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# ISO at RMIT: Not just a couple of acronyms

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the development of a quality management system for the teaching and learning processes and related support processes of a large Australian university. The system has been certified to ISO 9001 and represents an innovative application of the ISO standards for university-wide processes in higher education. Common criticisms of ISO systems, such as the quality system being seen as peripheral to business needs and possibly requiring excessive documentation, have been obviated through a focus on student-centered learning experiences and through the use of widely accessible intranet-based electronic documentation. Perceived benefits include a systematic approach to the management of university-wide processes, improved access to management information, a more coherent and integrated framework for quality improvement initiatives, greater understanding of the concept of business processes and an explicit framework of priorities for improvement and innovation. Feedback from staff has been positive and there is also evidence of strengthened client focus and an enhanced capacity to manage organisational change. Some of the challenges of adaptation of the ISO model to the educational context are discussed.

## Introduction

Universities the world over have been subjected to increasing pressures in the last decade to provide evidence of the quality of their outcomes and processes. In addition to initial measures of business efficiency through financial reports, various approaches have been adopted to provide measures of the quality of 'core' academic activities such as teaching and learning, research, scholarship and community services. External review mechanisms have also been imposed on universities, by key stakeholders such as the governments' review processes of the UK Quality Assurance Agency and Australia's Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. In addition to external pressures, within universities there appears to be increasing interest in having internal measures of quality and in taking a

more systematic approach to quality improvement. This may be one response to a more competitive environment, or reflect greater interactions with the community where quality management techniques have been more widely adopted for organisational improvement. This paper focuses in particular on the development and certification to ISO 9001 of the RMIT quality management system for teaching and learning.

## **Educational Organisations and ISO**

One approach to quality improvement is to focus on the quality of core business processes as an indicator of quality. The ISO 9000 management models (e.g. ISO 9001:1994) are practical examples of this approach although they have not been widely applied in universities. Since Sandwell College in Manchester, England became the first public sector educational organisation to be certified to the ISO standard, there have been many debates about the relevance of the ISO standard to the quality of education. Some swear by it, others swear about it and misconceptions abound. Perceptions to be addressed about ISO in an educational setting include that it:

- is skewed towards manufacturing
- is difficult to apply to the process of teaching and learning
- doesn't have relevance in an academic environment
- involves writing copious procedures and manuals
- lacks focus on what is done best – teaching
- is time consuming, and
- uses incomprehensible language.

In short, there is a perception that ISO is too expensive and too difficult to achieve for Universities. The ISO certification process at RMIT was used to dispel this ISO mythology and to achieve a positive outcome to benefit students and staff.

Quality means different things in different contexts, in the ISO context it refers to having a system in place that will assist the management of a process to assure a predetermined outcome. The standards also provide a framework for evaluation of the quality assurance systems of the organisation against a known model. This can be done internally at any time as part of a formative improvement program (e.g. by peer review), but most organisations acknowledge the value of an independent evaluation of the organisation by an authorised external body, which is known as certification against the ISO Standard. This is also a practical form of benchmarking. Certified organisations can use the logo of the certifying authority as part of their public image e.g. on letterhead and in advertising.

In an educational context the primary intention of the ISO standards is to provide a model to help universities put systems in place to be able to assure:

- the university staff and the students have the same expectation of what is to be delivered
- teaching and learning processes are properly managed to ensure that these expectations are met
- staff have a clear picture of what is expected of them, and
- adequate resources are provided to support teaching and learning.

## **Approaches to Quality Improvement at RMIT**

RMIT is a relatively large University with over 40,000 students. Both higher education and vocational programs are offered through various delivery options. The University has a strategic commitment to quality as reflected in its corporate goal "... to create and sustain a distinctive world-class university at the forefront of technical and professional education and real-world research, through continuous improvement and with all staff committed to quality management processes" (RMIT Strategic Plan 1999-2003). This commitment is reflected in various ways throughout the governance, management and resourcing of the organisation.

RMIT's commitment to quality management in recent years has led to several enabling improvements that collectively became significant in the successful development of a quality management system for teaching and learning.

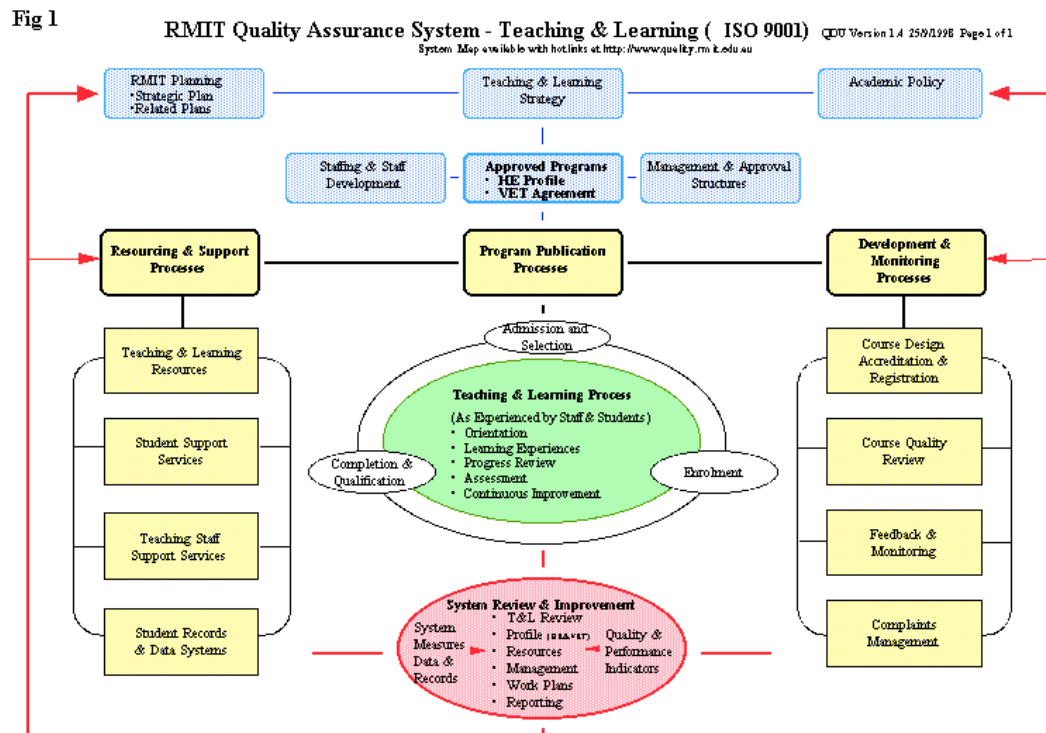
- A strong commitment from senior management which has ensured a consistent approach across the university.
- A Quality Development Unit that works across the entire university and a network of Directors of Teaching Quality based in each faculty.
- A generic framework for policies and processes, designed to enable the consistent management of the University's core business activities.
- Corporate leadership via a Teaching and Learning Strategy (RMIT Teaching & Learning Strategy 1998-2000) that is reviewed and enhanced annually.
- An educational quality assurance process, at the course and subject level, with key focus on teams working together to continually improve the quality of teaching & learning & taking responsibility for that quality & its evaluation (Bowden [1992]).
- Work planning for all members of staff.
- The alignment of an information technological infrastructure with strategic teaching and learning goals.

### **Implementation of the ISO System**

One misconception about the nature of the standards themselves is that they are prescriptive. The standards are NOT prescriptive. The standards only indicate what must be done but not how it is to be done, this enables organisations to customise their quality system around their own operations. This allowed RMIT to design a system that is;

- attractive and helpful to staff at RMIT and not an artificial imposition
- flexible in its application, with language familiar to university staff, assisting staff to understand how the university works
- easily implemented, with a minimal burden of additional paperwork
- a balance of generic processes that have to be followed together with individual faculty or departmental interpretations, and
- an enabler of quality improvement rather than a system of quality control and audits.

The system that evolved focused on the essential processes of teaching and learning such as enrolment, the provision of learning experiences and assessment.



## System Design

For each Component “box”

- **Scope**
- **Flowchart / Process**
- **Table of responsibilities, documentation & planned improvements**

The specific implementation of the ISO system took eight months. This was a relatively short time given the size and complexity of the university but reflected the changes already described. Implementation of the system consisted of four steps:

- initial preparation of a draft system using the existing RMIT Quality Management System framework, with reference to the ISO Standard

- (ii) verification and communication of the system through workshops across the university
- (iii) internal reviews to confirm that the system was being followed and relevant records were in place, and
- (iv) development of an Intranet site to provide access to the system and manage the documentation.

A critical success factor in the implementation phase was the use of quality champions. These were typically Faculty Executive Officers or Directors of Teaching Quality in each Faculty. They worked with the Quality Development Unit, the Faculty office and Department personnel to ensure the consultation process was thorough. As implementation progressed they initiated improvements where processes were not being followed and advocated changes to the process documentation where it was not accurate.

### **System Documentation**

System documentation was kept to a minimum and dispelled one of the myths associated with ISO. Key teaching and learning processes were identified and then documented in the following way:

- A flow chart which identified each step in the process
- A table describing key information about related policies and documentation, management responsibilities and planned improvements.

This concise format provided a brief and clear description of RMIT's 'macro' processes while allowing faculties the flexibility to provide their own operational details.

A second interpretive document was then generated for the external auditors to ensure that each element of the ISO standard was being addressed in the RMIT system. This obviated the need to acquaint staff with the language of the ISO Standard with terms such as "Customer Supplied Product" or "Control of Non-conforming Product".

### **Document Management**

With a high acceptance of the World Wide Web in the University, where a large number of policies were already posted, it was decided to publish the system on an Intranet site. This enables easy updating of documentation by the process owners whilst allowing the Quality Development Unit control of the total system.

### **Internal Audit of the System**

In addition to specific review processes that exist within the system, a process of internal audit was established to maintain and continually improve the overall system. The validation of the system documentation led to the development of recording mechanisms that could be used by staff and the Quality Development Unit to record the level of adherence to the system. Further internal audits generated additional information about the strengths and weaknesses of the system. These two sets of information were used as the basis for refining the internal auditing system and to develop agreed improvement plans in consultation with the relevant staff.

## **External Audit of the System**

An initial certification audit by an authorised external organisation followed by periodic surveillance audits are required to gain and maintain certification. The initial certification audit was concerned with the quality system addressing the ISO elements and conformance to that system. The surveillance audits focus on compliance with the system and in addition, look for evidence of continuous improvement and sustainability. The certification process is valuable to the organisation in several ways but particularly by continuing to maintain a focus on the importance of mechanisms to assure clients of quality and by offering advice on further opportunities for improvement.

YES — ISO 9001 is an acronym worth having

The principal business improvements that are derived from a quality assurance system include increased customer satisfaction, simplification of cumbersome systems, a reduction in paperwork and a focus to guide significant improvement of processes. Other benefits to staff are well recognised also, such as enhanced job satisfaction through better understanding of how the organisation works, more opportunities for staff to be involved in improving the business and, of course, fewer complaints. These improvements also provide a strong foundation for further and broader business improvements (e.g. as recognised by an Australian Quality Award).

In addition to business improvements, external certification allows the organisation to use the certification logo in promotional and other ways (e.g. on stationery and advertising material) and offers contractual opportunities with other organisations who will deal only with ISO certified suppliers (including many government authorities and tendering processes). Certification also provides public evidence of a commitment to quality assurance, which is recognised both nationally and internationally.

Specific benefits of the implementation and improvement of the Teaching and Learning Quality Management System being certified to ISO 9001:1994 standard are:

- A coherent intranet site focused on a core activity has been welcomed by most staff who have had difficulty in locating information concerned with teaching and learning across a plethora of related but not necessarily linked sites
- The use of an electronic system has also obviated the difficulties of management of a paper-based system, which is sometimes seen to be a shortcoming of ISO systems.
- 'The way we work at RMIT' has become more transparent
- There is clear evidence that we are improving
- The internal reviews required for ISO certification have provided an explicit framework for improvement priorities

The experience at RMIT demonstrated that ISO certification can be achieved across a university and that it can be beneficial. The University has a set of explicit improvement targets to work towards and these will strengthen and enhance the existing quality management systems. It is clear that sensitive adaptation of the ISO model to the academic context has been critical to its acceptance. So too has been an understanding that the ISO certified system is part of a coherent set of improvement approaches. Achieving ISO certification is the easy part of the quality challenge. Establishing an ongoing commitment by all within the organisation to achieving high levels of quality, creating a robust quality system and maintaining it by a process of continuous improvement are the real challenges.

## References

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