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Benchmarking and peer review of teaching practice for the purpose of evidencing excellence in teaching and learning

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Abstract

This paper explores the difficulties inherent in benchmarking teaching practice for the purpose of formative development of teaching skills in higher education. An approach that uses long established principles of undergraduate education in a negotiated peer review process is proposed. The approach is based on a trial in a learning and teaching mentoring program called Building Innovation in Learning and Teaching (BuILT). This mentoring program involves 19 schools at the University of South Australia (UniSA) across all four metropolitan campuses and two rural / regional campuses. Involvement in the program either as a mentor or as a participant is by invitation. This program seeks to develop excellence in teaching and learning through dissemination, professional development and teaching and learning awards.

Introduction

Internationally and in Australia the higher education environment has undergone significant changes in the last 30 years (Martin, 1999, Ramsden, 2003, Darwin and Palmer, 2009). These changes have seen higher education institutions take on larger teaching commitments with a wider and more diverse student population (Martin, 1999). An example of this change in environment is expressed in the Bradley 'Review of Australian Higher Education' which recommends that the Australian Government should aim to have 40% of 25 to 34 year-olds with at least an undergraduate degree by 2020. Furthermore, it recommends that students from disadvantaged backgrounds should make up 20% of enrolments in undergraduate programs by this same date (Bradley, 2008, p. xiv). The level of student diversity that universities currently experience, and will continue to experience in the future, represents a profoundly different landscape to that historically seen in universities in Australia where students have predominantly been from middle to high socio-economic backgrounds (Ramsden, 2003, Bradley, 2008). A larger, more diverse student population requires a greater engagement with teaching and learning. Whereas once academics and teaching were largely unregulated and unaccountable, today's higher education environment places both academic and economic significance on good teaching and scholarship (Ramsden, 2003, p.3).

Partly in response to this rapidly shifting higher education environment the University of South Australia (UniSA) has significantly modified its approach to teaching and learning, adopting a Teaching and Learning Framework that emphasises the engagement of students as distinct and above the notion of "student centred" learning (Lee, 2007, p.3). Closely associated with the concept of engagement is that of active learning (Dewey, 1938, Biggs, 1999, Biggs and Collis, 1982). This suggests that learning occurs best when students are actively involved

and invested in their learning and are able to make sense of their learning experiences. Importantly, as Dewey (1938) also points out, good teaching does not constitute a denial of traditional methods in favour of progressive methods. Brown and Race (2002, p.61) concur and stress that the choice of teaching method should be "fit for purpose", that is, effective, efficient and appropriate for the context in which the learning occurs. Quite rightly then the new framework does not mean the end of traditional lectures and tutorials. Rather, it values a range of learning environments of which lectures and tutorials are just two.

BuILT Mentoring Program

Against this changing backdrop the University, funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's (ALTC) Promoting Excellence Initiative (PEI), designed and implemented a mentoring program for lecturers called Building Innovation in Learning and Teaching (BuILT). The benefits of formal mentoring arrangements in higher education are long established. Boyle and Boice (1998, p.158) note the advantages experienced by protégés and the significant career, research and publication advantages they experience over their non-mentored colleagues. In our present day higher education environment these advantages remain, but formal mentoring relationships are fraught due to the demands of academic life (Darwin and Palmer, 2009).

BuILT has a number of purposes. Initially, the program seeks to increase the capacity of staff to teach to the new framework and to identify and support a new generation of higher education lecturers who seek to demonstrate excellence in their teaching. Subsequently BuILT is intended to support their teaching practice and the recognition of that teaching through internal and external teaching awards and, more broadly, to aid in preparation of evidence for critical reflection and promotion purposes. The identification and dissemination of excellence is critical, as institutions with different teaching missions will recognise teaching excellence in different ways (Skelton, 2005). For this reason, mentors in BuILT (known as facilitators) are carefully selected. Facilitators tend to be well established, recognised and successful teachers chosen for their dedication to teaching and learning as much as for their recognised disciplinary knowledge, skill and application. Participants (those being mentored) are likewise carefully chosen and tend to be either relatively new staff, PhD students with a teaching load, or occasionally sessional staff who have demonstrated flair and ability in teaching and learning.

The problematic nature of benchmarking BuILT or 'What is excellence?"

Bridgland and Goodacre (2005, p.3) describe benchmarking as "the systematic collection of information about performance, over time, and comparison of data with that of past performance. It also typically includes a self-assessment against internal and external reference points, often in collaboration with select partners." An example is the "Business Excellence Framework" (Bridgland and Goodacre, 2005, p.5) which is designed to use benchmarking to:
- Guide improvement and success
- Enable employees to better understand systems and processes
- Position the organisation in terms of its sector and competitors
- Develop an understanding of the concepts and principles behind "excellence"

At the level of an institution or program, benchmarking teaching using such a framework is extremely problematic. At present there is no internationally recognised set of benchmarks that can be applied to all teaching and learning environments. When the dynamic nature of

teaching is considered, the lack of a set of benchmarks is perhaps not surprising. However, that there is no accepted benchmark does nothing to lessen the need to compare and evaluate good practice and pragmatically, demonstrate they give value for the public dollar (Bridgland and Goodacre, 2005).

Typically, candidate benchmarks are premised on the notion that one should identify indicators of good practice from which performance measures are then developed. This is what can be characterised as a 'summative' benchmarking approach. However, when applied to teaching and learning the whole question of any proposed set of universally applicable indicators or measures raises a number of questions. For example, how does the Teaching and Learning Framework influence a proposed benchmark or indicator? Would a benchmark indicator developed elsewhere be transferable into UniSA? Conversely, if a benchmark was designed specifically within UniSA, using the Teaching and Learning Framework, what credibility would it have outside of this university?

Further questions relate to other contextual influences such as; how does the nature of a particular discipline or profession affect what is seen to be good teaching? What about the notion of a student centred environment where it is the students who may profoundly influence the teaching approach? At this university we have adopted a set of graduate qualities. How could a benchmark developed at a different university without a set of explicit graduate qualities be applicable? As Skelton (2005, p.73) succinctly states, "any sense of a uniform "idea" of teaching excellence now seems to be out of the question!"

Another whole set of questions surround the concept of creativity and innovation. That is, how can innovation be benchmarked? If a teaching practice is truly innovative then by definition there will be few examples by which it can be compared. Considerations such as these implicitly require any candidate set of benchmarks to paradoxically capture both the complex, diverse, and the dynamic nature of teaching and yet retain the essential transferability required of a benchmark.

Adaptation to teaching

There are basic principles, mentioned above, that characterise benchmarking as being about guiding improvement. Further, they should lead to a better understanding of the systems and processes within which one operates. Benchmarking should inform where one's organisation is placed and logically, as a consequence, should then be able to demonstrate how one is different from one's competitors. Most importantly it should help develop excellence.

While the development of universally accepted benchmarks for teaching has proven problematic, there are reasonably well accepted principles of undergraduate teaching. Ramsden (1992) and Chickering and Gamson (1987) provide two sets that have a great deal in common. In terms of the BuILT mentoring program it is proposed that a synthesis of these principles might offer a way forward and provide the basis for a dynamic benchmarking tool. The two sets of principles are:

Ramsden
1. Interest and explanation
2. Concern and respect for student learning
3. Appropriate assessment and feedback
4. Clear goals and intellectual challenge
5. Independence control and engagement
6. Learning from students

Chickering and Gamson
1. Encourages contact between students and faculty
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students
3. Encourages active learning
4. Gives prompt feedback
5. Emphasizes time on task
6. Communicates high expectations
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning

In their present form it is arguable that some of these principles read more as statements. For example, "Emphasizes time on task" (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) is not so much a principle as a stated directive. In order to maintain a strictly principles based approach; a synthesis of the two sets of principles will need to be developed. As the purpose of the principles approach is to support the gathering of evidence of teaching excellence it is appropriate that the tool be used in a formative rather than a summative way.

This is very different from the typical benchmarking approach with its set of static observable indicators that can be 'seen' by anybody which lack the flexibility to be authentically applied across a range of disciplines, learning environments and teaching and learning orientations. A benchmarking tool using principles would require one to interpret the learning environment based on multiple, possibly competing, contexts. That is, the reviewer would need to understand the context in which teaching takes place, would need to understand the discipline (Healey, 2000) and would need to understand both traditional and progressive pedagogies. Thus, understanding and also benchmarking teaching using principles requires a person experienced in teaching and learning and knowledgeable within the discipline in which the teaching occurs. The structure of the BuILT program recognises this purpose as the facilitators have been chosen precisely for these attributes. This approach finds support in Skelton (2005, p.76) who argues, "there is a growing assumption that teaching excellence can only be understood and supported within a disciplinary framework". This type of approach is not new in teaching and learning and is more commonly used in peer review. It is for these reasons that the traditional process of benchmarking, with its connotations of summative evaluation, be replaced for the purposes of teaching and facilitating the growth of new academics by one where benchmarking is characterised as formative peer review.

Methodology

A method of evaluation relates strongly to the purpose for which the evaluation is to be used (Patton, 1987). In the case of BuILT, the purpose of evaluation is twofold. Firstly, it is to formatively document the development of teaching in relation to the proposed principles. Secondly, it is to facilitate the gathering of evidence for a teaching award and to assist the participant to structure and focus their claim of teaching excellence.

Given these purposes, and the need for flexibility as articulated in this paper, there should be a collaborative engagement between the participant and the facilitator in working through the principles process. It is proposed that, while all principles should be addressed, the principle(s) that most accurately align to the participant's claim for excellence be the focus of the formative review.

The nature of a mentoring relationship is complex and if it is to be meaningful there needs to be careful consideration regarding any reporting which may lead to a conflict of interest and a loss of trust between participant and mentor. The principles approach is designed

to support this relationship and, for this reason, the nature of the peer observation must remain, both formative and owned by the participant.

Conclusion

BuILT has the potential to sustainably develop excellence in Teaching and Learning in future cohorts of emerging academics. Skelton (2005) describes how some tertiary institutions have adopted the term 'excellence' to describe an institutional requirement of all its teachers. Further, he notes that if everyone is considered excellent then the term itself takes on connotations that are normally associated with a superlative. BuILT seeks to address this concern by being selective about who is involved yet, at the same time, holds as an aspiration that the culture of excellence is something that should be sought by all. Fundamental to the development of the program, and to the academic, is the need to collect evidence that reflects the developing talent of the lecturers and scaffolds the dissemination of innovative teaching approaches. This tool requires to be flexible enough to accommodate the individual requirements of discipline and institution and, most importantly, the teacher and students.

Although the benchmarking / peer review tool is yet to be tested it does appear to have the capacity to meet the four criteria identified by Bridgland & Goodacre (2005). The BuILT mentors were to use the tool for the first time in 2009 to peer review and benchmark their participants. This information will be used to:
- provide a focus for peer review
- capture the teacher's learning
- document areas needed for improvement
- document excellence
- benchmark their teaching at UniSA
- evaluate the tool and identify areas for improvement
- benchmark the effectiveness of the BuILT program.

An evaluation and follow up article is planned to be written in 2010 discussing the effectiveness of the tool and of the BuILT mentoring program.

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