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Program Assessment and Reporting: Linking People, Processes and Data

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As part of a larger Simplification Project for program quality assurance processes conducted at RMIT University, this paper chronicles the refinement of one aspect: program assessment and reporting. This involved the realignment of criteria used in program quality assurance with those developed in higher-level strategic and business planning processes. In addition, the project attempted to address the lack of alignment between annual program processes and subsequent decisions made about the future of programs, particularly in profile planning processes.

A revised Program Annual Report process was developed that aimed to achieve simplicity and alignment while re-engaging program leaders and heads of schools with the quality agenda. A concerted effort was made to develop a process that improved on previously poor vertical communication inherent in program quality assurance. This paper explores the ways in which this was achieved by a) linking people to data through the use of agreed and contextualised performance indicators, and b) linking people to process through more meaningful input into planning and opportunity for dialogue.

Notation

Program: denotes a program of study leading to a qualification.

Schools and Portfolios: RMIT has recently undergone an organisational restructuring process whereby 7 faculties have been reorganised into 26 schools across 3 academic portfolios (akin to colleges or divisions).

1. Background: Drivers for Change

For over a decade RMIT has shown an ongoing commitment to an innovative and rigorous approach to assuring the quality of its programs. Program Quality Assurance (PQA) at RMIT is a system for accrediting and reaccrediting programs based on a set of criteria including:

- need for the program
- educational design
- equity
- management
- resources
- evaluation and maintenance
- stakeholder requirements.

As part of a comprehensive process of monitoring and review under PQA, program teams are expected to develop their own indicators against the PQA accreditation criteria, maintain a program log, report annually, review indicators on a five-year cycle, consult stakeholders, undertake program renewal, and participate in an external PQA audit (Hart, Adams & Fehring, 2003). PQA also exists within a framework of external monitoring from International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) certification and audits, as well as Australian Quality Training Framework audit requirements for Technical and Further Education (TAFE) programs. The Australian Universities Quality Agency joined this plethora of external monitoring for higher education programs in 2000. Within this context it had become clear that aligning
processes and enhancing simplicity in such a comprehensive system was paramount to maintaining the engagement of program leaders with the quality agenda.

1.1 Process Simplification

The Process Simplification Project was conceived in response to the perception that the program quality assurance processes were arduous and overly bureaucratic. Earlier, interviews with staff revealed that administrative processes were obstructive rather than facilitative, and that the role of program manager was increasingly focused on compliance rather than providing leadership in teaching and learning activities (Hart et al., 2003). The objective of a larger simplification project was to review, streamline and simplify current policies and processes. This paper outlines one aspect of that larger project, namely program assessment and reporting (see the paper by Hart et al., 2003, for more details about the larger project).

1.2 Alignment

An additional driver for change was the revision of planning documents—the university’s strategic plan and sub-plans, including the Teaching and Learning Plan and the processes involved to determine the program profile for the university. This involved the development of performance indicators against specific objectives of Quality, Relevance and Viability (QRV) within each of these high-level plans. These new performance objectives were discordant with the seven criteria used in PQA. In addition, the project identified the lack of alignment between annual program processes and subsequent decisions made about the future of programs, particularly in profile and planning processes (Hart et al., 2003). While Program Annual Reports (PARs) were collated at faculty level and submitted as a faculty-wide report to a Teaching and Learning Strategy Committee (subcommittee of the Academic Board and Board of Technical Studies), the ‘voices’ of program leaders were lost in the increasing aggregation of information. Program managers had highlighted an inconsistency between the emphasis on reporting and auditing rather than on constructive feedback and support (Hart et al., 2003). This produced cynicism and frustration about the PQA process in total, and encouraged a distrust of the profile planning process as one by which perceptions of program leaders were consumed with ‘my program’ being ‘threatened’.

Creber (2000) has chronicled similar consequences for staff who feel marginalised from input into policy formation or planning processes. He found increasing resistance from staff as a consequence of not feeling they were ‘part’ of a process and therefore sceptical about the relationships between planning and subsequent performance outcomes. To address these issues, the following guiding principles for Program Annual Reporting were agreed:

- establish a minimum set of critical program criteria and associated measures that are aligned to strategic and business planning processes throughout the university
- agree to a standard process with minimal process steps, documentation and approvals
- allocate formal accountability for program management to the relevant head of school
- aggregate and distribute a minimum common set of program information centrally
- align central services to support new processes.

1.3 Engagement

A concerted effort was made to develop a process that improved on previously poor vertical communication inherent in program quality assurance. Beer and Eisenstat (2000) suggest that poor communication flow up and down the organisational hierarchy can have devastating consequences to the ability to implement and refine strategic goals and objectives. They go as far as labelling it the ‘silent killer’ for deploying an organisation’s strategy. Romme and Witteloostuijn (1999) concur with this view by suggesting that a critical factor to learning in an organisational context is the free flow of information. This gives people a real opportunity and competency to participate in making well-informed choices in the process of managing issues that concern them. Therefore, an additional principle for the development
of PARs was that they be widely disseminated documents that encompass participatory dialogue in their development (i.e. *amongst* program teams and *between* program leaders and heads of schools). They should be shared within and across schools to enhance the sharing of good practice and improvement *across* programs. To achieve alignment with planning and engagement with people, PARs should also:

- include achievements, issues and action plans for the program in the next 12-month cycle
- indicate programs that require improvement, and/or programs that are good practice exemplars
- identify systemic issues which are impacting upon the effectiveness of the program
- inform dialogues around improvement initiatives in school business planning and profiling.

2. **Performance Indicators: Linking People with Data**

Responding to emerging needs through the development of new programs, the profile planning process identifies programs that are to be discontinued. To address the quality of existing programs, strategic decisions are made to ‘rest’ and ‘renew’ programs.

The criteria guiding these decisions are based on QRV criteria; however, these needed to be operationalised as agreed key performance indicators (KPIs) for inclusion into PARs. This issue alone had been the source of much discussion and disagreement; therefore, a number of tests were applied to measures to assess whether they were sufficiently critical as to be included in PARs.

- Is the measure identified as a KPI in other university strategic documents?
- Is the measure outcome focused?
- Does the measure indicate the direction of change that would constitute an improvement?
- Can the measure be operationalised meaningfully?
- Is the measure easily attainable from current data?

Based on these tests, a set of critical measures were included in each PAR template as a populated data table. In order to contextualise indicators, other program information such as enrolment and student equity groupings were included. Table 1 displays the KPIs included in PARs.

**Table 1  Key performance indicators embedded in Program Annual Reports**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher Education Programs</th>
<th>TAFE Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality of Teaching and Learning</strong></td>
<td><strong>Quality of Teaching and Learning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completions</td>
<td>Pass rate / Module Load Completion Rate (MLCR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass rate</td>
<td>Attrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention</td>
<td>Completions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good teaching (Course Experience Questionnaire [CEQ])</td>
<td>Good teaching instruction (Student Outcome Survey [SOS])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic skills (CEQ)</td>
<td>Overall satisfaction (SOS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction (CEQ)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1  Key performance indicators embedded in Program Annual Reports (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher Education Programs</th>
<th>TAFE Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relevance of the Program</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate outcomes % full-time employed</td>
<td>Graduate outcomes % full-time employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate outcomes % full-time study</td>
<td>Graduate outcomes % full-time study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate outcomes % self-employed</td>
<td>Graduate outcomes % self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent of work-integrated learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of TAFE articulants/commencers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Viability of the Program</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of applications</td>
<td>Total number of Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) applicants plus directs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 1st – 3rd VTAC preferences</td>
<td>International student contact hours / total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Equivalent Full-time Student Units (EFTSUs) / total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.  Linking People to Process through Planning and Dialogue

PAR templates include populated data tables and a series of prompts to assist program leaders to contextualise performance data with narrative. The questions are specifically constructed to enable program leaders to first reflect on performance data and contextualise that data with any supplemental data such as outcomes of evaluations from other stakeholders—for example, from students and employers. Program leaders are guided through a series of prompts that elicit achievements and opportunities for improvement. Lastly, program leaders are asked to complete a program plan that includes:

- priority actions for the next 12 months
- responsibility
- a timeline
- resources required.

Program plans then inform school plans. Heads of schools are delegated responsibility for the program annual reporting process, and for ensuring that school plans and subsequently profile planning processes are informed by PAR identified priorities. The revised reports also provide information about accreditation and the outcomes of reviews of offshore programs.

This was a new approach to the role of head of school. Previously, heads of schools had been left out of the program quality assurance loop, with responsibility falling on deans and directors (teaching and learning). The disengagement of heads of schools may have exacerbated poor vertical communication in the past. The development of learning capacities in organisations involves building genuinely shared visions (based on an understanding of shared values), fostering the ability of people to see larger patterns and understand interdependencies across systems. Helping people to understand their contribution to a system increases and develops capabilities of individuals to better enable them to become more aware of their own assumptions, that is, develop critical thinking competencies (Sambrook & Stewart, 2000).

The re-engagement of heads of schools has been seen as a positive initiative for the encouragement of dialogue and improved communication flow. For example, one portfolio has hosted a series of workshops with each respective school to engage staff in dialogues around the systemic issues arising from PARs and strategies identified to address concerns at a school or portfolio level. This approach may become
good practice for breaking through resistance and fear of change; this has been a challenge at RMIT as in other organisations undergoing restructure.

Once [educators] come to see the bigger picture and understand how many pieces which make up the change puzzle are connected, [they] feel less the victims of powerful and mysterious forces and more confident about what to do when change is in the air. (Scott, 1999, p. 196)

The PAR process therefore re-engages heads of schools via aligned planning processes at the school level that encourages a shared vision amongst staff around issues of program quality and profile planning. School plans are subsequently aligned with higher-level plans through portfolio planning processes. Deans (academic development) report on key achievements and issues across program reports; these are submitted to the Vice-Chancellor’s Executive and the Teaching and Learning Strategy Committee (see Figure 1 in Appendix 1 for a flow chart of the process).

4. **Progress So Far**

It is envisaged that over time PARs will document how the program is travelling and how it has been improved. The information in the reports helps heads of schools and senior portfolio managers to manage programs effectively and to design and target support initiatives. The reports also enable management to surface key issues across programs that need to be addressed by other parts of the university or by senior management.

While a full review of the PAR process is planned for the middle of 2004, preliminary results are pleasing. Program leaders evaluate the revised templates as more accessible, easier to use, and consuming less time to complete than past versions. One program leader remarked, 'one example of simplification working at RMIT'.

Preliminary discussions with program leaders, heads of schools and senior portfolio representatives have identified wide support for the general approach being taken in the annual report template; this is moderated with concerns about the availability (including timeliness), validity and accuracy of data obtained through central information systems. However, there is overwhelming support for the onus of responsibility for data availability and accessibility to be on the data suppliers.

The outcome of a full review will investigate whether the revised PAR process has met its objectives of simplification, alignment and engagement, as prescribed at the outset of the project. This is important work for RMIT. Such improvements may have further reaching implications in relation to staff morale and satisfaction than initially expected. This is particularly so when we consider, in Peter Senge’s words, that ‘in order to retain extraordinary people, the work must be worthy of their commitment’ (Senge, 1999).

**References**


Appendix 1

Figure 1 Process steps for Program Annual Reporting, 2003–2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Process Steps</th>
<th>Informs</th>
<th>Planning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov-Dec</td>
<td>Report templates with preliminary data sent to Associate Deans</td>
<td></td>
<td>Program Review Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deans (academic development) distribute to program leaders for comment</td>
<td></td>
<td>School Planning Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Program leaders seek supplementary data, course level feedback etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dialogues with Program Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End Feb</td>
<td>Report templates with final data sent to Program Leaders; including Graduate Destination Survey, CEQ and student satisfaction data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End March</td>
<td>Reports finalised and submitted to Heads of Schools</td>
<td></td>
<td>Summary report to Deans (Academic Development)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Heads of Schools summarise Program leaders' reports in school planning template</td>
<td></td>
<td>Informs overall School Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May-June</td>
<td>Heads of School report to Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) as part of school planning process</td>
<td></td>
<td>Profile Planning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

63