

Rob Connoley | rob.connoley@deakin.edu.au
Deakin University
Victoria, Australia

Student evaluations and the impact on curriculum, teaching and assessment

This paper examines the nature of public policy change and resulting impacts on curriculum in higher education in Australia. The central focus is on a more recent but extremely influential policy basing some funding on 'performance' in learning and teaching. Public policy agenda in Australia has increasingly been underpinned by principles derived from similar 'schools of thought', public choice theory, agency theory, 'entrepreneurial government' and neo-liberal economic science. Key policies have included budgetary reductions, the privatisation of public instrumentalities, the advent of private-sector approaches to management, and the increasing use of market or pseudo-market mechanisms for the delivery of public goods. Higher education has not escaped this trend, as evidenced by funding reductions, a shift to increasing private sources of finance, and more recently the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF). The LTPF is allocated according to results obtained from student evaluations and specifically from parts of the Graduate Destination Survey (assessing employment outcomes) and the Course Experience Questionnaire (assessing teaching quality and skills development) that graduating students are asked to complete after they have finished their degree. The government has argued that the purpose of the LTPF is to reward higher education providers that best demonstrate excellence in learning and teaching. If this is correct, then Australian universities have a long way to go as only 14 institutions received funding in 2006 and only 21 in 2007 from a possible 38 institutions. It is argued here that the results do not necessarily indicate poor performance by a university but, in the case of skills development, a lack of making this overt to students through curriculum, teaching and assessment. The LTPF continues the policy trend of curriculum needing to be framed around employability and skill development and highlights many institutions remain perplexed as to how to do this. The main objectives of this presentation are to outline and describe a project that aims to address this by showing how curriculum needs to and can respond to this form of evaluation and what this may entail for the way in which traditional courses are taught and assessed. The presentation seeks to involve participants in identifying and discussing options for the teaching and assessment of skills and ways in which these can be progressively developed throughout a course of study.