

A HANDBOOK FOR

Executive leadership of learning and teaching in higher education

Craig McInnis, Paul Ramsden and Don Maconachie



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Foreword

Most if not all vice-chancellors owe their position to great teaching: someone who helped us see the connections, a passionate lecturer, a subject that 'clicked' and inspired a commitment to education. Most of us have been academics with decades spent in the classroom and assessing papers and examinations. Yet over time and in different roles, other institutional priorities take us away from the immediate experience of teaching, although not from the overall questions about quality of teaching and learning outcomes. For as this handbook argues, education is the core purpose even of research-intensive universities.

This handbook reminds readers of the fundamental principles of good teaching: making explicit ambitious desired outcomes not only in content but also in the level of understanding we want students to achieve, establishing an environment that maximises students' learning, structuring and organising subjects to align students' learning activities with their desired learning outcomes, and designing assessment that is aligned closely with learning activities and intended learning outcomes.

The authors note that learning is not a closed activity between a teacher and their students. It involves the way subjects are organised and structured within a curriculum broadly understood to include the goals of student learning, the shared responsibilities of teachers and students and the incorporation of work-integrated learning and other experiences beyond formal learning. It depends crucially on encouragement and support of academic leaders such as deans and heads of schools or departments. It relies on well-designed spaces, hardware, software and 'warmware' facilities and services by different units and at different levels of the institution to support and encourage innovation.

The authors demonstrate that our institutions can facilitate the learning we seek for our students only with the involvement and commitment of all levels from vice-chancellor and deputy vice-chancellor (education) to deans, heads of schools, program coordinators and subject coordinators. They support that with rich evidence of the great universities' institution wide and institution deep

commitment to students' learning. In addition institutions' governing bodies should understand their institution's educational mission and goals. Indeed, it is often students' learning that interests lay members of council and enlivens their governance responsibilities.

This handbook is welcome in reminding higher education leaders of their importance in facilitating students' learning and in filling a gap in the literature in describing how leaders may discharge their important role in inspiring excellent teaching and learning. While it is valuable for university executives to be distinguished teachers and researchers, the authors note that leadership is judged not by the leader's distinction or possession of exceptional skills, but by their impact. They therefore encourage leaders to focus on the institution's ethos, policies and programs to examine ways in which its academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings can be shaped to encourage student engagement. The authors explain the role that staff at each level of seniority in the institution have to support students' learning. Individually the authors Craig McLinnis, Paul Ramsden and Don Maconachie have deep expertise in their fields. Collectively they have the broad experience to make their advice valuable to colleagues at all levels of the university.

The authors' discussion of how research and scholarship should inform teaching is broad enough to include the range of approaches within Australian higher education institutions. As would be expected of these authors, the handbook is deeply grounded in the scholarship of learning and teaching. This book succeeds well also in assembling practical experience and evidence from key research and reflective scholarship. But it wears its scholarship lightly. The authors have elegantly pitched their text to higher education leaders, not to other experts in learning and teaching.

If 'the scholarship of teaching' in Boyer's (1990)¹ phrase were only discovering knowledge about teaching it would be little more than the scholarship of discovery of the particular field of learning and teaching. Trigwell and Shale² argue that teachers engaged in the scholarship of teaching are expert teachers who make public the way in which they have made learning possible. 'It is not just teachers' knowledge that is made public, it is also the practice, or more specifically the pedagogic resonance, that has made learning possible that is

made public' (2004: 531). In this sense all university teachers should be engaged in the scholarship of their teaching, and as this book argues, all university leaders should support the scholarship of teaching.

The rewards are many but fundamentally they rest on the pleasure of observing students' joy and exhilaration in their learning to which one has made a small but significant contribution.

This book shows how university leaders may shape the environment to achieve that satisfaction.

Professor Margaret Gardner AO

Vice-Chancellor and President, RMIT University

Chair, Strategic Advisory Committee, Office for Learning and Teaching

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Introduction

This handbook provides guidance on leadership of learning and teaching for senior university executives. Leadership for learning and teaching increasingly requires specialist skills and knowledge of contemporary approaches to learning and teaching—including familiarity with effective practice in teaching, assessment and the use of technologies to support curriculum delivery – as well as competence in the broader aspects of management and leadership.

The handbook meets a widely acknowledged need for a resource to support professional development activities as well as tools for individual leaders. It is an initiative of the Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Program funded in 2011 by the ALTC, the OLT's predecessor. In it we attempt to make available ideas and knowledge that are relevant across policy contexts, are useful in the long term, and which take account of, but are not constrained by, current and emerging policy issues related to the student experience. The first section sets out five core principles and elements that focus on what successful leaders can do to promote excellence in learning and teaching. The second section, a background briefing, provides a primer on the body of evidence that informed the development of the five principles, along with some suggested key works for further reference.

The primary audience for the handbook is provosts, deputy and pro vice-chancellors (including those newly appointed) whose responsibilities centre on the governance and management of teaching and the student experience, as well as those who aspire to such positions. Its focus is on strategic leadership—on an institution's distinctive vision for student learning across subject areas and the means by which the vision can be realised.

Strategic leadership naturally does not consist of a set of right answers about 'how to do it'. Diverse techniques apply to different situations and people. This is not a book of recipes about how to lead strategically. It is rather a compendium of core principles, illustrated by evidence and examples, drawn largely from case study universities and the observations of experienced and successful executive leaders. It is designed to enable leaders to make their own choices based on evidence of what might work in various circumstances.

The handbook acknowledges that robust leadership is needed to inspire, influence and enable colleagues, including associate deans and heads of schools, who have operational responsibility for providing an excellent student experience. It presents a positive view of the job of leading university teaching, based on evidence of what works. Many universities, including those contributing to this publication, have experienced the productive effects of strategic leadership for learning and teaching in practice. It can make a visible difference to institutional performance.

Executive leadership of learning and teaching

Perhaps the most important theme we emphasise in this handbook is the increasingly significant role of executive leadership in maintaining a strategic focus on the whole institution's strategy for learning and teaching. Effective leadership at this level is marked by the skill of locating the challenges an institution faces within a broader framework. This framework includes national policies and international trends in learning, teaching and the student experience.

Other themes include the need to create a distinctive vision for students' learning and to articulate it across the university. At this level of leadership it is not enough to address operational issues and such matters as preparation for quality review, discipline-specific issues, performance management of direct reports, or improving student satisfaction scores.

Academic leadership for learning and teaching requires a strong emphasis on impact. Student success — in all dimensions of their experience — is the paramount concern. For this reason, leadership is judged by its effects rather than by the leader's possession of competences. Its purpose is to promote the conditions that enable high quality teaching, to raise the awareness of colleagues so that they work together to deliver visible improvements to the student experience and the quality of teaching. The effective leader will appreciate and recognise the efforts of deans and heads of schools to support teaching, putting in place mechanisms to reward performance and inspire innovation at all levels.

Senior leadership necessarily occurs in a particular institutional context, requiring an expression of what is special about a university's approach to learning and teaching. It therefore demands some conceptual thinking about what a high quality student experience in that institutional context – across multiple disciplines and faculties – consists of. It is important to recognise also that leadership for teaching is experienced by academic staff in an institutional context: what heads and deans do influences teaching practices and academics' dedication to improving student learning.

The principles and elements presented in the handbook centre on: the importance of clear vision statements supported by everyone involved; statements of priorities for each unit of the institution that specifically sustain the vision; students' learning and development; evidence- and knowledge-based decision-making; understanding of the processes needed to realise the vision for the institution; creating a critical mass of leaders of teaching across the institution; and the need to deliver professional development that will enable staff to implement the vision. We give particular emphasis to increasing student involvement as a critical and increasingly important element in quality improvement.

Much of the literature in this area focuses on the leaders themselves and their personal characteristics. In contrast, we have looked to key studies and reports from case studies and examples of good practice that identified what leaders actually do in relation to fostering excellence in teaching.³ The principles and elements are therefore formulated as actions fundamental to successful whole-of-institution leadership. The elements are framed to suggest that strategic leadership of learning and teaching should typically be characterised by these kinds of activities.

Five principles for action

PRINCIPLE 1: Shape the strategic vision

A clear and inspiring vision of a university's distinctive approach to student learning and the student experience is a critical element in determining the credibility and impact of executive leadership.

In some instances newly appointed executive leaders will need to start from scratch by creating a strategic vision specific to learning and teaching. This may imply a major shift in the institution's planned direction. In other instances the task may be to shape a vision around a unique approach and an established track record of excellence. In all cases, the vision needs to be underpinned by a sufficiently compelling rationale. The distinctiveness of approach should directly align with the mission of the university and be grounded in the history, culture, challenges and opportunities peculiar to the institution.

A strategic vision should make sense to everyone involved: academics, students, administrators and support staff. It should convey a strong sense of priorities to avoid policy drift over time and across the faculties, schools, support services and administrative areas of operation.

Without a widely shared vision initial enthusiasm is likely to fade. Needless to say, too much vision and not enough action lead to frustration, cynicism and a preference for the status quo.⁴

What it means in practice

Applying up to date knowledge of how teaching influences student learning.

The vision is most likely to be adopted and sustained if it is informed by a strong understanding of research and reflective enquiry on learning and teaching and the student experience. It should be anchored in first principles concerning higher learning, for example, placing high expectations on students both academically and in their broader engagement with university life, while matching those high expectations with strong support and outstanding opportunities.

The most significant findings on effective learning and teaching point consistently to a basic set of areas for action. The vision, and the strategic plans and policies that follow, should draw on these core findings. They should explicitly guide approaches to student engagement with learning, assessment policy and practice, program design and delivery, the management of the student experience, and student feedback processes.

Identifying the institutional factors that affect student success.

The vision should be informed by an understanding of what conditions are most likely to enable the university to make an impact on student learning. A strong understanding of the links between the quality of teaching and all the elements that comprise the total student experience provides a firm basis for strategic improvements to student outcomes.

Student success occurs when educational experiences are designed and delivered so that learning occurs in a purposeful and coherent fashion, and when opportunities are created for active student involvement.⁵

Effective executive leadership focuses on the full range of factors leading to student success beyond immediate cognitive gains and disciplinary knowledge, embracing, for example, classroom instruction, learning support services, extra- and co-curricular activities, learning spaces and information technologies.

Conceptualising the future student experience.

Anticipating future directions and conceptualising the student experience is critical to successful executive leadership of learning and teaching. This is no small task in the face of rapid change in the global context of higher education, national policy, and technological innovations in learning and teaching and significant variations in the everyday lives of students, their expectations and aspirations.

Informing the university agenda for significant and ongoing changes in learning and teaching and the student experience requires systematic intelligence gathering and reflection on the future of the student

experience. There is a strong expectation in the university community that executive leaders of learning and teaching will assess and articulate future developments, identify changes of substance with direct implications for the university, and lead creative thinking about strategic institutional responses.

“You should focus on students and learning. You need to express a view on what a good learning environment is. You need to know the content of the job. Leadership is always the leadership of something.”

Assessing the current performance of the institution.

The vision should be set against a realistic picture of what is both desirable and possible for the institution to achieve. This requires a high-level assessment of how well the institution performs by its own measures as well as against national indicators and benchmark institutions.

The strategic assessment typically includes an analysis of the effectiveness of faculties and departments in meeting the current goals and objectives for student learning and their overall experience. It should include the full range

“Scan the environment. What’s happening in other universities? Have the courage to learn and to change.”

of administrative and support systems that influence the student experience. The use of current, accurate and informative local data is essential in this process. It is highly desirable that this data is complemented by independently sourced information about current performance.

The assessment should be focused, timely, and transparent. It should provide a succinct narrative and compelling numbers to guide institutional thinking around the vision. It should be informed by systematic analysis of the larger landscape of national and international developments to identify broader trends, challenges and opportunities facing the institution.

Effective leaders turn problems identified in the assessment process into opportunities. They identify the pivotal problems in learning and teaching likely to undermine the institutional vision and objectives. They use multifaceted strategies supported by convincing educational and practical rationales and compelling evidence that identify where the problems are and how they might be solved. They typically consult with key stakeholders to build consensus on the nature and source of the problems, gain support for the solutions and create commitment to their implementation.

Balancing collegial and managerial imperatives.

The strategic vision should reflect and support the core values, goals and objectives of the institution. Executive leadership of learning and teaching involves being strategic not only in relation to the competitive performance of the institution, but also the core function of promoting and supporting the self-development, self-realisation and self-determination of students, staff, and communities.

The vision gains support and commitment from academics by giving due emphasis to aspects of university life that have intrinsic merit, recognising

collegial and disciplinary identities while at the same time acknowledging the fundamental imperative of ensuring institutional sustainability in an increasingly competitive environment.

“Recognise the importance of professional staff. The messages they give to academics and students are vital.”

A balanced response to collegial and managerial imperatives includes development of expanded academic and professional capacity and capability among core staff, the meaningful involvement of these staff in high-level decision-making processes, and constructive alignment of traditional academic values and management perspectives.⁶

WORKING FROM A MODEL OF LEARNING

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY

Thinking hard about the future of learning and the student experience is considered a defining characteristic of the leadership approach at the University of Technology, Sydney. The University highlights the excellence of its teaching and the relevance of its courses as one of three elements it sees as of competitive advantage.

The University's 'model of learning' is central to strategic leadership. The model has three interrelated features: professional practice-oriented education; international mobility and engagement; and research-inspired learning. The leadership focus is on the process of embedding the model in course and learning provision and renewal.

Building teams is a key element supporting the vision of learning and teaching and its delivery. Leadership at the University of Technology, Sydney focuses on creating the conditions for innovation with internal cross-institutional networks of academics engaged in researching current and emerging trends in learning and teaching.

While the vision comes from senior executive, the strategic plan does not mandate policy and practice. The strategic focus is on getting the systems in place to support excellence in learning and teaching.

Distributed leadership is a strong theme in the collegial culture: it creates alignment and allows for good practice and innovation to emerge from the bottom up. The view is that policy can sometimes more effectively follow practice.

Taking a flexible approach allows faculties significant level of freedom to interpret the strategy to suit their context. A light touch is the preferred approach, emphasising ownership rather than enforcement or a heavy layer of policy dictating practice.

DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

FACULTY OF VETERINARY SCIENCE – THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

A new strategy to improve the student experience came on stream at The University of Sydney in 2000. The innovative approach in the Faculty of Veterinary Science complemented the University-wide changes and has been maintained for 12 years. It is exemplified through a scholarly, evidence-based approach to changing the student experience that resonates with academic values.

Leadership is strategic: a clear and sustainable vision for the future of veterinary education is vigorously implemented through a focus on interdisciplinary study. Implementation of the vision relies on dispersed leadership and a flexible framework in which both academic and professional staff are accountable for success. The aim has been to develop a culture of personal responsibility for a better student experience. It is supported by a collaborative environment in which all staff are expected to engage. There is strong emphasis on developing academic staff as teachers, with an emphasis on improvement rather than finding fault. A methodical approach to developing a nucleus of committed leaders in the faculty has been employed.

Changes to teaching practices have been stimulated by reference to external pressures — notably professional bodies and benchmarks with other universities.

PRINCIPLE 2: Inspire and enable excellence

Inspiring others to achieve the vision and to strive for excellence in student learning outcomes and the student experience is central to effective executive leadership.

Inspirational leadership can take many different forms, ranging from personal dedication to scholarship and curriculum development through to the executive's influence on national and international policies for enhancing learning and teaching. A sincere commitment to providing a better student experience will be manifest in the executive's language and behaviour.

Inspirational leadership is, however, insufficient in itself. It must be complemented by a series of carefully chosen policies and organisational arrangements that make it possible for staff to take advantage of the opportunity that an exciting and ambitious vision offers. These policies and structures will typically combine management structures with academic values associated with excellence and collaboration.

What it means in practice

Maintaining personal credibility through leadership in interpreting and shaping the national policy landscape.

A strong understanding of the broader landscape of higher education and an appreciation of the core educational principles involved is central to maintaining personal credibility within the institution. Beyond that, playing a significant role in the development of national policies and practice brings considerable advantages to senior leaders: public commitment to best practice in learning and teaching and involvement in external policy making underlines the authority of the executive to speak perceptively about achieving excellence within their university.

“The DVC has a good understanding of the broader HE landscape and makes it a priority to have a national and international purview and role in learning and teaching and to collaborate with universities that represent best practice.”

Effective leaders take every opportunity to inform the university community of changes in the national policy context and the implications for the institution and its approaches to learning and teaching.

Developing a coherent set of policies and objectives that support the vision.

Key policy documents should reflect a unified and focused approach across all dimensions of university operation that influence learning and teaching and the

“The role of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor involves ‘joining the dots’ across the university (that is) developing a comprehensive picture of learning and teaching policies to ensure integration and consistency with the Vice-Chancellor’s vision for academic strengthening.”

student experience. They need to be sharply focused on promoting the distinctiveness of the approach and provide a strong reference point to support improvement. The connections between objectives, actions and accountabilities should be abundantly clear and consistent.

There should also be a clear message that there is a strong sense of unity and commitment in policy and approach at the executive level. The university community should be confident that teaching is being led at the highest level.

“Getting people to share good practice across faculties is important. Incentives matter. The concept of good learning and teaching has become vital in the university – a total turnaround in 10 years – leadership and consistent messages about teaching and its equality with research have helped develop a culture of peer review and recognition of teaching.”

Interaction with faculties is critical, particularly how the information is presented and the way it is delivered. The policy has to be rewritten on the ground so that it makes sense and connects with the faculties.

Leading from a strong evidence base.

Effective senior executives use good management tools such as accurate

and up-to-date performance data that makes sense to everyone involved in improving learning and teaching. They create measures and monitoring processes directly relevant to the mission and context of the institution. A strong evidence base and locally developed and meaningful performance measures, combined with a robust quality assurance system, is used to translate the university’s strategic priorities for student learning through to the school level. In effect, the data drives the messages about what is valued by the institution.

Universities are often information rich and knowledge poor. A large amount of data is routinely collected but not analysed for the purpose of informing strategic thinking or guiding improvements in learning and teaching and the student experience. Mindful of evaluation fatigue, effective executive leaders

limit the volume of data collected and distributed to faculties and departments. They communicate findings in a clear and effective manner with an emphasis on identifying specific issues and providing direction for change. Student feedback systems are linked consistently and positively to improving teaching.

Presenting the vision as achievable with early wins and long-term change in sight.

While inspirational, the vision should nonetheless be seen as realistic and feasible in terms of the capacity of the university to achieve its aspirations. Identifying specific, achievable goals and the resources required to deliver at least some of them at an early stage of the process of change, is a critical step in gaining support across the university community.

This might occur through working closely with a group of deans or heads, listening to difficulties they single out that stand in the way of providing a better student experience and isolating practical solutions. It may also involve identifying areas of strength and drawing attention to opportunities to build on them.

“Ask yourself if the structures and systems support the vision of where you want the university to be in learning and teaching. Are they consistent? Do they send the right messages about teaching’s importance?”

“You need to have a long-term vision and keep it fresh – a change focus that’s realistic and achievable.”

Developing a focused learning and teaching plan.

A collegially developed learning and teaching plan, fully embedded in each faculty and school, provides the key reference point for translating the vision into practice. The plan establishes goals, timelines and a strategically limited set of clearly defined responsibilities. If the plan is to support the vision effectively, it must be developed as a collaborative enterprise owned jointly by senior staff and delivered through good communications and open dialogue.

Successful implementation relies on the coherence of the plan with other parts of the institution’s strategic goals, and eliciting buy-in from all levels of staff. Also of importance are explicit reporting mechanisms against operational targets associated with plans, and clear links between plans and resourcing.

Executive leaders use the learning and teaching plan to inform and guide infrastructure planning: particularly as it relates to the design and use of technologies and learning spaces, the creation of opportunities for informal student-student interaction, and the provision of student services.

Securing sufficient funds to support the vision.

The credibility of the vision, and the executive leadership, depends heavily on the extent to which the funds allocated to teaching and learning initiatives support the university's aspirations. Effective executive leaders of learning and teaching frame their arguments for resources in a positive way, link the argument to the culture and reputation of the university, and use clear and compelling numbers to support the case. They also structure the funding to drive performance.

A practical approach to encouraging faculty and school alignment with the overarching strategy is allocating financial resources to enable the objectives directly associated with the vision to be achieved. This might occur in different ways: through incentives in the form of rewards to faculties, for example, that achieve specified goals; by distributing learning and teaching improvement funds to realise aims in a learning and teaching plan; by competitive tendering for resources to develop new curricula or services to students; by the allocation of government funds for teaching performance to specific, focused themes.

Creating the conditions that enable academics to strive for excellence in teaching.

Promoting excellence starts with articulating a shared vision of teaching excellence across the university and then putting systems in place that encourage its achievement. These systems will include a focus by the senior executive on the small details that make effective teaching possible and the

"If you want people to buy into the vision, you have to empower them informally and give them good feedback. A business support group that meets regularly helps us develop teamwork and accountability."

factors that hinder improvement. This in turn implies an approach to management that involves listening to academics' concerns as well as directing their endeavours.

It might also involve the development of cross-university teams with a commitment to changing the student experience; incentivising and rewarding innovation and enhancement

in teaching, learning and professional services to students; establishing appropriate criteria for promotion related to teaching; establishing career paths for the leadership of teaching (such as associate dean positions) and empowering those in such positions to influence change.

The process of enabling academics will also include strategies such as mentoring schemes using outstanding teachers to support academics developing and improving their teaching skills. A focus on curriculum renewal and the performance of academic units is more effective than targeting individuals alone.

Stimulating staff engagement.

Sustaining and strengthening academic cultures is also a key element in engaging staff in the pursuit of excellence in learning and teaching. Executive leaders understand that high quality teaching and a positive student experience across the whole institution is more likely to be present when the academic culture is well-established and vigorous. They take deliberate steps to ensure that the vision and imperatives of the institution reflect the core values that motivate academic and support staff to strive for excellence.

The vision and approach are interpreted in terms of the consequence for the things that matter to academic staff. Will this make a difference to the quality of student learning? How will this meeting help us improve our course? How will changing the way we do this improve the service we provide? Staff engagement with the vision requires its regular interpretation in relation to the interests of students, staff, the institution and the community.

To ensure that innovation and improvement is not confined to a handful of departments and individuals, executive leaders of learning and teaching focus their efforts on enhancing the role and effectiveness of academic units and their leaders. They also create opportunities across the institution for communication and personally lead conversations about substantial learning and teaching matters. One specific strategy is to set aside time, free of immediate management concerns, to maintain a dialogue with key academic leaders about core academic matters, particularly related to the quality of learning and teaching.

“Repeat the messages about good teaching constantly. Be credible yourself: show you care about graduates and learning”.

“There are no quick-fix solutions to a better student experience. It takes time. You have to instill a culture. You can’t assume everyone has bought into it. We have moved from meetings where everyone sits round a table to groups that actually do things.”

“Articulating and implementing the vision is the subject of reflective practice...you can delude yourself that everyone understands the strategy and buys into it...”

THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING ON SUCCESS

THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

The University of Queensland has an exceptionally strong track record of achievement with respect to national awards for academics and teaching and learning initiatives. It is known for its strategic approach to using performance data to support leadership of learning and teaching.

Three clearly interrelated strategies were employed to inspire and enable excellence in learning and teaching at the University. The first strategy, a 'big step forward', involves a four-year process of recasting the learning and teaching plan as a more focused 'Learning Plan', emphasising points of distinction for the University in the sector, including the nature of the University of Queensland student experience. The second strategy centres on structural changes with cascading levels of responsibility including a significant role for Associate Deans (Academic) working with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic). The third strategy, a school-based performance framework, enables schools to translate the University's strategic priorities for student learning into their own context, and to assess their performance against internal benchmarks 'purposely set high' and directly linked to the aspirational targets of the University.

The major themes underlying these enabling strategies is that teaching is being led at the highest level with clear goals and processes in place. Schools are targeted as the focus for improvement. A set of tools with a robust quality assurance system reinforces the strategic leadership perspective that: 'data is driving the messages about what is valued and how teaching and learning could be improved'.

The school-based performance framework features: an annual data monitoring system; transparency with a single chart showing the performance of all schools; and KPIs with minimum thresholds. A series of dashboards gives schools and individual academics timely and accessible information about their performance from a range of teaching and learning indicators. Schools undertake short and focused reviews of readily available data on student demand, retention, success, satisfaction (among both current students and graduates), and graduate destinations across the school's teaching programs/majors.

UNITY IN POLICY AND APPROACH

QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Queensland University of Technology has a strong identity as a 'university for the real world' characterised by professionally relevant education and close collaboration with industry. It has a reputation for effective student learning support programs and innovative approaches to career development opportunities, most notably student e-Portfolios.

The University provides an example of devolved leadership with a sense of collective responsibility to address whole of institutional performance. It has achieved considerable success in attracting federal funding for a wide range of projects to improve teaching and learning and as a consequence has developed a critical mass of leaders of teaching and learning to support whole of institution change strategies.

Senior executive responsibility for improving learning and teaching is distributed over three portfolios. Actions are predicated on a shared understanding that success comes from: identifying the champions; focusing on what people care about – their disciplines and the professions; avoiding bureaucracy and compliance; and preparing the ground by ensuring the language of change and improvement is understood and shared.

The strategic focus is on issues of quality at the course level on external and internal performance indicators, particularly with respect to student attrition, satisfaction, engagement and 'real world' learning. A recent significant shift in the approach to achieving excellence in teaching and learning centres on a series of interrelated projects working from a 'Blueprint' that identifies major priorities, articulates broad strategies, and seeks to drive greater coherence and coordination of activities targeted at improvement.

A clear sense of unity in policy and approach at the senior level — 'all at the executive level are on message' — and a distinctive corporate culture of networking and collaborative approaches to implementing change underpins initiatives in course design and delivery, curriculum reform, and blended learning. Importantly, the approach is further supported with a strong sense of mutual respect between academics and professional staff and 'parity of esteem'.

PRINCIPLE 3:

Devolve leadership of learning and teaching

Devolved leadership of learning and teaching ensures wide ownership and comprehensive engagement of staff and students with the vision and its implementation. Once a strong central vision has been established, the aim should be to minimise top-down control in the means of its accomplishment, reserving options for central direction for abnormal situations such as addressing significant government policy shifts. In ordinary circumstances, different faculties and disciplines should be free to exercise discretion in how they deliver the vision. This form of unobtrusive senior leadership is the converse of micro-management.

What it means in practice

Ordered flexibility in the approach to implementation.

Successful strategic leadership in academic contexts requires flexibility in how a vision is delivered and practised. There is considerable art involved in aligning central management actions (including evidence-based decision-making) with collegial academic values and ensuring they sustain rather than obstruct each other.

Typical approaches include: encouraging change through careful reference to external pressures; working wherever possible through consent and consensus; fostering a culture of improvement and support rather than blame; reiterating scholarly values and underlining the parallels between research and teaching; and using academic development units to steer enhancement priorities.

“Extensively distributed leadership makes for a wider conversation about learning and teaching.”

“Resist the temptation to tell people what to do. Remind them that teaching is the biggest source of the university’s income. Then enable them to achieve.”

“The Associate Deans (Education) are all research active, so people listen to them when they speak about the importance of teaching.”

Aligning faculty and departmental leadership of teaching with institutional goals.

Institutional goals associated with enhancing teaching and the student experience should be actively re-interpreted by deans, faculties and heads to correspond with the needs of different academic units. Typical mechanisms for realising the devolved leadership of teaching involve using existing academic structures — such as academic boards, informal groups and committees —

“Always give people (including students) space. Listen to them as well as expecting them to listen to you. Get involved in the small details, but never micromanage – devolve and decentralise.”

to implement and monitor progress towards objectives. Effective senior executive leadership will be closely involved in overseeing and supporting these processes. A balance between management actions and collegial procedures needs to be struck.

Alignment will more likely be secured if formal mechanisms for reporting (e.g. reports on progress towards learning and teaching plan objectives) are in place and are owned by the devolved units and their managers.

Building a critical mass of leaders of learning and teaching.

Senior leadership of learning and teaching is only as effective as the people leading improvement, formally or by example, at the local level. This involves building a core of committed and skilled leaders across the institution. These may be formally recognised as mentors or award holders.

“Senior leaders should focus on the bigger picture and not get bogged down with issues like curriculum design in faculties. They should set an example for deans and heads, helping them to fit into the broader strategy but letting them work it out for themselves.”

Associate deans for learning and teaching and chairs of education committees are increasingly significant contributors where they are given sufficient authority and resources. Actively seeking exceptional external candidates for important management positions that support the student experience is an advantageous policy. Involving students in groups and projects that direct the implementation of learning and teaching strategies is also productive and is becoming more widely accepted as a significant element in achieving overall excellence.

“Ownership promotes loyalty.

There are downsides to distributed leadership, such as lack of consistency in the short term, but the advantage is that it leads to ownership of the vision so that alignment and innovation are created from the bottom up.”

Promoting collaborative approaches to the improvement of learning and teaching.

Successful executive leaders work from the assumption that the quality of the student experience depends on cooperative, integrated approaches to its management. This may imply incorporation of academic and service functions into single teams, recognising that professional services are decisive in ensuring quality. They also actively seek opportunities to engage in collaborative projects and work with other institutions in order to share insights, test the impact of innovations, and learn from best practice elsewhere.

CHANGING STRUCTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

Structural changes have been a central element in the strategic approach to improvement at The University of Queensland. An internal review suggested there was no need to reinvent structures: rather, there was a need to define more strategically the roles of the committees and individuals and the relationships between them. The strategy included reviewing all major committee membership delegates to determine the key decision-makers and identifying 'the people who need to be in the room'. Head of School workshops were conducted to inform leaders of policy developments, clearly cascading levels of responsibility were created, and Associate Deans (Academic) were developed as a key resource for the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic). Empowering the Associate Deans involved reinventing their roles as a key part of the highly strategic approach to improving teaching and learning. This includes a role in the assessment of performance data. The data has given the Associate Deans an agenda to start conversations within their schools and to influence change using school-based performance indicators.

VISION TO REALITY— DESIGNING NEW LEARNING SPACES

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY

Leaders of learning and teaching at University of Technology, Sydney developed a vision of a 'sticky' campus to help students make connections with one another on campus. A series of working parties designed potential learning spaces to facilitate connected learning experiences, bringing together a curriculum working party and a technology group.

The keys to success included: building credibility with the Vice-Chancellor's Industry Advisory Group; framing things in a positive way; providing compelling numbers and data analytics on learning to support strategic decisions about where to put resources to greatest effect; and networking with Deans. The use of external experts confirmed the viability and value of the strategy and students were invited to play a significant role in identifying and trialling preferences.

PRINCIPLE 4:

Reward, recognise and develop teaching

Explicit rewards for teaching — and outstanding teaching in particular — as a core component of academic work, is a central feature of successful leadership at senior executive level. Many academics, in all types of university, continue to believe that teaching is undervalued compared with research in higher education institutions; they may also maintain that their university's rhetoric about acknowledging teaching is not matched by its actions.

There should be a clear understanding among the senior executive group, regularly articulated in public, that the competitiveness and future success of the university depends on providing an outstanding experience for students. If this commitment is to permeate through to all levels of staff, robust systems need to be in place to reward and recognise the contributions of academics and professional staff to enhancing the quality of teaching and the student experience.

What it means in practice

Setting clear institutional expectations about the nature and outcomes of effective teaching.

An assurance that teaching matters and will be fully recognised both formally and informally should imbue the corporate culture of the university. Effective executive leaders will use every opportunity to stress that effective teaching is core business, that teaching should in no circumstances be seen as a distraction from research, and that the performance of the university in attracting students, retaining them and ensuring they achieve excellent outcomes is dependent on the quality of teaching they receive. This should be conveyed explicitly in the messages about what constitutes effective teaching and the expected outcomes.

Ensuring that deans and heads acknowledge and reward the teaching function of individuals and academic units.

Deans and heads play a significant role in recognising teaching. It is not unknown, however, for them to give their staff the impression that research performance and generating research income should take priority over time spent on teaching and its development – particularly in the case of more junior colleagues whose careers are at an early stage. Effective senior leaders will make certain that the formal and informal communications from deans and heads to their staff are consistent with the university's policies on recognising, rewarding and developing teaching.

Linking formal rewards (e.g. promotion, awards, financial incentives) to teaching excellence and the performance of academic units.

Formal rewards — most importantly, academic promotions — are fundamental to a perception among academics that a university is genuine about its commitment to treating teaching as a priority. Clear criteria related to teaching for academic promotions are indispensable: prescribed training of promotions committee members in assessing teaching performance and the use of peer-reviewed evidence in making personnel decisions are highly desirable. Close alignment between the criteria used for promotion and those used for teaching awards is essential, and a coherent relation between criteria for assessing teaching and those for assessing research and scholarship is advantageous. Executive leaders will also wish to consider options for rewarding and recognising the teaching performance of academic units and programs, possibly through financial incentives.

Aligning professional development opportunities with strategic learning and teaching goals.

A characteristic of effective senior leadership is the strategic use of the university's academic development unit and other support units to facilitate attainment of an institution's learning and teaching strategies. The support may typically include required training in teaching for newly appointed academics in which corporate objectives and academic values are linked; and the development of an evidence base concerning the student experience at the university on which professional development programs for academic and professional staff can draw.

Promoting the university as a successful teaching institution.

Publicising an institution's commitment to excellent teaching, and its commitment to an outstanding student experience, are important elements in establishing its competitive advantage. This has a strong impact on those within the institution who take pride in external recognition and feel acknowledged for their efforts to advance the quality of teaching.

Expressly highlighting instances of success that represent a particular university's history and values, such as evidence of the relevance of its programs to employers, or its record in producing individuals who become outstanding scholars and community leaders, are strategic actions that help position the university as an institution where teaching excellence is routinely expected.

AN EMBEDDED TRADITION OF RECOGNITION AND SUPPORT

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

The University of Wollongong has a history of a robust focus on learning and teaching. Over the last 20 years, it has articulated clear statements of how teaching will be recognised and supported across the institution.

These include: compulsory courses in teaching for academics; clear formal criteria related to teaching for all academic promotions; the use of peer-reviewed evidence of teaching performance in making personnel decisions; an emphasis on a student-focused approach to teaching; specifying what contribution an academic has made to student learning and curriculum renewal (rather than teaching performance narrowly defined); training for roles on promotions committees; the development of mentoring; and new methods for reporting learning and teaching achievements.

These systems have developed through strong, stable leadership at senior executive level and are aligned with core academic values. Teaching is evaluated in ways that are consistent with how research is evaluated. This approach sends a transparent message to staff that, despite the university's gradual move towards research-intensiveness, teaching remains core business. Teaching is understood as a key component of a broader student experience. Senior leaders lay emphasis on collaboration, engagement, an understanding of e-learning pedagogy and innovation, including the value of cooperation between academic and general staff. Senior leadership uses the university's educational development unit to focus attention on these priorities.

PRINCIPLE 5: Involve students

Increasing the involvement of students takes engagement to a new level when students are seen as active partners and change agents in shaping their learning experiences. Conceptualising the role of students in this way creates a significant set of challenges and opportunities for executive leadership. In this framework, while the university takes its share of responsibility for student learning, students play a role in enhancing teaching, the curriculum and their overall experience.

With the appropriate structures and processes in place, students can also make valuable contributions to strategic planning at all levels of university operations including faculties and departments, and importantly, take some ownership of quality enhancement.⁷ Involvement of this kind includes, but is not confined to, student representative bodies. It extends across the broad range of academic, co- and extra-curricular activities.

What it means in practice

Reviewing the relationship between all aspects of university life contributing to, or hindering, student engagement and involvement.

A high level strategic review of the academic, administrative and support elements is a useful first step in paving the way for a whole-of-institution approach to improvement in learning and teaching and the student experience. It should consider every point of contact and interlocking aspects in the student lifecycle, from recruitment to admissions to graduation and beyond.

In particular, a review of this kind should examine the nature and extent of student contributions as partners and change agents. The areas for investigation and analysis include student governance, opportunities for involvement in co- and extra-curricular activities, and levels of participation in quality assurance and improvement.

Designing systems that promote student involvement in academic quality processes.

Students can make a contribution to quality processes beyond current standard feedback systems. Student members of audit and review teams, disciplinary networks and professional associations can also play a significant role.

“Student unions in other places are not as respected by their universities as much as here. The five Associate Deans (Education) are the most student-focused people you’ll ever meet. They are genuine people. This reflects the DVC’s leadership, her passionate concern for student needs, which is great to see.”

“We involve students in the central budget scrutiny group. It’s a joint enterprise. We agree priorities together.”

“Scrutiny from the student body itself is particularly important and there are a number of meetings where this takes place. A Budget Scrutiny Group has been established jointly chaired by the University Registrar and its Students’ Guild president, which will oversee where Exeter’s additional tuition-fee money will be spent.”

A framework is needed to identify these and other opportunities to promote student involvement in academic quality processes. Working from a model of higher education as an engaged partnership with shared responsibility between academics, administrators and students (rather than a simple service model), the framework should set out a clear rationale for student engagement and involvement processes. It should also spell out the expectations the institution has of students and their joint responsibility for the quality of the university experience.

Strategies to increase student involvement in quality assurance, and the value of their input, include: developing networking opportunities for institutions and student representative groups to learn about effective practices in a range of institutions; providing guides and toolkits for student contributors; and arranging forums to facilitate discussion between students, academics, support staff and administrators.

Seeking student advice to improve teaching, the curriculum and the student experience.

Students can provide advice on key aspects of teaching and curriculum design and delivery. Working in partnership with university staff, and with appropriate structures and incentives, students can be a significant resource at all levels of operation.

Advice from students is particularly effective at the program level where they are able to contribute ideas specific to their personal experience of curriculum delivery, assessment, learning technologies and resources. Involvement at the

program level can include membership of discipline-focused student networks, professional bodies, advisory groups and accreditation panels.

Innovative whole-of-institution processes include providing students with incentives and support to investigate specific issues affecting the collective student learning experience across the institution. Again, with appropriate resources and support, students can be directly involved in building the evidence base to inform relevant committees and working groups.

Providing incentives for deans and heads to encourage students to engage in faculty and department learning communities.

Faculties and departments are the primary architects of learning communities. Incentives should be targeted at promoting local models of good practice in involving students to be shared across the institution. Conditions at the faculty and department levels are significantly different to warrant more targeted incentives.

Deans and heads should be encouraged to identify and disseminate examples of effective practice in relation to student engagement. Executive leaders are well placed to initiate and lead institutional forums to provide an opportunity for the university community to stimulate discussion about the extent to which such practices may have wider applicability across the university.

A CULTURE OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

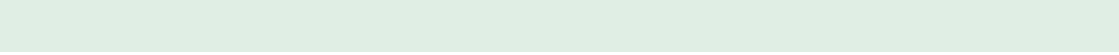
Exeter has shown strong performance in teaching and the student experience over the past five years. It is a campus-based university enjoying growing student demand and is a leader in the results of national surveys and obtaining educational awards. High quality horizon-scanning by the senior executive is focused on constant improvement.

The recent advances in the University's reputation are attributed to inspirational, credible and devolved leadership related to teaching and learning. The visionary strategy at senior executive level, and a consistent message about the vision, is combined with a flexible approach to implementation. This is underpinned by an evidence-based (data-driven) approach to enhancing the student experience. Research-informed teaching and structures support the standing of teaching: all professors teach undergraduates, and the Associate Deans (Education) are all distinguished researchers. Systems are in place to recognise teaching equally with research, supported by an explicit understanding at senior executive level, and permeating through other staff, that the future financial and academic health of the university depends on providing an outstanding experience for both local and overseas students.

Strategic leadership from the Vice-Chancellor and senior executive focuses on providing devolved responsibilities, including students. The 'culture of participation' that characterises the Exeter student experience is used to market the University and attract more students. The University recognises that integrating academic and service functions is decisive in ensuring a first-rate student experience. The student population is self-selected to provide an environment conducive to collaboration between staff and students. It consists largely of people who wish to enjoy a participative experience, autonomy in learning, and a strong commitment to co-curricular activities such as volunteering. Students and staff independently speak of decision-making about priorities in teaching and curriculum as a joint enterprise.

Student engagement and involvement in all aspects of teaching, learning and quality are exceptional and student input is built into the educational structure. There are active staff-student liaison committees in every department, college-wide strategy groups with student input, and a specific student-led change project. There is also a joint appointment funded by the students and the University to support student engagement. A research-led undergraduate experience encourages active and self-governing student experiences. The 'Students as Change Agents' project provides a framework for students to be actively involved in the development, running and advancement of the university. Students identify a part of their university experience that could be improved. They then carry out research on how best to make an improvement and the solution they propose is ideally implemented, or at least considered, by the university.

Background briefing



Background briefing: a body of evidence

This section draws together practical experience and a body of evidence from key research and reflective scholarship on learning and teaching and the student experience. It provides a brief primer focused on knowledge about how teaching and student engagement in higher education shapes student learning experiences and outcomes. It also looks at evidence concerning the effects of leadership on teaching and on academics' commitment to a high quality student experience and draws on work generated by the ALTC Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Program, and continuing with the Office for Learning and Teaching.

This material is relevant to anyone who has a role in promoting effective learning and teaching in universities.

How teaching influences student learning

Ensuring an excellent student experience is high on the national policy agenda. The close association of the student experience with teaching and assessment, as well as broader aspects of university life, is now generally accepted and understood. It forms part of national discourse and international league tables. It is integral to institutional success in competitive systems of higher education.

It is worth quickly tracing the history of the idea of the student experience, since it is helpful for executive leaders to be aware of it.

Academic success and successful learning outcomes – including facility with complex concepts, thorough knowledge of specifics, an interest in learning more and the ability to think for oneself – depend very much on the quality of a student’s engagement with academic subject matter. That engagement may be essentially superficial (sometimes called a ‘surface approach’): the student is focused on acquiring a list or unstructured grouping of pieces of disparate knowledge, often with an eye on succeeding in assessments with minimal effort.

Success in becoming a graduate who can reason and act for oneself, and apply theory to practical problems – precisely the skills that both academics and graduate employers want to see – depends on assiduous attention both to the detail and the broad reach of a subject. This is called a ‘deep approach’: it generates high quality, well-structured, complex outcomes, and produces a sense of enjoyment in learning and commitment to the subject.

The aim of teaching in universities is to make student learning possible. Good teaching (and its close associate, effective assessment) implies engaging students in ways that encourage the use of deep approaches to studying. It means specifying desired outcomes in terms not only of topic content, but in the level of understanding we want students to achieve. It means setting up an environment that maximises the likelihood students will engage in the activities designed to achieve the intended outcomes. It means choosing assessment tasks that tell us how well students have attained these outcomes. Some characteristics of learning and teaching associated with different approaches to studying are summarised in the table below.

Characteristics of learning and teaching associated with deep and surface approaches

Surface approaches are encouraged by...

- Assessment methods emphasising recall or trivial procedural knowledge
- Assessment methods that create anxiety
- Cynical or conflicting messages about rewards
- An excessive amount of material in the curriculum
- Poor or absent feedback on progress
- Lack of independence in studying
- Lack of interest in and background knowledge of the subject matter
- Previous experiences of educational settings that encourage these approaches

Deep approaches are encouraged by...

- Teaching and assessment methods, alongside a well-structured and stimulating curriculum, that foster vigorous and long-term engagement with learning tasks
- Stimulating teaching, especially teaching which demonstrates an academic's personal commitment to the subject matter and stresses its meaning and relevance to students
- High, clearly stated academic expectations
- Assessment criteria that are aligned with the objectives of the curriculum
- Opportunities to exercise responsible choice in the method and content of study
- Interest in and background knowledge of the subject matter
- Previous experiences of educational settings that encourage these approaches

Note that these aspects of the student experience take us beyond the ‘teaching performance’ of individual academics. They encompass the broader aspects of programs and how students are engaged with the content to be learned – from working on learning tasks with other students, through the design of learning spaces and the effective use of e-learning, to the nature of the curriculum itself. Good teaching and assessment help to bring ideas, facts and principles to life in a way that encourages students to find out more for themselves.

It is also useful to be aware that variations in how university teachers approach their teaching are systematically related to the way they experience the context of teaching. When lecturers perceive their class sizes to be appropriate, they are more likely to report using an approach to teaching aimed at making learning possible through a focus on changing students’ understanding. When class sizes are perceived as being too large, academics are more likely to use a teacher-centred approach and use a strategy of transmitting information.

Similar relations have been found between these qualitatively different approaches to teaching and four other aspects of the teaching context. Lecturers report greater use of an approach to teaching that is student-focused and aimed at conceptual change when they experience control over the content being taught, when their department provides support for teaching, when they have an appropriate academic workload, and when they perceive that the characteristics of the students, such as language skills and prior knowledge of the subject matter, are conducive to effective learning.

In adopting a conceptual change/student-focused approach, lecturers focus their attention on the students and monitor their perceptions, activity and understanding. Transmission of content is seen to be necessary, but not sufficient, for enabling student understanding.

Academics using this approach assume that students build their own knowledge: the lecturer’s task is to challenge students’ existing ideas through questions, problems, discussion and presentation. This approach embraces a mastery of teaching techniques, including those associated with presentation and transmission, but goes beyond technique. Teachers adopting this approach explain the differences in students’ outcomes of learning through relations between students and context (including the role of the teacher) rather than the differences being due simply to the actions of the teacher.

An information transmission/teacher-focused approach to teaching is qualitatively different. In adopting this approach, teachers focus their attention only on what they do (their forward planning, good management skills, use of an armoury of teaching competencies, ability to use information and communication technology). They attempt to transmit information related to the curriculum and assume that this will be sufficient for student learning. They are likely to explain differences in outcomes of learning as being due to differing student abilities or variation in teacher competence in organising and presenting subject matter. These approaches are associated with perceptions of larger class sizes, a perception of lack of control over content, limited departmental support, inappropriate workloads, and perceptions of inadequate student preparation.

For the ways in which approaches to teaching are related to the leadership of teaching, see the final section on the impact of leadership on learning and teaching.

Assessment of student learning

It is generally agreed that students' experiences of assessment in higher education exert a profound influence on their learning. How they think they will be assessed largely determines what they learn. Senior executives may find it helpful to remember that the effects are often harmful: students anticipate what assessment will test and focus their learning on getting by with surface approaches. In other words, if they perceive that their learning will be measured in terms of reproducing facts or implementing memorised procedures and formulae, they tend to adopt approaches that prevent understanding from being reached. The extensive use of surface approaches to learning indicates that much assessment in higher education is flawed.

However, when assessment is closely aligned to teaching it supports learning. If students see it as an integral part of learning, providing useful feedback on what has been understood and what areas need further work – and fairly testing achievement – it encourages them to use approaches that enable more sophisticated learning outcomes to be achieved. Feedback on learning is usually called 'formative assessment', and it is a fundamental part of good teaching. The significance of helpful comments on students' progress in any discussion of effective assessment cannot be overstated.

The other main reason for assessing is of course to judge attainment ('summative' assessment): the two functions may or may not go hand in hand. Sometimes, using assessment tasks to do both things, as is sometimes the case with continuous assessment, creates a conflict in students' minds – they think they are 'being asked to display and hide error simultaneously'.⁸

More imaginative approaches to formative assessment, it has been suggested, would involve considering evidence about staff and students' expectations and the importance of feedback as part of learning. This evidence reveals that students are often unaware of what feedback consists of and how it relates to learning and teaching; their expectations are frequently not aligned with those of academics. It also shows that student generation of feedback, student involvement in understanding assessment criteria, and the development of focused, systematic reflection can serve as means of speeding up learning in higher education.⁹

Curriculum

Until recently, 'curriculum' was not an expression much used in higher education. Curriculum embraces not only academic issues (what topics and outcomes should a course include?), but also practical ones such as how work-based learning might be incorporated in a program, what credit should be given for previous achievement, the appropriateness of problem-based learning in a professional course, and whether a program will enable employability skills to be acquired.

Wider issues are less frequently raised. These include the relative responsibilities of teacher and taught: whether curriculum is about transforming students' lives or about training them for jobs (or both); the relationship between academic and other aspects of a students' experience; links between scholarship and teaching; and the relevance of goals such as developing students' capacities for learning continually and their ability to evaluate their own learning.

A renewed focus on curricula is apparent in contemporary debate about higher education. It has been argued that new models of the curriculum are needed: ones that are trans-disciplinary; that extend students to their limits; that develop skills of inquiry and research; and that are imbued with international perspectives. It has been suggested that these qualities will ensure graduates who are educated to the standard that the future economy and well-being of democratic nations demand.

According to this view, a student experience that is fit for the future will develop in students qualities of flexibility and confidence and a sense of obligation to the wider community. Typical components of this perspective include applications of research-based study for undergraduates: to cultivate awareness of research careers; to train students in research skills for employment; and to sustain the advantages of a research-teaching connection in a mass or universal system of higher education.

A curriculum example that deserves close attention is the trans-disciplinary and generalist undergraduate degree. This incorporates research skills training, courses in globalisation and diversity, and engagement in voluntary work.

Undergraduate programs are complemented by postgraduate taught programs that provide more specialist, vocational and applied learning opportunities. The models implemented or proposed at the University of Aberdeen, King's College London, Harvard University, the National University of Singapore, and The Universities of Melbourne and Western Australia, provide examples of what can be done. The research-based approaches realised in the UK at the Warwick-Oxford Brookes Reinvention Centre, Imperial College, and the US National Science Foundation also merit consideration by executive leaders.¹⁰

Research and teaching

Discussion of curriculum leads on to issues associated with the perennial debate on the relations between academic research and university teaching. Different institutions will have varying policies on how research and scholarship should inform teaching, but it remains a strongly held value among academics that the pursuit of knowledge and its communication to students are fundamentally allied to each other. It remains true also that in Australia the title of university is reserved for higher education institutions in which teaching is carried out alongside research.

There is some evidence to suggest that students' development of academic and professional skills benefits from a strong relationship between teaching and research.¹¹ Students themselves describe subject expertise and up-to-date knowledge among their lecturers as central to a valuable university experience.¹² It would also appear that academics' approaches to teaching are associated with how they conceptualise their subject matter: it is not simply how active or productive a researcher is that matters in enhancing teaching quality, but what form of activity the researcher concentrates on. A scholarly awareness of the broad, developing conceptualisation of the subject matter is linked to a more student-focused approach to teaching.¹³

The conversation about research and teaching has moved on from simple questions of whether research productivity and teaching skill are either empirically linked, or merely independent activities, to the issue of how teaching can be enhanced, and the student experience made richer, through drawing on synergies between these aspects of academic work.¹⁴ National policies and institutional pressures to excel in research have often tended to drive the two activities apart, and since time spent on one activity reduces the capacity to participate in the other, individual academics experience competition rather than synergy between teaching and research.

A key question for executive leaders is whether they can harness the positive aspects of the relationship through practices such as undergraduate research projects, involvement in graduate teaching, and systems for recognising and rewarding good undergraduate teaching by senior researchers. Practices such as requiring staff who are appointed to leadership positions in teaching (such as

Associate Deans Education) to be productive researchers underline the cultural significance of a university's commitment to exploiting the connections between teaching and research. Expectations that deans and heads will underline the benefits to the student experience to their staff, and put in place mechanisms to recognise efforts to bring the activities into alignment, are decisive levers.

Reward and recognition of teaching

Although a high quality student experience plays a critical role in a university's success, numerous studies have shown that academics believe teaching performance to be less recognised than research performance.¹⁵ Promotions and appointments criteria and processes do not invariably reward teaching, in spite of the stated intentions of institutions. Deans and heads may not lead in a way that puts teaching on the same footing as research.

The research indicates that academic staff in all types of universities believe strongly in the importance of teaching in higher education and most prefer to do both teaching and research. They say that formal institutional processes (especially promotion) and a leadership culture that values teaching both contribute to recognising this importance. Many academics feel that the status of teaching is low in comparison with research. There is a discrepancy between the value they perceive to be given to teaching and the value they believe it should be given. Criteria for promotion, it would seem, do not invariably include teaching performance, especially at more senior levels. The results suggest that schemes such as teaching awards, although valuable, do not substitute for more fundamental changes to promotions processes and institutional culture.

These insights are of more than hypothetical relevance for executive leaders of teaching. The issues for them revolve around practical mechanisms that can be put in place to underline the importance of teaching. This includes visible and committed leadership by the executive team – leadership that reiterates the significance of the student experience to the university's competitiveness and links the quality of that experience to good teaching. An appreciation of teaching will gradually become embedded in the leadership and management culture of an institution.

It is important to devise systems for assessing teaching that are based on rigorous standards and are coherent with the ways research performance is assessed. Good practice in promotions and appointments procedures involves clear, evidence-based criteria for assessing teaching performance in higher education. These robust criteria work best when they are aligned with those used for teaching awards. They may usefully be accompanied by training for members of promotions committees in how to use them for evaluating teaching.

Requirements for training and development in teaching for academic staff, and credible arrangements for delivering such support, play a complementary role in transmitting messages about the importance of teaching.

Good teaching is a collective as well as an individual responsibility. Above and beyond individual teaching performance, it is essential to recognise the impact of faculties, departments and programs on the student experience. Systems that have proved effective include various forms of incentive and recognition for innovation and the application of good practice in curriculum, teaching and assessment at program and faculty level.

The student experience

The governance and management of the student experience presents both a challenge and an opportunity for senior executive leaders. The student experience is increasingly understood as the outcome of 'negotiated engagement', with universities recognising that students, especially in the digital age, are integral to the formation of the experience, and potentially active partners and change agents supporting institutional improvement.¹⁶

A set of core research findings provides senior executive leaders with an evidence-base for thinking about the ways the institution can make a difference to the student experience. While some caution is needed in applying research findings from different national contexts and diverse cohorts of students, there is increasing convergence in the findings with a strong baseline for a strategic narrative about how student lives and expectations are changing, and the nature of the future student experience. The conclusions are arrived at from different theoretical starting points, but are nonetheless consistent with those in the previous sections about the influences of teaching on learning, the importance of assessment, and the value of a focus on curriculum.

The US has been the most significant source of systematic research on the student experience over the last 50 years. The emphasis of that research is strongly based on the deeply embedded belief that undergraduate education ought to be intensively student centered. A landmark review of three decades of research on how university affects undergraduate students reached the unequivocal conclusion that the single most important determinant of student success at university is the amount of time and effort they put into their studies and their involvement in the academic, interpersonal and extracurricular offerings.¹⁷ However, the authors note that this makes it all the more important that executive leaders focus on the ethos, policies and programs of the university to examine ways in which the academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings can be shaped to encourage student engagement.

Four findings on the impact of university on student learning outcomes are of particular relevance. While they may seem obvious, these fundamentals nonetheless need stating. First, the more students engage both in academic work and the broader academic experience, the better their knowledge

acquisition and general cognitive growth. A high level of engagement also increases students' openness to ideas, sense of autonomy and intellectual orientation. Second, strategies for engagement aimed at increasing active learning — including peer teaching, individualised systems of instruction and e-learning — foster both cognitive and psycho-social growth. Third, wide cognitive impact comes from academic experiences that purposefully provide for challenge and integration, for example, where students are required to integrate learning from separate courses around a central theme.

The fourth key finding is that student learning shows an unambiguous link to the ways teachers go about teaching in the classroom. The two most salient dimensions of teacher behaviours that make a difference to student learning outcomes are the skill levels of teaching, and the nature of the course structure and organisation. The teaching skills that matter most are well known, and, importantly, they are learnable behaviours. They include the ability to provide clear explanations, demonstrating enthusiasm about the subject, being organised and prepared, and being available to talk with students about their studies.

The quality of the course structure and how well the course is organised deserves close consideration by senior executive in their efforts to improve learning and teaching and the student experience, and particularly in quality assurance systems. The evidence is clear: organising courses to enable studying with other students — including online — adds considerably to learning outcomes. Engagement occurs where students feel they are part of a group of students and academics committed to learning, and where learning outside the classroom is considered as important as the timetabled and structured experience.

Strategic decisions about the future of the student experience need to be based on a considered and nuanced understanding of the evidence. For example, it is widely believed that students are stretched for time with the demand of part-time work to survive and that this and other external pressures are preventing them from fully engaging with university life, in particular limiting their participation in co-curricular activities. The picture is more complex and of course will vary across institutional and campus contexts.

Students' sense of being part of a learning community has a strong positive impact on their perceptions of personal outcomes such as improved communication and problem-solving skills, the acquisition of discipline knowledge and skills, and ethical and social sensitivity. The sense of the university as a learning community also directly influences students' satisfaction with their overall experience. These findings underline the point made in previous sections of this background briefing that separating the improvement of teaching skills from the broader learning environment of the institution is a fundamentally flawed strategy.

Impact of communications technologies

Communications technologies have the potential to enhance the core elements of good practice in undergraduate education, including expanding the capacity of institutions to foster diverse student talents and unique ways of learning, promoting active and collaborative learning, and creating new opportunities for students to generate and share knowledge.¹⁸ New technologies can also increase the amount of time students spend on task and provide additional active learning experiences, particularly those that give students control of their interactions with the subject material and prompt reflection on the learning tasks.

The ability of students to use digital technologies in new forms of course design and delivery is somewhat problematic. Students assume they should have options to study in a range of formats and settings and they expect institutions to provide individualised digitally based services in keeping with their everyday work and social experience. However, campus-based students are not as enthusiastic about the use of communications technologies in learning as might be expected.

A number of studies counter the common assumption that young people born or brought up in the internet age are naturally adept at using the web effectively.¹⁹ Although these students demonstrate an ease and familiarity with computers, they generally rely on the most basic search tools and do not possess the critical and analytical skills to assess the information that they find on the web. There is a notable gap between the creators and users of digital information: the bulk of students prefer, as do most people, user-friendly technology that is largely intuitive with no training required, and 'in the background'.

The circumstances and experiences of students differ markedly with respect to their expectations and use of communications technologies with significant variations across age cohorts and fields of study. Undergraduate students remain firmly attached to the importance of traditional approaches to university education, notably personal contact, albeit in a web-supported setting. Their preference for significant face-to-face learning opportunities remains strong: UK research finds that students rate the teaching skills of their lecturers/tutors, and interactive group teaching sessions as the most important factors in their

thinking about their learning experience at university. Of least importance is the availability of online discussion forums.²⁰ Similarly, while younger generation doctoral students are sophisticated information-seekers and comfortable with the relevant technology, UK research shows that they are not early adopters or keen users of the latest technology applications and tools.²¹

Studies of the impact of new technologies on student learning and teaching in higher education provide an evolving but limited evidence base. They rely heavily on institutional reports of practice and case studies, and the evidence of success, particularly from studies comparing the effectiveness of different modes of delivery, is at best modest. Despite the methodological shortcomings some useful findings on student learning, course completions and grades are emerging.²²

Some evidence points to advantages for hybrid models of course delivery over online delivery, but overall there is little evidence that online or hybrid learning, on average, is more or less effective than face-to-face learning. Online students do not outperform face-to-face peers or vice versa although highly sophisticated online systems of learning appear to have a stronger impact on student learning than relatively basic approaches. Blended learning presents significant potential advantages in responding to the everyday realities of students and the imperatives of more cost-effective course delivery. Again, however, the evidence suggests the learning outcomes are unlikely to be notably better or worse than traditional formats.

The relative costs of achieving improved learning outcomes are of particular interest to executive leadership. Achieving the same outcomes for significantly less cost is a major incentive to invest in new technologies. However, the evidence on the cost-effectiveness of online teaching is not conclusive. While the data have limited value in determining the level of investment institutions should make, and success is not always reported in relation to the costs involved, students learn more in less time in hybrid and online courses.

New challenges and opportunities are emerging as institutions adapt their approach to course design and delivery in response to open source content from around the world. For example, courses may be built around forms of assessment that make learning more personalised but also collaborative with the use of small groups and social media. Moreover, the impact of changing the

nature of assessment tasks also means fundamental rethinking of the learning outcomes and the standards and norms that have been associated with current assessment practices.²³

The sheer pace of change is itself a challenge for executive leadership. In particular, there has been a surge in enrolments with online providers, and increased student expectations that mobile technology should support their learning and more generally improve their communications with their university. However, while modes of interaction between teacher, student and university are clearly changing, rapid shifts in student preferences for types of technologies also limits predictions of their patterns of use.

Impact of leadership on learning and teaching

The natural progression from work on different approaches to teaching is to ask what the literature and research on academic leadership for teaching tells us about its influences on teaching and the student experience. Does academic leadership influence teaching quality, academics' approaches to teaching, and their commitment to providing a high-quality learning experience for their students? Can it result in better learning outcomes?

Inspiring, change-focused (or transformational) leadership — as seen by the teaching staff themselves — influences how they go about teaching. University teachers who report collaborative and transformational forms of leadership teach in ways that enhance the student learning experience, while those who report less inspirational leadership are more likely to approach teaching as a form of transmitting information.²⁴

There are clear links between academics' approaches to teaching, their experiences of leadership, and the broader context of the department in which they teach. In particular, a collegial commitment to providing an outstanding learning experience and a focus on enabling effective learning outcomes is associated with more stimulating and collaborative forms of leadership.

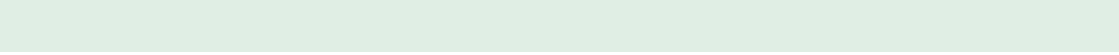
A study of departmental leadership for good teaching in a sample of research-intensive universities identified nine clusters of leadership activity associated with excellent teaching environments, some of which have been incorporated in the five principles for leadership at the executive level.²⁵

A fundamental message for senior executives to emerge from this research is that effective leadership for teaching involves different combinations of characteristics in different contexts: there is no single recipe that works for every situation. However, they should also be aware that one factor seems to be common to effective leaders of teaching at faculty and departmental level. They typically emphasise students' experiences of studying in a constantly developing curriculum, rather than focusing on the teaching of discipline-specific knowledge and practices.²⁶

Inspirational and devolved leadership, focused on the improvement of teaching, appears to generate an educational climate or culture favourable to dialogue and innovation. This in turn is reflected in the approaches to teaching used by

staff and the motivation of students to become involved in quality processes and curriculum development.

These conclusions apply even more forcefully to senior executive leadership of learning and teaching. It is important to understand the significance of building an institutional climate or environment where teaching is valued and in which appropriate structures to emphasise its importance and assess progress towards better student experiences are put in place. A central part of senior leadership for teaching is the use of evidence to drive policy, embed visionary goals and evaluate outcomes.



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