Simply Effective ...

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Perfect alignment: tools and tasks

It is impossible to remove a screw with a hammer and it is foolish to try to cut grass with a pair of nail scissors: we need to choose the right tool for every task we have to undertake - and we need to find a perfect alignment between tool and task in order to complete the latter effectively.

Some tools, like screwdrivers, are very simple; and some, like computers, are not. Some tools, whether or not they are complex, we can find on the shelf, while others we need to design specifically for a purpose. Developing such bespoke tools can create enormous challenges. It may be very difficult to create that perfect alignment between task and tool - especially if we have no time to make adjustments along the way.

In institutions of higher education, as within all other complex organizations, we are constantly asking ourselves serious questions about our effectiveness. These questions begin with a characterization of success - we need to know what success looks like. Answers to our questions will require us to gather evidence - evidence that then needs to be analyzed and interpreted. And when our questions are settled - when we know what is and what is not effective within our organization - we need to make changes and improvements: we need to plan and to re-plan. This is the way in which we move our institutions forward, semester by semester and year by year.

During the last ten years I have spent time in maybe 30 different universities and colleges. Most of the time I have spent trying to work out what is, and what is not, working within the organization, and - crucially - what mechanisms and tools the institutions have developed in order to determine for themselves what is successful and what is failing within their operation.

What I have noticed, time after time, is this: if there is one major problem that besets many universities and colleges, it is poorly designed systems for evaluation. Let's call these systems frameworks for quality assurance and enhancement (FQAEs). In other words, I see institutions trying to remove a screw with a hammer. They try to do something with the wrong - or a poorly designed - tool, and they expend enormous amounts of effort - wasted effort - in the process.

Measures, measurements, and self-reference

We need to remember that a FQAE is a measuring instrument, rather like a ruler or bathroom scales. When it is used properly it supplies us with more or less accurate measurements. So an FQAE is essentially normative: if it is properly used then we are obliged to believe in the results. Or do we?

I said that an FQAE is essentially normative because one of the areas we aim to quality assure and enhance is the very system for quality assurance and enhancement itself. This is not an entirely paradoxical situation - we need use our common sense, and our capacity to make expert judgments, in order to assess whether (or not) our formal systems of assessment are themselves adequate and fit for purpose.

This, almost self-referential, process is one that is very often overlooked. Who guards the guards! Who saves us from ourselves! Unfortunately, since so many FQAEs have serious flaws, overlooking the effectiveness of the effectiveness framework itself is a major mistake.

CLICKS's Latest News:

- Interview on Gulf News with Dr. Narimane Hadj-Hamou, CLICKS' CEO

- CLICKS to organize a workshop on Accreditation and Quality Improvement in December

- The MENA Higher Education Leadership Forum attracts over 150 leaders of higher education from 30 countries

FORUM Video

Poll Time:

What drives quality in Higher Education Institutions from your perspective?

- ■ Internal Quality Policies and Systems
- ■ Leadership and Commitment from top Management
- ■ Good Learning Experiences Continuous Research in the field
- ■ Standards and Expectations from Accrediting Bodies

Why in your view should Higher Education Institutions worry about quality?

- ■ Customer satisfaction and competition
- ■ Accountability
- ■ Continuous improvement
- ■ Public Image and credibility

How would you rate the quality of technology enahnced learning comparing to traditional learning?

- ■ Superior
- ■ The Same
- ■ Inferior
- ■ Not Sure

Gurus, Skeptics and Enthusiasts

Those of us who are involved professionally in quality assurance and enhancement (QAE) lie on a spectrum of commitment. There are some who are fanatics - for whom QAE is a passion; these quality gurus are likely to create large and complex systems of evaluation - and they soak up the time of their colleagues in dances of paperwork that are horribly ineffective and will last until the end of time. There are other colleagues who are doubters - for whom QAE is felt to be a distraction from core business; these quality skeptics are likely to miss the smell of institutional failure until it becomes just too overpowering to ignore. The majority of us, however, are just quality enthusiasts - we see the value and the purpose of QAE but, sometimes, we just don't find a way to make it work for us as well as we would like. And our other colleagues, those who are not directly involved in quality management, become easily alienated and disillusioned as soon as they feel that the demands made on them – in the name of quality enhancement – are a waste of their time; if those demands take effort and time, but do not noticeably lead to improvements.

Let's not let them down – let's make sure we do a great job!

Keep it simple - keep it real

Above all – please keep your FQAEs simple. Take a look at what you are doing – at the institutional, faculty, department or program level. Make sure, the mission is clear and achievable and make sure the goals align and cover all stakeholders (internal and external). Choose outcomes rather than objectives under the goals – make sure these align with the goals, and make sure they are very few in number. Remember that an outcome is something that should be achieved directly by the unit, entity, program or resource – it is not a promise for the future. Remember that you will need assessment instruments for each your outcomes – and that you should triangulate and not rely on one measurement alone. The more goals and outcomes you have, the more assessment you will have – and that leads to more data gathering, more analysis and effort that grows multiplicatively or even exponentially with the number of targets you set. Do not create a process so large and complicated that you drown in undigested data and which leaves no time for the most important part of all: feeding properly analyzed and useful data into future planning cycles.

By all means adopt a standard approach – say using the balanced scorecard methodology – but please remember that such a methodology is not magic – it is as dangerous as it is potentially useful. These methodologies need to be deployed with care and intelligence – they need to be adapted and adjusted to your specific context.

Whatever you do, you will need to involve others in your processes. Do not alienate them! If, for example, you ask faculty members to keep and maintain course files or portfolios, then make sure these are actually used as part of the system you have for revising and improving academic programs. To often quality offices see their role as simply ensuring that such portfolios are properly constructed. They then sit on a shelf gathering dust and are only wheeled out when external accreditors are present. Creating only a compliance culture is perhaps the worst sin of all.

I said: "Take a look at what you are doing …". As I discussed earlier – keep reflecting on you FQAE and criticize it relentlessly – chip away at what is not needed – keep it lean and mean. Ask yourself: why is this component or process part of the framework? Does it contribute? Is it providing useful indicators that feed into planning and helping to fulfill the institutional mission. If not – remove it.

Developing a successful FQAE is as difficult as it should be simple to deploy. It requires a clear head, a critical mindset, and just a little common sense. Be simply effective!

CLICKS Areas of Experties:

■ **Leadership and Governance**
■ **Quality and Accreditation**
■ **Strategic Planning and Performance Measurement**
■ **Innovative learning and Teaching**
■ **Research in Higher Education**

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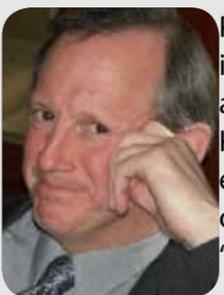
Professor Martin Henson is a senior academic manager and consultant, specializing in Higher Education strategy, management, accreditation, audit, curriculum design and development, and international collaborations. He is in demand as a keynote speaker, consultant and capacity builder on the international scene - working with many ministries of higher education, especially in the GCC, and with KPMG. He has undertaken over 50 academic and institutional reviews, developed accreditation standards, and led strategic planning exercises. He is a professor of Computer Science, with over 100 publications, and has attracted over US$1 million in research funding over the last three years. He currently leads International Strategy at the University of Essex - a top ten university in the UK and THE "Top 20 under 50" in the world.

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The Center for Learning Innovations and Customized Knowledge Solutions (CLICKS) has been established with the aim of supporting Higher Education Institutions in specific areas that are new and emerging and very much required to achieve excellence.

CLICKS was launched with the mission of providing innovative and customized knowledge solutions that build education institutions' internal capabilities in the MENA region and facilitate their transformation to achieve sustainable results on their journey towards academic excellence. In particular, CLICKS provides services and solutions including capacity building programs (both public and tailored to specific institutions), consultancy services, knowledge solutions development (i.e. frameworks, strategies, plans, tools, etc), knowledge transfer and mentorship at both individual and institution level in the following key areas:

• Strategic Planning and Performance Management
• Leadership and Governance
• Quality and Accreditation
• Technology integration in higher education
• Research in Higher Education

The Center through its headquarters located in the UAE, Dubai and its two branches in the UK and Malaysia is associated with an impressive pool of international experts at the disposal of its clients and is guided by the knowledge and expertise of a formidable leadership board whose membership includes some of the best leaders in the advancement of higher education and learning worldwide.

CLICKS has also a strong emphasis on research and development and engages in publishing best practices, reports and working series as well as organizing conferences and setting up networks to promote the dialogue between and among Higher Education key stakeholders.

Vision:
To be the trusted partner in shaping the future of education for the MENA region

Mission:
To provide innovative and customized knowledge solutions that build education institutions' international capabilities in the MENA region and facilitate their transformation to achieve sustainable results on their journey towards academic excellence.

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