

SRHE paper – Conference 2014

Title: Disruptive change, transforming cultures: approaches to university-wide curriculum renewal through blended learning

Krause Kerri-Lee, *University of Western Sydney, Australia*

Abstract

This paper outlines a whole-of-university systems approach to undergraduate curriculum reform with a focus on technology-enhanced curriculum design. In 2013 the university embarked on a 3-year whole-of-university curriculum renewal process. Academic departments undertook a comprehensive mapping of undergraduate academic programs, reviewing the alignment of course and subject learning outcomes, assessment and learning activities. Academic Program Directors identified opportunities for embedding technology-enhanced learning and assessment in the respective academic programs. The university's Blended Learning Strategy has been integral to this process with its focus on renewing curriculum and assessment design through the blending of face-to-face engagement with technology-enhanced learning, enabled by a progressive rollout of ipads to successive undergraduate cohorts. This three-year strategy has recently undergone a mid-point review. The paper provides an overview of the approach adopted together with an exploration of the cultural shift that has taken place across the institution, and the outcomes of evaluation to date.

Paper

Some have described the policy and systemic changes taking place in the Australian higher education sector as 'once-in-a-generation', 'seismic' changes which demand that higher education providers look closely at their business models and the ways in which they engage students and staff. In this volatile, highly competitive environment, universities that are heavily reliant on revenue generated by student load must pay particular attention to the quality of their academic program and the student experience. To address this imperative, the University of Western Sydney (UWS) in metropolitan Sydney, Australia, has embarked on a major curriculum reform agenda with a focus on technology-enhanced curriculum design as part of a broader emphasis on enhancing the quality of learning, teaching and the undergraduate student experience.

The university has over 1000 academic staff and over 40,000 students spread across six campuses in the Western Sydney region which is about the size of the country of Cyprus. The Western Sydney region is the third largest economy in Australia and the most rapidly growing region in the country. More than 60% of the University's undergraduate students are first in their family to attend university and the majority come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. A 2011 survey indicated that a minority of students had access to mobile devices to help them with their learning and a substantial majority of students work well over 20 hours per week to help them pay the bills for basic living costs. In 2013 the University decided to provide all commencing undergraduate students with an iPad as part of their enrolment package. Ipads were also distributed to all academic staff. This forms part

of the University's three-year blended learning strategy and it will be repeated in 2014 and 2015. Having a common mobile platform such as the iPad has opened up opportunities to foster innovation among staff and students, enhance IT literacy skills, and build a community of scholars who regularly share ideas, successes, failures and good practice in technology-enhanced learning and curriculum design. Extensive staff development has taken place and staff have been encouraged to develop a range of resources including custom-designed apps and iBook resources for their teaching. The presentation will feature some of the outcomes of the extensive investment in staff development that has characterised this process.

The blended learning strategy is a whole-of-university curriculum reform initiative involving comprehensive mapping of undergraduate academic programs, reviewing the alignment of course and subject learning outcomes, assessment and learning activities. The University graduate attributes attach particular importance to preparing career-ready graduates who are well-equipped to engage with the rapidly growing knowledge economy, both in the Western Sydney region and beyond. Having identified an opportunity to transform the ways in which technology is integrated into the curriculum, the University committed to a three-year roll-out of iPads as a signal to students, staff and the external market that UWS was serious about technology-enabled learning. We married this commitment with a focus on reforming the curriculum to make the most of technology-enhanced learning and teaching.

The process started with Academic Program Directors who identified opportunities for embedding technology-enhanced learning and assessment in the respective academic programs year-on-year from first to final year. The conceptual framework underpinning this institutional curriculum reform agenda is that of Senge (1999) who argues for the importance of facilitating high quality organisational learning and sustainable cultural change characterised by trust and collaboration. In order to achieve this goal of a 'learning organisation', we adopted a hub and spoke model (Ling, 2009) comprising an academic development and blended learning support team which connects with individuals, groups and institutional elements with a remit for supporting the development of academics as teachers, as well as informing strategic policy-making in relation to the quality of learning and teaching. Ling (2009) notes that academic development responsibilities may be variously assumed by, for example, Deans/Associate Deans (learning and teaching), Faculty Learning and Teaching Coordinators, Program Convenors. Thus academic development is presented as a shared responsibility and a partnership between academic developers and colleagues across the institution.

The hub-and-spoke model also places emphasis on academic development activities that are sensitive and responsive to institutional structures, processes and cultures (Krause, 2011; Smart, Kuh & Tierney, 1997). It recognises the power of strategic partnerships that are enriched by targeted support and data that is provided in a fit-for-purpose manner to a variety of staff groups - particularly academic staff and leaders - across the university as part of a coordinated approach to enhancing the quality of learning, teaching and the student experience. The Blended Learning and

curriculum renewal strategy included the recruitment of 40 blended learning and curriculum specialists to partner with academic staff in a hub-and-spokes model, providing targeted support in Schools. The design of collaborative learning spaces, both formal and informal, has also been key to the strategy, as has a robust evaluation framework.

Strategic partnerships, cross-functional collaborations and responsive units are fundamental to high-performing organizations (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 311). As part of this joined-up approach, a 'loose-tight' organisational structure (p. 311) has been key to the success of the initiative. This is characterised by a delicate balance of carefully managed and prescribed processes on the one hand, and autonomy, entrepreneurship and innovation among staff, in particular, on the other.

A key to success is building capacity by encouraging colleagues such as course and program leaders, heads of school and deans with responsibility for curriculum design and delivery to initiate local discussions to optimise the quality of learning and teaching (Guerra, 2008). The key message is that academic colleagues need to be empowered and supported to take ownership of the curriculum design process.

In the presentation I will reflect on lessons learned and progress thus far through the sharing of evaluation findings and feedback from students and staff. Implications for broader institution-level reforms and culture shifts will also be considered, along with reflections on the disruptive change – both positive and negative – afforded by distributing mobile devices to entire cohorts of students and staff.

References

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