

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

TALES FROM TASMANIA – SHORT- AND LONG-TERM RESPONSES TO COVID-19 IN THE CONTEXT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE, QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND SCHOLARSHIP

Tina Acuna, Jo-Anne Kelder

Presenting Authors: Tina Acuna and Jo-Anne Kelder (Tina.Acuna@utas.edu.au; Jo.Kelder@utas.edu.au)
College of Sciences and Engineering, University of Tasmania, Hobart Tasmania 7000, Australia

“The COVID-19 response is a masterclass in the components of purposeful learning – and of using that learning to build an effective quality system – before our very eyes. Let us make them the foundation of our everyday learning and improvement tools now - and when we're talking about the COVID-19 days in the past tense.” Cathy Baldwin

You can probably pin-point what you were doing, and where, when you first heard about COVID-19. It was my last day of annual leave when I started fielding calls from my Executive Dean about a novel coronavirus and how our students in China were effectively stranded. The next day, my first day back at the office, I recall chairing a meeting at 9 am to start planning our College response for transitioning affected units to online delivery. Roll forward another four weeks, this escalated to needing to shift as many units as feasibly possible to online delivery – which if you are in the higher education sector, you can relate to as a teacher, unit or degree coordinator, or in a leadership role. Working from home was the new normal, while being a few steps ahead of our students in preparing lectures and adapting practicals and rapidly gaining new web conferencing skills. It was at this time our university decided to accelerate a whole of institution academic transformation of our undergraduate degrees, ready for 2021, as part of a longer-term strategy towards a sustainable future. We were adapting our teaching delivery and planning for curricula change so quickly, it was at times a bit of a blur.

For universities, as self-accrediting providers, it is imperative that our teaching and curricula are quality assured to meet legislative requirements. Even though that sounds a bit dry, as educators we surely want the best outcomes for our students. A fundamental question is how the online delivery and associated accommodations to assessment has impacted the quality of our teaching and learning. How will this be reflected in institutional and national quality indicators? How have the expectations of our students changed? It is a large and complicated task to draw this data together, and to have the approval to use it more broadly to communicate our successes and reflect on the challenges. What can we learn from our experiences dealing with COVID-19 to enable us to react to rapid change more effectively in the future?

In mid-2019 (those were the days!) Jo Kelder and I were awarded the inaugural ACDS Teaching Fellowship. Initially proposed as a response to the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) minimum requirements that include continuous evaluation and the associated Guidance Note: Scholarship (TEQSA, 2018), our fellowship morphed to have a greater emphasis on quality assurance and quality improvement in the context of scholarship. These three interconnecting processes are conceptualised in a ‘Curriculum Evaluation Research (CER) framework’ for the specific characteristics of STEM degrees, with student learning at the core. Other outputs include national workshops at 11 institutions that introduce and refine the CER-STEM framework, a website, and a plan to share case studies and resources developed during the fellowship.

We would love to be able to state that we had the framework implemented in our degrees – but with so many COVID-19 activities, this too had to be temporarily shelved. Reflecting on the disruption to curriculum content and delivery, we all know that some quality was necessarily sacrificed due to the short time frames - there was no opportunity to consult, no efficient mechanisms to monitor student learning experience and engagement. We believe it is important to think clearly about whether, and to what extent, the quality assurance planning embedded in the CER-STEM framework might have informed the context of rapidly evolving curricula. How mechanisms for formative and summative quality improvement could have been deployed to gather and analyse data for quality improvement more effectively. And how a developing culture of scholarly teaching practice might have ensured teaching teams were confident that change-decisions were based on evidence communicated through scholarship.

Cathy Baldwin's quote, above, reminds us of the need for an effective quality system, which we will explore in the context of the CER-framework. Using our College of Sciences and Engineering as an example, we plan to implement the framework across all our shiny new undergraduate degrees that will be offered from 2021 onwards. This approach will not only enable us to provide multi-faceted evidence of the impact of teaching delivery at the degree-level, but to demonstrate how and why our degrees offer a distinctively Tasmanian learning experience for our students. Not to mention that we will have a comprehensive evidence base with which to inform the next cycle of curriculum renewal.

Proceedings of the Australian Conference on Science and Mathematics Education, 30 September - 2 October 2020, pages 5-6, ISBN Number 978-0-9871834-9-1.