

Is it serious?

**A tool to help you to explore Quality issues
in your Business School**

(Version 7 - March 2007)

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Introduction

This tool is to help in the training and development of staff in Business Schools. The idea is that a small group of staff will be supplied with details of an incident or fragment of text such as an overheard comment, the text of an email, an extract from some minutes etc. On the face of it this incident or item raises a dilemma but its nature is not clear. Is this a small problem that can be handled (if it needs to be handled at all) by straightforward action or is it indicative of something serious that needs a strategic evaluation and significant change? The task of the group is to discuss the incident or item, relating it where possible to their own institution. Is it straightforward or is it serious? Different members of the group may have different ideas about this. Each group member will be asked to rate the seriousness of an issue before proceeding to a more detailed discussion (in which they will have been asked to treat the issue as either a *Trivial* or a *Serious* issue). An overall view, reflecting disparate views if the group is not of one mind, should also be produced.

The group members can be from the same or different institutions. If they are from the same institution the discussion will perhaps focus on common problems; if from different institutions then different perspectives will be brought to the discussion.

The tool is to encourage reflection about the processes that operate in the participants' own business schools. It applies perhaps particularly to those with managerial responsibilities, but its ethos is that quality is everybody's responsibility. So the focus of the discussion prompted by the activity might be on strategy and change management issues (Symptom - *Serious*) or could be at the more personal level of what an individual needs to do in the particular situation focused upon (Symptom - *Trivial*). Furthermore, a trivial issue that crops up repeatedly would waste management or clerical time and become serious.

The conclusions are to be given at the end of the discussion by the facilitator to suggest possible approaches. Where possible these would be referenced back to the QuBE web site.

On the following pages there is one issue per page. For each issue the participants will be asked to

- Give a rating of the seriousness of the issue
- A participant (or team) will be asked to treat an incident as either *Trivial* or *Serious* and the participant (or team) indicate the reasons why this may be so
- The participant (or team) will then give their response (i.e. course of action to be followed)

At the completion of the exercise, respondents will be asked to make up a scenario of their own (Number 11- realistically drawn from their own experience?) These responses will be collated and incorporated so that the repository of scenarios grows **in a viral fashion**. When the tool has developed to this point, it can be used in its entirety or a sample could be drawn (to fit the individual needs of a department)

Some suggestions how the tool may be used

1. Set a strict time-limit for how long the activity should last. We would suggest either **30 minutes** (for a quick subset) or **60 minutes** for a 'full-run'
2. The tool is best used by a group of staff in which there is an independent chair and then two 'teams'. Each tutor or team should give an estimate on a 1-10 rating scale prior to their consideration of the topic whether the fragment is likely to be an indication of a *trivial* problem or a *serious* problem.
3. Then each tutor (or team) should consider the issues as either *Trivial* or *Serious* in turn.
e.g. Team 1: Trivial (odd numbers) Serious (even numbers)
Team 2: Serious (odd numbers) Trivial (even numbers)
4. At the conclusion of the exercise, the chair and team players could debrief in the following way:
 - Collect the 'seriousness' rating of each question and produce a quick metric (median, mean). There may be wide divergences of opinion of view on the seriousness of each issue and this, in itself, may provide a valuable discussion point
 - Discuss each question in turn, collecting first the 'trivial' responses and then the 'serious' responses. The discussion might wish to refer to the 'answers' supplied on pp. 16-26 (which are only intended as *illustrative* and not definitive responses to the issues in each scenario)
 - Are there any lessons to be learned that can be applied to their own department?
5. The group will then be invited to consider one or more scenarios of their own that can be gleaned from their own collective experience. This can then be added to a master file to create a bank of scenarios from which future tutors undertaking this exercise could sample. (Further details are supplied in the *Technical Appendix*)
6. A department could use the tool in a number of ways, including some or all of the following:
 - induction training exercise for staff new to the department
 - as a 'sensitising' mechanism/refresher course for existing staff
 - as a quality checklist as part of an internal self-review procedure

but the possibilities are really endless.

①

Student talking to tutor

Tutor: *Why don't you go and see Dr X about that.*

Student: *Who is Dr X? Where do I find him (or is it her)? And what does he (or she) look like?*

Your estimate (on a scale of 1 **Trivial** to 10 **Serious**) of the severity of this symptom)...

Trivial symptom

Serious symptom

For the following reason....

Your response.....

②

External Examiners Comments (1)

External Examiner *This module has used exactly the same assessment for the past 4 years and student performance is rather limited.*

Your estimate (on a scale of 1 **Trivial** to 10 **Serious**) of the severity of this symptom)...

Trivial symptom

Serious symptom

For the following reason....

Your response.....

③

External Examiners Comments (2)

External Examiner *When I was reviewing the final year projects, I noticed that not much reference was being made to current periodical literature in the field'.*

Your estimate (on a scale of 1 **Trivial** to 10 **Serious**) of the severity of this symptom)...

Trivial symptom

Serious symptom

For the following reason....

Your response.....

④

Dean's monitoring of quality

Dean to programme Leader *The failure rate for the 1st Year Economics module appeared to me to be at an unacceptable level*

Your estimate (on a scale of 1 **Trivial** to 10 **Serious**) of the severity of this symptom)...

Trivial symptom

Serious symptom

For the following reason....

Your response.....

⑤

Programme Leader to members of tutorial team

***Programme Leader to all tutors** When I was reviewing the contents of the module boxes prior to the visit of the External Examiners, although I could see evidence of samples of student work it was less evident that the sample had been double-marked in accordance with our own sampling procedures*

Your estimate (on a scale of 1 **Trivial** to **10 Serious**) of the severity of this symptom)...

Trivial symptom

Serious symptom

For the following reason....

Your response.....

⑥

One student to another

One student to another. *(Overheard in coffee bar by a member of staff)*
Well, it's no wonder that she got a good mark in her Accounting course work because she got ... (boyfriend) to do it for her.

Your estimate (on a scale of 1 **Trivial** to 10 **Serious**) of the severity of this symptom)...

Trivial symptom

Serious symptom

For the following reason....

Your response.....

⑦

One tutor to a fellow tutor

One tutor to a fellow tutor

As you were taking the last three weeks of the module, did you put the student evaluation questionnaire results and report in the module box (for the benefit of the external examiners)

Your estimate (on a scale of 1 **Trivial** to 10 **Serious**) of the severity of this symptom)...

Trivial symptom

Serious symptom

For the following reason....

Your response.....

⑧

Tutor to tutee

Tutor to 2nd year tutee

When I was marking your assignment, you seemed unclear how to reference both indirect references (references cited in the works you yourself have read) and Internet derived sources

Your estimate (on a scale of 1 **Trivial** to 10 **Serious**) of the severity of this symptom)...

Trivial symptom

Serious symptom

For the following reason....

Your response.....

⑨

Teaching and Learning facilitator to tutors

Teaching and Learning facilitator to tutors

Some staff have raised with me (informally) whether there is a policy of how to deal with 'overt reliance upon sources' at first year level

Your estimate (on a scale of 1 **Trivial** to 10 **Serious**) of the severity of this symptom)...

Trivial symptom

Serious symptom

For the following reason....

Your response.....

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Research and Consultancy facilitator to tutors

Research and Consultancy facilitator to tutors

Do we need to show the impact of research-informed teaching within our modules?

Your estimate (on a scale of 1 **Trivial** to 10 **Serious**) of the severity of this symptom)...

Trivial symptom

Serious symptom

For the following reason....

Your response.....

11

(Your own example here)

(Your own example here)

Your estimate (on a scale of 1 **Trivial** to 10 **Serious**) of the severity of this symptom)...

Trivial symptom

Serious symptom

For the following reason....

Your response.....

SOME POTENTIAL 'ANSWERS'

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| Student talking to tutor |
| Tutor: <i>Why don't you go and see Dr X about that.</i> Student: <i>Who is Dr X? Where do I find him (or is it her)? And what does he (or she) look like?</i> |
| (Symptom - trivial) The student hasn't encountered this academic. |
| Solution: The student just needs to be pointed in the direction of the academic's room. |
| (Symptom - serious) Students are disengaged from staff. They don't have any idea who staff are. They don't see themselves as members of an academic community. |
| Solution First make sure that the identities of staff are widely known - pictures on walls, pictures and biographies on departmental website. Try to create a sense of community. An induction meeting introducing as many staff as possible would be helpful. As would a student society which invites in external speakers. Or social events. http://www.qube.ac.uk/QuBE/toolbox/resereps/canon/InvolvingStudentsInQA.pdf See section 2.2.2 |

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| External Examiners Comments (1) |
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| External Examiner This module has used exactly the same assessment for the past 4 years and student performance is rather limited. |
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| (Symptom Trivial) |
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| The External Examiner has not understood that assessment does not need to change greatly. It is an open-ended essay with small variations and it is intended that the essay contents will change according to the students' reading. As far as performance is concerned, this is not an easy subject. |
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| Solution: |
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| Communicate better with the External Examiner. A clearly stated rationale, perhaps given as a sample solution would explain the situation. |
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| (Symptom Serious) |
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| This module has got stuck in a rut. The subject has moved on but the lecturer has not. It is being delivered in a way that does not interest or excite the students. |
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| Solution |
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| This module may need a rewrite. Is there a process to update a single module? Then this should be activated. But it could be that the out-datedness of a single module is itself a symptom of a wider problem - that the whole degree programme is out of date. A process to check this and to review what needs to be done should be activated. |
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| Or is it that the invariant assessment and poor student performance indicate that the delivery of the module needs to be changed? How involved are the students in this module. Perhaps need to consider ways of engaging students. See http://www.qube.ac.uk/QuBE/toolbox/think/think2/ and the full article linked there |
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External Examiners Comments (2)

External Examiner *When I was reviewing the final year projects, I noticed that not much reference was being made to current periodical literature in the field'.*

(Symptom Trivial)

The nature of the projects was such that inter-disciplinary and problem-solving issues were being researched and these issues are not well represented in the current literature

Solution:

Reinforce the norms that references to current literature will be especially rewarded.

(Symptom Serious)

The students are relying too heavily upon 'internet' type resources and failing to engage with the 'deep web' of available literature.

Accessibility to current journals and databases may be a problem at the institutional level.

Solution

- Students have to be introduced to the notion of researching an academic question rather than researching an area and, perhaps, guided in a more theoretically fruitful direction.
- Internet sources have to be handled with a degree of circumspection and subjected to critical evaluation
- Students have to avail themselves of the 'deep web' to access periodical literature
- Current periodical availability and accessibility needs to be reviewed - and probably augmented

④

Dean's monitoring of quality

Dean to programme Leader The failure rate for the 1st Year Economics module appeared to me to be at an unacceptable level

(Symptom Trivial)

The failure rate was somewhat higher than normal but within the range of variability that is to be expected from one cohort to the next.

Solution:

Indicate in the annual monitoring report that programme managers are aware of the problem and can contextualise it by giving comparative data.

(Symptom Serious)

This module had serious problems - principally because a tutor was suddenly taken ill and a (not completely satisfactory) replacement had to be found at short notice. Students were confused and were ill-prepared for the end of module examination in which they performed badly.

Solution

This problem is not unique - and a quality procedure should be available to remedy this. Firstly any new tutor needs a close mentoring if they are to take over a module half-way through. Secondly, students need some reassurance that any disruption should not impact adversely upon their work by some informal moderation.

More importantly, the external examiner should be kept fully apprised - some informal action, perhaps taken in consultation with the Dean should have been initiated, perhaps by a close scrutiny of the marks in the 'narrowly failed' region to attempt a broad degree of comparability between the patterns of one student cohort and its predecessors.

For wider examination of the role of deans see

<http://qube.ac.uk/QuBE/toolbox/resereps/summaries/ntu1/?searchterm=Deans> and the full article linked there

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Programme Leader to members of tutorial team

Programme Leader to all tutors When I was reviewing the contents of the module boxes prior to the visit of the External Examiners, although I could see evidence of samples of student work it was less evident that the sample had been double-marked in accordance with our own sampling procedures

(Symptom Trivial)

All double marking had been performed correctly but staff had been careless in documenting this fact in the photocopied facesheets/samples retained for examination by external examiners and other quality monitoring.

Solution:

Reinforce the importance of the 'evidence trail' by emphasising the message that quality procedures have to be documented and evidenced as well as being performed. Perhaps organise tutors in teams of 2-3 to self-monitor (in a non-threatening way) the contents of the module boxes.

(Symptom Serious)

The fact that evidence was lacking was because the second marking had not actually been performed. The incident might also point to a deeper organisational or cultural malaise in that it is possible that a mentoring system for new staff was implemented only half-heartedly or not at all. In addition, existing staff might be exhibiting a degree of complacency concerning the importance of procedures and their documentation.

Solution

A Programme Leader would need to ensure that particularly newly appointed staff appreciate the importance of the practice and its documentation. A case might be considered for a 'New Tutors' Handbook' to reinforce the message.

Existing staff need to be reminded, in forcible terms if necessary, that failures on their part can adversely impact upon the perceived quality of procedures within a department.

Tutors may be organised in teams of 2-3 to help monitor, in a collegiate and non-threatening way, the materials made available for inspection by external examiners and other monitoring audits.

For an examination of the deeper issues concerning the developments of a quality culture, see http://qube.ac.uk/QuBE/toolbox/resereps/index_html/?searchterm=quality%20culture and the full article linked there.

⑥

One student to another

One student to another. (Overheard in coffee bar by a member of staff)
Well, it's no wonder that she got a good mark in her Accounting course work because she got ... (boyfriend) to do it for her.

(Symptom Trivial)

At one level, this might be a case of student tittle-tattle. There is no evidence available to the tutor that the presented work is not all of the student's own work. The remark was an overheard one - and an issue had not been formally made or identified.

Solution:

The tutor might check informally with a tutor group (or one or two individual students) whether there was any evidence of systematic copying of work (particularly if the work is of a numerical nature)

(Symptom Serious)

There is a more systematic student culture (particularly in work involving numerical answers) in which one student *perceived to be competent* does the work which other students incorporate into their assignments.

It also indicates a series of problems including complete lack of understanding of the material, lack of confidence in handling numerical data and (probably) poor time management

Solution

Experienced tutors of statistics and accounting will have encountered this problem in a series of guises and can be an intractable one (patterns of numbers do not necessarily display a pattern of plagiarism as do words)

The solutions may range from a selection from any/all of the following:

- Ensure that all data is commented upon so that understanding of the figures can be put into words
- Attempt some randomisation of data sets if this is possible so that each student has an individuated set of data
- Stress the importance of the difference between group collaboration (*as a learning activity*) and assignment submission (*as an individual activity*)
- Reinforce the norms of 'good academic practice' (i.e. not plagiarised)
- Inculcate good time management skills (as short-cuts are liable to be taken under time pressure)
- Take some intermediate assessments (perhaps on a sample basis)

⑦

One tutor to a fellow tutor

One tutor to a fellow tutor

As you were taking the last three weeks of the module, did you put the student evaluation questionnaire results and report in the module box (for the benefit of the external examiners)

(Symptom Trivial)

This is an innocent reminder to ensure that the fellow tutor has actually performed the evaluation, got the results and put them into the appropriate location for subsequent quality monitoring.

Solution:

The programme leader may need to institute some monitoring systems to ensure that all module evaluations have been correctly undertaken and filed. Evidently, every institution will have its own system of recording evaluation at the module level and on occasions this will not be under the control of any individual tutor

(Symptom Serious)

It could be that the second tutor has forgotten (or neglected) to collect the necessary student evaluation of this module. This may be evidence that these evaluations are not taken particularly seriously or that there is a haphazard approach to monitoring. On the programme leader level, this may point to an absence of an inclination (or the time) to ensure that this aspect of routine quality monitoring is adequately performed

Solution

As with other concerns, the solution may lie at both a cultural and at an organisational level.

Problems for the programme leader to address are the following:

- Have all new tutors been inducted into the importance of this procedure (e.g. is there a handbook or a checklist for new tutors?)
- Were initial standards amongst a tutorial team initially high but there has been some slipping away over the years?
- Does there need to be a timely reminder to the team and an organisational response (ticks in a spreadsheet) to ensure that this monitoring has been performed?
- Have action plans for refinements to the module been drawn from the current module evaluation?

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| Tutor to tutee |
| Tutor to 2nd year tutee <i>When I was marking your assignment, you seemed unclear how to reference both indirect references (references cited in the works you yourself have read) and Internet derived sources</i> |
| (Symptom Trivial) The student had mislaid the guidance notes for correct referencing or had been inconsistent in their application |
| Solution: Ensure that the student had appreciated the importance of the referencing guidance notes and this had been an oversight on this occasion |
| (Symptom Serious) There has been no systematic instruction in the use of a referencing convention or guidance notes had been issued some time ago that were not widely publicised, accessible or indeed utilised. It could well be some tutors themselves (those without experience of writing publishable papers?) are unclear themselves, particularly concerning the conventions of Internet referencing. Are these concerns not seen as sufficiently serious for most tutors? The fact that it was a second year student could point to the fact that some important first year lessons had not been effectively communicated or reinforced by members of the tutorial team. |
| Solution Given the centrality of referencing to all student submitted work, the problem may in the fact that tutors themselves are attached to different conventions and the advice therefore given to students is unclear or ambiguous. This points to the need for a coordinated policy and to a simple set of guidelines to which all members of a teaching group subscribe. There may even be a case for a 'teach-in' or 'self-help' seminar at an appropriate juncture in the year to ensure a degree of consistency. At a more general level, are the lessons inculcated in the first year of a course effectively transferred to later sections of the course? Does there need to be an interaction between a 'referencing' and a 'good academic practice' (anti-plagiarism) policy. Solutions would be at the level of clarity, consistency and accessibility of policies adopted within a department. |

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| Teaching and Learning facilitator to tutors |
| Teaching and Learning facilitator to tutors <i>Some staff have raised with me (informally) whether there is a policy of how to deal with 'overt reliance upon sources' at first year level</i> |
| (Symptom Trivial) The tutor (possibly new to the college, or to first year teaching) is unaware of the norms or the policies to apply |
| Solution: The tutor needs to be pointed to the appropriate policies (and tutorial aids) available to help overcome this problem. There is an interaction between this problem and that of plagiarism (see Question ⑧) |
| (Symptom Serious) There has been no systematic advice given to students concerning 'good academic practice' or the existing policies are not applied consistently and systematically. |
| Solution The teaching group needs to have a clear set of guidance notes which are well understood and internalised by members of both the staff and the student community. Distinctions need to be drawn between the practices adopted by a more naive first year student (poor academic practice) and, for example, a third year student attempting to plagiarise sections of a source to incorporate into a final year project or dissertation (in which case, more exacting sanctions need to be applied) Assignments may need to be set which encourage individuality and creativity on the part of the student (which tends to suggest that all assignments may need to incorporate some evidence of <i>reflective thinking</i>) |

⑩

Research and Consultancy facilitator to tutors

Research and Consultancy facilitator to tutors

Do we need to show the impact of research-informed teaching within our modules?

(Symptom Trivial)

There does not appear to be an evident way in which this is actively tracked across members of a department

Solution:

Ask tutors to supply evidence (perhaps in a module evaluation form) how such evidence can be found within their module

(Symptom Serious)

It may well be current research and academic scholarly activity is less widespread within the teaching group than might be desirable.

In any case, even non-active researchers should be up-to-date with recent developments in their field - does the institution's library serve them well in this respect (in terms of current periodicals)?

Some colleagues may define their role as primarily a 'teaching' role and may therefore have defined themselves out of current research activities.

Solution

At the cultural level, programmes of staff seminars may help to keep members of a teaching team abreast of and informed about contemporary debates and developments within the field.

'Novice' researchers (not confined to junior members of the department) should receive active encouragement to prepare and deliver conference presentations and published papers that may then be rewarded e.g. after the acceptance of a paper(s) in a recognised journal, further funding is made accessible to encourage further efforts in this direction.

Mentoring of less-experienced by more experienced staff is one solution. At a more mundane level, staff should be encouraged to point to evidence of researched informed teaching in their own modules.

(Your own example here)

(Your own example here)

(Symptom Trivial)

Solution:

(Symptom Serious)

Solution

Technical Appendix

New scenarios may be incorporated into this exercise by composing material (scenario on p. 15, 'answer' on p. 26) and emailing to:

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with a note to update the '*Is it Serious*' tool.

End.