Evaluation Perspectives:
Interrogating Open and Distance Education
Provision at an Australian Regional University

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INTRODUCTION

Central Queensland University (CQU) encapsulates many of the recent changes to Australian universities. These changes include the imperative to diversify funding sources, the expansion of international education, the blurring of modes of study and the proliferation of online and other technologically based teaching and learning. This paper canvasses several of the issues framing current and potential strategies for evaluating the effectiveness of Central Queensland University's open and distance education provision. These issues include the institution's ongoing search for its identity; historically grounded practices and assumptions around open and distance education; changing demographics; expectations of contemporary university students and teachers; and evident tensions around the commercialization of some elements of the University's operations. The associated strategies are designed to respond to these issues at the same time as promoting diversity, equity and sustainability in the institution's open and distance education offerings. In combination, these issues and strategies derive from implicit – and too often unexamined – assumptions about which kinds of evaluation are viewed as 'legitimate' and about who gets to make those judgments. The paper concludes by considering some of the key implications of current evaluation practices and the conceptual framework for understanding what is seen as 'legitimate' evaluation (and by whom) in contemporary Australian universities' open and distance education offerings, and the potential role of evidence-based practice in reinvigorating that debate.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CQU

CQU is an Australian multi-campus regional university with an increasing focus on internationalizing its student population. Founded in 1967, it became a university in its own right in 1991 (Cryle,1992). Currently CQU has thirteen (13) campuses including five in regional Queensland, four in major Australian metropolitan centres and four campuses in other countries. In 2003 at CQU, 7 261 students (34%) were designated as 'distance education' or 'external students', while 1187 students (5.5%) were designated as "multimodal" or "internal and external" students (Luck, Jones, McConachie & Danaher, 2004, p. 5). The remaining 12 903 students (60.5%) were deemed to be 'face-to-face' or 'internal' students. Total student numbers more than tripled between 1990 and 2003, rising from 6000 to 21000 approximately. This increase was accompanied by an increasing diversity of the student profile. Up until the early 1990s, CQU's student population was approximately 50% internal and 50% external enrolments, and the majority of students were Australian. With the creation of the international campuses in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and the Gold Coast during the 1990s, international students now form nearly 40% of CQU's student population and they originate from 121 countries (UniNews Weekly, 9 January 2004; cited in Luck et al., 2004, pp. 4-5). Moreover, the proportion of school leavers and mature age students has shifted dramatically, so that in 2003 only one-fifth of new students are recent school leavers (p. 5).

EVALUATING TEACHING and LEARNING in a CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

A major organizational response to evaluation processes occurred in 2001 when the University implemented a new policy for evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning. The document System-Wide Student Evaluation: Evaluation Guide (Central Queensland University, 2000), sets out guidelines for evaluation. These guidelines focus on a particular approach to evaluation, namely on surveys of students' opinions about their experience of teaching and course presentation. This evaluation approach was developed to show that the University has processes to deal with quality issues and has robust public accountability mechanisms. This evaluation information is also available for other purposes, for example:

- to teaching staff for professional self assessment;
- for staff appraisal and development; and
- to support teachers' applications for promotion and tenure.

The policy guidelines (p. 5) clearly state that a student satisfaction survey is only one evaluation tool, and that teaching staff should collect evidence by other means, for example: a journal to record reflection on practice and self-evaluation; students' journals outlining their reflection about the effectiveness of their own learning process; peer or external expert review of courses; head of school review of courses; and educational expert reviews. Staff are encouraged to compile the results of such personal, professional evaluation processes in a 'Teaching Portfolio'.

However it is the 'official' student satisfaction survey process which is seen by many staff as the legitimate form of evaluation, because it has been given priority, is managed by the University and is done well. Evaluation conducted by individual teaching staff to improve learning is not seen to have the same status, and there is no evidence to suggest that it is done systematically by all teachers (Nouwens, Ross, Thomson, Harreveld & Danaher, 2004). This personal, unofficial and informal evaluation which is directed at improving the teaching process is a critical aspect of a professional approach to teaching (Smith & Lovat, 2003). However the status of the official compulsory University surveys of student satisfaction, together with recent government pressure for both summative evaluation of teaching and learning and use of performance indicators as measures of quality and accountability (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004), encourages the development of an evaluation culture that gives legitimacy to these perceptions of 'objective' measures and denies the importance of approaches to evaluation that have the potential to be more effective in improving teaching and learning. The critical reflection that follows begins with an analysis of the current 'high status' – and 'high stakes' – evaluation processes. Issues arising from a recent staff forum on evaluation are identified and used to inform this analysis.

UNIVERSITY-WIDE TEACHING and LEARNING EVALUATION AT CQU

Within CQU, Evaluation Services (ES) is a unit designated to provide course evaluation and teaching evaluation services and to maintain policy and standards for evaluation. ES facilitates the development and distribution of approved survey instruments, provides a collection service for surveys and provides data entry, analysis and reporting services. Course and teaching evaluations within CQU have been separated into four questionnaire models (see Table 1). The questions are suited to a variety of delivery modes including classroom and distance online evaluations. In addition to these formal, University-wide course and teaching evaluations that gather students' opinions of courses and teaching while they attend the University, the Evaluation Services unit also conducts the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS). The GDS is the annual questionnaire issued to graduates of all Australian universities to determine employment statistics for recent graduates. The GDS also includes questions (Course Experience Questionnaire survey) that summatively evaluate the quality of programs of study by seeking students' perceptions of the quality of their whole-of-program learning experience after they graduate.

Table 1: Survey questionnaire models

Student Evaluation of Courses (SEC) (Central Queensland University, 2003a)	Internal (face-to-face)	Questionnaire: 20 closed questions (13 core and 7 optionals chosen from a question bank) plus 3 open-ended questions
	Flexible (online or external education)	Questionnaire: 20 core, closed questions and 3 open-ended questions
Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) (Central Queensland University, 2003b)	Internal (face-to-face)	Questionnaire: 20 closed questions (10 core and 10 optional questions) plus 3 open-ended questions
	Flexible (online or external education)	Questionnaire: 10 core, closed questions and 3 open-ended questions

Issues in evaluating teaching and learning at CQU
A forum with teaching staff about evaluation of teaching and learning at CQU (Nouwens et al., 2004) identified eight issues that are described briefly in the following paragraphs:

- **Response rates and representativeness of surveys;**
- **Survey fatigue;**
- **Student perceptions of effectiveness;**
- **Cultural interpretations;**
- **Student diversity;**
- **Time-related pedagogical considerations;**
- **Teaching appraisals; and**
- **Student anonymity and trust.**

RESPONSE RATES AND REPRESENTATIVENESS OF SURVEYS

Completion of teaching (SET) and course evaluation (SEC) questionnaires is not compulsory. Response rates of over 80% of course enrolment have been achieved from face-to-face classes. However, online surveys generally used with distance education students result in very low response rates, less than 20%. The low response rate for distance education students raises questions about bias in the responses. The responders may be a self-selecting group; for example, successful students or students who had difficulty with the course or the teacher.

Survey fatigue
Students may be requested to complete both course evaluations and teaching evaluations in four courses in the same week. Students' comments indicate they are over-surveyed and, because participation is not compulsory, there is a growing reluctance to complete them. Whether or not this affects students' judgements and the quality of their responses is open to argument and highlights the need for investigation into 'survey fatigue' (Luck et al., 2004).

Student perceptions of effectiveness
Forum participants also expressed concerns that some students doubt the effectiveness of the surveys for improving the quality of their courses and that this may influence the quality of their responses. Survey results are quarantined until after grades are certified so the SET/SEC information cannot be used to improve the learning experience of the surveyed cohort of students. There was concern that students may perceive evaluation as a University marketing tool, rather than an opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses in order to eliminate or reduce the latter.

Cultural interpretations
Culturally influenced interpretations of the survey instruments and interpretations of the

evaluation process itself may lead significant groups in the student population to respond differently to the same questions. Analysis of responses indicates that the wording and intention of the questions are interpreted differently through different cultural lenses.

Student diversity

Many CQU students study part-time, in distance mode and have work and family commitments. On the other hand, a significant number of students study full-time, on-campus, with easy access to learning resources. These different groups may be expected to respond differently to questions relating to issues such as study workload. Such demographic factors are not identified in the survey questions.

Time-related pedagogical considerations: Research shows that the timing of questions can influence results (Kahnemann, 2000). Significant learning experiences and the average intensity and recency of these experiences are likely to bias responses to questions about the quality of learning experiences. Some approaches to teaching seek to challenge students to think for themselves and take responsibility for their own learning. Evidence from the staff forum suggests that the use of student-centred teaching approaches (such as Problem Based Learning) could result in poor scores on questions relating to items like course organization and support from students who prefer 'transmission' teaching. Surveys conducted before students are debriefed following completion of projects are more likely to produce such results. Perry (1988) points out that the development of complex attributes like commitment to ethical behavior and a preparedness to take responsibility for one's own learning occur in different rates in each student. Development is slow, complex and probabilistic (Knight & Yorke, 2003); it is not something that teachers can control, though appropriate pedagogy can scaffold and accelerate development.

Teaching Appraisals

Teaching staff at the forum expressed concern that Faculty supervisors, Deans and promotion committees may use the SET and SEC reports as authoritative indicators of the quality of staff performance. There was a perception that the scores on survey questions were used by these people as an objective measure of staff performance, and that qualitative information about performance was not seen to have the same level of legitimacy.

Student anonymity and trust: Anonymity of student identity in SEC and SET data is designed to encourage students to voice concerns without fear of academic retribution. However, anonymity also makes it difficult to use the survey reports for formative improvement of teaching and courses because improvement of the teaching/learning process often requires a detailed understanding of the contexts that produced the data, and the identity of the learners is central to that understanding. This view is supported by Curzon-Hobson (2002), who suggests that critical, dialogical learning that is central to the development of professional graduate attributes requires a pedagogy of trust between teachers and learners.

AN EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The evaluation policy and processes that have been developed at CQU are part of a pattern of ongoing responses to the complex changes occurring in teaching and learning at CQU. In this context, traditional approaches to the evaluation of teaching and the quality of courses have presented a range of challenging issues identified in the aforementioned staff forum (Nouwens et al., 2004). New approaches are needed to develop a robust and effective evaluation framework that reflects complex dilemmas inherent in the disembodiment of knowledge via formalised teaching and learning (Snowden, 2002). Here we are arguing that, in the field of higher education, evaluation should be considered in terms of three different contexts: (1) learners; (2) teaching and learning processes; and (3) institutionalised sites in which that teaching and learning take place. This three-fold evaluation framework is developed using Habermas' (1996) analysis of human cognitive interest that identifies such interests as emancipatory, practical and technical.

Some understanding of the problems of evaluating teaching processes in complex

organisations like universities may be gained from ideas emerging in the field of knowledge management. Snowden claims that "we always know…more than we have the physical time or the conceptual ability to say. I can speak in five minutes what would otherwise take me…a couple of hours to write down" (2002, p. 102). This notion that we lose something in the telling is crucial to an understanding of the evaluation process, because it invites reflection upon what is lost when we attempt to "disembody" (Snowden, 2002) the teaching and learning experience by describing it in numbers and text in survey questionnaires (SEC, SET), interview transcripts or other evaluation tools.

Yet large organisations and governments cannot operate without some degree of disembodiment of knowledge. To make timely and effective decisions, senior managers seek information that has been filtered from the rich and idiosyncratic detail of individuals' experiences. Thus, while teachers and learners develop understandings of the learning process that are based on specific, experiential knowledge and mutual relationships, aspects of which are difficult to generalise and articulate; managers develop a disembodied "organizational view derived from an abstract understanding of the task" (Warne, Ali, Linger & Pascoe, 2003, p. 307).

Disembodiment of knowledge incurs two types of costs. First, to articulate or to document the experience of learning in an authentic way requires an investment of time and thus requires resources. For a student to describe a learning experience to support the process of personal self-reflection may require only a few rough notes on paper. The same student would need to keep a more comprehensive journal to share the same learning experience in any detail with peers or with the class teacher. The greater the distance between a student's experience of learning and the recipient of that student's description of that experience, the more disembodied is the knowledge expressed, and the greater will be the cost of recording a faithful description of the experience. The second type of cost incurred in the disembodiment process is a reduction of authenticity in the description. As Snowden (2002) notes above, we cannot say or record everything we know, because some knowledge remains tacit and no description can accurately replicate a learning experience.

The information environments of learners, teachers and managers are very different, and so are their interests and purposes. Learners in higher education often need support to develop skills for reflecting upon, evaluating and improving personal learning experiences (Knight & Yorke, 2003). For teachers, evaluation is at the heart of curriculum processes (Smith & Lovat, 2003). Teachers seek information to evaluate learners' progress and the contribution of the teaching–learning relationships to that learning. Governments and university managers seek to ensure that the institution operates effectively and efficiently with transparent accountability for the disbursement of publicly funded resources (Department of Education, Science and Technology, 2004). All three perspectives are legitimate. Effective evaluation to monitor and improve learning requires an appropriate balance among the interests of the learners, the teachers and management.

We contend that improvement of the quality of higher education depends on a commitment to evidence-based practice that fully involves all participants in the education process. This requires the intentional development of an institutional culture of evaluation that recognizes and integrates the learning, teaching and management interests in evaluation and gives appropriate emphasis to each interest. Habermas (1996) provides a useful framework for analyzing these three interests in evaluation and integrating them in a culture of evaluation. In human social activity, he identifies three areas of cognitive interest, namely:

- technical cognitive interest relates to the use of knowledge in exercising predictive control over objectivised processes, over natural processes and work, to produce the goods that sustain life and society. For our purposes in this paper, this is the prime interest of the manager of the educational process.
- practical cognitive interest relates to the use of knowledge in making meaning, and for the preservation and expansion of mutual understanding required for practical consensual action. It is built upon cultural tradition, particularly on the use of language to create and share meaning and to encourage organised human activity. Teachers and learners operate together in this area of interest.

- **emancipatory cognitive interest** relates to the self-theories (Yorke & Knight, 2004) and use of knowledge in sharing power over human activity. It involves the capacity of individuals to reflect independently and responsibly on social activity and to act autonomously (Smith & Lovat, 2003). This represents the learners' interests in the educational process.

Each of these three areas of cognitive interest adopts a particular mode of inquiry to produce legitimate knowledge, and each of these modes of inquiry follows particular logic and methods. These modes of inquiry determine the legitimacy of evaluation in each area of cognitive interest and for each interest group (Habermas, 1996).

Table 2: Relationship of cognitive interest to inquiry modes in evaluation

Cognitive interest	technical	practical	emancipatory
Interest group	management	Teachers–learners	learners
Inquiry mode	empirical-analytical	historical-hermeneutic	social-critical

Table 2 can be expanded to explore the nature of evaluation for each interest group, to indicate the appropriate intent of evaluation in each case and to indicate what evaluation approaches could legitimately be used. This expansion is based on Habermas' work (1996) and on Snowden's study (2002) of how organisations seek to manage productively the internal flow and development of knowledge that produces improvement. The evaluation framework in Table 3 suggests that the three interests in evaluation are both legitimate and very different in purpose and method. Thus the kinds of evaluation a manager requires to support decision-making should not be used as substitute measures for evaluation of teaching/learning processes, or to determine whether effective learning has occurred.

Table 3: A framework of purposes and approaches to evaluation

technical interest in evaluation	practical interest in evaluation	emancipatory interest in evaluation
develop predictable, controlled learning systems	promote collaborative and productive teacher–learner relationships	achieve transformative and responsible personal development
provide explicit, transparent policy, procedures, training	develop a community of learning with clear, shared objectives	develop trust in learning networks, shared values and experiences
obtain generalisable, reliable information to make decisions about others	interpret and share meaning to guide and improve learning	reflect critically on personal activities to construct effective self-theories
use mainly summative evaluation: best practice, measurement, ranking, performance indicators	use mainly formative evaluation: good practice, dialogue, collaboration, feedback, improvement	use mainly reflective self-evaluation of personal action: self-reporting, journals, portfolios
legitimacy of evaluation based on objective, analytical processes and institutional authority	legitimacy of evaluation based on authority negotiated and shared between teachers and learners, and on discipline and learning community standards of good practice	legitimacy of evaluation based on personal values, beliefs and commitment and the authority of each learner's personal experience

DISCUSSION

The complexities of technology-based education in a multi-mode, multi-campus university present a challenge for the evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning. The issues identified at the CQU staff forum, issues that were described earlier in this paper, indicate a need for more robust and holistic evaluation frameworks than the simple concepts of evaluation that have been used in traditional higher education. Such evaluation frameworks should recognize the interests of managers, teachers and learners in the educational process. They should understand the corresponding evaluative interests of these groups, namely technical, practical and emancipatory, and recognize that each area legitimately involves the application of different evaluative processes.

The SEC/SET surveys described earlier are 'technical' and largely summative in that they can usefully indicate to managers that students have a problem with some aspect of a course (e.g., workload, clarity of objectives). However the reports give little detailed information about the nature of the problem or how to fix it. From the point of view of CQU student respondents, the surveys are summative because they can have no impact on learning in their current course; accordingly the staff forum indicated that students might see these surveys as providing information for marketing courses rather than for improving them. From the University's point of view they are summative accountability measures required by the government. The university is seen to support this formal, technical type of evaluation with staff and resources (see Figure 1), and has integrated requirements for this aspect of evaluation into procedures to support policy (Central Queensland University, 2003a, 2003b).

While policy guidelines to evaluation (Central Queensland University, 2000) invite teaching staff to develop evaluation portfolios to support the SEC/SET surveys with authentic descriptions of the teaching/learning process, there is little support available to implement this.

The policy guidelines do not mention the role of learner self-evaluation in the evaluation process, although a capacity for lifelong learning is nominated as an attribute that the University seeks to develop in its graduates. Thus the emphasis at CQU is on the use of evaluation for management purposes, and little explicit organizational support is provided for evaluation to improve teaching or learning. Indeed staff forum comments indicate that at least some teachers have a perception that evaluation for management purposes has become a de facto standard for teaching evaluation.

If universities are to meet demands to develop effective professional capabilities in graduates, then student-focused emancipatory interest in evaluation should receive more extensive and explicit attention in teaching (Scott, Yates & Wilson, 2001). Such capabilities require the explicit development of emotional intelligence and robust understanding of self that grows from a capacity to reflect critically on one's experience, motivation, responsibility, commitment and sense of identity (Holmes, 2000; Knight & Yorke, 2003; Perry, 1988). However, traditional approaches to higher education have made content the official, explicit discourse, while personal development was a hidden agenda that was not formally recognized in program or course management. Thus the official processes used to evaluate learning focus attention on the content of what is learned, not on the personal development of capabilities that higher education now seeks to make an explicit outcome of learning. For this reason, the evaluation of learning needs to be extended from the traditional focus on content to include the evaluation of the effectiveness of learners' personal development, and that requires the use of evaluation processes that align with emancipatory interests.

The practical interest in evaluation relates to the relationships between teachers and learners. Like any professional behaviour, effective teaching and curriculum development depend on evaluation (Smith & Lovat, 2003). Such evaluation ranges from momentary interpretation of individual and class responses with consequential feedback, to more reflective processes that use notes on teaching events, documented reflection in journals and scholarship and research in teaching. Effective higher education invites learners to

engage in a journey of inquiry into the world and self. Curzon-Hobson (2000) argues that this spirit of inquiry grows in a trusting relationship and a sense that the teacher will both care about and challenge the learner: "students must sense the teacher's willingness and passion to hear" (p. 269). This capacity to hear each learner and respond to that learner's concerns is central to this practical interest in evaluation, to the teacher obtaining an understanding of the learner's understanding and responding appropriately. Developing a productive teacher/learner relationship involves more than determining whether a student has "confidence in the teacher that the content of a program is 'up to date' and that methods of assessment are 'fair' or 'valid' (Curzon-Hobson, 2000, p. 268). Yet these are matters that management accountability surveys seem intent on determining.

Figure 1: Holistic evaluation of teaching and learning
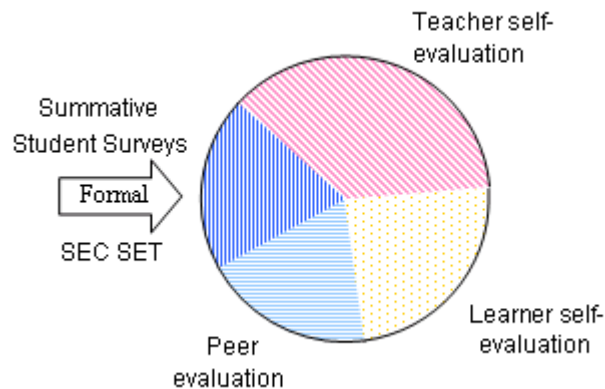
In summary, a holistic evaluation framework must give appropriate weight to management, teacher and learner interests in education. Figure 1 indicates that the focus of attention in the practice of evaluation at CQU has been on management interests. The increasing complexity of university operations requires that the organization give more explicit attention to teacher evaluation of the teaching–learning process (using methods like peer- and self-evaluation), and the development in learners of self-evaluation skills and the development in the university of a learning environment conducive to the practice of such skills.

CONCLUSION

Using this evaluation framework to analyse the concerns expressed about the course and teaching evaluation processes at CQU suggests that a clear distinction be made among evaluation for management purposes on the one hand, and evaluation of teaching/learning processes and student self-evaluation of learning on the other. The SEC/SET surveys are effective educational management tools for identifying strengths and areas of weakness in course planning and delivery that require further investigation. However, while they are effective evaluations for management purposes, they are neither authentic evaluations of the teaching–learning process nor effective evaluations of the individual learning that has occurred. The development of a culture of evaluation of teaching and learning is an issue for teaching professionals, it can be supported and promoted by institutional encouragement and use of reflective teaching portfolios and evaluative or research focused scholarship of teaching. Studies should also investigate the effectiveness of the learners' emancipatory interests and explore the impact of the education process on development of self-reflection and self-evaluation capabilities that provide a foundation for high-level attributes that graduates are expected to develop.

Such a holistic framework for evaluation is required to establish the legitimate role of different approaches to evaluation, and to justify a more balanced allocation of time and resources to improving students' learning. A robust conceptual framework is essential in the complex and changing environment that is CQU. The complexity of teaching has increased with multi-mode teaching, the use of online, multimedia and videoconference technologies, the inclusion of international students and increasing numbers of mature

students on more campuses,. The University must ensure that evaluation processes related to its core activity — learning — keep pace with this change.

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