Sustainable assessment change: where are the program leaders starting from?

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This paper reports on the attitudes and beliefs of program leaders at a regional university as they led a curriculum and assessment renewal at program level. The renewal was driven by the introduction of a new set of graduate attributes. The research reported here represents the pilot stage of a university-wide project that sought to understand how program leaders saw their role, how they perceived their identity as change agents and how they understood the capacity of assessment to enhance students’ engagement with the graduate attributes of a professional program. The aim of this pilot research was to gain deeper understanding of how to make changes to curriculum and assessment sustainable in the university context, to ensure that they have a life beyond the funded implementation period and become integrated into the university’s teaching and learning practices. The researchers recognised the central ‘gate-keeping’ role of program leaders in this process, and therefore sought a deeper understanding of the factors that affect program leaders’ approaches to curriculum and assessment change in higher education.

Keywords: curriculum renewal; graduate attributes; program leaders

Theme: assessment for sustainable learning within and beyond the course

Introduction

The National Graduate Attributes Project identifies staff conceptions – defined as the “different understandings people have about the very nature of graduate attributes” (Institute for Teaching and Learning 2009, p. 3) – as being influential in how academics approach curriculum design and assessment when attempting to integrate graduate attributes. Green, Hammer and Star (2009) argue that, in general, the processes required to realise sustainable curricular changes embedding graduate attributes have been largely underestimated. Barnett and Coate (2005) observe that many initiatives in higher education have skirted around genuine engagement with the
curriculum, yet it is curriculum renewal that is most likely to deliver enhanced student learning outcomes.

At the university where this research was undertaken, teaching, learning and assessment are often ‘engineered’ at program level. Therefore, an important strategy was to work with program leaders from their particular starting points. Program leaders direct change, interpreting policy for others in the local context (Debowski, 2008) and enabling change to be synthesised at that level. They can provide staff with substantive reasons for change and translate university initiatives such as the graduate attributes into discipline-specific language (Ras, 2004). Investigating the factors that affect program leaders’ attitudes and beliefs in relation to curriculum renewal and assessment – including their prior knowledge and experience – and building an implementation process on that basis, were seen as significant in enhancing the probability of sustainable assessment change.

The aims of the project included making changes to curriculum and assessment sustainable, so that they have a life beyond the immediate implementation, as well as having students reflect on this sustainable approach in their evidence of learning beyond the assessment tasks in individual courses (Boud, 2000; McCarten, Cunningham, Buchanan & McAfee, 2008). Consequently, program leaders with responsibility for students’ attainment of program learning outcomes were identified as the key change agents.

Methodology

The research was based in the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, which O’Donoghue (2007) says emphasises social interaction as the basis of knowledge. Howe (2001) argues that from an interpretive perspective, knowledge is situated and constructed for specific purposes. Meanings are created via interactions between human beings in their everyday (in this case, organisational) settings, and the concern of the interpretivist is to understand how people define the events or reality that they experience (O’Donoghue 2007). This view requires consideration of both the agency of the individual to lead change and the social structure that they work within, to best support particular curricular and assessment change processes while discouraging others (Ashwin, 2008; Shay, 2008). It is the individual’s perceptions of the experiences that shape their reality that are of interest, however, focusing on only one aspect of the phenomenon would result in an incomplete understanding. In order to deeply engage with program leaders’ attitudes and beliefs about curricular and assessment change, case study methods have been used. Noor (2008) articulates a belief that case study is an appropriate method when an in-depth understanding of a situation is required, particularly when the situation has multiple variables. The aim of this research is to: understand the factors that influence or affect program leaders’ attitudes and beliefs, including the cultural and social patterns that act on their individual behaviour. These factors hold the key to sustainable change.

Findings

The investigation began with two case studies of program leaders identified as ‘early adopters’, who were leading the development of new programs. Both programs investigated led to professional accreditation and had external requirements.
Interviews with program leaders revealed the following congruencies in attitudes and beliefs.

- All academic staff need to genuinely engage with the graduate attributes for them to be more than a ‘tick-and-flick’ exercise, a concern echoed in the literature (Oliver, Fern, Whelan & Lilly 2010; Barrie 2008).

- The language of graduate attributes must be used in course outlines, assessment descriptions and criteria and have pedagogical implications; one program leader suggested that academics (including herself) should self-audit against the graduate attributes.

- Retrofitting new graduate attributes to existing programs may be a cause of misalignment. Biggs and Tang (2007) suggest that, where possible and appropriate, graduate attributes should be aligned with existing program learning outcomes, without forcing a contrived match.

- When asked how students might provide evidence of graduate attributes, program leaders identified both aligned curriculum and assessment as key sources. Knight (2007) encourages program leaders to plan coherent curricula aligned to graduate skills and favourable to overall learning goals, rather than focusing on a course level.

- In exploring their own processes of leading curriculum change, program leaders identified a process that included: working from a research base; consulting and sharing information with all stakeholders; and seeking feedback from the profession via external accreditation. There was an expectation that the University as an institution should follow a similar approach.

Conclusions and implications for theory, practice and policy

Working with program leaders to understand their attitudes and beliefs enhanced appreciation of how program leaders engage with the changes as part of curriculum and assessment renewal, as well as how new graduate attributes might be introduced in ways that are sustainable in the long term, whilst acknowledging program leaders’ central gate-keeping role. The pilot project led to a deeper understanding of how program leaders can lead sustainable assessment change, and forms a basis for applying a tailored approach to educative intervention, curriculum and assessment renewal and policy implementation. It supports program leaders to develop and extend their own understanding of the role of assessment to enhance student attainment of - and engagement with - graduate attributes by responding to their existing attitudes and beliefs in relation to their role as curriculum leaders.

The findings of this project have the potential to affect assessment in higher education and the practice of universities seeking to engage in sustainable curriculum and assessment change. It will contribute to a growing body of knowledge (see, for example, Barnett & Coate, 2005; Barrie, 2009; and Healy, Bradford, Roberts & Knight, 2010) about how universities can wisely invest in planning and managing change that is sustainable over time and results in enhanced learning outcomes for students.

References


