

The Case for a Centre for Learning and Teaching

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Introduction

The impact of the Bradley Review, and the Governments response to it, are still continuing to transform the Australian Higher Education sector just as radically as any of the reforms that preceded it in earlier decades. When considered from a market perspective, these reforms have ensured that the sector must increasingly both understand and be able to respond rapidly, and in agile manner, to changing and challenging market conditions particularly where the recruitment and retention of students is concerned. In addition to these changing market dynamics is the evolving and increasing requirement to be able to demonstrably quality assure many aspects of the learning experience, but most particularly those elements that relate to the expression of the curriculum, particularly in terms of learning outcomes and the related assessment and moderation regimes.

Within this context it is increasingly important that individual Higher Education Providers are clear as to understand how the component parts of their business, be they research, learning and teaching or business activity, contribute to their overall income profile and support these diverse aspects of the business accordingly. In the case of learning and teaching it is thus important that they ensure that they are providing the facilities, resources and experiences to teaching practitioners, which will enable them to provide the types of learning and teaching experience that 21st Century students are increasingly demanding. Furthermore, where there is a desire to shift the balance of the business profile e.g. towards a greater proportion of income being generated via research activity, it is important to ensure that this is achieved over time and in a controlled and deliberate manner and that the core income generating components of the business, which for very many Higher Education Providers will be learning and teaching, continues to be supported to ensure its ongoing viability.

Many current Higher Education Providers are operating within an income profile that would see the largest significant portion of their annual income generated from learning and teaching activity, most of which will be earned in the provision of education at the undergraduate level. Within this context, it is thus vitally important to ensure that the core revenue generating business activity of the organisation is appropriately envisioned, led and supported at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. In addition, and in a market where for many universities student recruitment at the higher post secondary outcome levels (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank, Universities Admission Index, National Tertiary Entrance Rank or Overall Position) is becoming harder, it is often the case that 'university readiness', that is the preparedness of newly recruited students to be able to access and engage with their learning experience, is tapering; leading to an increasing requirement to focus attention and resources upon undergraduate retention (and completion) as another critical learning and teaching activity.

Current and future demand: The strategic case

As well as the changed and changing environment within which Australian Higher Education Providers must operate at the national level, there are also significant challenges occurring internationally. These challenges are seen in terms of a technology fuelled change in student expectation as well as an increasing requirement for an institution to be able to utilise technology to compete internationally with its learning and teaching product.

It is increasingly becoming apparent that the professional development of academic teaching staff needs to ensure that capacity is established both in pedagogical as well as technological understanding. Indeed, it is now the case that appropriate teacher professional development must develop not only the individual practitioner's ability to teach, but also to teach well with technology. Thus universities need to ensure both the formal pedagogical development of academic teaching staff as well as the continuing development of the capacity of academic teachers to use technology in their teaching practice.

In addition, and as noted above, in an economic environment where achievement of recruitment targets often means accepting less well academically prepared, more 'at risk' students, there is an increasingly strategic requirement to ensure that students are supported in their ability to access and engage with their learning and teaching experience, in terms of time, place and their capability to meet learning expectations. This increased requirement to ensure that more students are better supported through to successful completion of academic studies is also consistent with existing Australian Government targets that seek to increase and widen participation in Higher Education for students from 'less traditional' university entry backgrounds.

It is against this backdrop that the case is made for the centralised support of the learning and teaching activity, albeit one that is firmly fixed within, and led by, the academic community.

A Learning and Teaching Centre

Thus a case is made for the establishment of centralised support provision as a means for providing leadership to the following key strategic areas of current learning and teaching performance:

- The provision of academic staff development
 - The pedagogical professional development of academic teaching staff
 - The technological professional development of academic teaching staff
- The management of the successful student experience including:
 - The provision of support for student learning
 - The increase of student retention rates at the undergraduate level
 - The ensuring student access to learning content
 - The quality assuring of learning and teaching content and delivery
- The leadership of the University's response to future learning provision, including, but not limited to online learning and physical learning and teaching space

Structure and focus

If the leadership of this range of learning and teaching activity is considered important to the business of learning and teaching there is thus a requirement to ensure that it is both coordinated and led in a strategic manner. In addition, there is a requirement to ensure that the strategic learning and teaching imperatives, particularly where they relate to curriculum design, development and delivery, and quality assurance, are achieved. In this respect a coordinated and centralised entity would need to ensure that it is vertically aligned with the University as a business, in that it provides to the academic community a recognised and recognisable internal structure that it can intuitively interpret to determine how it may locate required support services. At the same time it needs to ensure that it retains a capacity to manage a horizontal alignment to facilitate discourse and collaboration between academic and professional groups across the University.

Model

In order to meet these requirements a model is proposed that seeks to identify and meet both the demand for service provision and the need to ensure the maintenance of lateral relationships within the professional role groups that such a Centre would likely comprise. Set out below (Fig 1) is the model used to describe the expected service requirements of the Academic community.

Learning and Teaching Centre Academic Support Teams

Within such a centralised approach is a proposed team to service the areas of 'Academic support and curriculum design', 'Curriculum development and delivery', and 'Access to curriculum and student support'. It is suggested that support to the academic community on curriculum design would be provided by academic staff with the role of supporting academic colleagues, predominantly at the Course and Unit Convenor levels with curriculum design and review.

Curriculum development and delivery could be provided from a team of professional design and development staff capable of both assisting the increase and uptake of educational technology by

individual academics (building capacity) and where necessary, designing and developing high quality and more media rich curriculum delivery tools that support and enhance the delivery of online content to students. Such staff would be expected to work closely with the centrally employed academic staff member in the curriculum development and curriculum delivery processes to ensure the application of enhanced learning content to support the student learning experience.

The final centrally coordinated area would be that supporting 'Access to curriculum and student support'. This team would support student access to learning material and content in terms of their academic literacy. In particular, they would be the traditional 'Learning Advisor' role often centred within the Library to facilitate predominantly undergraduate student ability to understand and meet the requirements of their academic study.

Access to Curriculum and Teacher Support Team

A third group of staff would enable support the area of 'access to curriculum and teacher support' (as opposed to student support), thus providing a capacity to both deliver and manage a range of learning analytical data to inform the work of the area supporting 'access to curriculum and student support'.

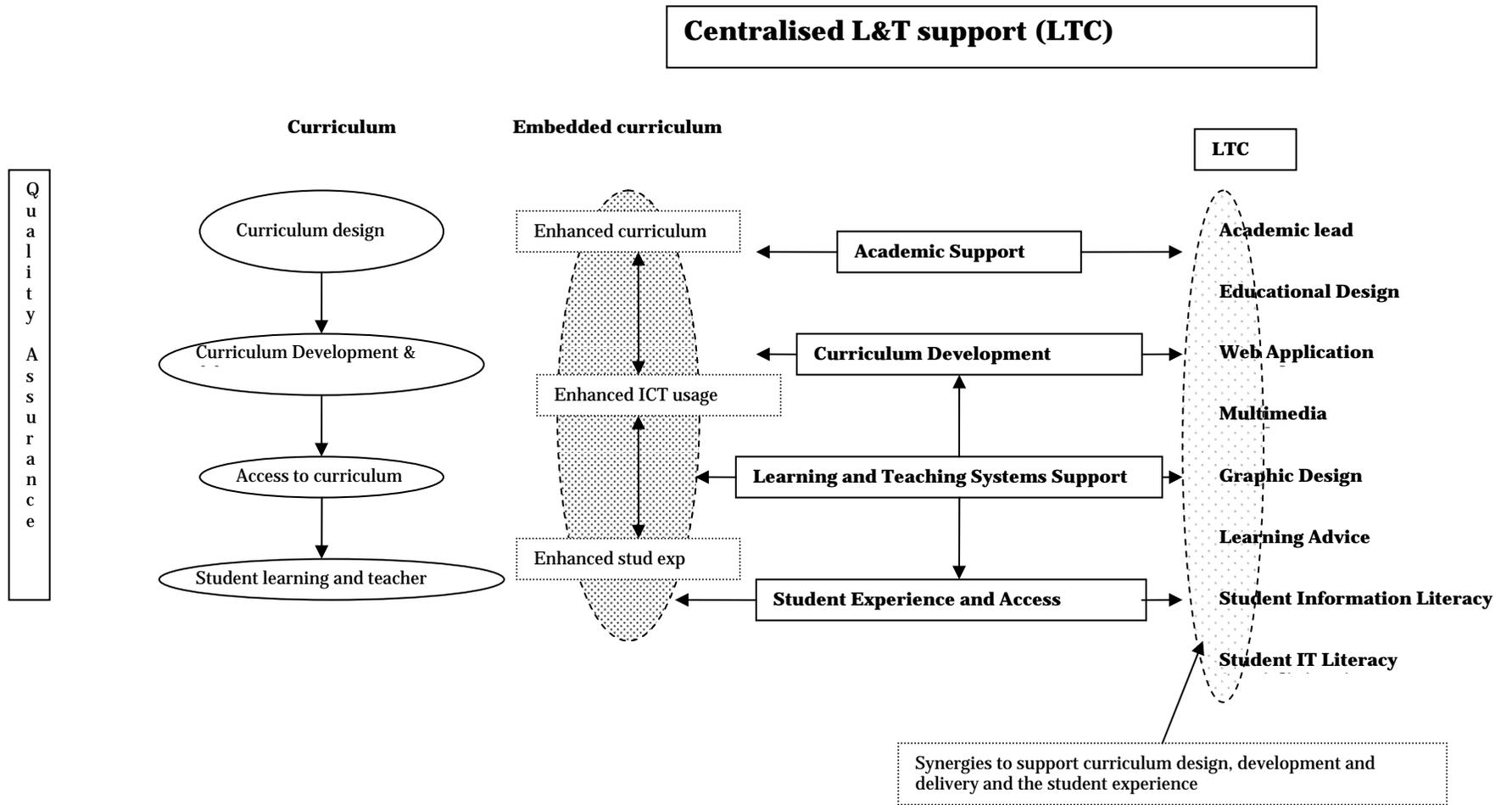


Fig 1 - LTC model

Conclusion

This presentation considers a centralised response to the support of the learning and teaching activities of Higher Education Providers. It will be argued that such a centralised response would assist the institution in enabling the delivery of a range of enhanced products and services, and, at the same time, seek to ensure a close alignment with the academic teaching community as they in turn seek to address the challenges of the future. It is acknowledged that this is but one response and that even if such a centralised approach is endorsed there will always be an ongoing requirement for further and iterative re-shaping activity in the short to medium term as universities seek to ensure that the shape of their organisation maximises their capacity to partner with and support the academic community in the delivery of the University's priorities.