 2001). It is almost taken for granted across the sector that, given an increasingly competitive higher education environment, it is essential that universities participate in benchmarking activities to facilitate improvement as well as satisfy expectations and requirements for accountability.

Benchmarking practices range from the sharing of best practice in a learning organisation through to complex international benchmarking looking at designing sustainable international cooperation in higher education or comparative evaluation of courses in different areas. Appropriate comparisons should only be made within the field of study, and should not be considered in isolation from other sources of information such as qualitative comments, employer feedback and other forms of student feedback. It is also important to monitor trends in Australian national instruments such as Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) data, particularly with reference to any interventions which may have occurred and the resulting outcomes. McKinnon et al (2000) developed a benchmarking manual for Australian universities which contains 67 benchmarks across nine areas (governance and leadership, external impact, finance and physical infrastructure, learning and teaching, student support, research, library and information services, internationalisation and staff). The benchmarks provide a mechanism to determine performance trends and initiate continuous self-improvement, compare performance with other universities, and in some areas to ascertain a competitive position relative to others. The learning and teaching benchmarks are covered under the five areas of: a learning and teaching framework or plan, course establishment processes, teaching quality, quality assurance processes and student outcomes.

The premise of this paper is that one of the principal tools for course review at Curtin is a Needs Analysis which focuses on continuous improvement as a benchmarking activity and seeks a 360-degree perspective on the ‘health’ of a course. In the field of human resources, traditional feedback methods are often ‘top down’, privileging the perspective of supervisors. 360-degree systems include the perspectives of alternative raters, such as peers and subordinates who can provide feedback on performance (Facteau & Facteau, 1998; Joy Fisher Hazucha, 1993; Warech & Smither, 1998). The merits of this approach are subject to ongoing research (Morgeson, Mumford, & Campion, 2005). In this paper, the concept of 360-degree feedback on a course is somewhat metaphorical, as there are limited comparisons to be drawn between the performance of a human manager and a course. Using this metaphor, the Needs Analysis tool for course review emulates the 360-degree approach in that it seeks to capture the voices of key stakeholders such as those who teach the course, current and recent students (their enrolments, retention, pass rates, evaluation of units), recent graduates (through their course experience feedback, employment and further study, and views on their work-readiness), the employers of recent graduates (in their views on the work-readiness of graduates in their employ), and the relative success of other educational providers in the market. The recommendations from the Needs Analysis are synthesised into a checklist for ensuring identified issues are addressed in all components of the course.

2. The voice of current students

In Curtin’s Needs Analysis, the voice of current students is heard through the use of data sources which are similar to those used by most universities (and the Learning Teaching Performance Fund):

Course Demand
- Number of 1st preferences, by school-leaver and non-school-leaver (domestic and international)
- Average Tertiary Entrance Rank of enrolling students

Course Activity
- Commencing and total Headcount and EFSTL (domestic and international)

Course Teaching and Learning - Student Performance (domestic and international)
- First year retention rate
- Course annual retention rate
- Course Student Load Pass Rate
- Unit Pass Rates (international, domestic)
In addition, the Needs Analysis draws data from Curtin’s online student feedback system, the eVALUate unit survey. Quantitative results of the unit survey are examined through the eVALUate Course Summary Reports which provide percentage agreement figures for all units in which students within the course were enrolled at that time, including electives outside the teaching area. Data is provided for the 11 items within the unit survey (see http://evaluate.curtin.edu.au/info/unit_survey.cfm). These items capture student perceptions of the clarity of learning outcomes, and the helpfulness of resources, experiences, feedback and the quality of teaching in achieving those outcomes, and the appropriateness of assessment and workload. Qualitative results from the preceding four semesters (since 2006) are analysed using CEQuery. Subdomains which predominate in Best Aspects and Needs Improvement comments are interrogated further using SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys to create visualisations of foci of comments (Oliver, Tucker, & Pegden, 2006).

3. The voice of recent graduates

The voice of recent graduates is also heard through data sources similar to those used by most universities including the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS). CEQ data (a subset of the AGS) provide feedback on the graduate experience of the teaching and learning within their course, benchmarked against the national average for the Field of Education (FOE) through the:

- Good Teaching Scale
- Generic Skills Scale
- Overall Satisfaction

Graduate employability is determined by GDS data:

- Proportion of Respondents in Full-time Employment
- Proportion of Respondents Employed (Full-time and Part-time)
- Proportion of Respondents Undertaking Further Study

It is well-known that response rates to the AGS are variable, and that data are lagging by up to two years. The AGS is completed by students within months of completing their course, and often when graduates have barely commenced employment (if at all), and their responses are likewise affected (Scott, 2005). For these reasons, Curtin has created a new tool which seeks fresher data from graduates of up to five years’ standing, and asks them to report their level of agreement with statements related to the effectiveness of this course in assisting them to be ‘work-ready’ (Oliver, Jones, Tucker, & Ferns, 2007). This tool, eVALUate Graduate, has 15 quantitative items which map directly to Curtin’s nine graduate attributes (which are the basis of the course learning outcomes for the course). Graduates are contacted through the Alumni database or existing School or Department databases. Results are reported as percentage agreement with each item, and this enables the course review team to identify which graduate attributes might require stronger emphasis in the course review. Respondents are also asked to comment on the best aspects of their course, and what needs improvement. As for the eVALUate unit survey, all comments are analysed using CEQuery and SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys. Data from this survey are interpreted with caution because response rates are variable and because recent graduates are more likely to respond to this survey, and they would still be in the process of testing their understanding of work-readiness (Scott, 2005).

4. The voice of the employers of recent graduates, and industry experts

A similar tool is used to capture the perspective of those who employ graduates of up to five years’ standing. The eVALUate Employer survey asks the same quantitative and qualitative items as the eVALUate Graduate survey, based on employers’ perceptions of the work-readiness of those in their employ. Results are reported exactly as for the graduates, and this allows triangulations and comparison. To date, response rates for both graduates and their employers remain a challenge, but refinements to the system are in hand to improve participation. Where courses have strong professional accreditations requirements and very strong relationships with employers and industry, surveys tend to have much higher response rates. Industry experts and external stakeholders are often those who belong to professional accrediting bodies, as

well as those who practice the profession (but do not necessarily employ graduates). Professions vary widely, so capturing the perspective of this group is determined on a case-by-case basis by the course team.

5. The voice of competitors in the market

Benchmarking with other providers captures the voice of competitors. The three CEQ scales reported above (Generic Skills, Good Teaching and Overall Satisfaction) are used to identify the relative performance of a course against those who offer courses in the same FOE. Typically, results are reported in relation to the national average, and indicate where the course sits within the FOE as follows: ‘In this Field of Education, Curtin ranks at about the middle of 20 national competitors.’ Other benchmarking methods and resources are used on a case by case basis, with each course team nominating activities in which they have participated which provide benchmarking data. This may include reviewing the structure and content of similar courses taught elsewhere, discussions with staff in other universities to determine how they deal with areas which have been identified as requiring improvement.

6. The voice of current staff

The Needs Analysis includes an Executive Summary with recommendations for courses which are synthesised and distilled into a checklist which highlights aspects for special focus, and against which completion of the review is reported at all stages. The Needs Analysis is discussed with the whole team who reach agreement on the areas for improvement and then work with curriculum support staff to implement improvements. For example, in one large course review, the key areas identified for improvement from the Needs Analysis are clarity of assessment criteria, and a stronger focus on work-integrated learning in assessments. As each major within the course proceeds through the review, these are addressed in a case study progress report which is transparent to all university and Advisory Board stakeholders.

Feedback from staff indicates that they find the Needs Analysis is a useful tool to determine the changes required in their course. Feedback such as the staff comments below indicate that the Comprehensive Course Review process provides a mechanism to provide staff with professional development to improve the quality of the course offerings in a highly contextualised manner.

"The first meeting- it was not going to be a quick and surface thing. It was a significant process. It took the course back to the bare bones. Looked at the aims and outcomes for the students to really look at what the course would stand for."

“We very rarely get to connect together and it was very useful to have everybody there and a common focus. That was really useful. To feel that we were actually beginning to pull together something that was different and something that was possibly, hopefully going to make a difference for the future…. People talk more together because of the experience of going through Curriculum 2010 together”

“It helped me also to put my unit into perspective and a simple thing like matching Learning Outcomes and Assessments in a way that we were shown in the course meetings – that was good – it sounds like an obvious thing that your Learning Outcomes and your Assessments must match but – when you actually sit down in a meeting and discuss if they actually do or not and finding out that actually we could word assessment items differently, we could structure them differently.”

Conclusion

This Needs Analysis tool is in its early implementation phase, and will be subject to continual refinement. Just as questions remain about the effectiveness of including ‘alternative raters’ in 360-degree human resources tools, so to with this Needs Analysis tool. In their 2005 summary of research findings on the 360-degree tool for performance management, Morgeson, Mumford and Campion (2005) sought to answer 27 questions about this method. The first three questions were key: “What are some of the benefits? What are some of the downsides? And most importantly, does it work?” They report some of the benefits as:

subordinates and others are in a good position to observe and evaluate managerial performance; multiple assessments can increase reliability and validity; there is often an increase the focus on customer service, and the 360-degree can call attention to important performance dimensions previously neglected. The downsides are that the feedback might not be truthful, either too positive or too negative, and honest feedback can sometimes hurt. Notwithstanding these concerns, they conclude that 360-degree performance management tools do work (Morgeson, Mumford, & Campion, 2005).

Again, the limitations of the 360-degree metaphor with course performance are acknowledged. One striking difference is in self-assessment: in the human resources management tool, the person being assessed has the opportunity to self-assess. The parallel in this metaphor is the course teaching team. In some ways, this Needs Analysis downplays the voice of this teaching team because theirs is often the predominant voice in the creation of curriculum, the assessment of students, and in research in the discipline. While their perceptions are not ignored in this Needs Analysis, their prime role is to listen to the voices which perhaps have been previously neglected. Anecdotal evidence so far indicates that the teaching team, including the course coordinator and the Head of School, are sometimes surprised at what course performance data reveal, particularly in regard to retention rates, employment rates, and the perceptions of recent graduates about their work-readiness. Future refinements of this Needs Analysis must include a critical analysis of its adequacy, including the absence or unwarranted privileging of stakeholder voices, the appropriateness of performance indicators and, as in all survey tools, the representativeness of response rates. These issues continue to challenge universities’ attempts to improve benchmarking within the review process.

References