

Chapter 17

An Associate Dean's Community of Practice: Rising to the Leadership Challenges of Engaging Distance Students using Blended Models of Learning and Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Associate deans (Learning and Teaching) face a number of challenges in successfully retaining and progressing students in their faculties. The first challenge involves identifying strategies to assist students to actively engage with their studies. This challenge escalates if the primary mode of delivery involves distance learning. The second challenge stems from the need for associate deans to empower their staff to design, develop, and deliver curricular that achieves student retention. This chapter conceptualizes blended learning and describes how an associate dean's community of practice facilitates an institutional approach to student engagement, both in terms of supporting students and supporting staff. These initiatives include a whole-of-institution approach to learning and teaching policies, practices and infrastructure, and professional development activities, incorporating an assessment week, university presentations, and peer review activities. The chapter outlines the success of these initiatives in building the learning and teaching capacities of both students and staff at a regional Australian university.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-3978-2.ch017

INTRODUCTION

Associate Deans (ADs) (Learning and Teaching [LT]) across Australia are facing similar challenges. One challenge lies in their attempt to engage staff and facilitate their learning and teaching capabilities so that, in turn, their students' learning experiences are enhanced. This at a time when staff are required to do more with less and, simultaneously, required to master and demonstrate a continuing and growing parade of new technologies, especially if the university in which they work teaches using a blended learning model. A second challenge for associate deans is that they are expected to achieve these goals with no line authority at a time when universities are finding themselves under increasing financial pressures and faculties are increasingly competing for limited resources. This paper explores the ways in which a community of practice approach assists associate deans to demonstrate the strategic and collaborative leadership that can boost learning and teaching outcomes at a regional Australian university.

First, the paper reviews the literature, explaining the change forces currently impacting on the Australian Higher Education (HE) sector. The range of institutional responses to this change is explored next, including organizational redesign, strategic leadership, and communities of practice. The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is then described in relation to its regional status, diverse student cohort and history as a leading distance education provider. To complete the contextual overview, USQ's organizational structure is then outlined in relation to the role of associate deans, their responsibilities and their participation in Communities of Practice (CoP). The third section of the paper reviews three key initiatives the associate deans' CoP engineered to enhance both their staff and students' learning and teaching outcomes in relation to blended learning.

THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT

This section's focus is on the 'change forces' impacting on the Higher Education (HE) sector and the institutional responses to this change. Three theoretical threads are explored: organizational redesign; strategic leadership; and communities of practice.

The Higher Education Sector

HE in Australia is operating in a highly volatile context where external pressures for change are increasing. These include: decreased funding per capita while competition increases; the growing pressure to create new sources of income; more commercial institutions; more numerous students who are becoming more diverse and forthright about getting value for the money paid; emerging instances of litigation against universities; and increasing government scrutiny; in place, and changing, external quality audits (Scott, 2008). Scott adds that rapid developments in Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) have made possible modes and approaches to learning unimagined thirty years ago.

These changes are generating questions about learning and teaching: about the extent to which a university is a place where new knowledge is created and where research occurs away from the mainstream; as well as where learning primarily is seen to involve transmission of set content using a 'one-size-fits-all' model delivered in lecture theatres, tutorials and laboratories on a set timetable operated at the institution's convenience over fixed semesters. Scott (2008) maintains that to remain viable, universities must build their capacity to respond promptly, positively and wisely to this interlaced combination of 'change forces.' This volatility is exacerbated for academic/learning and teaching leaders by the particular change forces pressing on them: decreased government funding,

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