

Chapter XIV

Blending Technology into an Academic Practice Qualification for University Teachers

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ABSTRACT

An accredited course in Academic Practice aligns with university and national strategic goals related to teaching and learning enhancement within a research-intensive institution. The course was originally designed to be taught in face to face mode with an elearning dimension to provide the flexibility required by students in full time employment. Participation in a national implementation initiative for E-Learning Guidelines created an opportunity to reconceptualize the course for blended learning. A range of contextual factors influenced both the pace and the scale of technology enhancement. The design-based research process adopted for review and redevelopment of one of the core subjects for a Post Graduate Certificate course is described in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The Post-Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice is a relatively new qualification designed to promote an institutional strategic objective to enhance the quality of teaching within a research-intensive university. Academic staff at the university are typically appointed for discipline-based

research experience rather than for their credentials as teachers. Development of an accredited tertiary qualification reflects an international trend towards professionalization of teaching across the university sector. In a context where demand for accreditation of tertiary teachers is increasing, the University aims to maintain its position amongst the leaders in the field by offering a qualification

designed to meet the academic career development needs of its own staff.

The course is offered by the University's Centre for Academic Development, because senior management identified the broadly based experience of the staff in this unit as the appropriate base for the initiative. Staff in this centre come from various disciplinary backgrounds and typically have teaching or educational design qualifications as well as discipline based higher degrees. Senior members of the department have many years of relevant experience, and have contributed to the evolution of theory and practice in the field of academic development.

For an initial two-year trial period, the Certificate was offered as an internally approved course prior to application for formal accreditation through the national body. During this time, the overall approach to curriculum design and delivery was reviewed and further developed. The review process included an independent evaluation conducted by a senior member of staff from another university faculty, various forms of feedback solicited by the teaching team and reference to evolving literature in the field. Together, these sources provided the basis for ongoing refinement of course content, activities and assessments.

One of two core courses for the accredited version of the Post-Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice (abbreviated to PGCert for the remainder of the chapter) explores a raft of generic learning, teaching and assessment theories and perspectives. It also aims to advance the creative use of technology in teaching and learning to reflect the current institutional environment and international trends in this direction. Prior to accreditation, the course was designed around face-to-face teaching sessions presented as a fortnightly series of community of practice meetings where participants met to discuss readings, engage in reflection on practice and share experience. This structure was revised and supplemented by online activities following accreditation. The

online element was added partly to accommodate the schedules of participants, for whom current employment in a teaching position is an enrolment requirement. Another key objective was to model good educational practice through the introduction and integration of elearning tools and strategies into the curriculum. The aim was to equip students with sufficient knowledge and experience of elearning strategies to consider applying these within the context of their own teaching. It was anticipated that this knowledge would be gained through a combination of teacher led activities, shared experience and collaboration with peers.

Given the campus-based nature of the majority of courses offered by the institution, there was no intention to replace face-to-face teaching with online learning in any substantial way. However, it is realistic to expect that an appropriate blend of technology-supported teaching and learning strategies will be used in an increasing number of courses to enhance the learning experience of campus-based students. An institutional trend in this direction supports student engagement in increasingly large classes by offering flexible opportunities for communication, interactive learning, formative assessment and feedback through the use of various elearning tools and strategies. Development of the PGCert as a blended learning experience is a move to actively promote the knowledge and skills behind creative elearning solutions rather than leaving their acquisition to chance.

In an institution with class sizes varying from ten to over a thousand, applying the principles of good educational practice can present considerable challenges to teachers. In many instances, elearning strategies blended with core classroom-based activities, such as lectures, labs and tutorials play a key role in the development of successful learning designs for the current environment. It is therefore critical for teachers to acquire both the conceptual knowledge and the practical skills involved in design and implementation of blended learning.

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