

Assurance of Learning - Are academics and senior management reading from the same hymn sheet?

Assurance of learning (AoL) is an important process in educational settings as it evaluates how well an institution accomplishes the educational aims at the core of its activities, whilst assisting the faculty members to improve programs and courses. This paper derives from a pilot study of an ALTC Strategic Project which conducted an audit across 25 Australian Business Schools to investigate AoL practices. It used semi structured interviews with senior managers and focus groups made up of Faculty leaders or academics. The interviews showed that there is an obvious challenge in trying to get academic staff to buy into the benefits of the AoL process. This paper examines the differences in understanding between the leaders and the academics, highlighted through the focus groups, and then showcases educational leadership strategies that have been successfully implemented across Australia to foster aligned understanding of the AoL process.

The focus group analysis identified differences between academics and leaders at four target business schools. A Leximancer map was used to demonstrate that the focal points of discussions between the two types of groups were quite different. The leaders tag sits nearest the concepts "change" and "staff" whereas the academics tag sits adjacent "skills" and "external motivators" This can be interpreted to mean that the focus of the leaders discussions were on strategic issues such as staff engagement and change management and academics talked more about process issues such as teaching graduate attributes and external accreditation.

In order to further identify differences between the academic and management discourses, it made sense to compare and contrast the two groups on the same series of concepts, namely: program: learning; skills; teaching; change; staff; assurance; and assessment. An example of this is the "program" concept. The quotes for this concept show a subtle difference between the management and academic conversations about "program". Broadly speaking, the leaders discussion centres 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 large subject assurance, and the value to students of seeing how their skills are developed over a program. In line with the Leximancer map, the leaders concerns are strategic. The academic groups are more focused on process issues, the politics of program management, the challenges of seeing links to program goals when staff see learning objectives as "retrofitted" into subjects. These differences between leaders and academics are not surprising considering that the approach to AoL has focused on more strategic engagement with those managing AoL.

These differences in concepts between academics and leaders are important as without an alignment between the two groups effective assurance of learning processes are difficult, and result in low staff engagement. Successful strategies that have been developed to foster shared values on assurance of learning include: strong senior management commitment and leadership; developing leadership and champions among unit and program level staff; providing professional development opportunities; demonstrating success and effectiveness; and making the process inclusive with academics collaborating in the development and implementation of the process.