A Model for Quality Assurance of Assessments and examinations (MQAA) (0224)

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The role of HEIs as stakeholders in societal change is becoming more prominent and greater emphasis is put on quality assurance and accreditation of HE. 'Quality assurance of HE' has become a generic term for external quality monitoring or evaluation, and accreditation is the temporal establishment of legitimacy/appropriateness of an educational entity (Harvey, 2014). The perceived need for external quality assurance reflects a demand for accountability by stakeholders as well as a global, contemporary decline in trust of public service institutions (Kinser, 2014).

Although there are good reasons for accountability there also is a risk that systems for quality assurance works against the quality of teaching and learning (Jessop, McNab, & Gubby, 2012). Some authors explicitly argue that the quality of teaching and learning is decreasing as a result of adopting industrial quality models to the complicated nature of education with an increasingly diverse group of students (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Dollery, Murray, & Crase, 2006).

Considering the risks of focusing heavily on external quality assurance and the fact that Sweden is currently between quality assurance systems, it was decided that this study should focus on creating and testing a model for enhancing quality rather than quality assurance.

MQAA is based on the following premises:

- Assessment drives student learning (Ramsden, 2003) Instruction, learning, assessment and learning outcomes should be linked through constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011).
  Assuring the quality of assessment and examinations throughout an educational meme, affects the quality of the entire educational environment.

- Formative assessment is a significant condition for student learning in HE (Boud, 2000; Hattie, 2009), thus the balance between formative and summative assessment needs to be visible.

- Learning and instruction are increasingly competence-based. Competence is complex and not always easily assessed.
  Competence assessment for educational programmes can be evaluated using a

comprehensive quality framework based on the research by Baartman et al. (2011).

- By frequently involving internal stakeholders, an embedded culture of quality management may arise (Becket & Brookes, 2008). Involvement results in people taking ownership of problems and responsibility for solving them.
  In order to involve internal stakeholders, all the courses leading to a degree and all of the staff involved with these courses, as well as representatives for the students, were invited to take part in the study.

- Peer review by 'critical friends' provides a perspective from the outside. The 'critical friends' give constructive suggestions and ask questions rather than audit.

Method

Criteria for evaluating competence-assessment programmes (Baartman, et al. 2011) were reviewed and adapted to a Swedish context, resulting in the ten criteria: [1]Constructive alignment, [2]Formative assessment, [3]Reproducibility, [4]Transparency, [5]Acceptability, [6]Comparability, [7]Fairness, [8]Cognitive complexity, [9]Authenticity and [10]Cost and efficiency.

A method for visualizing constructive alignment and progression in learning outcomes, was constructed based on the works of Biggs (e.g. 1999; 2012) and research into using rubrics when assessing student learning (e.g. Sadler, 2005). This method was used to evaluate the two first criteria. Criteria 2-10 were evaluated using a survey based on the research by Baartman et al. (2011).

Three programmes were chosen to participate in a pilot study of the implementation of MQAA. The choice was made so that the selection was representative of the different programmes at Malmö University.

A workshop to introduce MQAA, the method for visualization and the survey was held with teaching staff from each programme. Following the workshop, the teaching staff worked in teams to prepare the documentation for the visualization during 3-4 weeks. The survey was distributed to teaching staff, students and programme managers. The documentation and survey results for each of the three programmes were analysed by a group of 'critical friends'. The results of the documentation process as well as the analysis were discussed at a second workshop with teaching staff from all three programmes and the group of 'critical friends'. Directly after the workshop the 'critical friends' evaluated the model. The following semester, representatives from the three programmes and their respective heads of department were given a survey to evaluate the process and the results of using MQAA for visualizing and

enhancing quality.

Results

The ‘critical friends’ found that MQAA provided a good way to visualize constructive alignment, the balance (or imbalance) between formative and summative assessment as well as the progression of learning outcomes during the programme.

The participating teaching staff found MQAA to be a good way of achieving a shared understanding of the learning and assessment in all the courses/modules leading up to graduation. This shared understanding enabled a constructive discussion on strengths and weaknesses within the group of teachers, between teachers and students, as well as between the teachers and the ‘critical friends’. These discussions lead to major changes in the curriculum for each of the piloted programmes.

Teaching staff really appreciated to be involved in the quality development of the educational programme, rather than merely writing the obligatory self-evaluation, as they had found that writing this report rarely facilitated the development of ‘real quality’.

The workload of producing all the documentation needed was found to be straining. However, the staff found that the work, made an instant and significant contribution to their professional endeavour as university teachers, the quality of assessments as well as to forming a quality culture within the institution.

The survey was found to be a useful tool for comparing the views from teachers and students, teachers and programme managers, students from different educational programmes and teachers from different educational programmes. The results of the survey were used for updating information given to students, competence development of staff and as a benchmarking tool.

All participants found that the transparency of progression in learning outcomes and assessment was increased. They also agreed on that the process had been successful.

Conclusions. The study indicate that MQAA – including the method for visualization and the survey, was found to:

- Facilitate discussions of quality based on empirical data
- Improve and increase transparency of assessment as well as constructive alignment in courses.
- Induce interest for continuing quality development

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