

REFRAME: a new approach to evaluation in higher education

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Abstract

Evaluation practices in the higher education sector have been criticised for having unclear purpose and principles; ignoring the complexity and changing nature of learning and teaching and the environments in which they occur; relying almost exclusively on student ratings of teachers working in classroom settings; lacking reliability and validity; using data for inappropriate purposes; and focusing on accountability and marketing rather than the improvement of learning and teaching. In response to similar criticism from stakeholders, in 2011 Queensland University of Technology began a project, entitled REFRAME, to review its approach to evaluation, particularly the student survey system it had been using for the past five years. This presentation will outline the scholarly, evidence based methodology used to undertake institution-wide change, meet the needs of stakeholders suitable to the cultural needs of the institution. It is believed that this approach is broadly applicable to other institutions contemplating change with regard to evaluation of learning and teaching.

Key words: Higher education; evaluation; pedagogy; student feedback; surveys; teaching

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Introduction – the broader environment

Evaluation practices in the higher education sector have been criticised for having unclear purpose and principles; ignoring the complexity and changing nature of learning and teaching and the environments in which they occur; relying almost exclusively on student ratings of teachers working in classroom settings; lacking reliability and validity; using data for inappropriate purposes; and focusing on accountability and marketing rather than the improvement of learning and teaching (Alderman, Towers, & Bannah, 2012). In response to similar criticism from stakeholders, in 2011 Queensland University of Technology (QUT) began a project, entitled Reframe, to review its approach to evaluation, particularly the student survey system it had been using for the past five years (Alderman, Towers, & Bannah, 2012 - in press). This project is anchored within the student feedback and evaluation literature with the project team adopting scholarship as the planned evaluation strategy. This paper is the third in a series and is focussed on the project as a whole.

The documentation of Reframe through peer reviewed articles is quite deliberate. In a recent review of twenty-nine higher education providers across twenty countries, Henard (2010) expressed concern in their main findings about the paucity of teaching quality projects that are based on academic literature. More specifically: *The vast majority of initiatives supporting teaching quality are empirical and address the institutions' needs at a given point in time. (Initiatives inspired by academic literature are rare.)* (Henard, 2010, p. 10). This lack of rigour is in direct contrast to the scholarship expected of academic staff and this became a driving force behind the Reframe project leader's deliberate intention to evaluate the project through peer reviewed journal articles and conference papers.

This paper will outline the scholarly, evidence based methodology used to undertake institution-wide change in a design-led project to meet the needs of stakeholders in a manner suitable to the cultural needs of the institution..

QUT's local context for evaluation of learning and teaching

In 2005, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) made a formal recommendation to the university with regard to its student feedback system. *Recommendation 6 AUQA recommends that QUT strengthen the mechanisms to ensure that feedback is given to students on the results of and follow-up to the evaluations of teaching and units* (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2005, p. 21). This recommendation was one of the main drivers for the introduction in 2007 of the Learning Experience Survey (LEX) deployed to collect data from students on units and teaching. Evaluation continues to be of tactical importance with the strategic plan for QUT titled Blueprint 3 specifically refers to *Quality of teaching and courses – Refine approaches to gathering, reporting and acting on meaningful teaching and learning data* (Queensland University of Technology, 2011, p. 5) as a key target area for the university.

In 2012, this strategic direction was supported through the audit report by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and its audit affirmation:

QUT has recently moved to address the negative feedback it has received from staff regarding LEX, including criticism that it is inflexible, lacks sophistication, is too internally orientated, and focuses too much on individual units and teachers.

Affirmation: Queensland University of Technology's commitment to improve its monitoring of course quality through the implementation of the REFRAME project is affirmed.

(Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2012, p. 18)

Therefore, evaluation of learning and teaching is of ongoing importance for external and internal stakeholders.

Project management

This section of the paper will outline the approach taken to project management with respect to Reframe. QUT's commitment to quality assurance within projects is reinforced by a number of standards, policies and procedures such as: Manual of Policies and Procedures; Human Resources Policies and practices; and Frameworks such as Systems Development Framework, Service Management

Framework and a rigorous Project Management Framework specifically relevant to information technology governance (Queensland University of Technology, 2012a).

The nature of the activities being undertaken within Reframe as being both a design- and user-led project, meant that the project management methodologies underpinning the project utilised elements of both *Project Management Body of Knowledge* (PMBOK) and *Agile Project Management* principles.

PMBOK principles, which QUT's Project Management Framework adheres to, informed the initial scoping and identification of the Reframe subprojects and activities of work. However, the dynamics of Reframe, particularly from a design- and user-led project, required greater flexibility and agility to respond to the development and organic maturation of new evaluation approach. This would involve being responsive and flexible to deliver an 'end product' to meet its users and stakeholders.

Briefly, the PMBOK approach categorises key project phases into five groups: initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling, and closing; and draws upon nine knowledge areas of: integration; scope; time; cost; quality; procurement; human resources; communications and risk management (Project Management Institute, 2012). This was the guiding framework for Reframe when considering key project components and how best to develop a series of relevant artefacts that captured evidence and information to further engage stakeholders and governance groups in continuing support, satisfaction and agreement to the progression of the Reframe project, without being overly documentation heavy.

Agile Project Management as a methodology, and initiated within the fast paced information technology industry, enables developers to rapidly respond to the market's dynamic nature, and to new emerging approaches to business. The Agile methodology originated through the shared experience of a group of seventeen information technology industry project leaders meeting together in 2001 discussing and sharing their practice in developing software within challenging and fast changing environments. The Agile methodology techniques are now utilised in other non-information technology industries, as the underlying *agile manifesto* streamlines expression of core development values: people; communications; the product; and flexibility (Layton, 2012). Four highly relevant key values to Reframe and the delivery on a design- and user-led promise to implement institutional change.

In applying a project management framework to underpin the task of an institutional approach to change in evaluation, it required an understanding of the historical factors and triggers leading to the call for change, and formalisation into 'project' status.

The following image Figure 1 Reframe Project Phases, was developed from a previous document *The Journey Artefact* (Melanie, 2011), to illustrate the four main phases of the project: trigger, development, transition and embed. The colour from light to dark demonstrates project maturation over time and the inclusion of the coloured icons represents an increased level of sophistication in the new evaluation framework. This project is a three to five year body of work and 2014 is deliberately absent from this diagram as this will evolve over the next twelve months.

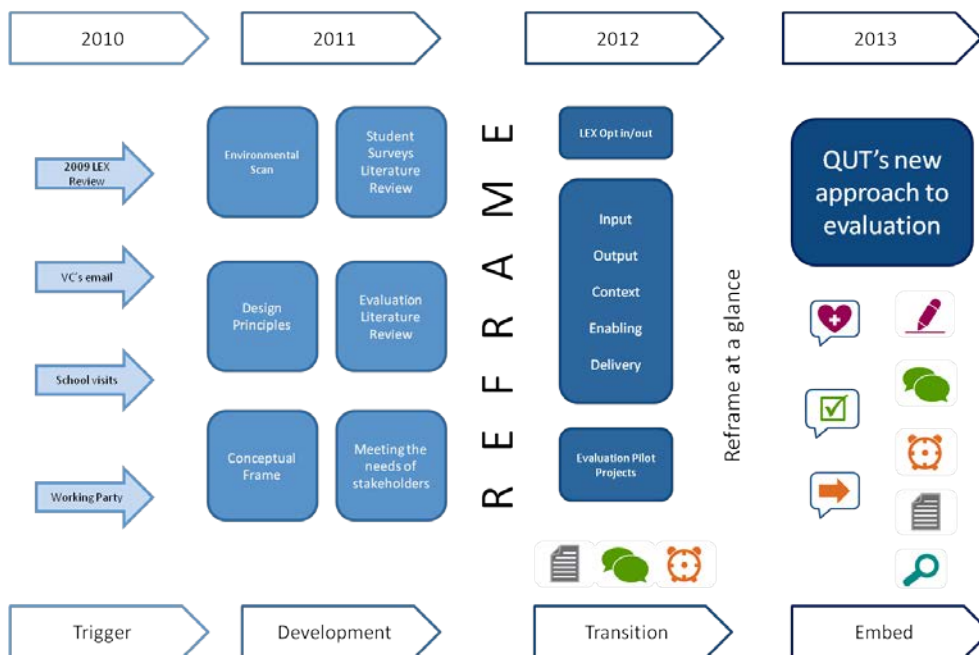


Figure 1 Reframe Project Phases

Trigger

The *trigger* phase was an important step to bring cohesion within the project executive team and to assist with a common language and understanding through documenting the history and triggers leading to Reframe. An initial research into the back-story, visualised into a single page document artefact 'The Journey'. This artefact provided clarity as to the stakeholders who were already engaged, and to identify and acknowledge this early phase of activities.

Development

The *development* phase identified the progression of events and development of activities designed to actively pursue a robust and rigorous environmental scan and literature review, both within a national and international higher education sector context (Alderman, et al., 2012). This provided foundational strength and academic rigour to the development of the design principles and the conceptual frame for further developing a new approach to evaluation at QUT (Alderman, et al., 2012 - in press).

The body of work undertaken in the *trigger* and *development* phases garnered institutional support, stakeholder voice and overall momentum to shift the activities into a formalised 'project' phase, where the title Reframe became a word representing of an intentioned multi-dimensional framework to bring wide-spread institutional change from the previous single-source evaluation method for teaching and learning (for example LEX) with endorsement by the institutional leaders.

Transition

The *transition* phase required further scoping to fully realise the anticipated ongoing activities necessary to transition into a multi-dimensional evaluation approach. This required a process of identifying tasks into five broad categories:

inputs, outputs, context, enabling and delivery which ultimately led to the identification of thirteen distinct sub-project activities with designated responsible sub-project leaders across three different divisions. This phase developed the Project Overview or Work Breakdown Schedule, another key document artefact providing clarity to the various responsible service owners and sub-project leaders. The project Reframe will be complete at the end of this phase as the institution moves into the delivery of the evaluation framework as core business.

Embed

The *embed* phase will launch and integrate the first generation of tools and evaluation methods with ongoing support structures to embed within core business of the various service owners. Additional human and system resources were identified and funded to ensure that carriage of the evaluation framework continues to meet stakeholder's needs and expectations for support and guidance. At the end of 2013, Reframe as an evaluation framework will be reviewed with the second generation to roll out in 2014.

Organic project maturation

As Reframe was a design- and user-led project the usual types of project documentation where the project detail, scope, impact and outcomes are clearly defined up front was not necessarily going to work well in this instance. As an institution who had experienced five years of a rigid, inflexible system it was a challenge to offer a more organic approach to the project and follow the principles of good project management and its associated reporting responsibilities.

The project team developed a range of tactics to take advantage of previous successful initiatives. For example the project leader applied a generational approach to the development of several reports within the annual course quality assurance framework (Towers, Alderman, Nielsen, & McLean, 2010) where feedback from stakeholders is actively sought and this informs the next generation of reporting. Stakeholders within QUT were accustomed to being invited to participate and collaborate in projects over a number of years. Therefore, rather than start with an end product in mind, the project sponsor and leaders were open to a more organic development over time through engagement, refinement and repositioning along the way. In this way it was possible to meet the needs of stakeholders rather than managing the needs.

In Figure 2 Organisational change through organic project maturation, this illustrates the way in which the project team have engaged in activities and events that are part of QUT's culture as a way to collaborate and disseminate information to stakeholders. The following section will describe the way that Roadshows, one hour information sessions on each campus, were the trigger point for the development of artefacts to use at each Roadshow. After each Roadshow, the outcomes were then documented through the governance opportunities offered through formal committee submissions. In this way it was possible to be organic and responsive and yet still maintain an appropriate level of documentation of the project.

The colour of the Roadshows gets stronger with the maturation of the project and the size increases as the number of staff and students engaged within the collaboration and dissemination grows over time. What remains constant is both

the internal and external stakeholders, these remain pivotal to the success and endurance of organisational change.

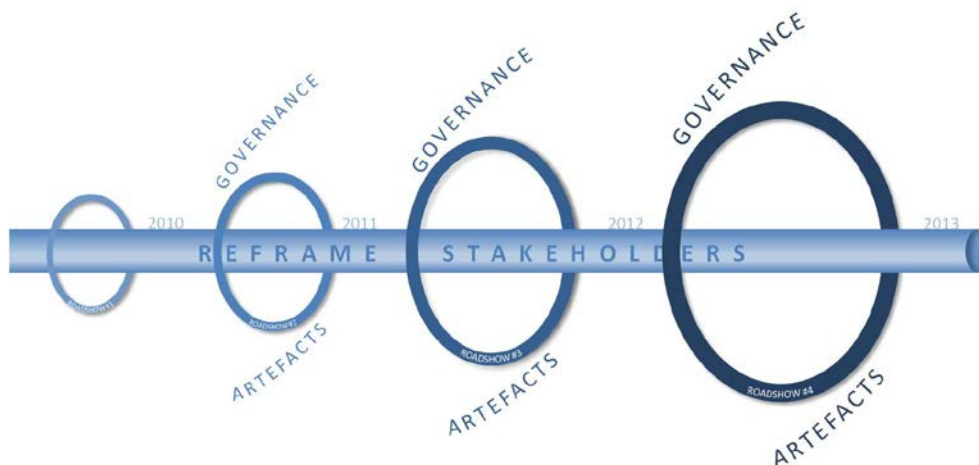


Figure 2 Organisational change through organic project maturation

Governance:

Another key component of Phase II was ensuring that there was proactive engagement and reporting back to governance groups and dissemination with stakeholders seeking further inputs, feedback and endorsements along the way, particularly around milestones. A Reporting Opportunities Schedule artefact was developed to enable preparation and lead time requirements to negotiate the various levels of the scheduled hierarchical institutional governance committees, and to provide clarity for the directional path to achieve appropriate submission acceptance.

Engagement of stakeholders from across the institution to participate in the Reframe Reference Group was essential as a sounding board to test ideas with and capture critical feedback early to inform development. This enabled further confidence for wider dissemination through Roadshows, presentations, and engagement with stakeholders across the institution.

A Relational Frequency Database was initiated as a living artefact that continually captures the engagement of stakeholders across the many sub-projects, working parties, pilots, presentations and governance groups. This provides further identification to the individuals who are engaging with Reframe on a number of levels as champions with four or more activities of participation and engagement, those with two to three instances of engagement, or those with at least one. This has aided in identifying the spread of engagement across the stakeholder groups, and also where to focus additional effort in engaging the majority of stakeholders.

Stakeholders

QUT is an autonomous public higher education provider with responsibilities to both internal and external stakeholders. The internal stakeholders are academic, technical and professional staff, students, the executive arm of the institution and line managers across all faculties and divisions. The external stakeholders are the regulatory authorities: TEQSA risk framework and AQF; unions, and the boarder community.

The academic community are expected to uphold standards and ethical practice as an expectation of their usual code of practice. The project leader strongly believes that institutional activities should mirror the standards and ethical practices in the same way. In response to this, QUT has adopted the *Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations* (Australasian Evaluation Society Inc, 2006) to guide evaluation and when the Reframe suite of evaluation tools and the practices are available these will be submitted to the Ethics Committee for appropriate consideration.

Artefacts

Reframe prides itself on being a user-led project, and it is therefore essential to be able to provide evidence of continuing stakeholder engagement and participations, to ensure that their voice is heard, and their expectations are being met. Additional artefacts of evidence include recording unsolicited feedback, supporting NTEU articles, communication with TEQSA, survey pilot testing with over 7,000 students and staff, providing a Pilot Scheme Initiative with seed funding for academics to pilot with their students proposed complementary evaluation methods and to develop resources for general application across a variety of teaching scenarios and disciplines.

Through a variety of presentations and workshops, whether openly invited or strategically targeted Reframe is applying a multi-approach to the ongoing generational rollout of evaluation tools, and ongoing support which will continue to embed evaluation practice at QUT, and further evidence for quality assurance of learning and teaching.

Outcomes

At the point of presentation, *Reframe at a glance* (Queensland University of Technology, 2012b) the broad concept of the evaluation framework is now being launched across the institution together with a number of reports to support the use of existing data. At the same time, a number of pilots involving over 7,000 students and approximately 600 academic staff are underway. The main elements for Reframe are:

All academic staff will be expected to develop:

- a personal strategy to develop annually using the endorsed evaluation suite
- academic staff are expected to annually engage in evaluation drawing on multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data
- evaluation needs to be targeted and focus on the impact on student learning

To support academic staff and assist the institution in understanding the effectiveness of the learning and teaching at QUT there are a number of automated surveys and optional evaluation strategies. The automated surveys are:

- Pulse Survey – launched in weeks 4-5 of each semester
- Insight Survey – launched in week 13 of each semester
- Exit Survey – between weeks 3-12 of each semester every student who withdraws from a unit or course will be invited to provide feedback on their withdrawal

The optional teaching evaluation strategies are currently in pilot mode and will form part of core business in 2013 are:

- Tailored Survey – optional for academic staff to elect to launch a teaching survey
- Peer Review – optional
- Instant Response – optional
- Existing Data – there are a number of reports currently available to support curriculum conversations
- Customised Approach – academic staff who currently undertake evaluation in a myriad of ways, for these staff there will be an opportunity to register this activity

The most significant change is in the ownership of the teacher survey data. Previously all data was shared with line managers and unit coordinators. With Reframe, all unit data will flow through to relevant stakeholders, however, all teaching evaluation strategies connected to the teacher are optional. Therefore, the teaching evaluation activity will be registered and it will be the choice of the academic staff member whether the data is shared with line managers or other parties, for example promotion panels. The foundation of Reframe is embedded within an underlying assumption of trust with agency returned to academic staff in terms of evaluation of learning and teaching.

Conclusion

It is believed that the approach taken within Reframe is broadly applicable to other institutions contemplating change with regard to evaluation of learning and teaching. There is no doubt that this type of widespread organisation change is not something that occurs overnight. It requires time: a three to five year body of work; dedicated human resources: project team and then ongoing staff for implementation; collaboration and dissemination: over 500 staff engaged in over 1,000 activities to date; cross divisional collaboration: three divisions working in harmony; and an environment where stakeholders believe they have a voice and that their voice is heard. What is exciting is positive unsolicited feedback is starting to come through from academic staff with praise for Reframe and its potential to enhance the quality of learning and teaching at QUT.

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