

Internal evaluation systems and the creation of a peerless bureaucracy

Simon Burgess, CQUniversity and Monash University

Abstract

In recent years universities have worked hard to develop internal evaluation systems. This paper first discusses the development of statements about ‘course learning outcomes’, ‘programme learning outcomes’ and ‘graduate attributes’ and recognises that these initiatives do serve certain worthwhile purposes. Given that the statements are concerned only with the *minimum* standards to be attained by all students, however, what they can achieve is quite limited. They help to prevent certain forms of inadequacy but they do nothing to inspire any rise above mediocrity. To ensure high standards of teaching and learning and to inspire continuous improvements, far more is required. While student evaluations and peer evaluations both have a positive contribution to make, in most Australian universities peer evaluation is a far from prominent feature. Following a recent and remarkably successful trial, a *peer partnership* approach to teaching evaluation is championed here as being eminently worthy of wider encouragement and institutional support.

Key words: Evaluation; course learning outcomes; programme learning outcomes; peer partnership; graduate attributes

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Introduction

Many commentators have inveighed against the constant scrutiny and reporting requirements that ‘managerialism’ and ‘neo-liberalism’ are said to have brought to contemporary universities (Strathern, 2000; Hil, 2012; Meyers, 2012). Yet it must be recognised that universities today are accountable to students, education ministers, quality assurance agencies, industry partners and private patrons; these are just some of the many ‘stakeholders’ to whom we answer. Regardless of whether such accountability is inevitable, it is certainly one of the main reasons why, in the current circumstances, we need to have effective systems of internal evaluation.

While this paper represents a view that is unsympathetic towards those who have called for radical reform, it is not an endorsement of the *status quo*. At most universities regular course reviews, disciplinary reviews and programme reviews are now required as a matter of internal policy; student evaluations of teaching and course materials are now routine; and serious initiatives are in place to ensure that academics take heed of the feedback and recommendations thus provided. Upon

observing that such policies and practices are in place, however, we should not simply and blindly assure ourselves that all is well.

Contemporary university internal evaluation systems feature statements about course learning outcomes, programme learning outcomes, graduate attributes, course synopses, and course profiles. With regard to nomenclature, what are referred to here as *courses* are also commonly known as ‘subjects’, ‘units’ and ‘modules’; they are the units of study which are typically completed in one ‘term’ or ‘semester’. Similarly, *course profiles* are also commonly known as ‘unit guides’ or ‘unit information guides’. A *programme* is a normally a series of *courses* which make up a particular qualification, e.g., a ‘Bachelor of Arts’ degree, although admittedly such *programmes* are also commonly known elsewhere as *courses*.

Course learning outcomes and graduate attributes are of particular interest. Importantly, formal statements about graduate attributes and course learning outcomes do not simply help to govern academic standards. They are actually integral to the contemporary university’s system of internal evaluation in that they can quite legitimately be referred to in course reviews, disciplinary reviews, programme reviews, teaching evaluations and course evaluations, as well as when making decisions about the appropriateness or otherwise of proposed changes to courses and programmes. It is important to have a clear understanding of the purposes behind these statements of attributes and outcomes, however, because there is some danger of developing over-inflated hopes about what such statements can achieve. Some of the associated governance processes also need to be critically considered. As will be explained, there is a fairly simple way in which those processes could be streamlined while remaining equally robust.

If there are some clear limitations on what statements about attributes and outcomes can be expected to achieve, it is worth pointing out what more may be required. The argument to be advanced here is that although student evaluations of teaching are important, universities should not rely upon them to the virtual exclusion of peer evaluations. As a practical matter, this paper therefore outlines a *peer partnership* approach to peer evaluation and suggests that such an approach is eminently worthy of further encouragement and institutional support.

Outcomes and attributes

For a number of decades, both in Australia and internationally, formal statements about course learning outcomes (or *objectives*) have been developed for virtually every university course. In a first year engineering course (e.g., CQUniversity’s MATH11219 Engineering Mathematics), one of these outcomes could be

Use the Fundamental Theorem of Calculus to illustrate the relationship between the derivative and the integral of a function and apply the theorem to problems involving definite integrals,

whereas for a first year law course (e.g., CQUniversity’s LAWS11061 Contract A) one could be

Use clear and appropriate legal terminology and style to demonstrate an understanding of the fundamental concepts of contract law.

The coordinator of a course is expected to ensure that the activities, assignments and exams within it assess each student with respect to these course learning outcomes so that some assurance can be given that every student who successfully completes the course will indeed have gained the forms of knowledge, ability and

skill required for those outcomes. In addition, the various course learning outcomes for the courses that comprise a programme need to be ‘aligned with’ and ‘mapped to’ both the programme learning outcomes and the graduate attributes so as to ensure that for every student who successfully completes the programme, those outcomes will have been secured and those attributes cultivated.

In general, the nomination of these course learning outcomes, programme learning outcomes, and graduate attributes constitutes a considerable amount of work. There is some complexity associated with ensuring that the course learning outcomes are all genuinely assessed, and meeting all the ‘alignment’ and ‘mapping’ requirements poses an additional challenge. Similar alignment and mapping tasks are involved when developing the university’s official statements concerning their graduate attributes because these, in turn, need to be consistent with the Australian Qualifications Framework. As academics, these sorts of tasks are not necessarily the most exciting that university life provides. Yet in spite of the painstaking work that goes into course learning outcomes, programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes, two basic questions are seldom posed. First: precisely what purposes are they intended to serve? And second: precisely what can they be expected to achieve?

It is easy to see that the need for accountability and internal evaluation set the context for any serious answers to these questions. The phrase ‘audit culture’ is invariably used in a plainly pejorative way, and course learning outcomes, programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes are clearly integral to the aspects of university life that can allegedly be so described. Yet as the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern observes:

audit is almost impossible to criticise in principle—after all, it advances values that academics generally hold dear, such as responsibility, openness about outcomes and widening of access. (Strathern 2000, p. 3)

Even if this sort of concession seems obvious, it does constitute an important acknowledgement. And it is with this kind of general acknowledgement in mind that what is being advanced here is not a criticism of course learning outcomes, programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes *per se*. The view that is being urged, however, is that although such outcomes and attributes are central to university systems of internal evaluation, the purposes that they can serve are actually quite limited.

Virtually all universities now provide a course profile for each of their courses, and this document outlines the terms of a quasi-contractual ‘learning partnership’ between the university and the student. These course profiles are quite routinely over 10 pages long and they typically include a synopsis of the course together with the course learning outcomes and various details about the assessment tasks, textbooks and recommended readings. These course profiles tend to be of some use when conducting course reviews, disciplinary reviews and programme reviews. They can always be expected to convey a basic idea of what the course is about and they potentially provide a preliminary basis on which to work out whether or not the course has been developed competently and in a manner consistent with the stated objectives.

Some academics have complained that the official statements of outcomes are *formulaic* (Hil, 2012, ebook reference circa 1517 of 3363). This is understandable given that those who write the outcomes are normally instructed, or even required, to use verbs that serve as reminders that the various intended outcomes and attributes are to be *assessed*. It should be acknowledged, however, that although

this requirement does permit only a restricted range of verbs (e.g., students must ‘review’ and ‘explain’ rather than merely ‘comprehend’ or ‘understand’), it does allow a full and rich vocabulary of nouns, adjectives and adverbs with which to describe the various forms of knowledge, ability and skill that need to be gained. The formulaic nature of so many statements of outcome therefore actually has little or no bearing on why such statements, even when well devised, can serve only rather limited purposes.

To properly understand these limits the crucial point to appreciate is that the outcomes and attributes involved are supposed to be achieved by *all* students who complete the relevant course or programme requirements. This being so, they can be concerned only with the *minimum* standard, i.e., the standard attained by a student who gains a ‘pass’ with the barest possible margin. If the outcomes and attributes were to require *anything at all* that would merit a higher mark, then those outcomes and attributes would not necessarily be attained by students who merely pass with the barest possible margin. *Ipsa facto*, the university would be set to violate its own assurance that *all* graduates will attain those outcomes and attributes. Expressed bluntly: graduate attributes and course and learning outcomes refer merely to the attainments of the worst possible passing student.

When academics devise their statements of course learning outcomes, this reality is not necessarily in the forefront of their minds. One would be hard pressed to find any statements of course learning outcomes that read, for example, ‘Provided that you turn out to be a student of at least marginal competence you will end up being able to demonstrate a kind of passable adequacy in your comprehension of the basic concepts of contract law’. Indeed, it is quite common for course learning outcomes to be expressed in statements that gloss over the fact that in most cases, a student’s possession of the knowledge, ability or skill concerned is not a simple categorical issue, but rather a matter of degree. Consider, for example, the following course learning outcomes for an introductory course in contract law at CQUniversity.

On successful completion of this course, you will be able to:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the Australian legal system and commercial law concepts;
2. Communicate effectively in this discipline using appropriate style and terminology;
3. Recognise legal issues and locate, interpret and apply relevant provisions of case law and legislation considered in the course;
4. Identify the obligations, rights and remedies available to parties in commercial transactions.

(LAWS11056 - Introduction to Contract Law.)

Amongst the students who successfully complete this course, their abilities to respectively demonstrate, communicate, recognise and identify these things will vary. The students who manage to pass the course by the barest possible margin must possess those abilities at least to some minimally acceptable extent, lest the basic premises underlying course learning outcomes be broken. But there will also be those who possess far greater mastery with respect to these abilities, and as a corollary to this some of them will be amongst those who complete the course with something better than the barest possible pass.

It is worth noting that some statements of course learning outcomes quite plainly do recognise that the abilities, skills and forms of knowledge concerned are matters of degree. The course learning outcomes for a comparable course in contract law at Monash University, for example, are as follows.

At the conclusion of the unit, students should have achieved the following learning outcomes:

1. A coherent, critical and policy-aware understanding of the principles and rules of the law of contract;
2. A well developed ability to extract and evaluate principles and rules from primary and secondary law sources (cases, statutes, textbooks, articles and other writings about contract law);
3. A well developed ability to use these principles and rules to solve selected problems in examinations and other settings;
4. A well developed understanding of the dynamic nature of the law of contract;
5. A reasonable level of understanding of trajectories for further evolution of contract law's principles and rules.

(LAW2101 - Contract A.)

So where CQUniversity talks of an ability to *demonstrate, communicate, recognise* and *identify* certain things, Monash University talks of, for example, a ‘well developed ability’ or a ‘reasonable level of understanding’. To notice this difference is not to criticise either. Noticing this does, however, point towards certain subtleties that should be recognised.

Course learning outcomes (along with programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes) can be concerned with abilities, skills, attributes and forms of knowledge that are matters of degree; their possession is not always a simple categorical matter. As an obvious corollary to this, different students can possess them to differing yet adequate extents. Two different students may both be considered to have gained ‘a well developed understanding of the dynamic nature of the law of contract’, for example, and yet while one of them may possess nothing more than the basic knowledge required to pass the course, the other may have come to develop a breadth and depth of knowledge that allows her to accurately answer all manner of subtle and obscure questions about recent developments relating to common law remedies for damages and liquidated claims. So for students to be considered to have gained a particular outcome, they are not necessarily required to possess the relevant abilities, skills, attributes or forms of knowledge to the maximum extent possible. And given that they do need to be possessed by *all* students who successfully complete the course, the extent to which they need to be possessed can be no more than the extent to which they would be possessed by a student who gains a ‘pass’ with the barest possible margin. Again: course learning outcomes, programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes essentially refer merely to the attainments of the worst possible passing student.

While these reflections are somewhat depreciatory, the benefits provided by statements about course learning outcomes, programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes must be acknowledged.

First, it is worth bearing in mind that some university courses and programmes are accredited not simply by the universities that offer them, but also by external industry bodies, learned societies or professional associations. These external authorities need to be assured that graduates of particular courses and programmes possess certain levels of ability, skill and knowledge, and so these basic statements about outcomes and attributes can be expected to be of some interest to them. Of course any programme evaluation for accreditation purposes will always require far more than a perusal of statements about learning outcomes and graduate attributes. Yet it should not be denied that many accreditation bodies may well find such statements to be helpful. They do give at least a rough account of what the programme is designed to provide, together with some preliminary basis for comparison with potentially related or competing programmes.

A second benefit relates to the processes involved in approving new courses and programmes. Whenever academics propose to develop a new course or programme it is now incumbent upon them to create these formal statements about the various outcomes that the proposal is intended to produce. As noted above, given all the assessing, ‘aligning’ and ‘mapping’ work involved, this generally requires a considerable amount of painstaking work. Yet the painstaking nature of this work does give rise to a certain benefit. Put simply, it serves as both a disincentive and a quality control measure that helps to discourage and filter out proposals for new courses and programmes that are ill-considered.

Without denying these two benefits, however, it would still seem that statements about course learning outcomes, programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes can play only a rather limited role in any university’s system of internal evaluation.

Both students and prospective employers are generally interested in the knowledge, skills and attributes of *individual* students, not in the attainments of a course or programme’s worst possible passing student. And quite obviously, most students can be expected to have gained considerably better attainments than that particular kind of student.

Most importantly, however, it must be remembered that academics also have far more to be concerned with than the attainments of the worst possible passing student. Those interested in the development of a system of internal evaluation need to be concerned with *the entire spectrum of possible attainment*, from abject failure to the strongest ‘high distinction’. Following Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), the kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that results from communicating high expectations to students has often been referred to as the ‘Pygmalion effect’. This same basic insight has been further promulgated as a matter of principle by Chickering and Gamson (1987). For this reason, teaching academics would be indulging in a fairly serious dereliction of duty if they were to focus exclusively on the attainments of those deserving of the barest possible ‘pass’. In any effective system of evaluation, academics must also attend to the higher and more inspiring standards and possibilities. Statements about graduate attributes and learning outcomes are central to a university’s system of internal evaluation because those statements do help to prevent certain forms of inadequacy. In and of themselves, however, such statements do not help anyone to rise above mediocrity.

These observations raise some large questions. For example, how can universities help to ensure that their academics do communicate high expectations to their students, inspire them to do their best, and thereby rise above mediocrity? How can universities help to ensure that their academics are inspired to work towards the

continuous improvement of their course materials and their approaches to teaching? As will be explained further below, there are alternatives to simply mandating more and more regulation and compliance measures. In particular, there is good reason to think that all manner of helpful insights into teaching and learning can be prompted and shared through peer evaluations of teaching. First, however, it is worth understanding the bureaucracy that governs some of the existing elements in our evaluation systems.

Are robust processes necessarily bureaucratic?

In universities today, even minor adjustments to course synopses and course learning outcomes generally cannot be made without the completion of highly detailed documents followed by the scrutiny and support of at least two academic committees. Similar procedures often need to be followed when seeking to make certain adjustments to assessment tasks. These procedures are curiously bureaucratic and they clearly contribute to what Richard Hil describes as ‘rigidification’ (2012, ebook reference circa 1501 of 3363). In Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, or TEQSA, is apt to expect universities and other ‘registered higher education providers’ to ensure that there are ‘robust internal processes for design and approval of the course of study’ (Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF), 2011, p. 14) and ‘highly effective academic governance processes and a robust internal capability to monitor and improve its higher education courses of study’ (2011, p. 18).

There is no doubt that within universities around the world, the growth in student numbers has been accompanied by a disproportionate growth in bureaucracy. While the ratio of students to academic staff has generally remained fairly constant, in many places the ratio of non-academic to academic staff has increased dramatically. For example, in the United Kingdom the number of academics from 2003-4 to 2008-9 increased by 10 per cent. In the same period, however, the number of managers increased by 33 per cent. As Tariq Tahir of *The Guardian* explains:

The demands of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), for instance, mean that there is more paperwork required in course design and learning outcomes, for which students need to be assessed. (2010)

In the United States a similar trend is evident. Between 1975 and 2005 there was an increase in full-time academics of 51 per cent. In the same period, however, the increase in administrative staff was 85 per cent, and the increase in ‘other professionals’ (e.g., IT specialists, counsellors, auditors, accountants, admissions officers, human resources personnel and others) was 240 per cent. While the precise explanation for such disproportionate increases is not entirely clear, one of the common reasons cited concerns

the growing need to respond to mandates and record-keeping demands from federal and state governments as well as numerous licensure and accreditation bodies. (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 51)

It must be said that in Australia the disproportionate growth in bureaucracy appears to have been far more moderate, and in certain respects the growth in the number of academics has actually been greater than the growth in the number of ‘general’, ‘professional’ or ‘non-academic’ staff (Gallagher, 2011; Dobson, 2012; Jones et al. 1999). Such details may put some in mind of the suggestion once made by the

political scientist Alan Fraser Davies: ‘Australians have a characteristic talent for bureaucracy’ (1964, p. 4). But in any case, even in Australia there appears to be some room for improvement.

Very few of us are opposed to the adoption of robust processes but an important issue to raise is that of whether such processes need to be so bureaucratic. Consider, more specifically, the need or desire that course coordinators sometimes have to make certain adjustments to course synopses, course learning outcomes and assessment tasks. Course coordinators are apt to wish for such adjustments for various reasons. They may find certain elements of the course to be out of date; they may see that they can create a much stronger ‘research-teaching nexus’ through such adjustments; they may recognise (perhaps following student course evaluations) that student needs and interests would be better served through such changes; they may even see that such adjustments would allow the programme learning outcomes or graduate attributes to be addressed more effectively.

What then, would a less bureaucratic yet equally robust process look like? While the need for detailed documentation that explains the proposed changes is inevitable, there does not appear to be any compelling reason to *always* have the proposed changes scrutinized by several committees. In the first instance, rather than submit the proposed adjustments to the scrutiny of a series of committees, course coordinators could simply document and discuss the proposed changes with the head of programme. Given the work that has now gone into programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes, in a vast number of cases the crucial question to consider will be simply whether the proposed changes are consistent with the requirements of those programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes. The head of programme (who is commonly also the chair of the first relevant academic committee) is in the perfect position to answer this question, and could be authorised to approve the proposed changes, and to allow the associated documentation to be entered into the university’s various information and record-keeping systems. Of course there will be some occasions when the head of programme is unsure about the merits of the proposed changes, and in such cases the issue should generally be submitted for consideration through the full committee process. But in any case, it is important note that this process would be equally robust, the adjustment procedure would be radically expedited, much of the time that is currently required from a large number of committee members would be saved, and many a research-teaching nexus would be created or strengthened.

Embedding both student evaluation and peer evaluation

Strategies that enhance the quality of teaching and learning are central to any university’s system of internal evaluation, and the importance of inspiring continuous improvements is undoubted.

Student evaluations of teaching were first used at a university at least 85 years ago and they are now a very prominent and much touted element in virtually every university’s system of internal evaluation (Kulik, 2001, p. 9). But given that the results of such evaluations often have a significant bearing on gaining academic employment, securing tenure, achieving promotion and building a reputation, it is unsurprising that the validity of this form of evaluation has long been a matter of much study and great contention. Richard Hil contends that ‘As objective measurement tools, student evaluations and student experience surveys are about as

useful as bed sores’ (2012, ebook reference circa 1598 of 3363). There are, however, some broad and genuinely in-depth reviews of the literature that strongly suggest otherwise. James A. Kulik is responsible for one of the most impressive of these and he drew the following conclusion.

First, the studies show that student ratings agree well with other measures of teaching effectiveness: learning measures, student comments, expert observations, and alumni ratings. Second, research studies also show how useful ratings can be to teachers. The studies show that teachers profit from the information that the ratings provide... (2001, p. 23; see also Cashin (1995) and Balam and Shannon (2010))

Consistent with such research, a fairly obvious point to make is that in any healthy academic culture, academics should feel no embarrassment in admitting that student evaluations are generally quite useful, in acknowledging that student criticisms and suggestions can prompt genuine improvements, and in welcoming the reassurance and encouragement that comes from student praise.

Yet however strongly universities may embrace the use of student evaluations, when academics wish to gain feedback on their teaching and their course materials, this form of evaluation should not be the *only* one that is readily available. More specifically, student evaluations should not be relied upon to the exclusion of *peer* evaluations.

Peer evaluations can take a wide variety of forms. For example, while they may be focussed on course materials or assessment tasks, they may involve sitting in on a colleague’s lectures or tutorials. They can involve a hierarchical relationship between a mentoring senior colleague and a junior academic protégé. Alternatively, however, they may involve a reciprocal relationship between freely chosen collegial equals, each of whom provides constructive and supportive feedback on the work of the other. While they can be mandated as part of a managerial performance review process, they may instead be simply made available as an opportunity to enhance one’s teaching skills or materials. They can involve a fully ‘standardised’ and ‘criterion-based’ approach, but they may instead feature highly personalised, context-sensitive and individually negotiated forms of feedback.

Indeed, peer evaluation of teaching has been advocated by a variety of scholars and some have explained it in some detail (e.g., Bell, 2001, Taylor & Richardson, 2001, D’Andrea, 2002, Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004, Bell, 2005, Harris et al. 2008, HERDSA, 2008, Cooper & Bell, 2009, Lefoe et al. 2009). Of course not all forms of peer evaluation are of equal merit, and especially not in all academic contexts. Also, one naturally assumes that the way in which peer evaluation is received by academic staff is apt to be highly dependent on the way in which it is introduced. But these qualifications notwithstanding, a certain form of peer evaluation that is more accurately known as a *peer partnership* approach appears quite unequivocally to be of great merit and broad applicability. As an exemplary illustration of this approach, consider that which was recently trialled at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and which met with most remarkable success (Barnard et al. 2011).

Well before commencing in any peer partnership evaluations the project team at QUT invited academic staff from across the university to complete a survey designed to find out whether they would like to take part in any such form of evaluation. Around 39 per cent of academic staff fully completed the survey and over 80 per cent of respondents indicated favourable attitudes towards participating in direct classroom observation, in the evaluation of course materials, and in the

evaluation of student assessment. More than 50 per cent indicated that they would be willing to participate *even if it resulted in a heavier workload*. The fact that the QUT staff liked the idea so much constitutes a genuine challenge to those who assume that academics ‘tend to be skeptical of any process of peer review involving teaching’ (Taylor & Richardson, 2001, p. 49). It is important to recognise that only 45.9 per cent of respondents would have been well disposed towards participating in a peer partnership programme if it were part of the organisation’s performance management programme (Barnard et al. 2011, p. 439). After taking such views into account, the QUT team developed an approach that can be summarised as follows.

- Academics were encouraged by project leaders to participate in the project, but their participation was voluntary; it was not part of a managerial process.
- Seminars and workshops that focussed on how to provide supportive and useful feedback were facilitated.
- Participating academics were free to request feedback on any aspect of their teaching, including their classroom presentations, course materials, teaching strategies and marking standards.
- To build partnerships based on cooperation and support, the participants were encouraged to identify concerns with their partners and to agree upon goals, ground rules, and preferred forms of feedback.
- Participants were encouraged to explore strengths, alternatives, and possible solutions to problems. The tone of discussions was collegial and respectful and it focussed on listening, affirming achievement, and finding solutions. Feedback was deemed to be ineffective if it was either solely evaluative, delivered severely, or considered judgemental.
- The participants alternated in their roles such that each member of the partnership alternately acted as observer and observee of the other.

Some sense of the value and success of this approach can be garnered from what are reported to be typical comments later provided by participants in the programme, a small selection of which are as follows.

‘My experiences of the partnerships have been really positive, in terms of personal development and as a staff development tool.’

‘I was worried that peer partnership was a way to evaluate me. Now I know that the peer partnership process can benefit me as well as the observer.’

‘It is a learning culture for a university, it is one of the most valuable tools we have to offer staff.’

‘I am really grateful to you for introducing me to the peer-review system. It has helped me to reflect on my teaching and improve it.’

‘It’s been really useful to have another person who is fairly impartial and supportive looking at what’s going on in the presentation process.’

(Barnard et al. 2011, p. 441)

Given such comments, the success of this peer partnership approach to evaluation is quite clear. Furthermore, the QUT project team involved are now working on the development of various resources to assist others who wish to adopt a similar approach at their institutions. These resources are expected to be available in 2013 (Alan Barnard, pers. comm. 9 July 2012).

In recent decades most universities have created sizable bureaucracies that are centred around an ‘Office of Learning and Teaching’ or the like, and the work of ordinary academics is deeply affected by the evaluation systems that such offices have established. Given that most universities have adopted peer evaluation in relation to teaching only as an ‘infrequent and generally piecemeal activity’ (Harris et al. 2008, p. 3), however, academics *qua* teachers actually have very little role in the systematic evaluation of what they do. So while we may all wish to have a peerless bureaucracy, what academics experience is effectively a bureaucracy without peers.

In time, one tends to think that this is bound to change. As is commonly observed in the literature, peer evaluation is extremely well established and widely accepted in the assessment of research dissertations, submissions to journals, research grants, book manuscripts, and all manner of published scholarly work. The fact that it has not been widely adopted with regard to teaching is clearly an anomaly. Moreover, there is a growing number of scholars who advocate it, various studies suggest that it genuinely does help to improve teaching practices, and some of these same studies also demonstrate that academic staff are willing to embrace it. As a final practical suggestion, therefore, the obvious point to make is that senior academic administrators should encourage and support it.

At present, individual academics who share their insights through detailed, in-depth peer partnership evaluations of each others’ teaching are generally being far more generous than duty requires. But such efforts could quite easily be recognised and rewarded. Feedback provided within the QUT project suggests that academic staff would not be particularly enthusiastic about a peer partnership approach if it were ever used as part of a performance management process. But without punishing those who choose not to engage in peer partnership evaluations of teaching, it is perfectly feasible to recognise and reward those who do. Indeed, for universities that are truly committed to developing the best possible systems of internal evaluation, surely it is time to do precisely that.

Conclusion

In recent years many universities have developed statements about course learning outcomes, programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes. While such statements are worthwhile, what they can achieve is quite limited. Importantly, they can be concerned only with the *minimum* standard, i.e., the standard met by a student who gains a ‘pass’ with the barest possible margin. This is because such outcomes and attributes must be attained by *every* student who successfully completes the course or programme concerned, regardless of how marginal the student’s work may be. A simple and practical suggestion was made with regard to the unnecessarily bureaucratic processes associated with changes to course learning outcomes and course synopses. The overwhelming point, however, was that a university’s system of internal evaluation clearly needs other elements if it is to both ensure high standards of teaching and learning and inspire continuous improvements. While student evaluations are valuable, they should not be relied upon to the exclusion of peer evaluations. More specifically, experience suggests that a *peer partnership* approach to the evaluation of teaching and course materials can be particularly valuable and well received. The obvious suggestion to therefore make is that peer partnership approaches be encouraged and supported by senior administrators at all universities.

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