

Putting Financial Oversight and Quality Assurance on the Same Page

Notes from a session presented at the COU 2014 Learning Outcomes Symposium. These notes summarize the comments contributed by the participants of the session and provide guidance from numerous institutions on how quality measures can support financial oversight.

The comments are grouped under four headings: Learning Outcomes Assessment programs; Pedagogical considerations including advanced technology; Prior Learning considerations; and budgeting considerations.

Learning Outcomes Assessment programs

Much of the discussion regarding this topic involved the belief that, with the introduction of an LOA process at the program level, there is a possibility of streamlining the curriculum which can lead to cost savings. Considering and assessing programs as a whole will allow faculty to have a better understanding of how and when learning takes place and could eliminate duplication of course content. It was also suggested that could lead to a reduced or better use of TA's leading to additional cost savings.

In addition to the potential for streamlining the curriculum it was believed that a robust LOA process will result in increased program quality, higher levels of student success and ultimately improved institutional reputation.

Pedagogical Considerations

Much of the discussion regarding pedagogical considerations centered on the use new technologies. There was general agreement that while new technology did involve start-up costs that could be high, the implementation could result in savings over the long run. Some examples of technology that could result in improved program delivery and possibly reduced costs included: mobile learning, flipped classrooms and self-directed modules. Blended learning that would include traditional face-to-face contact along with components of online content and contact could result in reaching out to new groups of students thereby potentially increasing revenues.

Some of the cost benefits that were considered with advances in the use of technology included: freeing up classroom space, possibly including more staff time (less faculty) in the delivery of the courses (faculty developed content), and reaching broader students audiences. Some notes of caution were expressed in ensuring that the investment is not limited to the technology itself but also the preparation of staff and faculty in the development and use of the technologies.

Some other contributions regarding pedagogical advances that could improve quality while managing costs centered on topics related to experiential learning opportunities and professional skills development. One suggestion was the use of more coordinated and centralized experiential learning models that would make quality control easier and potentially lead to lower costs. Also more professional partnerships that may include having some aspects of a course taught off campus.

Educational partnerships were also considered between and among colleges and universities. Also it was felt that better alignment/communication between educational levels (high school/college/university) could result in more efficient program planning and thereby reduce costs of delivery.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

There was some discussion on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) could lead to access to new groups of learners, e.g. learners with professional backgrounds. It was acknowledged that there are many variables that need to be considered in PLAR. A wider use of PLAR along with a greater ease of transfer credits within the Higher Education community in Ontario would lead to more streamlined programming. A simple review of admission standard and practices could result in cost savings. (Note this same consideration was the impetus for the Tuning project in Europe which has gained ground in the US and Australia)

Budget Control

On the last topic of budget control the following observations were made: academic units are in the best position to understand how quality is defined within their discipline and also in the best position to manage the factors of quality(i.e. workload, curriculum, delivery considerations) For the units to exercise this mandate to ensure quality while managing costs they would need to be given the appropriate level of autonomy and resources.

Another suggestion for better managing costs without sacrificing quality was to minimize redundancy within the education system and to look for more ways to share resources within and between institutions.

Summary

In summary, it was generally agreed by all the participants that it is possible to improve educational quality while exercising prudent cost management. This can be achieved through:

- Close attention to program outcomes and assessment
- Effective use and investment in new technologies for program delivery
- Educational partnerships with industry, professional bodies and other educational institutions
- Conducting further research into PLAR and transfer credits in Ontario
- Placing the authority and the responsibility for ensuring education quality and cost control in the hands of the academic units.