Report on desk review of Academic Quality Action Plan
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Statement of Works

To undertake a desk review of Unitec's EER response, the Academic Quality Action Plan (AQAP), to assess the following; is the right work being prioritised? is the programme of work moving quickly enough? and is there anything that's missing?

Activities:

- After an initial review of the full AQAP, and the Director Ako's Update report (26/09/19) to the Commissioner, ELT and Academic Board, the Reviewer requested access to further documentation and permission to interview some staff, in order to triangulate information from multiple sources and facilitate reporting with some confidence, particularly in relation to Recommendation 1 - Student achievement targets and Recommendation 2 - Improve Academic Board oversight and reporting of the Plan.
- The further documentation/information included: Academic Board minutes (Sept, Oct meetings 2018 and 2019); the Academic Risk Register; an example of an Academic Committee self-evaluation. Names and contact details of staff members connected to Academic Board and/or sub-committees for short phone interviews.
- Initial feedback was provided to Simon Nash, as tracked notes on his Update report, followed by a phone call on the 18 October with reflections on Academic Board meeting minutes, and clarification of some matters including; international student support and success - confirmed this has been a focus following INZ audit identified attendance recording issues, and development of Moodle site for Code of Practice information to be completed by all staff over 2020 (this has been viewed), communications with NZQA – recommended Simon enquire as to the need for on-going progress reporting, and general communications with staff regarding the plan and progress. Simon confirmed the Academic Risk Register, based on the 6 KEQs is in the early stages of development so doesn't show much detail yet.
- A short questionnaire was designed for phone interviews, for consistency of enquiry. The focus of enquiry was on the AQAP, communication and commitment to the plan, strategies and activities, effectiveness of academic structures and the PEP process. Phone interviews (20 - 30 minutes) were scheduled and conducted with 2 staff on 23 and 24 October.

Findings

The Academic Quality Action Plan, progress reporting, communication and staff commitment to the strategies.

The Academic Quality Action Plan is a very extensive plan, is being well monitored, and progress against the plan is being regularly reported at Executive level and to Academic Board (AB). The assessment of progress is realistic. This is evidenced by the plan, the Update report, recent AB meeting minutes, and reports from staff.

The members of Academic Board, and/or the sub-committees interviewed reported that they are well informed about the plan, it's purpose and progress. The recently appointed Academic Programme Managers (APMs) had knowledge of the plan, how the actions had been filtered down to HoS, and their focus was on implementing their part of the plan. When asked to rate how well informed they were about the AQAP, on a 1-5 scale with 5 being well informed and 1 not informed, the interviewees gave 2 ratings at 5, 2 ratings at 4 and 1 rating at 3.

Interviewee's views on how well the plan and progress being made has been communicated across the organisation were mixed, and ranged from 'being well communicated at AB and to new APMs, to little evidence of this institutional wide, or in schools, to seeing this as a gap, with 'considerable opportunity to connect the dots' for staff, and 'get buy-in'.

The recent establishment of a governance group to support the Director Ako with decision-making and leadership of the EER preparations is an useful strategy, as this is an extensive work plan, and needs to be driven by a team and have commitment from right across the whole organisation. This group will be able to assist with the communication challenge noted above.

The Reviewer considers it would be preferable to shift the focus of the plan and the work programme, from the response to EER, onto institutional performance and quality outcomes for students/learners. There is a risk that once EER is over in 2020 the practice improvements may not be sufficiently embedded into business-as-usual, and that there could be some reversion to previous practices. However, it is understood that this current focus is necessarily to keep up the concentration and momentum.

In regard to the dashboard and the measures of the plan's recommendations/actions underway expressed as percentages. Whilst, the Update report explains that these are not indicators of achievement of the outcomes, this could be misinterpreted by viewers of this dashboard. It is essential that everyone is very clear about what this dashboard illustrates i.e. the completion of implementation of the actions only, and this needs to be communicated across the organisation.

Actual improvements and shifts in quality processes and outcomes will need to be measured by focused evaluation exercises. The Reviewer understands that the plan is to have all academic teams undertake a full programme evaluation (PEPs) over December – February, including ensuring programme documentation is complete and current. Following that 'mock' panel exercises are planned for March/April. The success of these evaluative exercises will be dependent on the quality of the facilitation of the evaluative conversations and the preparedness of facilitators/leaders to ask probing questions, as well as all staff being well prepared for the evaluation meetings, knowing and understanding their student educational performance targets, actual achievement data, the improvement strategies being implemented and the impacts these are having on student outcomes. It is strongly recommended that facilitators are provided with training and practice exercises are undertaken before the PEPs commence.

Interviewees were asked to comment on the level of commitment teaching staff have to improving quality, and whether this commitment has shifted in the last 12 months. Responses confirmed that teaching staffing have always been very committed to their students and their success. There has been a significant shift over the last year in the commitment to improving quality, and now there is a clear plan and direction, staff are all 'on the same page'.

The newly developed and released Moodle site courses, which contain all the information for Schools and staff on how they will contribute to the AQAP is a timely resource, is well introduced in the Kaupapa section, and sets out the expectations for semester 1, 2020 clearly. The five strategies generally align to the recommendations and high level actions of the Plan, with a focus on parity of achievement for priority groups, including student retention, Māori and Pacific student success, and the International Code of Practice. The staff capability focus area sets out the expectations for staff to earn badges (two per staff member in 2020). This clarity is timely as there was some feedback relating to this badging system, the need for more specificity and monitoring to ensure that these development activities were being taken up. It would be worthwhile to include some questions in the staff survey at the end of the year (if this is conducted) to gauge the value of these capability activities and to collect evidence of changed practice as a results of the learnings.

As an indicator of progress the interviewees were asked to rate Unitec's preparedness for an external review if this was to occur now, using a sale of 1-10, with 1 being not at all prepared, and 10 being very well prepared. Preparedness was rated as follows; 2 rated 5-6, 1 rated 6-7, 1 at 8, and 1 at 9 (the optimist!) with comments such as – '*definitely seen improvements, more ownership of quality from staff at programme level , monumental shifts in addressing issues, proud of what's being achieved, heading in the right direction, commitment, must be seen as BAU, can't been a project, must be embedded, related to what happens in executive, School is well prepared'.*

The final question asked in the interviews related to the upcoming programme evaluations (PEP) and explored the value of this evaluative process, the impact these have on improving student achievement, and how the process could be improved. Responses included; ' *process is still developing and being embedded, not everyone has access to the data - the APM's have to circulate,*

Student support teams are pleased to have seen the template and have the opportunity to input, and have seen some evidence out of the 2018 PEPs, data is not available earlier enough and this impacts on the level of evaluation, improvements have been made in template'. Clearly there has been some significant improvements in the value of the PEPs, however there is a need to focus on the preparation, data availability and understandings, and as noted previously, the skills of the facilitators.

The following section of the report includes reflections on Recommendations 1 and 2, 4 & 6.

Rec 1- Establish and implement student achievement targets.

The key to success in this area is going to be the communication of targets to all staff, their understanding the need for these targets and the implementation of the strategies, and then the monitoring towards achievement. Access to student data, understanding and using this information to drive improvements is a challenge. This was established from the work the Reviewer did with the Social Practice team and reinforced by staff interviews (refer to comments in earlier section).

Rec 2, 4 & 6 - Improve Academic Board oversight and reporting

The following observations were made from reading the Academic Board meeting minutes - September and October 2018 and 2019.

- There has been a noticeable shift in the focus of AB onto the important academic matters, and to improving the overall academic quality and integrity.

- The delegation of the Chair of AB to the Director Ako has had a positive impact (this is in no way a reflection on the previous chairing, more on the focus that has been brought to the role). The self-assessment of the performance of the Chair, item 5.2 at the recent October meeting, provided some very positive feedback, acknowledged that this is a challenging role, and noted the 'out-of-sight' improvement compared to last year.

- Members are more committed to Academic Board. This is evidenced by improved attendance, less apologies and members arriving late, as well as by the academic discussion occurring at meetings.

- The record of the meetings (minutes) have improved in quality and accuracy. This is evidence by the reduction in matters arising the following meeting and errors being corrected, as well as there being a thread with the on-going actions.

- Committee self-assessment practice is an excellent example of refection and continuous improvement. Examples noted are the performance of Chair (as noted above) and item 3.1.1 September 2019, relating to the issue of purchasing birth certificates where affordability is an issue.

It is recommended that the Academic Board undertake a full self-assessment of its performance for the year, at the same time as the programme teams are involved in their PEPs, as well as a mock exercise in the lead up to the EER in 2020.

Interviewees were asked to rate AB's effectiveness in overseeing and monitoring quality across the institution, and leading quality improvement, and to report key achievements. Their responses illustrated that AB is in catch-up mode. Whilst there is good progress being made, the meetings are being well chaired, and there is robust discussion, interviewees were clear that there is a way to go yet. Several people expressed concerns relating to some members not understanding what is actually happening in the schools (at the coal face), and another about the level of critical review and debate, suggesting that there is room for improvement in this area. Key achievements were noted as the introduction of traffic light system, closer monitoring of degree monitoring reports, focus on moderation results, consistency of templates and the initiatives taken by the Chair to improve the quality of chairing and flow of meeting.

As the sub-committee reports were attached electronically to the agenda and minutes, the reviewer was not able to access these and therefore is not able to comment. Interviewees were asked to comment on the Academic Board sub-committee structure, the effectiveness of these committees, and to provide examples of how this is working in their school, or area. Responses included, 'grateful *of the leadership from AB, TOR reviewed, and feedback was taken on board, committee performance has improved, still some role confusion, lack of clarity about where responsibilities begin and end, communication flow needs to improve'.* Several interviewees noted that there are some issues

relating to the connections between the Quality Alignment Board and the Programme Academic Quality Committees. The Reviewer has not had the opportunity to fully explore these academic structures, functions and links so is not in a position to comment on this, however, suggests that this is looked into.

Conclusions

Overall, the Academic Quality Action Plan is focusing on the most important areas, and when the actions and strategies are fully implemented these will lead to improvements in academic quality, student achievement, and in particular parity of priority learners.

Good progress is being made. This was evidenced from the documentation, Update reports including the dashboard, and from staff feedback (noting that generalisations have been made from a small sample). How this progress is measured and reported needs some attention, as the dashboard being used for reporting to Academic Board shows progress against the plan's recommendations and actions, rather the actual improvements.

In relation to the question - is there anything missing? This is difficult to respond to without further engagement and on-site work. A review of the older Category 1 plan has not be undertaken at this stage. The Reviewer understands that this is important in terms of the work that was underway at the time of the last EER, and that there were some actions not carried over and/or identified in the current plan but which could contribute to overall progress.

Next Steps

To be discussed and agreed with Director Ako.