

THE QUALITY IMPROVEMENT TOOLKIT

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ABSTRACT

As the importance of demonstrating student learning within higher education has grown, institutions have developed learning outcomes assessment programs to provide evidence of student learning. Further driven by quality assurance requirements and accreditation mandates, institutions have started to develop systematic assessment programs that include assessment structures, personnel, processes, and documentation. At Zayed University the assessment program is based on an annual assessment cycle where colleges and departments are asked to prepare assessment plans and reports, to collect and analyze assessment data, and to implement improvements when necessary. To do this, faculty charged with learning assessment responsibilities require a common set of resources or tools. Recognized as one of 10 inaugural *Excellence in Assessment Designees*, an award sponsored by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, Zayed University has developed a series of templates, exemplars, rubrics and other resources to help facilitate effective assessment and ensure quality in its assessment program. These documents comprise the Quality Improvement Toolkit (QIT). Drawing on the performance improvement literature, and, in particular, Thomas Gilbert's Behavior Engineering Model (BEM) and its descendants, this paper introduces Zayed University's QIT and illustrates its effectiveness in helping to assure quality and promote effective assessment of student learning.

INTRODUCTION

Because of interventions that occurred in the US more than a century ago, higher education quality assurance has been, and remains, linked to accreditation (Woodhouse, 2012). Within the US however, the term assessment is more often the term used by accreditors, and more recently, this is primarily focused on collecting evidence about the degree to which students are achieving learning outcomes. Though all areas of institutions should be assessed to assure quality, the emphasis is on student learning.

Learning outcomes assessment provides the necessary overview to determine whether or not students are achieving the required learning outcomes. While it is expected that faculty are regularly altering and modifying their courses or pedagogy to improve student learning, it is macro-level oversight offered by program learning outcomes assessment that ensures students, as a collective, are learning what they are expected to learn. Over the past number of years and with the assistance of accreditors, expectations have come forth as to what constitutes effective learning outcomes assessment and what processes and resources may be required. These resources and processes, though context specific, share similarities as they normally include an assessment cycle that includes a plan and report. How these resources and processes are actualized and manifested within institutions can facilitate cross-institution learning and is how best practices emerge. Components of Chevalier's updated Behavior Engineering Model (2003) have been used in the ongoing and multi-year development of Zayed University's Quality Improvement Toolkit (QIT) and can demonstrate the University's internationally recognized best practices in assessment, the foundation of its academic quality assurance processes.

THE CONTEXT

Founded in 1998, Zayed University is a UAE federal institution providing English-medium, baccalaureate and masters degree programs to approximately 8,500 students on its two campuses located in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Students are primarily Emirati undergraduates who study in a gender-segregated environment in either the College of Business (COB), the College of Education (COE), the College of Arts and Creative Enterprises (CACE), the College of Technological Innovation (CTI), the College of Communication and Media Sciences (CCMS), and the College of Sustainability Sciences and Humanities (CSSH).

Zayed University was established as a learning outcomes-based institution, which put it in good position to pursue international accreditation. Because of this and as a way to quality assure the institution, Zayed University has purposefully pursued a number of such accreditations. The university was first accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), one of six US-based regional accreditors, in 2008. Since then, COB has been accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, COE by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, CTI by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), CCMS by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, and CACE by the National Association of Schools of Art and Design. It is felt that these accreditations differentiate the institution from its regional peers and fully establish it as an institution worthy of the name of the UAE's founding father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. More recently, Zayed University has become accredited nationally by the UAE's Commission for Academic Accreditation, a process from which the institution had previously been exempt. Taken together, the history as a learning outcomes-based institution and the various accreditations have provided the impetus for quality improvement and compliance that has led to development of the QIT.

ACCREDITOR EXPECTATIONS

Over the past number of years, as there have been increased accountability pressures applied to tertiary institutions (Ewell, 2009), accreditation bodies have often taken the lead in insisting that universities demonstrate quality, and that the key function of nearly all universities, that is, educating the next generation, be measured, evaluated, reported, and improved upon when necessary. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the umbrella organization for US accreditors, defines the learning outcomes assessment process as:

- Articulating student learning outcomes;
- Providing evidence towards attainment of the learning outcomes;
- Reporting on successes and expectations of the learning outcomes;
- Using results for improving student learning (CHEA, 2014).

Most US accreditors implement such a process, but couch it in slightly different terminology and may go about it in unique ways. MSCHE describes the four step assessment process as:

1. Developing clear and measurable learning outcomes;
2. Providing learning opportunities where students can achieve the learning outcomes;
3. Assessing student achievement of the learning outcomes;
4. Using the results of the assessments to improve student learning (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2009, p. 63).

From the perspective of a disciplinary accreditor, ABET (2016) explains the assessment process as one in which programs must have a set of defined learning outcomes, and "must regularly use appropriate, documented processes for assessing and evaluating the extent to which the student outcomes are being attained. The results of these evaluations must be systematically utilized as input for the continuous improvement of the program" (ABET, 2016, General Criterion 4).

Within the UAE, the CAA takes a course level perspective through its course files process. For course files, the contents of each course, that is, syllabus, teaching materials, assessments, examples of student work, marking criteria, grades and a faculty reflection, are the mechanism through which the quality of a course and programs are assessed (Commission for Academic Accreditation, 2011). Through examining the course files, reviewers should be able to determine whether course learning outcomes are being achieved and subsequently determine whether or not the program learning outcomes are being achieved.

Through the QIT and the associated assessment program, Zayed University aims to achieve academic quality assurance which meets the expectations of itself, its stakeholders, and its accreditors.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

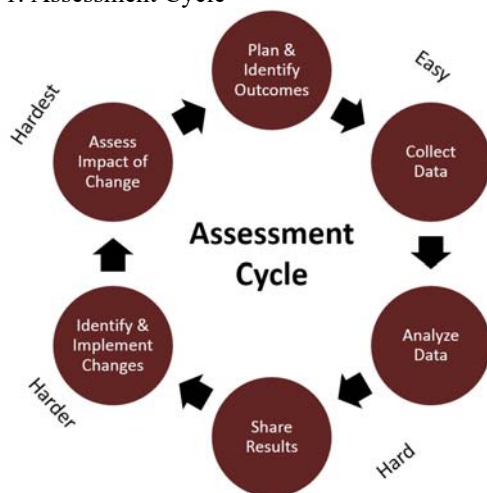
Zayed University's outcomes-based curriculum and its tight linkages with international accreditation have meant that it has always been near the forefront of the assessment movement. In its early years, it developed a set of university and program learning outcomes that were often assessed through an electronic portfolio. Though more an artifact repository than a portfolio, rubrics were used to assess the students' level of attainment against aligned learning outcomes. With leadership transitions, inadequate faculty understanding, and technology changes, this approach, though still a best practice today, began to evolve. As these were still early years in the assessment movement, this initial process was still very much focused on conducting assessment, rather than on using results. The influence of accreditation bodies had had an impact, but more on establishing

the mechanisms of assessment, rather than on using assessment data to inform programmatic changes to improve student learning. This, in turn, made assessment seem like an accreditation compliance issue when it should have been seen as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. There was limited institutional understanding about the purpose of assessment and there was no toolkit to serve as a resource.

The next phase in the development of the Zayed University’s assessment program, though staying true to its learning outcomes origin, began to mature as did the assessment movement. As part of this maturity, seminal publications such as Walvoord’s *Assessment Clear and Simple* (2010), Suskie’s *Assessing Student Learning* (2009), and *Designing Effective Assessment* (Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009) were released. These books firmly established the *how to* of assessment and, given that assessment of this sort had been underway for a number of years, were able to share examples from numerous institutions. The basic structures and designs of learning outcomes, assessment plans, assessment reports, curriculum maps, and the meaning of direct and indirect measures were all firmly established, but the impact of assessment remained mixed. For example, in their 2009 National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) survey of Provost’s and Chief Academic Officers, Kuh and Ikenberry (2009) found that about 75% of institutions had common learning outcomes, that accreditation was the main driver of assessment, that assessment data was only used somewhat to evaluate programs, that it was operated on a shoestring, and that faculty engagement remained by far the top challenge faced by leadership. Not surprisingly, the findings from the NILOA survey would have also described the state of assessment at Zayed University then as well. Mirroring these developments, Zayed University’s assessment program began to implement the basic processes, guidelines, and documentation, beginning with the creation of its QIT.

The current phase in the development of Zayed University’s assessment program is one of re-positioning itself, much like the assessment movement, to focus on using assessment data to implement meaningful actions and to improve student learning (see Figure 1). Though always the *raison d’être* of learning outcomes assessment, moving to where

Figure 1. Assessment Cycle



assessment was seen as an integral part of the teaching and learning has been a challenge. As Hall stated “assessment is pedagogy. It’s not some nitpicky, onerous administrative add-on. It’s what we do as we teach our courses, and it really helps close that assessment loop” (Association of American Colleges and Universities, para. 8, 2010).

Within the assessment movement, there has been a call for better use of assessment data because data proliferates, processes and procedures are well developed, but rarely is student learning data used to improve higher education. In describing findings from the massive multi-year Wabash assessment study, Blaich and Wise (2011) recognized that the problem was not a lack of data, but rather effective utilization of data already on hand- they had found that only 25% of institutions had effectually responded to the data. Though implementing effective actions remains a challenge, actually progressing to the point where changes lead to improved student learning is rarely in evidence. For example, Banta (2011) was only able to find 9 (6%) cases out of 146 assessment exemplars where an improvement in student learning had been demonstrated after changes had been implemented. On a positive note, the 2013 NILOA survey of Provost’s and Chief Academic Officers found that there had been a number of changes over the previous 4 years (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014). Two of the major changes were that institutional commitment to continuous improvement and faculty interest in improving student learning are now two of the top drivers of assessment, and that there is

more assessment using a more diverse set of measures than earlier reported. Nonetheless, accreditation remained the key impetus behind assessment and more faculty engagement was required. To address these issues, a number of recent publications have started to emphasize use of assessment results to a degree that has never before existed. Kuh et al. (2015) stressed the importance of beginning the assessment process with use of results in mind. Ickes and Flowers (2014) advised that answering questions such as *who will address the assessment findings?* and *how will they be addressed?* from the start of the assessment process is key. In sharing ways to facilitate use of results, Banta and Palomba (2015) described a number of best practices within assessment reports including a project ownership section and a section to describe the faculty dialogue that has occurred. This renewed emphasis on effective use of assessment results has meant that Zayed University has been making additions and alterations to its QIT.

ASSESSMENT PROGRAM CHALLENGES

One challenge encountered in our assessment program was a lack of consistency in the quality of assessment data collection and reporting in annual assessment plans and reports. Plans and reports that did not meet expectations were returned with, often extensive, feedback for revision, resulting in additional time spent and frustration for the assessment committee members. Factors contributing to this problem included, varying levels of assessment expertise and familiarity with our assessment program, changes in assessment committee membership and lack of continuity in knowledge transfer, and the once-a year nature of plan and report submissions. Assessment committee members are also active teaching faculty with research obligations, so competing demands on time is an additional factor.

The second challenge facing our assessment program was facilitating the transition from a focus on collecting and presenting assessment data, to an orientation, in both thinking and practice, toward analyzing and using this data to take evidence-based actions to improve student learning; a process referred to as ‘closing the loop’. In practice, closing the loop involves analyzing program-wide student performance on a given learning outcome, identifying a performance gap between target and actual student performance, and developing and implementing interventions to close the performance gap. These interventions could be changes in the:

- academic program, e.g. adding or removing a course, revising course sequencing or admission criteria;
- curriculum, e.g., revising course content, materials, assignments, assessments, changing teaching techniques;
- academic processes, e.g., adding training or professional development, improving technology, modifying frequency or scheduling of course offerings;
- assessment plans/ processes, e.g., revising learning outcomes, data collection or analysis methods, information dissemination;

One of the reasons why making the transition from collecting, analyzing and presenting data to closing the loop is difficult is that identifying a performance gap between desired and actual performance is relatively easy, while determining the appropriate intervention/s to address the performance problem is challenging. Ewell (2009) noted that assessment evidence can identify a learning performance problem, but that this evidence does not suggest how the problem can be fixed. He continued by stressing the need for faculty engagement and discussion to uncover the causes behind the performance problem, in order to formulate appropriate interventions. Engaging faculty and eliciting insights into the cause of performance problems can also be a challenge. Faculty may view the enterprise of program assessment with skepticism and dread. Program assessment’s role in accreditation may result in it being viewed as a primarily bureaucratic exercise (Schoepp & Tezcan-Unal, 2017), but with implications for increased faculty accountability and scrutiny. Faculty may also view the opportunity cost of increased involvement with assessment as a loss of time to devote to teaching (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014).

A further reason why implementing this change is difficult is that taking action involves risk. No one wants to be responsible, or held accountable, for implementing an action which damages a program. As Blaich and Wise (2011) pointed out, “it’s far less risky and complicated to analyze data than it is to act (p.13).” Rather than act, there is a tendency to postpone action in favor of collecting additional data.

One of the solutions to these issues is to provide faculty with tools that facilitate effective planning, collection, analysis and reporting of assessment evidence which are oriented to the goal of closing the loop, as well as additional tools to facilitate the actual closing the loop process in pursuit of improved student learning.

SUPPORTING THE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

As Suskie (2015) stated, “the single best way to implement your quality agenda is to design everything you do to support that agenda” (p.240). In addressing our first challenge; the lack of consistency and quality in data

collection and in the quality of the annual assessment reports and plans, similar to Qatar University (Al-Thani, Abdelmoneim, Daoud, Cherif, & Moukarzel, 2014), we realized that providing faculty with well-designed tools that communicated expectations, and provided guidance and quality feedback, was essential in supporting and achieving our desired level of quality. The importance of these tools is emphasized in the performance improvement literature, where it is exemplified in Gilbert's Behavioral Engineering Model (BEM) (see Table1).

Table 1. Behavior Engineering Model

Environment	<p>1. Information</p> <p>1. Roles and performance expectations are clearly defined; employees are given relevant and frequent feedback about the adequacy of performance.</p> <p>2. Clear and relevant guides are used to describe the work process.</p> <p>3. The performance management system guides employee performance and development.</p>	<p>2. Resources</p> <p>1. Materials, tools and time needed to do the job are present.</p> <p>2. Processes and procedures are clearly defined and enhance individual performance if followed.</p> <p>3. Overall physical and psychological work environment contributes to improved performance; work conditions are safe, clean, organized, and conducive to performance.</p>	<p>3. Incentives</p> <p>1. Financial and non-financial incentives are present; measurement and reward systems reinforce positive performance.</p> <p>2. Jobs are enriched to allow for fulfillment of employee needs.</p> <p>3. Overall work environment is positive, where employees believe they have an opportunity to succeed; career development opportunities are present.</p>
Individual	<p>6. Knowledge/ Skills</p> <p>1. Employees have the necessary knowledge, experience and skills to do the desired behaviors</p> <p>2. Employees with the necessary knowledge, experience and skills are properly placed to use and share what they know.</p> <p>3. Employees are cross-trained to understand each other's roles.</p>	<p>5. Capacity</p> <p>1. Employees have the capacity to learn and do what is needed to perform successfully.</p> <p>2. Employees are recruited and selected to match the realities of the work situation.</p> <p>3. Employees are free of emotional limitations that would interfere with their performance.</p>	<p>4. Motives</p> <p>1. Motives of employees are aligned with the work and the work environment.</p> <p>2. Employees desire to perform the required jobs.</p> <p>3. Employees are recruited and selected to match the realities of the work situation.</p>

The BEM, was originally conceived by Gilbert (1978), and was later adapted by Binder (1998) and Chevalier (2003). Commonly known as the six boxes model, the BEM is a diagnostic tool used for identifying and analyzing performance issues in the workplace. Though Chevalier and Binder have made minor changes in terms of the labeling of boxes and the order of operations, the model largely maintains Gilbert's original content and structure and its distinction between environmental and individual factors that affect work performance. Environmental factors refer to the support provided by the work environment, whereas individual factors are those which the employee brings to the workplace performance. Chevalier (2003) noted that, "Environmental factors are the starting point for analysis because they pose the greatest barriers to exemplary performance" (p.4), and stated that environmental factors are not only the starting point for diagnosing workplace performance, but that Information (e.g., feedback, guidance, clear expectations), and Resources (e.g., tools, materials, processes) are two areas where improvements provide high impact at relatively little cost. With this in mind, it made sense for us to take advantage of these high-impact, low- cost solutions and focus first on these areas to improve performance through the development of an extensive toolkit.

THE QUALITY IMPROVEMENT TOOLKIT

The QIT is a faculty resource which contains the following components.

1. Assessment plan and report templates

The assessment cycle is built around annual submission of assessment plans and reports by each academic program. Following guidelines from the Wabash study (Blaich & Wise, 2011), the minimum expectation is that each program assess two program learning outcomes each year through a combination of a direct measure and an indirect measure. Assessment of program learning outcomes are cycled through, so that over a course of a few years, they all have been assessed. The templates provide a standardized structure for items like the outcomes being assessed, the methods of assessment, the sampling plan, the results from the assessments, and descriptions of any corrective actions being implemented. Because of differences between the disciplines, some flexibility for template adherence is permitted, but in general, the templates are closely followed, thereby increasing institutional understanding about the assessment process and expectations.

2. **Assessment plan and report exemplars**
Though all assessment plans and reports are available on the website, a set of exemplars has been developed to demonstrate best practices. These have been created by synthesizing different components from a number of submissions, so that faculty members can see examples of excellent practices from across the institution. The exemplars are able to show excellence in both plan and report structure and in the assessment practices themselves.
3. **Assessment plan and report rubrics**
All submitted assessment plans and reports undergo a peer review process. The concept of peer review is a practice to which academics are familiar and by having submissions reviewed by peers, not only administrators, the feedback is strengthened and faculty members learn of current practices, both weak and strong, across the institution. To normalize and guide the review process, a set of analytic rubrics have been developed which allows reviewers to evaluate plans and reports according to an agreed upon criteria which have been deemed essential to assessment. Reviewers are able to select the appropriate descriptors along the levels of performance and can add additional comments where necessary.
4. **Learning outcomes assessment handbook**
The purpose of the handbook is to describe in a narrative format the entire assessment process, to provide a history and rationale for existing practices, and to link to key documentation. Given that new faculty become involved in assessment each year, the handbook provides them with a single source to learn about learning outcomes assessment. If followed, the handbook would enable a neophyte faculty member to have a meaningful understanding of assessment.
5. **Assessment calendar and steps**
While the assessment handbook provides an overall understanding of the assessment processes, the assessment calendar and steps documents offer the necessary details to conduct assessments each year. Updated annually, the calendar gives key dates such as when to submit drafts of plans and reports, when the peer review processes will be conducted, when to analyze data, and when final drafts of documents are due. The assessment steps document serves as a checklist of what each unit should be doing when, in order to effectively implement the narrative shared in the handbook. These are important elements such as drafting reports or sharing results with faculty to generate ideas for improvement.
6. **Guidelines for drafting learning outcomes**
Even though Zayed University has a long history of learning outcomes and learning outcomes assessment, up until recently there had not been any institutional guidelines about writing quality learning outcomes, whether these were at the course or program level. As part of the CAA accreditation process, and in concert with the new national qualifications framework, these guidelines have been developed. They provide the current best practices, suggest things to avoid, give examples of well-crafted learning outcomes, and present operational verbs (Adelman, 2015) which can lead to precise and meaningful learning outcomes. Overall, the quality of learning outcomes has increased immensely over the past few years.
7. **Professional development calendar**
Stemming from faculty feedback about professional development opportunities, the professional development calendar is developed at the start of each academic year, discussed with the institution's assessment committee, and updated as required. It provides a series of workshops and presentations that are designed to increase the assessment knowledge and skills of faculty members. The priorities change depending on faculty input and the needs of the institution. For example, over the past two years with the commitment to align to the national qualifications framework, there have been many sessions concentrating on writing good learning outcomes since this forms the foundation of the alignment process.
8. **PLAIR consultation tool**
In 2014 Fulcher, Good, Coleman, and Smith, published a National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment paper introducing an assessment model to effectively close the assessment loop by increasing student learning following interventions. They named the model PLAIR- Program Learning Assessment-Intervention-Reassessment, and it led to the development of our own tool known as the PCT- the PLAIR Consultation Tool. The tool was created to guide the consultation process between the Office of Educational Effectiveness (OEE) and an academic program embarking on a PLAIR initiative. PLAIR

allows programs to focus their assessment work on one learning outcome for multiple years, rather than cycling through learning outcomes. It requires in-depth and extensive assessment work, program-wide faculty buy-in, and is designed to lead to meaningful improvements in student learning, which remains a constant challenge in assessment (Blaich & Wise, 2011; Fulcher et al. 2014).

9. Syllabi templates

With CAA accreditation the institution has been required to standardize and improve upon its existing course syllabi. The Commission has highlighted the need to more clearly present the weekly topic schedule, demonstrate alignment between course learning outcomes and assignments, and provide clearer explanations of assignments and their associated marking schemes. Working through university committees, syllabi templates have been developed for the general education, majors, and graduate programs which set the minimum standards and ensure compliance with the national accreditor.

10. Syllabi exemplars

As was done with assessment plan and report exemplars, syllabi exemplars have been created by synthesizing different components from a number of existing syllabi. Though the syllabi templates are quite structured, they set a minimum benchmark and the exemplars provide examples of syllabi that are in compliance with the CAA, but also demonstrate excellence in that students have all the necessary course information in a clear, concise, and meaningful manner.

11. QFE alignment templates

Within the UAE's higher education and under the auspices of the CAA, alignment of all academic programs to the national qualification framework, the Qualifications Framework Emirates (QFE), became mandatory by the end of 2015. The institution used this mandate to drive systematic improvement in both program and course level learning outcomes. In doing this we created alignment templates, bachelors and masters level, with three major sections. The first section shows alignment between program learning outcomes and the QFE outcomes; the second section demonstrates alignment of program learning outcomes to the courses; the third section shows the individual course learning outcomes alignment to the program learning outcomes. The benefit of the QFE alignment process is that faculty must be deliberate in their drafting of learning outcomes and must reflect meaningfully on how learning outcomes are linked together. As learning outcomes or programs change, the QFE alignment documents must be updated to reflect the current reality.

12. Course files guide

The course files process is an initiative from the CAA, so it is relatively new to the institution. The Commission requires that institutions maintain updated files for each course of instruction with enough information so that a reviewer or faculty member could determine whether or not a course is meeting its learning outcomes (Commission for Academic Accreditation, 2011). There are seven specific sections that constitute a course file, and these include items such as teaching materials, assessment instruments, examples of student work, and a faculty reflection on the course. Course files are stored electronically and to guide the process and demonstrate compliance and effective practices, a support document has been developed. The support document emerged from faculty interactions and through an internal review of existing course files.

13. Course files reflection examples

One of the most important elements of a course file is the faculty reflection on the course. This is where faculty are able to reflect on issues such as the appropriateness of the learning outcomes, the extent to which the syllabus was covered, the degree to which students achieved the learning outcomes, or any problems that might have occurred. This reflection can be a meaningful process if faculty see its value and see how their reflections are leading to course improvements. To facilitate the completion of faculty reflections a set of examples of both poor and high quality reflections have been created. It is expected that by showcasing high quality reflections faculty members will recognize how this can lead to areas for improvement.

14. Course files audit sheet

Part of the institutional course files process is to ensure they are being completed, that they are completed in a meaningful manner, and that they are in compliance with the expectations of the CAA. To accomplish this, an audit sheet has been produced which will be used by the OEE as it conducts a semester-by-semester review of samples of course files from each academic program. This document confirms to programs what is being reviewed and offers a medium for the OEE to suggest areas for improvement.

By providing the assessment resources that constitute the QIT, we have successfully addressed the environmental barriers to achieving quality. Exemplars, templates, and PLAIR consultations, for example, provided guidance and allowed us to reduce faculty barriers to meeting expectations of consistency and quality of program assessment and other quality assurance mechanisms. We achieved notably higher quality submissions of assessment plans and reports, and also reduced assessment committee frustration and time

consumed in completing the assessment process. Reducing these initial barriers, allowed us to begin focusing on our second challenge, which was orientating assessment committee members towards a focus on closing the loop.

OUTCOMES

Though not equal in importance or priority, each of the processes and resources are important elements in an assessment program and in helping our organization use assessment data to improve student achievement. The introduction of assessment plan and report templates and exemplars has led to higher quality initial submissions, reducing both time and frustration in revision, and making the process less burdensome. The recent introduction of a planning for use and follow up sections should help ensure that faculty are engaged in the discussion and analysis of student assessment, and that closing the loop actions are considered, implemented and reviewed.

Increased emphasis on providing consultations as assessment committee personnel, particularly those new to the role, begin the process of writing their plans and reports, has helped provide clarity and reduce frustration. These consultations provide the additional benefit as opportunities for us to raise opportunities for research, and to encourage assessment committee personnel who have adopted best practices. As a result of these consultations, we have recognized several of these faculty members and have showcased their achievements at our annual assessment retreat and other professional development opportunities. At the department level, we recognize a college which has exemplified assessment best practices with our annual Best Practices in Assessment Award.

Our assessment peer review panel's use of a rubric provides a common framework for evaluating plan and report submissions, which facilitates the peer review process. Having a peer review has also enabled colleagues to see how assessment is conducted in other units. With the inclusion of a calendar and checklist to our assessment handbook, assessment committee personnel now have a simple, but comprehensive, 2-page document to stay aware of exactly what is required and when throughout the assessment calendar. This type of document was actually requested by a faculty at our recent assessment retreat, and we were pleased to reply that it was available in the most recent update of our learning outcomes assessment handbook.

We are currently piloting PLAIR with two colleges and are in the initial stage of implementation. Faculty members with whom we are working report that they are pleased to have this opportunity to focus on closing the assessment loop and improving student performance under the guidance of the OEE. The use of the PCT has resulted in fruitful discussions which have brought forth a variety of suggestions for improving student performance, and has led faculty members to develop much improved assessment tools that are being implemented across a number of courses.

LESSONS LEARNED AND CONCLUSION

Establishing the QIT of resources and processes plays a vital role in developing a culture of quality, assessment and learning. It provides an environmental solution (Gilbert, 1978) through which faculty can work towards a quality assured academic program. Though institutions will create their own versions of a toolkit, which best fit within their particular context, the items that constitute the toolkit have been tried and tested through use and are the mechanisms noted in assessment literature. In the 4-year process of constructing our QIT, a number of lessons have been learnt:

- Let faculty lead the process as much as possible.
- Provide opportunities for faculty to learn from one another.
- Offer regular professional development opportunities targeted to different levels of expertise.
- Seek support from higher leadership because they set the institutional tone.
- Make assessment planning include planning to use assessment results- without this it will be difficult having results lead to meaningful actions.
- Be aware of the expectations from different accreditors.
- Work hard to keep the focus on continuous improvement, not on accreditation compliance.
- Assess the assessment program and share the results with stakeholders. Any assessment program needs to be demonstrating the use of data to drive decisions to be seen as credible.
- Consultations, consultations, consultations.

While not actual documents, assessment consultations between the OEE and leadership of each academic program are held around the assessment plan and report submission due dates as a minimum requirement. In some cases, if programs are doing well it is a general update meeting with possible suggestions for improvements or praise to continue the good work. In other situations, a few meetings may be required to ensure

that programs are on track, are taking the necessary steps to be effective in their assessment practices, or are working on specific improvement projects with the OEE.

In summary, the QIT has addressed the environmental needs (Gilbert, 1978) of the institution as it seeks to further improve its assessment program and assure institutional quality. Successfully borrowing concepts and tools from the field of performance improvement and applying them to academic program level assessment highlights the value in looking beyond the academic literature in search of solutions. Whether one is seeking to improve performance in the academic workplace or traditional workplace, the need to provide employees with the requisite feedback, tools and processes is a common essential. Given the assessment program's recent international recognition, we feel it represents a best practice that is worthy of emulation.

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