The "value" of evaluating teaching practices for continuous improvement

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Registration standard objective

- AQTF 2007 (and successive registration standards) RTOs to demonstrate continuous improvement

- focus on outcomes rather than process

- Quality approach with an increased emphasis on continuous improvement

- aimed at better enabling RTOs to improve and innovate

Past standards, approach to quality

- Past registration standards too prescriptive,

  focus on procedures and processes, to the detriment of good performance and quality outcomes in VET (KPA Consulting 2004)

- Australian VET sector investigations into quality (e.g. Hager 1997, Gibb 2003, MacRae 2004)

- Quality and innovation in RTO's (e.g. Mitchell et al. 2003; Callan 2004; Mitchell et al. 2006)

- RTO capability (e.g. Clayton & Fisher 2005; Callan et al. 2007; Harris, Clayton & Chappell 2008)

Studies in continuous improvement

- Studies in other sectors suggest successful continuous improvement is difficult (Chapman et al. 2000)

- Failure rates are high (Bessant & Caffyn 1997)

Impediments:

- failing to understand the concept;

- lack of organisational skills for implementation and,

- lack of will to progress continuous improvement (Bessant & Caffyn 1997)

4

Formative evaluation of AQTF 2007 in 2008

"*…many RTOs expressed a lack of understanding as to what was meant by 'continuous improvement', and uncertainty as to how to implement an effective continuous improvement approach within their organisation. They also expressed concerns as to how to competently demonstrate continuous improvement approaches in practice within their organisations*" (KPMG 2008, p.57)

Study aim

- Explore what individual practitioners and managers (within selected RTOs) understand of the concept of continuous improvement and what they understand will be required to demonstrate continuous improvement as required by AQTF 2007

Study method

- TAFE SA Institutes
- Participants purposively selected, identified early adopters
- ten practitioners
- two diverse teaching groups
- different levels including educational managers, quality managers, quality assurance group
- Qualitative, semi-structured interviews mid 2009

Understanding the concept

- *organisation-wide, focused, sustained* and *incremental* Bessant and Caffyn (1997).

- *planned, organised, ongoing* and *company-wide*. Boer et al. (2000)

- Systematic, ongoing process (not ad hoc), improving overall performance through change

- Continuous improvement complex process of implementation, a management technique embedded in quality principle, AS WELL as the ultimate outcome, change.

Planned and focused data collection, evaluation and learning

- Incremental, not discontinuous dramatic, change (Imai 1986)

- Planned and systematic evaluation of data, not ad hoc.

- plan-do-check-act cycle (Deming 1986; Imai 1986)

- continually evaluating and reviewing to "close the loop" returning knowledge into the planning phase

- constant evaluation (Kaye & Dyason 1999)

Reflective practice

- freedom to explore, innovate for change (Sitkin et al. 1995)

- "double loop" learning (Argyris 1997)

- enhanced review and reflection, reconsider accepted practice and challenge current methods (Ayas & Zenuik 2001)

- "continuous innovation" (e.g. Boer et al. 2001; Boer & Gertsen 2003; Smeds & Boer 2004)

- Combination of routine and control for systematic single loop learning, AND the more innovative reflective learning, time, motivation and capability

- (Hyland & Boer 2006; Richtner & Ahlstrom 2007)

Evaluation of data

- Australian VET sector studies suggest data not always evaluated to inform decisions on changes to teaching practice (Gibb 2003; MacRae 2004).

- Similar in UK (Visscher & Hendricks 2009) and European sector (Visscher 2009)

Process or outcome

Two approaches to quality in education
- "procedural quality" quality assurance, focusing on *proving* quality systems, accountability and auditing, and,

- "transformational quality" qualitative in nature more about continuous improvement, organisational transformation and caring for the customer, than systems and hard data (Sallis 2002)

- A culture conducive to change needs to be process-orientated rather than results-orientated Choi (1995)

- Misleading to emphasise outcomes, continuous improvement not a short-term activity, evolution and aggregation of key behavioural routines that develop over-time (Bessant et al. 2001)

Behavioural routines

- **<u>Understanding CI</u>**
- **people at all levels demonstrate a shared belief in the value of small steps and that**
- **everyone can contribute, by themselves being actively involved in making and recognising incremental improvements.**
- **when something goes wrong the natural reaction of people at all levels is to look for reasons why etc. rather than to blame individual(s).**
- **people make use of some formal problem-finding and solving cycle.**

(Extract from Bessant et al. 2001, pp. 72-73)

Behavioural routines

Getting the CI habit

- **people use appropriate tools and techniques to support CI**

- **people use measurement to shape the improvement process.**

- **people (as individuals and/or groups) initiate and carry through CI activities – they participate in the process.**

- **closing the loop - ideas are responded to in a clearly defined and timely fashion – either implemented or otherwise dealt with.**

(Extract from Bessant et al. 2001, pp. 72-73)

Behavioural routines

Focusing CI

- individuals and groups use the organisation's strategic goals and objectives to focus and prioritise improvements everyone understands (i.e. is able to explain) what the company's or department's strategy, goals and objectives are.

- individuals and groups assess their proposed changes against departmental or company objectives to ensure they are consistent with them.

- individuals and groups monitor/measure the results of their improvement activity and the impact it has on strategic or departmental objectives.

- CI activities are an integral part of the individual's or group's work, not a parallel activity.

(Extract from Bessant et al. 2001, pp. 72-73)

15

Behavioural routines

Leading the Way

- managers support the CI process through allocation of time, money, space and other resources.
- managers recognise in formal (but not necessarily financial) ways the contribution of employees to CI.
- managers lead by example, becoming actively involved in design and implementation of CI
- managers support experiment by not punishing mistakes but by encouraging learning from them…

- (Extract from Bessant et al. 2001, pp. 72-73)

Findings and Discussion

- sustained and ongoing nature of continuous improvement well understood by all

- *"It's an expectation on the lecturer to be continually improving and be better than you were yesterday"* and, from another, *"…doing things better… in small step increments, looking at our processes and improving them"*

- Predominant focus was keeping up-to-date, making minor changes

Incremental vs more radical change

- Bessant and Caffyn's (1997) contrast "preoccupation" with incremental change with a broader and potentially more advantageous understanding embraces broader change and innovation.

- Quality managers understood continuous improvement more in terms of the latter concept, but acknowledged this broader approach not fostered, and hampered, by lack of time for reflection and funding limitations

Perceptions of evaluation

- AQTF 2007 has brought an increased emphasis on evaluation,

"…there is a reasonable cohort out there that does surveys because they know they need to do surveys, but they don't do surveys or feedback processes to get the benefit of the outcome from that and to use that… using stakeholder data to drive continuous improvement…AQTF just brought that upfront"

- However…
- *"even now, if people ignored it [evaluation] they could"*

- *Quality manager "…closing the loop is a really important point. It's not one that I feel we have done particularly well, so far"*

Perceptions of evaluation

- Much change/improvement not a result of a systematic or planned approach to evaluation

- "proactivity" was not necessarily based on a systematic review of data.

- *"…it needs to be a systematic approach to improving and that means it's communicated as well, it's a system, not just people doing their own thing, it's shared across the work team"*

  Others indicated informal, ad hoc reviews

Perceptions of data

- Perceptions that much data not valuable

- Perceived apathy and ignorance of respondents
  surveys were lengthy or confronted with too many survey instruments "*…they [stakeholders] always see there's a heap of questions and if its three pages long they have a heart attack*", and, "*Oh, we've [the stakeholders] done this 50 question one, we're not going to do any others…*".
- perception that questioning poor
   "*I guess we find that we do a lot of surveys…some of them aren't relevant to us but we still have to do them, blanket type one size fits all*"

Perceptions of data

- *"gone are the days when we ask about the canteen"*

- Recognition by quality managers that careful question formulation, different methods of collecting data (such as focus groups), and efforts to teach survey respondents the value of providing feedback, were improving the value of data had not yet spread to practitioners

Perceptions of data

- The number of surveys administered "by management"
- "…*they [the data] are just collected and filed*"
- survey data for quality *assurance* purposes, rather than to identify opportunities for broader improvement.
- a lot of data is collected, but practitioners were not always clear of the objectives.
- lack of involvement planning for data collection
- lack of understanding, control and ownership limited utilisation.

Perceptions of audit compliance

- Perception compliance possible even without evaluation

- Dual understanding ongoing changes for improvement as dedicated teaching professionals, compared to, AQTF 2007 compliance.

 "…*making sure our paperwork and everything is in place*".

- *" I've got version control so I've continuously improved, that does not mean so much to me as developing something new… we should be testing exit profiles*"

- "*it is an interesting concept because what is continuous improvement and what is meeting the audit requirements*?".

Perceptions of compliance

- *"we're really trying to get away from this idea of changing paragraph 2 on page 5 of that 35 page resource. We don't necessarily want the detail of that, all we want to know is that you are improving"* Quality manager

- *"…we develop lots of paperwork just for auditors…just to explain why we do something… auditors without an educational background*" Practitioner

Outcome vs process?

- What message is the focus on outcomes rather than the inputs used to get there providing?

- Change may not always be required rather, it is the evaluation and learning that is valuable to the process to determine if, and what, improvement and therefore change is necessary.

- Is it correct to focus on evidence of change, rather than evidence of the <u>process</u> of informed decision making (evaluation)?

What will be required?

- Ensure practitioners "get the CI habit"
- Develop in practitioners the capability to undertake a systematic approach to evaluation, appropriate data
- Practitioner development should include developing behavioural routines which support continuous improvement
- Provide opportunities for more reflective learning
- Auditors professional judgement to encourage and support genuine improvement, rather than superficial change
- Audit focus on the process of evaluation AND the support and evidence of the routine behavioural measures undertaken for continuous improvement

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