

Building On AUQA Learning and Teaching Commendations in Devolved Institutional Contexts

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AUQA has for the past five years been undertaking an audit process of Australian universities. The process involves universities preparing a performance portfolio that identifies the institutional vision and mission and the quality processes in place to achieve these. The philosophy underpinning the audit process is one of reflection, self-development and improvement. Following an audit visit, an audit report is produced containing commendations recommendations and affirmations. An analysis of 24 AUQA reports from across the different universities groupings revealed that AUQA has commended good practice in learning and teaching in a number of areas. These include, in order of frequency of commendations, quality assurance, teaching practice, social and intellectual support, curriculum development, and the physical learning environment. The analysis provides a rich source of information on which universities can build good practice in teaching and learning. The challenge is how best this work might be undertaken in the context of typically devolved institutional structures. We outline an approach that may facilitate the spread of good learning and teaching practices across an institution. We consider key issues, namely where support for learning and teaching is best located, who is responsible for which aspects of support, and the communication, leadership and change management required for effective embedding of good practice.

Background

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) began auditing Australian universities on a five year cycle in 2000. Each university is held responsible by AUQA “for setting and monitoring its own standards, for being able to describe what these standards are, to justify its processes for achieving them, and to provide evidence of its performance in these matters” (Woodhouse, 2002, p. 3). The audit process involves a performance portfolio being validated by a review panel during a site visit that includes interviews with a wide range of stakeholders. The focus of the audit is on self-development and improvement using the ADRI (Approach, Performance, Results, Improvement) approach with an emphasis on self-development and improvement (Woodhouse, 2002; 2003). AUQA audit reports are public documents and contain commendations recognising good practice, recommendations identifying areas for improvement and affirmations as a subset of recommendations that acknowledge areas for improvement already identified by the institution.

An analysis of the commendations from 24 audit reports published as at January 2006 from four Group of Eight, four Australian Technology Network, four Innovative Research, six New Generation, three (predominantly) Distance Education and three non aligned universities was undertaken. (de la Harpe & Radloff, 2006). Of a total of 328 commendations, 125 commendations were related to supporting student learning and enhancing teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. A bottom up qualitative analysis of these yielded six categories including: *Physical*, *Social* and *Intellectual* support for student learning, *Curriculum* design and development, support for *Teaching*, and *Quality* systems and processes. Categorisation of the 125 commendations into these six categories required splitting a number of commendations into more than one category which resulted in a total of 133 commendations across the six categories.

The largest number of commendations related to *Quality* (35), with the majority of commendations for quality assurance review processes for courses, programs or organisational units. Next was *Teaching* (31), with the majority of commendations for the provision of some form of professional development activities for academic staff, including mentoring or induction programs for new academic staff. This was followed by *Social* (30), with the majority of commendations for the provision of special support programs and services. Then came *Intellectual* (18), with the majority of commendations for the development of graduate attributes and academic skills, and then *Curriculum* (13), with the majority of commendations for program structures in particular provision of flexible learning and pathways. The least number of commendations related to *Physical* (6), with the majority for infrastructure including technology, campus environment and the library.

The analysis of these commendations provides a rich source of information on best practice across the sector from which universities can learn and which they can build on to enhance learning and teaching. The challenge is how to do this work in the context of devolved institutional structures and high degrees of autonomy and multiple lines of responsibility and accountability. Such contexts make bringing about and embedding innovation and change difficult as a number of reviews looking at the effectiveness of dissemination and implementation of innovations in teaching and learning in Australia and overseas have revealed (McKenzie, Alexander, Harper & Anderson, 2005; Scott, 2003, 2004; Southwell, Gannaway, Orrell, Chalmers & Abraham, 2005). The reality is that in many cases, good practice does not become embedded, fails to ‘take’ and is not sustained.

Approach for Building Learning and Teaching

In order to meet the challenge of building on and sustaining good practice in learning and teaching, we propose that a whole of institution, integrated, learning focused and evidence based approach is essential. We have come to this view over time based on the current literature on student learning and institutional change, and on our experience in leading and supporting learning and teaching, first as academics in a discipline, next as academic developers in both central and devolved settings, and currently in senior leadership and management roles.

In order for this approach to work, a number of key issues need to be addressed. These include determining where support for learning and teaching is best located, agreeing on who is responsible for which aspects of the support, and ensuring that there is in place effective communication, leadership and change management required for success.

Where support is best located

Support should be located at different levels depending on where it will be most effective – for example, support for developing policies, systems and procedures and advice for implementing them should be co-ordinated in organisational units that service the whole university while hands on and operational support is best located in academic units such as departments, schools and faculties Knight (2002, p. 79) points, out that activities aimed at improving teaching and learning are most effective when situated at “mid-level systems that connect with the macro level of the institution and the micro level of the individual”.

Support aimed at improving practice and changing conceptions is best provided as close as possible to the actual academic work in order to build and maintain professional relationships and mutual respect and understanding, and to maximize access, since “learning and knowing are situated and contexted, which means that they are situated in the daily operations of activity systems or communities of practice” (Knight and Trowler, 2001, p. 147).

Further, this support is more likely to be accepted when it is provided at the local level of existing groups of disciplines. There is considerable evidence that different disciplines have their own culture, language, and practices which influence their approach to learning and teaching and hence, the kind of support required for further development and enhancement of learning and teaching practice. Moreover, conceptions of and approaches to learning and teaching as well as work practices of academics vary according to their discipline (Becher 1989; Donald, 2002). Therefore, efforts to support learning and teaching must acknowledge and take into account the reality of 'academic tribes' and their unique ways of knowing in order to ensure success (Becher and Trowler, 2001).

Finally, support should be demand driven rather than supply led and should be based on identified needs rather than on historical and legacy systems and existing staff capabilities and interests. It also needs to be aligned to the institutional mission and strategic directions and priorities.

Who is responsible and accountable

At the local level, faculties and /or departments and schools are responsible and accountable for developing, implementing, reviewing and improving their programs. They need to undertake these activities within an overall institutional policy and strategy framework. As mentioned, at the institutional level units such as Policy and Planning and Teaching and Learning are responsible and accountable for the strategy and policy framework within which local areas operate for example for program development and review; quality assurance, student feedback; teaching awards; staff induction; and promotions. Such units also need to ensure that university policies and systems are in place to meet and report against DEST criteria and to interface with national bodies such as The Carrick Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.

At each level, it is essential that there are clearly defined roles that have responsibility for supporting learning and teaching. Ideally, each department or school needs designated positions for Program Leaders, and a Director, Teaching and Learning, as well as administrative positions supporting programs. At faculty level, a senior academic position such as Dean or Director responsible for leadership and co-ordination of learning and teaching and quality assurance across the faculty should be in place. At an institutional level, a position at the level of DVC or PVC focusing on learning and teaching is essential to provide overall leadership and direction and to champion change.

Leadership, communication and change management

We argue that leadership at every level is critical for ensuring that good practice in learning and teaching permeates the whole institution. The key tasks of leaders include developing a shared understanding of the vision, philosophy and goals, determining roles and responsibilities, setting clear and realistic targets and timelines, ensuring adequate resources are directed to learning and teaching, monitoring progress on improvement activities and projects, and recognising and rewarding achievements in learning and teaching. There is evidence that faculty Deans and Department or School Heads are the single most important factor in supporting improvement of learning and teaching (Wright and O'Neill, 1995).

Effective communication is essential at every level for a whole of institution approach to the development and sustaining of good practice in learning and teaching. Communication involves clear, consistent and frequent two way interaction using many modes, including face to face discussion, all of which take time and effort and require well developed inter and intrapersonal skills.

Developing and sustaining good practice in learning and teaching invariably necessitates changes in policies, practices and conceptions, which are often difficult and challenging to bring about. Thus, effective change management skills are needed at all levels. There is an extensive literature on change management that can inform institutional efforts. For example, Kotter (1996) and Kotter and Cohen (2002) provides an eight stage process for bringing about and sustaining organisational change, including.

establishing a sense of urgency; creating the guiding team; developing a vision and strategy; communicating the change vision; empowering broad-based action; generating short-term wins; consolidating gains and producing more change; and anchoring new approaches in the culture. Those in learning and teaching leadership roles wishing to implement an AUQA commendation at their institution might be well served to follow Kotter's model.

Conclusion

Bringing about and sustaining good practice across the Higher Education sector is dependent on being able to facilitate change within devolved institutional contexts. This means that we have to adopt more sophisticated approaches to supporting learning and teaching including locating resources where they will have the most impact rather than where they have usually been or where they appear neat and tidy. We also need to establish a culture based on mutual trust respect, collaboration and, , and a commitment to reflection to ensure positive outcomes and lasting impact. But most importantly, we need to capitalise on the talent, energy and passion of the people across the institution since in a devolved context, each of us has a role to play in ensuring that good practice in learning and teaching is located everywhere.

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