

Commonwealth of Learning: Review and Improvement Model

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In countries where quality assurance systems are not well established, universities can find it useful to invite external visitation panels to advise them on quality improvement and wider issues. However, these can be costly. Drawing on its experience with organising such panels in Africa, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has developed a Review and Improvement Model (RIM), which is essentially a guided, do-it-yourself approach to quality assurance that helps keep costs to a minimum.

The experiences that led COL to develop the model

The University of Ghana International Visitation Panel

In 2007 the University of Ghana sought external advice from an international visitation panel after its reputation was tarnished by serious breaches of examination security. It wanted to re-establish its former national eminence and become a global leader in higher education. The panel consisted of ten international members from seven countries and six Ghanaians, as well as UNESCO member Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic.

The panel visited the campus for two periods of one week separated by four months and then submitted a final report nine months after starting work. The remit included academic programmes, governance and administrative structures, infrastructure and resources. Both the university and the Government of Ghana found the report valuable and it stimulated major reforms that are still ongoing. However, although the benefits of the process were clear, the cost was high. This was not a model that could be rolled out on any scale in developing countries.

Institutional Trial Quality Audit of the University of South Africa

In 2007 COL also organised a trial quality audit of the University of South Africa (UNISA). Here, the context was different. South Africa has well-established quality assurance processes and UNISA was due for an institutional audit by the Higher Education Quality Committee of the South African Council on Higher Education in August 2008. UNISA asked COL to conduct a trial audit in advance of the real thing.

In UNISA's case, Dr Willie Clarke-Okah coordinated a panel of seven international members from five countries and one local member. Again, a UNESCO member, Ms Zeynep Varoglu, was also involved. The panel had a preliminary meeting in the UK with UNISA officers and then visited UNISA for a week, publishing its report two months later.

Once again, UNISA found the panel's report highly beneficial, both as a dry run for the official audit, and for what it learned about creating an institutional culture of distance learning. But although this process was somewhat less costly than the University of Ghana panel, it was still an expensive exercise.

Lessons learned

COL decided to distil these two experiences into a model that would yield similar benefits but at a much lower cost. Two lessons emerged clearly from our experiences.

- First, much of the value in quality assurance comes from self-assessments conducted within institutions. At the University of Ghana, institution-wide departmental self-assessments were conducted only after the panel's first visit and at its request. UNISA conducted a major self-evaluation exercise before the panel's visit.
- Second, it is essential to have some mechanism that encourages staff to take quality assurance seriously. In Ghana, the publicity surrounding the visits of a high-profile international group helped to do just this. At UNISA the upcoming audit by the South African Council on Higher Education helped to focus minds.

The COL Review and Improvement Model (RIM)

This led COL to develop a model which, like the visitation panel for the University of Ghana, is primarily intended for the institution's own use for improvement and capacity building. It can also be used to help meet external quality assurance requirements just as UNISA saw its visiting panel partly as a dry run for the official audit a year later.

The COL RIM model is made up of five steps, which are described below.

1. Initiation

The initiation phase aims to determine whether an institution is really ready to go ahead with implementing COL RIM and has the ability to do so. It must be prepared to change, to have open discussions about what needs to improve, to let go of old habits, and to accept new ways of doing things. In practical terms it means that senior management must be committed to leading and advocating the process and to allocating time and people to it. A COL RIM workshop in Nigeria came up with a list of questions to assess readiness.

While initiation can include a preparation visit from COL, this adds to the cost. Instead, COL seeks to send representatives of institutions that are interested to workshops such as the one held in Nigeria. A representative exposed to the COL RIM model can therefore provide institutional colleagues with the information necessary for the initiation process.

If the institution makes a positive assessment of its readiness, it signs a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with COL. The MoU arranges for liaison people on each side, and provides principles and timelines for implementation, arrangements for external verification, and cost-sharing.

2. Staff survey

Once the MoU is signed, the next step is a staff survey. Administered to all staff electronically by COL, in partnership with the institution, it asks them to rate a set of quality indicators individually at one of three levels, based on performance descriptors, saying how they perceive practices in their own areas of work. A response rate of 25 per cent is considered adequate. This survey is used by the institution's management as a key input into the next stage of self-review.

3. Self-review

This is the core of the COL RIM model. Self-review relies on a team of senior staff members to scope and investigate outcomes of the institution, focusing both on good practice and on areas for improvement. It is guided by six thematic questions about the institution's results.

1. How effectively does the institution communicate with its stakeholders?
2. How well does the institution provide the outcomes that its stakeholders need and value?
3. How effectively does the institution engage with local and international communities?
4. How effective are the institution's innovative and creative responses to a changing environment?
5. How effectively does the institution develop the capacity of its people to provide valued outcomes for stakeholders?
6. How well does the institution monitor and improve its performance?

All of the quality outcomes of the process are formative outcomes. It is the most valuable part of the process for the institution.

The exercise produces a report that aims to answer the key thematic questions, making judgements on the evidence and recommendations for improvement.

4. Verification

The next step of the model is verification of the self-review, led by an external (Lead) verifier and involving a team of internal verifiers not involved in the self-review team. These internal verifiers receive training in quality assurance methods from the Lead verifier. The aims of this phase are:

1. To verify the rigour of the methods, findings and recommendations of the self-review and, in doing so, to make a judgement about the extent to which the institution can be considered a 'COL RIM' verified institution. Possible ratings are 'not verified', 'threshold' and 'verified'.
2. To extend the capacity of the staff in quality assurance through training in methods of scoping, evidence collection and forming judgements.
3. To make additional recommendations for action where appropriate, based on the cause and effect analysis of the verification team.

5. Follow-up

In this stage, the recommendations made in the self-review are verified, expanded or modified and implemented. Institutions are invited to give feedback to COL on the effectiveness of the model. For its part, COL reports to stakeholders periodically on the collective outcomes of institutions that have implemented the model, and on refinements to it.

Conclusion

It must be stressed that this is very much a new model. It was trialled once in 2009 with an institution in the Caribbean. The result was 'not verified' and the institution would like to go through the process again in 2011. COL will trial COL RIM twice or three times more in 2010 with institutions in Nigeria and Sri Lanka before making the model widely available to Member States. Already eight institutions have asked to use the model.

To conclude, the COL RIM model:

- combines internal and external quality assurance in a low-cost 'do-it-yourself' approach that does not require a panel of external experts;
- develops systemic thinking and organisational learning;
- offers credibility without high-stakes consequences for poor performance; and
- focuses on improvement, which includes capacity building and developmental support.

This do-it-yourself model will help institutions to develop a culture of quality and to be ready for external quality assessment when it comes.

This article was adapted from a speech delivered by Sir John Daniel at the Council for Higher Education Accreditation International Seminar, Washington, DC, on 28 January 2010.

References

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