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Enhancing the student experience through improved higher education leadership and practice

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Despite the efforts of many passionate and committed members of the academic community, efforts to address threats to the student experience have generally failed to produce substantive change across the sector or evenly across institutions. Many changes are being implemented across our sector to address the shortfall in the student experience, but their potential success may be hampered by academic disengagement with these initiatives. This paper explores the reasons for the 'stickiness' of traditional practice, arguing that traditional higher education values, organisational structures, rewards and notions of academic work are partially to blame. Suggestions are made as to how institutions and individual learning communities can enhance the student experience by redefining academic work, reviewing academic expectations, integrating support for new academics and developing effective learning communities. The paper argues for a more integrated approach to academic leadership to ensure our students are suitably supported during their learning journey.

Keywords: student experience; academic leadership; academic practice; academic development; curriculum reform.

The theme of this conference, *The Student Experience*, focuses on an area that has been of great concern across the world. The increased competition for students and reputation as high quality educational institutions has stimulated a strong consideration of what factors ensure a quality educational experience. In their recent report on Australian higher education, Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales (2008) highlight the importance of a good student experience, arguing that "students are more likely to complete their studies if they are satisfied" and "more likely to return to study if they have had a positive experience previously" (page 69).

While the higher education sector seeks to improve the quality of the student experience, there is little doubt that the backdrop on which this agenda is operating is very challenging. Our sector has been anxiously exploring the impact of the long-standing loss of financial support for higher education. While those of us who are located in Australia no doubt feel this is particular to our nation, many other nations have also experienced funding challenges relating to their higher education support (e.g. Asonuma, 2003; Torres and Schugurnsky, 2002 and Kwiek, 2003). Internationally there is a strong concern that the overall student experience has degraded markedly as the costs of higher education force many changes to our educational practice. In Australia, however, this has been particularly marked as the comparative funding base slips further away from other nations. The Bradley Review revealed an alarming decrease in student satisfaction across a number of areas, including student and staff interactions, enriching student experiences and feedback provision (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008, page 75), possibly highlighting the impact of funding issues.

This concerning evidence highlights the challenge this nation faces in ensuring students are not major victims of the funding shortfalls. A further cause for concern is the likelihood of the Federal Government pushing for better institutional performance relating to attracting a higher proportion of low socio-economic students to attend higher education institutions.

While the goal of promoting education as the means of moving beyond a poverty cycle is a positive focus for our community, it also raises some challenges for our universities as they try to embrace a more diverse cohort – with a number requiring additional support, at the same time as they seek to at least maintain a credible support for students already participating in higher education.

Certainly, the financial base for higher education has been a strong factor in reducing our efficacy in providing a meaningful educational experience for our students. But can it be fully to blame? Perhaps there are other elements that can be seen as causal considerations. The changing context for students, with increased hours of paid work is certainly an influence on student disengagement (Devlin, James and Grigg, 2008). However, studies such as that conducted by Koljatic and Kuh (2001) show that limited changes in academic practice remain an issue for our sector as a whole.

If we honestly explore how we are operating as academic communities, it is clear that there has been minimal change to the way things are done. The teaching and learning environment that we experienced as new undergraduates is largely still operating as the primary template for the educational context that now operates. While we have ‘tinkered’ around the edges and sought to enhance elements of our academic practice, for the most part, we have retained a very strong traditional model for how learning and teaching operates in our higher education context. This paper will suggest that there are many reasons for this ‘stickiness’ of traditional academic practice. It will argue that these can be broadly framed around the ways in which we continue to interpret higher education values and recognition, the practices by which each of our institutions operate, and the limited way in which individual academics are supported in establishing and enhancing their practice. Some ways in which we can improve our leadership and management of academic work will be explored, offering perhaps a more positive way forward – despite the limited funding that is available to many of our communities.

National support for academic activities

In countries like Australia and New Zealand, where a large part of the higher education funding is provided by national government, there is a high interdependency between the policies of the day and the resource allocations that are received. In the case of Australia we have seen various initiatives in the last few years that have pushed universities toward particular agendas. The likely changes to higher education stemming from the Bradley Review are likely to change our priorities further, particularly with respect to addressing social inequity in higher education

Perhaps because of the financial pressures in our higher education sector, we have seen considerable energy across the world in reconfiguring the structure and design of academic programmes. The Bologna Model stimulated much discussion of the most viable options for students. In Australia over fourteen institutions are reviewing and redesigning their undergraduate and graduate programmes with a view to improving the student experience and outcomes. These are large-scale changes to a whole academic canvass which necessarily encompass a review of the broader structures of university course design as well as the more fine-grained development of a course of study. With such ambitious agendas, many of these institutions are discovering that it can be hard to shift academic activity toward full engagement with these agendas.

In the last two years the push to reform curricula has been strongly driven by some core principles. There has been widespread recognition that undergraduate students need to experience more breadth in their learning before moving toward a more in-depth focus on a particular discipline / major stream of study. This has encouraged a number of the research-intensive universities to move towards a tiered model of 3 + 2 years of study – abandoning the previous concept of double degrees. In many of the reforms the push toward a stronger research-led focus has been prominent, including the introduction of a research-intensive stream for talented undergraduate students. Similarly, universities are exploring how they can internationalise their curriculum and increase the connectedness with workplace learning. In many cases these comprise the new foundations on which curricula are being established. Bradley et al., 2008 also support these principles as being desirable, and indeed, necessary for enhancing the student experience. However, they also bring new expectations for academic practice. The challenge that is very evident is how academics can be encouraged to be fully engaged in educational reform and its subsequent enactment.

Factors influencing academic engagement with educational reform initiatives

Academics do not operate in a vacuum. Framed by a discipline and dictated by the economic exigencies of the local community and the university, each academic can have quite a different role to play in teaching and research. Those who work in professional disciplines may be expected to interact and support a diversity of activities relating to workplace learning, professional association interaction and the assurance of externally driven standards. In some disciplines the curriculum and research may have evolved to reflect the particular research interests and profiles of the academics concerned. In others, the curriculum may operate as a strongly structured pathway to ensure adequate coverage of the many knowledges that must be conveyed to a student. There may also be quite strong divisions between those who teach and those who research, with the experienced and successful researchers playing a lighter role in teaching. The increasing workloads have tended to exacerbate these points of difference as each academic focuses on the highest priorities in order to manage burgeoning workloads.

At the same time, the inexorable push for academic research has continued with increased fervour, often undercutting institutional efforts to focus attention on the improvement of the learning context. The almost universal academic experience is that one must publish – and increasingly, that this must be in high repute journals. With these sorts of pressures, it is even more difficult to encourage people to focus on the less measurable aspects of academic work – particularly the areas relating to educational reform and the student experience.

When exploring curriculum reform, then, the university is challenged to create an agenda that is engaging and persuasive – one that all can see will benefit the students, the university and the overall academic experience. The challenges operate at three levels: creating an effective institutional focus on the need for change; increasing academic community engagement with the agreed agenda for change and empowering each individual academic to support those changes through their own actions and philosophy.

At the institutional level, the nature of the consultation process and leadership of the reform process are significant factors in promoting whole of university engagement. A first step is creating a persuasive need for the reform of educational practice. In Australia the focus on educational outcomes stemming from the Bradley Review has added weight to the concerns within institutions. The current models and design of undergraduate curricula are clearly not

working as effectively as they should. The identified change focus for each institution will be partially based around their own mission, identity, likely catchment of students and other specific factors. But overall, there is a clear sense of urgency and concern for building a more effective approach to an enriching educational experience.

The engagement of the university community needs to start at this point, with widespread consultation and discussion as to suitable approaches. Ideally, the issues currently evident in the university need to be surfaced so that stakeholders have a better sense of what needs to be addressed. While the predominant approach to this phase of consultation has been via written submissions, alternative large-group methods of consultation can also generate considerable creativity and exchange across the university community - and particularly, encourage stronger interchange across professional and academic members. It is important to recognise, however, that the encouragement of strong engagement by the wider community also then requires ongoing interaction and communication to ensure that connectedness is maintained and nurtured.

Communication, recognition of the complexities that the reforms may generate and sufficient time to debate and explore those implications are important elements that need to be addressed in the review and implementation process. The costs of whole of institutional reform are considerable and need to be fully recognised prior to commencing an ambitious change process.

However, these are just the initial foundations to enable a strong student experience. There are other institutional, community and individual factors that also determine how fully the student is the focus of the overall academic environment.

Reforming institutional educational strategies

The student experience is likely to be a major priority of the overall institution's strategic plan. It lies at the heart of a university's long-term well-being and will be increasingly important in Australia as changes to government policy lead to deregulation of student quotas. Johnson and Deem (2003) suggest that the management / policy focus on the student is moving toward an increased logistical concern: focusing on organisational, structural and resource-related issues. Certainly, there is evidence of a strong push for viable student numbers, financial management of educational practice and stronger understanding of education as a financial enterprise. It is important to retain the central focus on providing an overall student experience that enables students to be well-rounded, informed, innovative and adaptive in their intellectual pursuits.

The role of both academics and professional staff in promoting an effective student experience also needs to be more fully recognised. Neither can operate effectively without the other. The growth of a senior professional tier that works in partnership with academics has meant that the different services and systems that underpin educational activities are better supported. However, this partnership is only effective if both parties are able to work collaboratively and respectfully. The traditional "antipathy" that once dogged university cultures is gradually diminishing, partly assisted by the growing inclusion of professional and academic leaders in annual reviews of educational outcomes and in the development of organisational enhancement projects. To encourage this collaboration, it is also important to ensure that new academic leaders are fully aware of the role and talents that professionals bring to the discussion. It is also well past time for universities to stop calling professional

staff “general” or “non-academic”. On the other hand, professionals in our universities need to operate within an applied research or active learning paradigm – with the goal of improving the systems, services and outcomes that are employed or generated.

The increasing need to build an effective focus on the student experience also requires considerably more consideration of what comprises a successful academic. While it is generally accepted that academics need to operate across research, teaching and service parameters, the primary measure of an effective academic is research driven.

Academics who are focused on supporting students are generally poorly recognised for that effort – despite the criticality of making the educational experience a rewarding and rich opportunity for students. Of concern is the fact that many women play a major role in enabling student learning and building effective learning communities. However, they then experience difficulties when it comes to promotion as their research outputs are often less significant. Further, the research outputs of those who are highly engaged in supporting offshore teaching are also impacted by their teaching commitments. In general then, universities are promoting research as the primary career channel, while exhorting academics to place more focus on the student experience but limiting the consequential valuing of those activities.

Of course, this is not denying that there are many ways in which excellent teaching is currently recognised. Teaching awards, teaching grants, teaching fellowships and the valuing of student evaluations of teaching are all mechanisms by which the effective teacher can be recognised. Certainly, this has enabled better recognition of those who strive to build a strong student experience. We have seen the emergence of a new career track in some universities, with the teaching specialist now recognised and promoted. Academics who operate as research-intensive teachers have an important role to play in promoting better educational practice. This increased level of appreciation of the teaching academic hinges on changes to university reward and recognition systems, and will ultimately need to be more universal in its application. In some institutions there is still evidence of a dismissive attitude toward those who focus on teaching and have spent less time developing their research.

In all of these areas, university policy needs to articulate down to the practice and actions of those operating as higher educators. Academics need to be fully engaged with the emergent issues in their sector, their university and their local community. However, as this next section will show, there are many ways in which this connectedness can be diminished once the local interface emerges.

The local academic community

The influence of the academic community on an individual’s values, work focus and priorities cannot be overstated. This is the primary environment in which an academic operates, and the one that provides the direct conduit for interpreting the institution’s culture and values.

The leadership within the local academic community is a strong driver as to what counts and what is valued. The academic leader, who is often drawn from the academic community with possibly very little experience in leadership and management, may operate primarily from long-established values and insights. If a university is strongly focused on providing the best student experience, it is essential that the academic heads are drawn into the process and provided with support to create an environment that focuses on quality improvement. Scott,

Coates and Anderson (2008) note the importance of ensuring the ongoing development of those in academic leadership roles. Support to heads has generally been poorly addressed in our universities and requires considerably more focus and resources. It also best operates through the combined efforts of those with leadership development expertise and academic developers who understand the emergent needs of the evolving curriculum, a partnership that requires considerably more focus than so far evident.

There are two levels of development support that need to be made available. The first is broadly focused on building the general leadership capability of academic heads. Their role requires the application of an understanding of many areas of academic practice and management, including financial, human resource and performance management, strategy, and change leadership (Debowski, 2009). The second relates to the enhancement of academic leadership of learning and teaching. In this regard, academic leaders need ongoing guidance as to how curriculum and learning experiences might be better managed and designed to increase the quality of the student experience (Scott, Coates and Anderson, 2008). They need to be assisted in moving from their past focus on being a quality teacher within a specific discipline paradigm, to focusing more broadly at a strategic level on the structures, principles and architecture of learning. Curriculum reform, educational evaluation, student needs, learning innovation, establishing educational standards, and promoting a strategic focus on quality assurance are some of the more critical elements. At present, many heads are assumed to have this knowledge from their past lives as academics. In fact, this is a very dangerous assumption: they need to move to far more sophisticated perspectives on how educational design and enhancement operates. Our current university focus on providing foundational programmes for new teaching staff has led to a chronic neglect of academic leadership capability building. The addressing of this gap could be one of the most important ways to build a stronger teaching culture in our educational communities. Good teaching leaders need good support.

Further, while Scott et al have provided a useful blueprint for those who hold formal roles in teaching leadership, (such as course and unit coordinators) they require more than just guidance on their functional role in promoting good practice. They have an important role to play in building a culture of quality enhancement. This is best achieved by building a leadership community where they feel supported and are assisted in developing the capacity to offer a persuasive vision and strategy to those around them. The recognition of the work that coordinators do and the workload allocations that are accorded them are strong signals as to whether teaching leadership is valued. The development of a community of peers can also encourage their ongoing development as they share with other coordinators their challenges and successes in leading quality learning.

In reviewing a local community's approach to building a focus on quality learning and the student experience, it is also useful to consider how academics are acculturated into their communities. Do they receive a well planned induction? Are they introduced to the key people who can assist them? Do they even know the names of those who are useful contacts? How are they advised of the policies and practices that they should follow? Who guides them through what has been established in the way of protocols and expectations? Is a mentor made available or encouraged in that first year? Without guidance of this nature, there is little likelihood that the individual will build an intensive understanding of the learning environment and the student needs that should be reflected. This is an area that is particularly critical in moving a whole community toward a student focus.

There is also considerable benefit to be gained by promoting a whole-of-community focus on particular areas of professional development that can enhance the student experience. In most of our universities we have developed a model whereby the passionate academic chooses to attend centrally conducted workshops on topics of interest. The challenges occur when those academics return to their local communities and try to implement new strategies and approaches in isolation. A powerful learning mechanism operates when a whole community explores how they might better manage their academic practice. Annual retreats or meeting days might focus, for example, on areas that need to be better managed across the entire community. Assessment practices, online management and design (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007), student feedback, variety and innovation in learning design and presentations (e.g. Boulton-Lewis, Marton, Lewis and Wilss, 2004), work-based learning (Dreuth, 2002), professional accreditation and many other topics are fruitful areas of focus as the community aims to increase professional understanding and some commonly agreed approaches to achieve greater gains in the student experience. Advanced communities might also consider taking these discussions further, to explore other ways of framing learning: for example, adult learning principles and goal setting theory have significant implications for learning (Hean and Matthews, 2007) and there is a critical need to develop our inter-cultural competence (Paltridge & Harbon, 2008; Swamingathan & Alfred, 2001). Working across discreet communities has far greater impact than through single individuals. It also ensures that more experienced academics are offered an opportunity to reflect on their practice and assumptions in a non-threatening way. Again, this method of engaging with ongoing learning also provides a strong cultural message that teaching counts.

The systems and practices that are in place also play a part in promoting a focus on quality learning. Are early career teachers provided with support and guidance through an effective performance management system? How do they know if they are meeting the expected standards? What *are* the expected standards? Is there follow-through from student and unit evaluations? Does the school discuss its teaching performance? Has it identified areas of teaching concern that require more focus by all academics? Is there a strategy or sense of urgency about improving the student experience? These all provide additional cues as to what is important.

Within this review the focus has primarily explored the nature of educational enhancement from the perspective of the academic. It is also important to consider how the student voice is being integrated into the ongoing development of quality learning and teaching. White (2007) promotes the inclusion of the student voice when curriculum and policy change is being planned and enacted. In some schools we see a student reference group and a strong voice. In others, the presence and interaction are significantly muffled or ignored. Again, these are simple ways to build a stronger community presence on learning and teaching in order to enhance the student experience.

This brief analysis hopefully challenges us to think a little more fully about how quality teaching is enacted in local communities. In many discussions at this and other conferences, the disconnection between the knowledge we share and the practice we see can lead to considerable frustration. Part of the reason for this is the limited engagement of the local community. If we can build a stronger connection and attachment to quality learning across the systems, processes and culture within each local community, considerable gains could be achieved. Smith (2008) for example, argues for an integrated environment which offers interpretive guidance on the evaluation of learning and teaching, opportunities to be engaged in a learning community that focuses on evaluation, scholarship of learning and teaching and

ongoing professional development, and peer evaluation and feedback. A comprehensive focus on learning and teaching of this nature requires considerable leadership and modelling by all who are responsible for providing leadership. As Ballantyne, Todd and Olm (2007) also note: there is considerable need to escalate our academic awareness of quality assurance and its enactment. Very few of our staff, for example, are familiar with their national quality assurance standards or the ways they are enacted in our communities.

Large national agendas like the Bradley Review provide an ideal platform to increase academic engagement. Discussion of the diminishing student experience, consideration of student engagement data, integration of the student voice, sharing of learning methodologies and insights, discussions across the whole community and ongoing evaluation of the curriculum are all important elements of building a culture where learning and teaching is prominent and valued. Individual academics will make learning and teaching count if they believe it is part of the fabric of their university.

Conclusion

The student experience is a powerful phrase that highlights the need to focus on the way curriculum is designed, enacted and nurtured across our many academic communities. This paper has aimed to explore how those processes are best supported across our institutions and within local teaching communities. The importance of academic leadership in guiding effective curriculum reform, academic standards and ongoing academic professional development has been highlighted, along with the responsibility of every academic to be an advocate for best practice and an ongoing learner about quality teaching. The paper has also highlighted the role that academic and other developers may play in providing broad guidance and customised support to help those communities grow. Everyone has a role to play in enhancing the student experience.

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