

ASSURANCE OF LEARNING - ARE ACADEMICS AND SENIOR LEADERS SINGING FROM THE SAME HYMN SHEET?

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Abstract

Assurance of learning (AoL) is an important process in quality education, designed to measure the accomplishment of educational aims at the core of an institution's programs, whilst encouraging faculty to continuously develop and improve the programs and courses. This paper reports on a study of Australian business schools to investigate current AoL practices through semi structured interviews with senior faculty leaders followed by focus group interviews with groups of senior program leaders and groups of academic teaching staff. Initial findings indicate there are significant challenges in encouraging academic staff to commit to the process and recognise the benefits of assuring learning. The differences in understanding between the various leaders and the academics were highlighted through the different focus groups. Leaders' stressed strategic issues such as staff engagement and change, while academics focussed on process issues such as teaching graduate attributes and external accreditation.

Understanding the differences in the perspectives of leaders and faculty is important, as without a shared understanding between the two groups, there is likely to be limited engagement, which creates difficulties in developing effective assurance of learning processes. Findings indicate that successful strategies developed to foster shared values on assurance of learning include: strong senior leaders' commitment; developing champions among program and unit level staff; providing professional development opportunities; promoting and celebrating success and effectiveness; and ensuring an inclusive process with academics of all levels collaborating in the development and implementation of the process.

Keywords: Assurance of Learning; Quality Higher Education; Australian Quality Framework

1 BACKGROUND

1.1 Defining Assurance of Learning?

For centuries, universities have been using student grades as a convenient measure of student performance and indeed, student grades are often used as indicators of student learning (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). However, the tertiary education sector worldwide is experiencing a wave of reform focusing on substantive student outcomes and value adding through quality assurance and pedagogical transformation (Cheong Cheng, 2003). Tertiary institutions are seeking to find better and more reliable measures of student learning with assessment focused on measuring learning outcomes. With this interest it is not surprising that assessment of learning or assurance of learning (AoL) is becoming one of the most frequently discussed topics in tertiary education today (Martell & Caldron, 2009).

Essentially AoL is about knowing whether or not students are achieving the learning outcomes of a program of study. It assumes the implementation of a quality assurance process to continually monitor and evaluate student outcomes with strategies to "close the loop" (continuous improvement) where there is deviation from those outcomes. Quality assurance through AoL is an on-going development

approach that involves the capturing, monitoring and evaluating of data specific to student achievement on specific program¹ goals (Krneta et.al 2012).

For AoL to be effective it is important that the academics involved in the teaching program are also involved in the process of developing and measuring learning outcomes (Lawson et al, 2011). Academics have been traditionally seen as experts within their particular disciplines and required to work in within these discipline silos. An effective AoL process now requires academics work both within and across disciplines on a programmatic basis to consider the teaching and assessment of skills as well as the discipline content knowledge.

1.2 Leadership Challenges

Universities are facing new challenges in the design and delivery of quality programs. Internationally there is pressure for significant change in addressing the measurement of quality in teaching and learning processes (Barrie, 2007; Krause, Barrie & Scott, 2012). Academic leadership is under increasing pressure to respond to the challenges of accountability with respect to quality teaching and learning outcomes. As a consequence, those in academic administrative positions have greater responsibility for ensuring academic programs reflect the strategic outcomes of the university. These leaders are charged with facilitating a teaching environment, which motivates staff to engage in student-focused approaches to learning. Such environments have been found to foster better student outcomes due to a deep approach to learning (Ramsden et al., 2007).

The complex and dynamic social, economic, and political contexts of higher education present significant challenges (Smith & Hughey, 2006). Indeed, Scott et al. (2008) suggest that the changing Australian higher education landscape and the extent to which leaders are capable of leading change are critical factors in developing the quality of programs. Ramsden (1998) highlights the key role of academic leadership as motivating and empowering staff to achieve a common direction for facilitating student-focused learning. However, the reality is that mounting daily pressures and operational demands often mean initiatives for improving the quality of academic courses is not achieved or is a low priority amongst other time demands (Jones et al., 2009). Effective leadership and collegiality is paramount to achieving good learning outcomes in the higher education context (Gibbs, Knapper & Picinnin, 2009). Therefore, the role of academic leaders is critical when implementing change initiatives and encouraging cultural shifts in approaches taken to teaching and learning.

1.3 Shared Understanding

Previous studies have shown that changes to Australian government policy and modernisation practices implemented in universities result increasingly in academics withdrawing into their own work to overcome changing values in academia. These changing values include limited empowerment; academic freedom, increasing managerialism and decreasing job satisfaction and commitment (French 2011). Developing, marketing and delivering quality products indicates the need for an organisational strategy to which all members of the organization are empowered to contribute and to adhere including both academics and administrators (French 2011).

A prime aspect of leading the change is the creation of a shared understanding, which is a precursor to a shared commitment. Whereas strategies for creating commitment have been well documented; crafting a shared understanding has not been well understood. Shared understanding is defined as the stakeholders understanding each other's positions well enough to have an intelligent dialogue about their different interpretations, and to exercise collective intelligence for necessary actions (Conklin, 2006). Developing a shared understanding requires robust conversation in order to expose where understanding may be unclear. The three structural components that create shared understanding in an organisation are the vision, the mission, and the values. These should be well defined and articulated, and authentic. Different organisations accomplish it differently, but the best way is to use the collective wisdom through inclusive activities (Wertsch, 1991).

1.4. Aims

This study aims to investigate the shared and private understandings of senior academic leaders and teaching academics responsible for implementing AoL processes within their Schools. It is also an aim to examine the leadership strategies implemented to achieve quality assurance measures (Lawson et

¹ The term "program" refers to a whole degree, which is made up of "units" of study.

al., 2012). This study forms part of a larger research project originating from an Australian Government Office for Teaching and Learning project designed to investigate how different Australian universities are implementing AoL throughout their institutions (Lawson et al., 2011).

2 METHODOLOGY

The method centred on a series of focus group interviews. Focus groups are small-group interviews (typically less than 10 people) often used to evaluate programs (Esterberg 2002). While they are used alone they are more often used in conjunction with other methods such as individual interviews or surveys. They are particularly useful when the researcher wants to know about people's opinions or attitudes in the context of group processes. Our focus groups were conducted to discuss issues that arose from an initial set of interviews with senior faculty leaders (Lawson et al 2011). The objective of the follow up focus groups was to explore the key elements of understanding required in building group processes in AoL, the challenges faced and the impact of AoL on continuous improvement, teaching and learning, and organisational culture. One of the advantages of small-group interviews is that they allow for the collection of a fairly large amount of data in a relatively short period of time. As there is limited information on implementing AoL this method was useful in being able to gather more than large amounts of data.

2.1 Participants

Data were collated from a series of eight focus groups. The participants for these focus groups were selected from four institutions that were identified as having expertise in embedding AoL into their educational processes. These were business schools that participated in the interviews which formed part of the larger research project, which were identified as having developed advanced processes of mapping, measuring, and closing the loop with learning outcomes. The focus groups consisted of four groups of senior management, (one from each of the four institutions) who reported on the leadership strategies for AoL and four groups of teaching academics (one from each of the four institutions) who reported on the implementation of these strategies in practice. An important factor for this study was to ensure that each focus group was relatively homogeneous to ensure people felt comfortable interacting with one another. Esterberg (2002) suggests that this format encourages participants to express their opinions freely. All participation in the focus groups was voluntary and responses were treated as anonymous.

2.2 Focus Group Interviews

An experienced interviewer facilitated each of the discussions in the focus groups at each of the four institutions and they were taped and transcribed verbatim. Questions were used to guide the group discussions. These were developed from the interviews with senior management staff (Assistant Deans Teaching and Learning) from Australian Business Schools (n=25) and are listed in Appendix I. Each focus group took between 1.5 and 2 hours.

The transcripts were analysed using content analysis, where text is located into categories based on explicit rules of coding (Krippendorf 2004). This allows the analysis of large volumes of data in a systematic way, to discover and describe the issues of focal importance to the interview subjects. The content analysis software used for this analysis, Leximancer 2.25, was used to add reliability to the concepts extracted from the text to provide an important and transparent contrast to interpretation by the researcher and in that way fosters analytic triangulation (Leximancer 2005). A benefit of this approach is that 'machine' learning is used and this can be viewed as more objective than the researcher's interpretations in generating and apply coding. In order to assure verification of coding and results the transcripts were also analysed by a second experienced researcher using NVivo. Agreement was found between the two analyses.

The transcripts of each discussion were examined by the researchers and decisions about the codes made. Each level of analysis was run using all the defaults excluding the text from the interview. After the initial runs, semantically null concepts, such as "think", as in "I think..." were omitted. In the preliminary analysis, the maps produced by the software were examined for overall patterns and proximity of concepts in relation to academic leaders and staff, followed by more detailed analysis of concept content. Once a map was generated, concepts were checked for meaningfulness, by examining the text evidence behind each concept. The Leximancer software makes it possible to look at the actual sentences of transcribed text that were coded against each concept on the map. Once a meaningful and stable map was established, it became a starting point for further interpretation. The

follow up interpretation used shared understandings between the leader and the academic groups as the basis for analyses.

3 FINDINGS

Analyses identified both differences and similarities between the focus groups for academics and leaders at the four target business schools. From the Leximancer map in Fig 1, it is clear from the gaps between the items linked to leaders and those linked to academics that the focal points of discussions were quite different. The leaders' responses sit nearest to the concepts of "change" and "staff" whereas the academics' responses sit adjacent to items categorised as "skills" and "external motivators". We interpreted this to mean that the focus of leaders' discussions was on strategic issues such as staff and change, while the academics talked more about process issues such as skills and external accreditation.

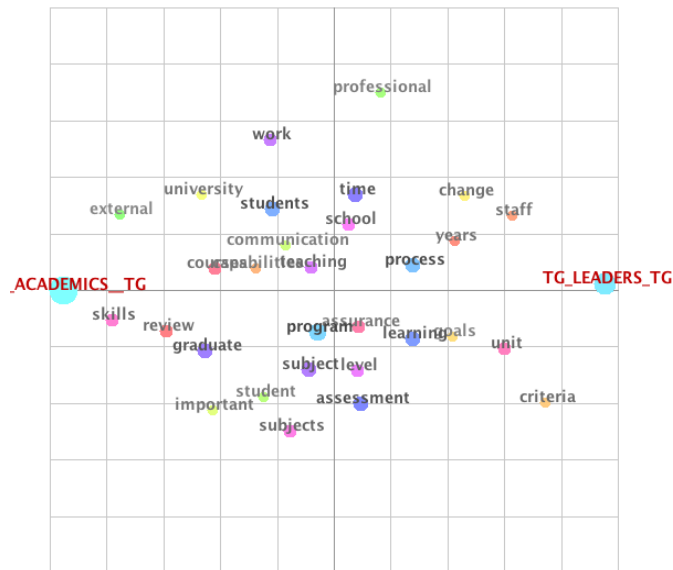


Fig 1: Leximancer map showing the main concepts discussed by education leaders and teaching academics

To identify further differences between the discourses of academics and that of the leaders, different concepts were compared and contrasted for the two groups namely: process; change; skills; teaching and learning; and AoL impact. A comparison of the discussion concerning each concept was undertaken by drilling down into the segments of text that were coded against each concept; the correlations between the academics' comments were compared with the segments of text coded with the correlations linked to comments made by the leaders. Representative segments of relevant text for the two are shown in Tables 1-6.

3.1 Process

Both groups recognised the importance of AoL as a process. While the leaders stressed this importance in terms of a process for continuous improvement, the academics emphasised the value of meeting external requirements. The leaders' discussion centred on the value of the whole-of-program approach, the benefit to staff of seeing the connections between their teaching units and the whole program, the value of a program approach in facilitating AoL in large classes, and the value to students of seeing how their skills are developed over the course of an entire program. There is a sense of challenge in selling the message of AoL to academic staff, convincing them that it is valued institutionally (for example, through the academic promotion process) and evidencing that the AoL process forms an integral part of curriculum development.

On the other hand, the academic groups were more focused on the internal politics of program leaders and the challenges of seeing the links to program goals particularly where staff perceive learning objectives as being "retrofitted" into units to meet external requirements. The perspective of this group emphasised that until there is a clear and logical alignment between the different levels of graduate attributes there will be difficulty in getting staff engagement.

Both groups emphasised the importance of embedding (AoL) processes within the normal work of academics, and that this is encouraged through devolving ownership of the process. There were differences and similarities between the leaders and the academics. While both groups agreed that participation was central to making the process part of the culture, academics had reservations about the sincerity of efforts to encourage a participatory process.

Leaders talked differently about the process of developing AoL in terms of integrating it into curriculum development and the challenges of confronting perceptions that AoL was mainly for accreditation. They also talked about the process of providing a clear framework to structure programs and identify gaps in skills development within programs. Academics discussed engagement as central to any kind of sustainability, and that the process of encouraging engagement helped provide unit coordinators with a program view of assurance of learning. However, academic participants expressed considerable cynicism about the real purpose of AoL, and of the level of participation substantively open to them.

Table 1: Representative segments of text regarding AoL Process

“process” and leaders’ comments	“process” and academics’ comments
<i>This is still a very important process and as you saw, identifies gaps in the program.</i>	<i>. . . a number of different accrediting bodies - whether it's AQF, AACSB, professional bodies we're trying to do this all for everyone</i>
<i>If graduate qualities are espoused characteristics that you claim your student will leave with, the only way in which you can be certain of doing that is through assessment</i>	<i>There's no real clear linkage of that strategy. because we are sort of retrofitting programmed learning objectives into existing subjects to meet requirements, it becomes a bit disconnect</i>
<i>it is building blocks where the early subjects build on and develop certain skills</i>	<i>I think it comes back down to certain things are being driven from a university faculty level and then on to us as to what we have to put into subject.</i>
<i>It's about implementing strategies to try and improve</i>	<i>to some extent it sort of feels much more one way rather than being a two way process and for us to be able to then have input to be able to say well we're the ones that are teaching in the area</i>
<i>We see the AoL process as addressing that gap (between expected and actual attainment)</i>	<i>. . . they said something like ... you will be able to prove to us that 80 per cent of your student graduates meet the minimum capabilities and you've got those measures for each of those things. As soon as I heard that I went oh my - I don't know how I'm going to do that</i>
<i>When I talk to our colleagues, what I think that they don't like is well, okay, they're collecting data for accreditation, you know, this is not for us. They see it as a waste of their time, an intrusion into their precious time.</i>	<i>There is a big disconnect between subjects and overall what's happening with this course. I think that that really comes from that lack of linkage in between I guess program learning objectives, subject learning objectives, and then you've got graduate attributes sitting on top of that.</i>
<i>I think it's a long process and I don't think that it can be achieved in a short time.</i>	<i>I think we have a lot of people who are probably uninterested, unengaged...they just don't care</i>

3.2 Change

There were significant differences in how the two groups talked about the change required to incorporate AoL into current programs. Primarily, the leaders group talked about the change as a broad process of getting people on board with AoL processes, while academics tended to talk about unit level change. Leaders identified that when external accreditation became important there was an expectation that change would come about quickly. However, there is recognition that change processes are slow, and that some people will always resist change. Academics discussed the changes within their own units as a result of curriculum mapping across the program or measuring AoL outcomes of the students through assessment. They identified that these changes had broader effects across the program. Further, the academics said they were cautious of the change required and felt that they were not always empowered to make the necessary changes in their areas and so did not take ownership of the process.

Table 2: Representative segments of text regarding Change

“change” and leaders comments	“change” and academics comments
<i>I think when we jumped on the AACSB band</i>	<i>Sometimes when you change actions, you change</i>

<i>wagon it was all about really quick change</i>	<i>thinking</i>
<i>It is dynamic at the moment in the change in the way that professional bodies are behaving to universities.</i>	<i>to get their info back and to change everything, how much time is involved with it?</i>
<i>It's still an endless process</i>	<i>you have to have a good reason to change it</i>
<i>which is the kind of fixed, and it changes that, that's quite hard to change but you can change it a bit underneath.</i>	<i>So I didn't want to go and change things and possibly make it worse or [laughs] - I'd just have to change again.</i>
<i>they don't want to change anything because it's too hard to change sometimes</i>	<i>If you want to change - you want to be able to change it</i>
<i>I actually think the people that aren't into it at the moment probably never go into it. I mean there are always people who will never change</i>	<i>Well one of the real problems was there was that period where you weren't to change the Part A - so our response to that was to write Part A is quite generic</i>
<i>It is a domino effect on everything else but if they understand if they change something it may then have an impact on the subject over there ... then that would be great...</i>	<i>I've been largely just continuing along with how we've always done things and then just to some extent retrospectively applying it to the new requirements</i>

3.3 Skills

The two different groups discussed skills development of students throughout teaching programs quite differently. The academic groups discussed skills extensively, emphasising the challenges around building or recognising the teaching of skills within a program. They questioned whether teaching graduate attributes was their responsibility. The leaders group discussed skills in terms of awareness. That is, making students aware of the skills they acquired throughout the program in order to build their confidence ahead of joining the workforce and to highlight areas of skills they need to develop.

Leaders discussed the importance of a program view in skills development and that without program coordination unit coordinators are much more focused on content and technical skills rather than life or work skills. Academics talked about the importance of raising student awareness of the importance of skills, but with more discussion around the challenges of recognising the skills taught within units. The discussion also included that some lecturers often do not know how to teach particular skills and that there needs to be a better structure around how to develop student skills. They also talked about the need to scaffold the teaching of skills, to be able to understand and show the levels of development of a skill, and the need to measure the performance of these skills in order to be able to assure them appropriately and properly.

Table 3: Representative segments of text regarding Skills

"skills" and leaders comments	"skills" and academics comments
<i>I think it's really important for the student because I think when they get to the end of their program they don't always recognise the skills that they've developed.</i>	<i>in the overall scheme of things, like those are deep elemental skills, if at the end you're a graduate from this university then can we more or less say, yes, well, they've been taught or given the opportunity to develop these skills</i>
<i>by making them more aware of the skills that they have developed and how there's been a system in place for this to happen and them being assured, I think it might give them more confidence entering the workforce knowing that at the beginning I couldn't do this but now [I'm looking at investing] what I've got</i>	<i>we're sort of looking at scaffolding skills as well. ... if they've been taught that in first semester, year one, that the person who's teaching it who then again in later courses can use a lot of that material or use the same resources so that students are also may being referred back.</i>
<i>if you leave subject coordinators on their own they're focusing on content and the technical and the generic skills are important, if not more important, and they get forgotten</i>	<i>One thing I do do in terms of their development and attaining capabilities particularly around the interpersonal skills is always highly encourage them to get really involved in all the university extracurricular activities.</i>
	<i>At this stage, we're guessing that they go out with the skills But if we measured it, we could guarantee that they're going out with the skills or they're not</i>
	<i>The other thing is that teaching skills is a skill and we are not taught how to teach skills.</i>
	<i>It's all very well to say I can sort of fumble my way through writing a lecture or presenting a tutorial or</i>

	<i>choosing a book for a course reading. But that's not the same as actually knowing a structured way how to develop some skills.</i>
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3.4 Learning and Teaching

The different academic groups talked similarly about learning and teaching in the AoL process, and that the continuous improvement of programs and teaching practices was the ideal result of AoL processes. The leaders' groups talked about the processes emphasising learning in terms of demonstrating students' progress and helping students reflect upon the connection between assessments and their development as professionals. These were seen as complementary to continuously improving the learning experience through the alignment of units, reflecting on where AoL should take place to optimise learning, and assuring quality across the sector. Academics talked about AoL as a mechanism to assure that students are acquiring the skills expected of them, but also as a means to continuously improve the teaching practices in order to better develop students' skills.

The analysis of the term 'teaching' highlighted very similar ideas to that of 'learning', but with a greater emphasis on how staff bring about the learning outcomes through their presentation of material and assessments. Overall, the discussions highlighted the challenges involved in achieving a consensus on what it means to teach well. The leaders groups emphasised the connection between quality teaching and the alignment of programs; that the two are complimentary. They acknowledged the challenges of getting some academics on board who may prefer a particular way of doing things, academics who may be good teachers, but are not necessarily on board with AoL.

The academic groups talked about the deeper philosophical issues around the pedagogy of teaching skills in a program. Particularly that AoL presents an opportunity to clarify and reconcile the different philosophies and perspectives that disciplines draw upon in teaching the content and skills required in graduates. There was a sense of a need to recognise the differences in approach and what effectiveness might mean from these different worldviews. There was also a sense that AoL processes should take place apart from the work of teaching, a sentiment which is counter to the desire of making assurance participatory and part of the normal business of teaching.

The academic groups also discussed assessment in relation to AoL fairly extensively, identifying that this was their main point of interaction with graduate attributes and program learning outcomes. They identified that there was a need for them to be cognisant of the impact that their unit level changes to assessments could have on the structure of the program as a whole. The academic group highlighted the challenges inherent in assessing particular learning outcomes. There was also discussion about adapting to outcome based learning and related assessment strategies.

Table 4: Representative segments of text regarding Learning

"learning" and leaders comments	"learning" and academics comments
<i>The whole goal is to provide a mechanism for continuous learning as well as quality assurance or an assurance of quality in education provision no matter which sector it's in.</i>	<i>Yeah, it's the basic principle isn't it that you say students should be learning something; there should be a mechanism to see if they are and if they're not, how can we develop what we do in order to get them there?</i>
<i>That's what we really, truly should do, shouldn't we, to show that we're progressing them in a learning sense</i>	<i>So I think the good side is that it forces us to continue to do quality teaching and quality planning for teaching and learning</i>
<i>before you get to teaching you will have thought about and planned into your curriculum design where you are going to place the teaching learning activity which give the students an opportunity to develop those themes.</i>	<i>The development of the criteria happened in the background, whilst developing learning activities and generic activities</i>
<i>That's all part of the improvement of the thing - to say that there's - you know you could say that is part of the how we educate</i>	<i>it allows an open mind in learning instead of just teaching the technical skills</i>

Table 5: Representative segments of text regarding Teaching

"teaching" and leaders comments	"teaching" and academics comments
<i>overall I think it's lifted the quality of the staff and also it's lifted hopefully the quality of what we're delivering in terms teaching and really thinking through the goals and objectives that we say we're</i>	<i>So I think the good side is that it forces us to continue to do quality teaching and quality planning for teaching and learning.</i>

<i>doing and matching that to the assessment items that students are actually being tested on</i>	
<i>before you get to teaching you will have thought about and planned into your curriculum design where you are going to place the teaching learning activity which give the students an opportunity to develop those themes</i>	<i>To me, it has certain implications with regard to the effectiveness of your teaching and so when people take on those philosophies and those basic understandings about how we deliver our stuff - and not everyone shares those.</i>
<i>Assessing, with the CRA and everything's done quite well but when you're really teaching it properly it is hard to reverse</i>	<i>So there's a whole lot of different fundamental philosophies about teaching practice that first have to be - and you don't want them overcome, you don't want to standardise them, you do want this kind of diversity but how do you cater for it?</i>
<i>I think a lot of the innovation goes on in the teaching area and some of the assessments,</i>	<i>I think there should be an opportunity to really understand the pedagogy behind teaching those actual skills</i>
	<i>But then also, everyone has different ways of approaching things so whilst you may put various teaching resources in place for your tutors. I guess to some extent you have to be a lot stricter on them now as to what you want as output from them to be able to see into this process</i>

3.5 Assurance of Learning Impacts

When leaders groups discussed the impact of AoL, they generally talked about the benefits of promoting a program view amongst unit coordinators and general improvements to teaching and learning practices. Amongst academic groups the discussion was focused on connectedness with the benefits to the program and its effects on students. Academics felt the real advantages were in being able to make connections across units in order to get the whole of program view and being able to get a sense of the appropriate points within the program to focus on particular outcomes. They identified being able to get a sense of what different levels of achievement on different outcomes might look like, and the sense that the program is producing the desired content knowledge and skills in student outcomes. There was however a sense that AoL goes on in the background somewhat and perhaps only comes to the fore when there is a need for guidance and structure within a program. One other factor mentioned by the academics was the additional workload that AoL processes generated.

Table 6: Representative segments of text regarding Assurance associated with the correlations between the concept “assurance” and the leaders and academic tags

“assurance” and leaders comments	“assurance” and academics comments
<i>moving some people beyond a silo approach. So it's an opportunity to get people on board but, at the same time, I think it depends on the culture of the school.</i>	<i>We've looked at how our major rolls out, so how the units build on one another and where are the most appropriate points to focus on those particular graduate attributes or assurance of learning goals, in particular units.</i>
<i>The assurance has tended to rely on the technical aspects of it I think MR</i>	<i>making those connections across units has been one of the really neat things</i>
<i>I definitely think that it's lifted our game in the last couple of years</i>	<i>on the feel of assurance of learning is not a subject issue, it's a course issue</i>
	<i>Well, it's assurance that we're doing a good job. I suppose, assurance in making sure that - well, I suppose that comes down to industry standards. I just think there's a higher ideal than that in terms of universities.</i>
	<i>So yes there's impact on workload, but I think with any quality assurance measure and doing things well</i>
	<i>there's only so many hours in the day and you get there and go, whilst I would like to pull back and redesign that whole subject.</i>

4 DISCUSSION

Between the different levels of groups there were some subtle differences in how AoL processes were discussed. As a whole the leaders tended to talk about AoL as a broad strategic issue concerned with engaging staff in institutional change processes. Academics however tended to take a more unit and assessment approach to the issue, discussing how AoL is applied at the unit level and how

assessments reflect learning outcomes. While academics seemed equally interested in the benefits of assurance of learning processes, they were somewhat dubious about the sincerity and meaningfulness of the participation available to them.

Leaders highlighted the value of AoL processes, but also the ongoing challenges of engaging staff and convincing them of the organisation's commitment to quality teaching and learning. Academics agreed with the importance of participation as being central to a cultural shift, but indicated that there was a sense that assurance is primarily for accreditation rather than continuous learning. Academics talked about skills in an in-depth way, particularly what is needed in order to be able to develop student skills. Leaders talked about skills primarily in building student awareness of skills in order to build their future job prospects.

Academics talked about the opportunity for AoL to promote critical discussions about the different philosophical understandings and approaches to teaching. Leaders emphasised the confluence that comes from the promotion of quality teaching and program alignment. Change was seen by the manager groups as a broad institution level project of getting people on board. In contrast, academics talked about unit level change and the connection between units and the program as a whole. Leaders highlighted the importance of participation, making assurance everyone's business, in particular the benefits of having all staff take a wider view beyond just their part of the program. Academics highlighted the difficulties of implementing assurance with staff, but talked about the benefits of a mindfulness of programs and how they develop student skills.

It is to be expected that Management/Leaders of the new processes of AoL will view them as a strategic requirement and that the teaching Academics will consider the practical implications for implementing the process at unit levels. However it is counter intuitive to expect that Academics may not see themselves as the best teachers of specific skills designed for implementation within specific programs. Academics are traditionally seen as the experts of their content areas and models for the skills contextualised by their disciplines. Leaders of the AoL processes will need to consider the change requirements in skills development differently within their programs and ensure development opportunities for those Academic less secure in their abilities to teach and assess other related skills such as oral communication; written communication or group work among others.

While it is to be expected that the two different levels of academia, namely leaders and teaching staff would experience the change required in implementing a new quality assurance process differently, it is clear that the different groups envisaged each others contributions differently. The leaders expected the academics to take ownership of the process and implement the change quickly while the teaching academics felt un-empowered to make the necessary changes. As in any change process empowerment is an important consideration in promoting the shared understandings between different groups. Putting practices in place to encourage local decision-making at the unit level and the program level is an important organisational capability required with even the most educated of workplaces.

5 Limitations, Conclusions and Future Research

While focus groups provide access to extensive data, they can be limiting if participants do not speak freely due to concerns about confidentiality (Esterberg 2002). We sought to overcome this limitation by having separate focus groups that were homogeneous according to academic level and institutional employment. The facilitator discussed the importance of confidentiality at the beginning of each focus group held at each institution and all participants signed a confidentiality agreement. This gives us some confidence in the credibility of the data we have gathered on the shared and private understandings of AoL and its implementation in Australian business schools. We acknowledge that this information may not be transferable to other disciplines.

While academics and their leaders support the new AoL requirements in Higher Education they identify the requirements of different types of support to implement what is a major cultural shift. Senior leaders see the systems and cultural change as a strategic one that can occur quickly however the teaching staff recognise the philosophical changes required in their assessment of student outcomes and the skills development that may be a paramount concern for many teachers considered expert in their own discipline knowledge.

The differences between the leaders and academics involved in AoL show a general lack of shared understandings across many aspects of the process. This lack of shared understanding could be detrimental to the organisational capability of universities in effectively implementing AOL. Further

research in this area related to strategies of managing the changes required in an AoL process will shed light on current approaches utilised in Australia universities in order to determine best practice components.

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Appendix I

The following questions were used to guide the focus group discussions:

What is your institution/faculty philosophy behind assuring these graduate attributes?
What is your understanding of the external motivators behind assuring graduate attributes?
How do these external motivators impact your processes?
Do you feel you have got staff buy in for the process? How did you get staff buy-in for the process?
What are the main enablers for the process?
What are the intended outcomes of the process? What are the unintended outcomes of the process?
What challenges have you/are you facing? How did/will you overcome them/ what are the lessons learnt?

