Chapter 16

Getting the Context Right for Quality Teaching and Learning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the story of top-down, middle-out, and bottom-up change to promote learning and teaching at a regional university in Australia. The case study documents a whole-of-university change process designed to get the context right to enhance university learning and teaching. It describes the baseline for action, the planning processes, and implementation strategies that adapted a project management approach. The chapter explores contestable issues associated with centralised university change processes versus devolved, faculty initiatives, and it shows how these might be combined. It also outlines the guiding principles of the change process, which was informed by a concern to develop coherent student learning journeys, cross-institutional planning, and a community development approach to engage the hearts and minds of staff. It also featured a systems approach designed to make it difficult for staff to get things wrong.

BACKGROUND

This case study recounts change processes to get the context right to enhance learning and teaching at a small, regional university in Australia. It argues that a whole-of-university response is required because "changing only an element at one level may have limited, local and provisional success ... because the rest of the system is not touched and established patterns prevail over the single change" (Bamber et al., 2009, p. 3). Worse still, without a whole-of-university approach, the outcome might be like a cannibal using a fork (Elkington, 1999, p. 11)—no real change at all.

The case study outlines the principles informing the change processes, the plans and the implementation strategies. Its purpose is to share good practice, because "Case studies may provide ideas, suggestions, or imagery that might sensitize outsiders to issues they may have not considered, particularly with regard to the process of institutional change" (Wals, Walker and Blaze Corcoran, 2004, p. 347). It has particular import for student retention and progression because the purpose of the change process was to attract and retain students.

Since its inception, some 40 years ago, the case-study university has specialised in distance education and gained a reputation for keeping pace with advancements in online and blended learning opportunities (Taylor, 2001). So, flexible and blended learning became a defining feature of the university and 78% of its 27,000 students study online. Unsurprisingly, the University has attracted students unable to participate in traditional, on-campus, university studies. Often, they are the first in their families to study for a degree, and many are older students involved with family and work responsibilities and some are from rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. Thirty-three percent of the University's students are from low socioeconomic backgrounds, so the University may be characterised as engaging with the widening participation agendas now being set by governments around the world:

A number of recent reviews into higher education attest to the importance that governments attach to university education (e.g., Bradley, 2008; OECD, 2010; Spellings, 2006). Such interest in higher education is due, in part, to the global transition to knowledge economies. This requires nations to have highly educated populations … As a consequence, governments have sought to widen participation in higher education and to make university study accessible to a wide cross-section of the population (Broughan & Hunt, 2012, p. 183).

Given that this university is among the leaders in flexible learning in Australian Universities, and that it is responding to national priorities to widen participation, it might seem unnecessary to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. However, the motivation for change came from a number of sources. Firstly, competition

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