

Improving teaching and learning: a systemic approach to institutional change

Belinda Probert, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, La Trobe University, Victoria 3086, Australia.

belinda.probert@latrobe.edu.au

Paper submitted to the

‘What Works Conference’ on Quality of Teaching in Higher Education

OECD Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE)

12-13 October 2009, Istanbul Technical University (ITU)

Istanbul, Turkey

Improving teaching and learning: a systemic approach to institutional change

Abstract

This paper describes one university's approach to improving the quality of teaching and learning at the institutional level, based on the premise of improving the design of curriculum rather than focussing on the skills of teachers as such. The paper describes the process by which university-wide principles of curriculum design were defined and agreed, as well as the parallel campaigns needed to align promotions, budgets and other key drivers of academic behaviour and institutional culture behind curriculum renewal. The paper outlines the key enabling factors behind the approach; both those which might be seen as institution specific and those which can be found in most universities. It also identifies the structural and cultural obstacles to this kind of systemic reform, including some common approaches which are intended to improve teaching and learning, and the competing pressures for research improvement.

The context and the challenge

This is a paper about an ambitious, whole-of-institution approach to improving the quality of teaching and learning in one Australian University. While some elements of our strategy relate to our distinctive mission, this paper focuses on the fundamental difficulty which all universities face – namely how to improve teaching and learning at the institutional level. For while many universities have managed to align the key elements of structures, incentives and rewards to improve research outcomes, far fewer seem to have managed to do so in support of student learning.

The paper describes the approach which we have developed to changing the structures and cultures of one university, explains the explicit rationale for this approach, and identifies what made it possible to develop a campaign for systemic change. The proof of this pudding will lie in the evaluation of student outcomes which will be undertaken over the coming years. But we have, at least, formally agreed that our approach 'will be characterised by the use of evaluation, evidence and review in Faculties and Schools'.¹

After opening its doors in 1967, La Trobe University now has almost 27,000 students, including over a thousand PhD students and almost 5000 international students. It is a comprehensive university offering professional, generalist and specialist degrees, and has a

¹ See Section 3, Overarching Principles, *Design for Learning* (<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/teaching/assets/downloads/curriculum/DFL-publication.pdf>). As Derek Bok, twice President of Harvard University famously wrote: 'Throughout undergraduate education, a great wall separates the world of research from the world of practice – even though the practitioners involved are professors, trained in research, who would seem ideally prepared to take full advantage of whatever findings empirical investigators have to offer' (*Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid look at how much Students Learn and why they should be learning more*, Princeton University Press 2005, p. 9)

strong research record particularly in the sciences, and the humanities and social sciences. However, over the last decade the University largely ignored the changing external environment and growing competition from five other universities in Melbourne and, as a result, student demand for La Trobe's courses has been declining steadily.

Many of the academic staff at La Trobe would describe it as a research intensive university which has always taken teaching more seriously than its competitors, and which is characterised by a distinctively progressive and egalitarian culture². It is certainly the case that when it was established in the late 1960s, the University wanted to employ academic staff who 'included among their qualifications a capacity to teach students who, although clever, were likely to be culturally deprived and ill at ease in the University milieu'³. And back in 1983, the Academic Board decided that for promotion to senior lecturer (then the career grade), 'equal weight should be given to teaching and research'. Forty years later the University is still distinguished by the diversity of its student body, providing opportunities to high achievers but also many who arrive relatively ill-prepared for tertiary study.

At the start of the 21st century, despite these radical origins, the promotions criteria at La Trobe had become very conservative, requiring excellence in discipline based research and giving little weight to teaching excellence or anything else. The University did not do well from the national Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF)⁴, nor on any other measure of teaching (without wishing to suggest these necessarily measure anything very useful). Meanwhile, as at all Australian universities, the staff-student ratio had declined dramatically and there was widespread unease about its impact on student learning. Yet academics did not know how to respond to shrinking resources other than to bemoan the decline of the tutorial. There was little evidence that teaching was designed in any way that was noticeably different from our competitors and it was hard to argue that students should choose La Trobe because it was a fine teaching university.

A once-in-a-decade opportunity?

In 2007 a new Vice-Chancellor was appointed⁵ and he rapidly took stock of the University's declining performance in both teaching and research. In a new Strategic Plan the VC announced, among many other things, that all the University's courses were to be reviewed to ensure they were relevant, up-to-date and distinctive. These were rousing words, but as yet there were no senior staff to implement them. At the start of 2008 the VC was joined by a new DVC and DVC (Research). As the new DVC I now had to work out *how* to conduct such a huge review, and *what criteria* should be developed against which to measure all our courses. Fortunately for me I arrived in the middle of a restructure of the existing Academic

² Even the physical planning of the campus around the Agora was designed to create a 'clustered Bohemia...where all members of the University would meet and mingle' (Roy Simpson, 'The master plan', in *Building La Trobe University*, ed. William J Breen, LTU Press, 1989).

³ John Jenkins and Judith Richards 'La Trobe as a Teaching University' in *Building La Trobe University*.

⁴ These substantial government funds were awarded between 2004 and 2008 to universities on the basis of measures such as student satisfaction, retention and completion and graduate employment rates:

http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/learning_teaching/ltpf/

⁵ Professor Paul Johnson, previously Deputy Director of the London School of Economics.

Development Unit (ADU – the unit responsible for improving teaching and learning at La Trobe), giving us the opportunity to transform and re-launch this critical resource. In particular, we were able to attract a new Director of the ADU who was sufficiently over-qualified to justify the creation of a new position of Pro Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Academic Planning)⁶. Within a few months of his arrival in mid 2008 we had a new integrated teaching support unit called the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Centre (CTLTC).

The creation of a united teaching and learning leadership team is probably the one aspect of this story that is most difficult to replicate. In my view there are surprisingly few effective and informed leaders of teaching and learning working in Australian universities. We are generally faced with a choice between academics who are looking for university leadership positions via the Head of School, Dean of Faculty career path, or the growing group of teaching and learning specialists who have worked in academic development units, largely influencing only the enthusiasts and the converts who constitute a minority of academic staff in every university I have known. To simplify unfairly, the former often know little about teaching or learning apart from their own experience, while the latter know little about institutional politics and how to effect institutional change – and often have a hard time being taken seriously by the most influential academic staff. My good fortune in finding an internationally respected scholar in the field of higher education who simultaneously understands university politics cannot be overstated, and is central to the scale and ambition of what we are now trying to do.

The La Trobe approach

With a new senior team in place in mid 2008 we agreed that the only way we could systematically improve the quality of teaching and learning across the University was to focus not on individual teachers but on the design of curriculum⁷, including what is to be learnt, why it is to be learnt, how it to be learnt and when it is to be learnt⁸. The Australian higher education system began to focus on financial incentives (the LTPF) to promote improved teaching and learning in 2004, and very substantial funds were awarded between 2006 and 2009. While the performance indicators did include a measure of student satisfaction with their course after graduation⁹, most academics believe that they have little ability to affect this measure and are largely disinterested in it. At the same time, the most visible form of public or institutional recognition remained the major teaching awards which focus on individuals, and which are ignored and possibly disliked by the majority of academics. Meanwhile individual academics remain wedded to the notion of owning ‘their’ subject areas.

⁶ Professor Tom Angelo. His insistence on the primacy of designing good outcomes into the curriculum is visible in everything we are doing.

⁷ Everything has been aligned around this focus on curriculum including the name of our key policy committee, the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Committee.

⁸ Following the UK Higher Education Academy’s Imaginative Curriculum Project.

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/853.htm>

⁹ Course equals program or degree as opposed to individual subjects

The challenge we face is that we know that higher learning can only occur across an extended period of study; that some key graduate capabilities are learned over several years; and that for all students to succeed we need intentional, well-designed and coherent curriculum. How then can we bring the University together around a shared understanding of the importance of 3-4 year curriculum design as opposed to supporting individual innovation? As our PVC (CAP) is fond of quoting, ‘you can’t fix by analysis what you bungle by design’¹⁰.

Our solution was to establish a Curriculum Taskforce of about thirty academics chosen because others saw them as teaching leaders, and including the five faculty Associate Deans Academic. We then spent every second Friday afternoon together over four months, working to define what we agreed should be the principles underpinning the design of all undergraduate programs. From this process came a Green Paper, an open Colloquium, and four months of intensive consultation across the Faculties leading to a White Paper, which was adopted without dissent at Academic Board in May this year.

This White Paper is now known as *Design for Learning: Curriculum Review and Renewal at La Trobe University*¹¹. What is distinctive about it is the agreement on shared graduate capabilities, to be assessed against agreed standards of student achievement; the mapping of their development, assessment and evaluation at the program level; and a cornerstone, mid-point and capstone structure for all programs ensuring all students receive adequate formative feedback. Implementation is now the major challenge.

Changing the culture

The process described here certainly engaged a significant number of academic staff. Over 120 attended the launch of the Green Paper, over 300 (out of a total of 1100) took part in the face to face consultations over the following four months, and the Associate Deans Academic became a united and articulate group of change agents. However, this is certainly not enough to ensure success. For most academics the key signals they receive about what is expected of them come from their Heads of School and Deans, and from the University promotions scheme. The preoccupations of Heads of School and Deans are often budgets and research, for in these areas there are clear and unmistakable performance targets against which they will be held accountable.

In order to align the major internal drivers with our program of curriculum reform we have simultaneously attacked these other two drivers of behaviour (budget and promotions), believing that without clear alignment there is a very real danger of the project losing momentum or indeed being undermined.¹²

The promotions criteria and procedures were opened up for review at the same time as the Curriculum Taskforce was established. A primary objective of the review was to ensure that

¹⁰ R. Light, J. Singer and J. Willett (1990) *By Design: Planning Research on Higher Education*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.

¹¹ <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/teaching/assets/downloads/curriculum/DFL-publication.pdf>

¹² The introduction of a new, extremely competitive approach to research funding is already creating conflicting demands on particular staff.

teaching-focussed staff had a defined career path, and one major outcome was a recommendation that academic staff be able to make their case for excellence in either teaching and/or research, at all levels¹³. Not surprisingly there were concerns from senior staff who saw this as opening the door to easy promotion for their colleagues who failed to perform as researchers. However, the requirements for promotion on the grounds of teaching excellence at higher levels were clarified in a promotions matrix designed to identify the kinds of evidence that would be needed to support such cases. This makes it clear, again, that applications can no longer rely on student feedback or individual teaching innovations, but should also demonstrate contributions to curriculum design and program leadership which have been peer reviewed.

The revised promotions criteria were adopted unanimously at the same Academic Board meeting which approved the White Paper on Curriculum Review and Renewal in May this year. Some staff who previously won teaching awards but failed in their promotions attempts have since submitted applications. The success of one or two well known and highly regarded teachers will be a critical element in the broader campaign of cultural change, not just because it assures staff that teaching excellence will be rewarded, but primarily because it helps define what being a successful teacher actually involves. The cultural campaign will have been successful when academics stop saying that unproductive researchers should be made to do more teaching.

In the new promotions criteria we have also asked for evidence about how staff have invested in *preparing* to be successful teachers (as well as researchers or managers). This innovation aligns with the recommendation, accepted as part of the Curriculum Renewal White Paper, that every academic staff member be required to undertake our new three-day staff development program entitled *Effective Teaching for Higher Learning: Practical Research-Based Strategies*¹⁴.

The purpose of this requirement is not just to ensure some professional preparation by all individual staff members, but equally importantly to develop a shared conceptual framework for improving student learning¹⁵. Many academic staff have had a bad experience of 'being developed' and they are notoriously sceptical about such programs. At La Trobe the Academic Development Unit had rarely ventured out into the faculties, preferring to offer small scale opportunities to the teaching enthusiasts. The requirement that all staff undertake a program would be deeply counter-productive unless the program was extremely good indeed. In this respect I can only say that I think we were fortunate in our appointment of the PVC (CAP) who is able to turn the most hardened sceptic into a supporter (even if sometimes a grudging supporter). So confident am I in his abilities that we have invited the VC to sign up, and with his agreement, we have now invited all the Deans and Heads of School to join him in the Program in February next year. This will have a dramatic impact on

¹³ Australian universities have five levels of academic appointment (A to E) ranging from Associate Lecturer to full Professor and staff must apply for promotion between each level.

¹⁴ Numbers enrolling in this program are already starting to boom.

¹⁵ Even experienced staff who have undertaken similar programs at other universities are strongly encouraged to enrol for this reason.

the La Trobe culture – but whether it is positive or negative is entirely in the hands of the PVC (CAP). ‘No pressure...’

Budgets

The final key driver in supporting systemic improvements in teaching and learning is the budget. We have been able to win university support for funding the 3 year project of renewing all our programs around the agreed principles of curriculum design. But we are also proposing a more modest but perhaps in the longer term equally significant change to annual faculty budgets. This is derived from an approach taken at the University of Sydney some years ago, in which a significant element of the faculties’ budgets is held back and then redistributed to them on the basis of their performance against a number of teaching quality indicators over which they have some real control. In an ideal world the money will go back to the Faculties pro rata, because they are all doing the right things. The indicators we have proposed for our budget incentives relate directly to *Design for Learning*, and to the revised promotions criteria. They include the proportion of staff who complete not only the 3 day program but also a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education; the proportion of staff who publish in a high quality teaching and learning journal, as well as improvements in student retention and so on.

Lessons learned so far

La Trobe University is only in the early stages of this ambitious project, and the implementation of our agreed curriculum principles is unlikely to be straightforward since this is where our ability to engage and coordinate almost all our academic staff will be tested. Finding time to reflect on lessons we learn will be important, but there are some which are already apparent.

On the positive side, it is clear that our consultative, yet strongly evidence-based approach to curriculum reform has had a good effect on morale. This is revealed in things like the turnout for teaching and learning events, hits on the website for each bi-monthly DVC Newsletter, feedback on the 3 day program on effective teaching (which is extraordinarily positive), and individual email traffic. Many academics who are enthusiastic about their teaching are pleased that the University has a clear sense of direction, and resources to support the work that needs to be done. Each implementation working party will continue to connect individual academics to others, often from different faculties, in a shared project with clear goals, thereby helping to overcome traditional individualism and isolation. Nonetheless it would be naïve to ignore the fact that there are academic staff who remain untouched by this process and resistant if not hostile to any encroachment on their right to teach what they like, how they like. (In one early public forum, for example, it was suggested that I was undermining the principle of academic freedom.) Requiring everyone to undertake the 3 day program is central to reaching every individual staff member.

Some of our most well-respected academics who combine leadership positions such as Head of School with research eminence were initially unconvinced of the need for any such systemic change to teaching, and hostile in as much as the whole process deflected their staff

from research. Here the intellectual credibility of our approach and our focus on intellectual persuasion as opposed to central directives were critical. While this group mostly now accept the logic and need for change, they remain central to our success since most academic staff will take their lead from their Head of School rather than the Associate Dean Academic. Some will also continue to make the University's increasing demands on research performance a higher priority.

In raising the visibility and importance of teaching and learning I have made a point of talking about the importance of the role of the Associate Deans Academic, and we are currently reviewing their employment conditions (partly to deal with their tremendous workloads, but equally to increase their status in the University). Together with the fact that they have spent a great deal of time together over the last year, this has had an unintended consequence. The group has begun to self-organise and exert greater leadership in a number of ways, requesting funds for a planning retreat for themselves (without any PVCs or DVCs), and organising a combined planning day with School level directors of teaching and learning. This is one of the most important and least planned positive outcomes so far and will have important consequences for the initiatives that require cross-faculty co-operation.

At the same time it is essential never to confine the campaign to the teaching and learning experts as their influence will always be subordinate to the line managers, Heads and Deans. If these roles are not held accountable for measurable improvements in learning, then systemic cultural change will not be achieved.

Paradoxically it has also been necessary to discourage some programs from rushing ahead with curriculum reforms, asking them to delay this work until the university wide working groups have done the work of identifying agreed approaches to everything from standards to the design of the first year experience. Persuading everyone that it is better to do this work in a coordinated and intentional fashion is important.

And while not a lesson learned, certainly one which needs to be constantly re-learned is that we must communicate, communicate and communicate again. And this cannot be in the form of 'all staff emails' which are graphically disagreeable and unhelpful in the work of mobilising around a change campaign. Newsletters, interesting and well designed websites, but above all opportunities to meet face to face are essential. Leaders need to get out of the Vice-Chancellery on every possible occasion.

Conclusion

This paper essentially describes a strategy for institution-wide improvement in university teaching. What is distinctive is the focus on curriculum and the attempt to align every possible driver in support of this ambitious goal. Providing we are able to demonstrate that these changes do indeed improve student learning, retention and success, this is an approach that any university could adopt. But the will and the capacity will continue to depend on real individuals. I consider myself fortunate to have found myself between a Vice-Chancellor who takes teaching as seriously as research, and a Pro Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for teaching and learning who knows what he is talking about.