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# Knowledge, wisdom and a holistic approach: A case study of change-management in academic development

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores academic development using a diffusion model of change-management. Considering the sub-theme question of holistic approaches to teaching and learning, it presents the degree program as a holistic unit that can provide a framework to approach academic development activities. A case study of the Office of Program Quality in the Faculty of Life Sciences at RMIT University is included.*

**Keywords:** *Academic development; change management; diffusion of innovation.*

## Introduction

Change is affecting all aspects of the tertiary sector. In referring to the rate and breadth of change, Pennington (2003, p. 4) observes that the “volume, scale and complexity of contemporary change create a sense of almost continuous ‘white water’ at all levels within higher education institutions.”

As we shoot these white-water rapids, some ideas may provide a useful rudder – such as the underlying social expectation of tertiary study as: “an adult activity leading to improved personal capabilities and socio-economic status, recognised with an award granted by an institution, serving as a formally endorsed marker of expert knowledge” (Gray et al., 2004a).

How can we negotiate change and support teaching staff in ways that assist students' learning? This paper makes some preliminary suggestions.

## **Background: The Office of Program Quality**

The former Office of Program Quality (OPQ), was an academic development unit in the Faculty of Life Sciences, RMIT University, Melbourne. Established in 2001 by the then Director of Teaching Quality, Professor Alex Radloff, and it was subsumed into the Academic Development Group in 2004. In 2003, OPQ employed four academic development staff and one administrative staff member.

OPQ fostered innovation and promoted teaching and learning by planning, coordinating and supporting:

- The development, amendment and renewal of education and training programs\* in line with University, national and international criteria to ensure programs that were sustainable, competitive and flexible in meeting stakeholder needs
- Program quality assurance processes that developed continuous improvement in education and training programs
- The enhancement of academic and teaching-staff capabilities to facilitate learning in the Life Sciences in an internationalised knowledge economy
- The scholarship of teaching and learning

(\*This paper uses RMIT University nomenclature – where a degree/diploma/certificate is gained through a *program* of study that contains subjects/units called *courses*.)

RMIT degree programs, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, are led by a Program Leader (PL). This formal role typically involves teaching and research, administration and leadership responsibilities. The staff who teach a specific program are known as the Program Team (PT).

## **Academic development**

While the definition and nomenclature of academic development varies between (and at times within) institutions and countries (Macdonald, 2003; Stephani & Matthew, 2002), it encompasses “practices designed to enhance the academic performance of an institution of higher education”, which includes staff development, educational development and contributions to education policies (Candy in Macdonald, 2003, p.2). Candy also argues that academic developers are “meta-professionals” who focus on higher education in their research and teaching (in Macdonald, 2003, p.5).

### ***The degree program as framework for holistic innovation***

Academic development units commonly focus on supporting individual teaching staff. They may provide workshops, consultations and teach a qualification in tertiary pedagogy. In this model, individual teaching staff are the main unit around which academic development is organised and understood. Perhaps this approach arose from the traditional understanding of academic endeavour as primarily undertaken by individuals, where autonomy and independence are guiding principles. This can be seen in the orientation of many academic staff towards their discipline area or subject as their primary area of concern. This perspective can have a number of weaknesses: for example, it does not encourage academic staff to consider their teaching in the broader context of their students' degree program. Also, students

may experience their academic program as fragmented, lacking continuity and educationally dissatisfying.

For academic development, a potential weakness of organising work around individual teaching staff is that the outcomes could be similarly fractured and unsystematic. A focus on individual staff in academic development raises questions such as: How can the benefits of academic development be realised beyond specific development for individual staff members? How can academic development be organised in a systematic way that meets the institution's strategic objectives? How can academic development foster co-operation and collaboration in ways that strengthen relationships across disciplines?

Staff in OPQ approached these questions by using the degree or diploma program as the main unit to understand and organise activities. The program offers a holistic framework through which potentially disparate courses or subject units can be understood as a whole. It supports goals that go beyond the development of specific individuals and can systematically work towards the institution's strategic objectives in ways that foster collaboration across disciplines. It also encourages approaches and developments that can contribute to students' overall learning experiences.

### **Context for innovation**

Academic developers must balance the aims of supporting the developmental needs of academic staff while also contributing to broader strategic targets. To focus only on supporting staff without being mindful of the institutional and (in Australia's tertiary sector with significant funding from the Federal Government) the governmental context, might risk accusations of ill-formed aims; while to focus solely on institutional or governmental initiatives would potentially foster a "compliance culture" (Stephani & Matthew, 2002, p.27). While it is possible to interrogate these perspectives in terms of positions of power – indeed, Andresen argues that one of the greatest potential contributions of academic development is to "help subvert managerialism" (Andresen, 2000, p.27) – this paper will attempt to balance these two extremes by focusing on the benefits for students' learning in their degree program.

The broad goal for teaching and learning at RMIT University is "[t]o educate students who demonstrate leadership and can contribute creatively, critically and responsibly to their professions, vocations, employers and the community in an international and local context" (RMIT, 2002, p.7).

Policies regarding the quality of programs and courses are also relevant. The university's Quality Consultancy Unit has developed a framework, policy and tools to introduce an evidence-based system of quality assurance for teaching programs, which was implemented in 2001-2002 (Wahr & Radloff, 2002). The university's Program Quality Assurance system uses three broad criteria – teaching quality, viability, and relevance for stakeholders – to measure the achievements of a program and to gain evidence of its performance. This evidence is used to make strategic decisions about areas of study and modes of delivery, and whether these should be expanded, renewed or phased out (Gray et al., 2004b).

Given the high stakes associated with program performance, academic developers are faced with the challenge of demonstrating to staff that by committing time and resource to developmental strategies they will not only see benefits in the short term, but this will also lead to improvements in the program's overall performance indicators, although these may take years for fruition.

Staff from the OPQ also worked within the university's policy framework for teaching and professional practices, which includes the design and delivery of assessment and approaches to plagiarism and Boyer's model of scholarship

### **Change-management through diffusion: Knowledge into wisdom**

Universities, as traditional centres for the creation of knowledge, present academic developers with layers of knowledge about teaching and learning. Teaching staff are frequently employed on the basis of their expertise in a professional area – for example as a microbiologist, jeweller or journalist – and possess knowledge of ways to teach their discipline content. Their knowledge of teaching is inevitably informed by past experiences as students – sometimes in institutions and surroundings far different from their current circumstances. The knowledge of teaching staff is also informed by present innovations in teaching and learning, such as developments in information and communication technologies. In addition, teaching staff and academic developers have access to knowledge about teaching and learning through formal means such as books, journals, websites and conferences, and through informal means such as discussions with colleagues.

If a working definition of wisdom for this conference is “knowledge, and the capacity to make use of it”, staff in OPQ have taken this knowledge and made use of it partly through a diffusionist approach to change management.

#### ***A diffusionist model of change management***

Staff in OPQ have employed what Trowler, Saunders and Knight (2003, p.7) call a “diffusionist” model of change management in higher education. Rogers (1995, p.5) defines diffusion as “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system”. In this context an innovation is “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (Rogers, 1995, p.11). This model borrows a metaphor from epidemiology or communication theory, where innovations are imagined to spread like contagions or infections.

Rogers (1995, pp.163-6) identifies five categories of individuals who adopt an innovation:

- **Innovators** effectively launch a new idea and may act as gatekeepers.
- **Early adopters** are socially more integrated into the social system than innovators and are opinion leaders. These individuals are also good allies for change agents.
- The **early majority** follow an innovation with willingness, just before the average member of a social system, but do not influence the opinion of others.
- The **late majority** adopt an innovation just after the average individual, but are sceptical.
- **Laggards** are suspicious, late adopters and use the past as their reference point when making decisions. It is important to note that typically their reluctance is an accurate reflection of systemic difficulties such as limited resources.

Within the diffusionist model it is not assumed that change is easy or will occur at a consistent rate in all areas. Indeed, some innovations may result in limited or no diffusion (e.g., Alexander & McKenzie, 1998). This model does not imply uniform success. Indeed, the theory of diffusion of innovation has been criticized for being most applicable to North America in the 1950s-1960s – where it was developed – and less applicable in other cultural contexts and more contemporary times (Clarke, 1999). While it is important for us to

be mindful of cultural diversity among staff as well as students, the Australian context is sufficiently similar to the North American context for the model to provide some usefulness.

### **OPQ change agents**

Staff in OPQ used the degree program as the lens through which to look at ways to diffuse innovations to teaching staff. Staff from OPQ may have been described as change agents, in that they worked to influence change on the behalf of the change agency, the university.

If “[s]uccessful change, like successful learning, is a constructive process...” (Trowler, Saunders & Knight, 2003, p.18), then change agents hold a key role in shaping and constructing change. Rather than seeking change that came from top-down (from senior management), or bottom-up (from students), change from OPQ staff members came from the middle-out from working with PLs.

The impetus for change had partly come from the teaching staff. OPQ was in dialogue with teaching staff regarding the forms of support that they sought – for example, thorough questionnaires and School-based discussions.

On another level, the OPQ represented a support group that was able to interface between the policy makers (university management) and program staff – by providing an interpretation of policy in terms of program enhancement, as well as sound practical solutions as a means of implementing policy.

### **Programs as a lens for innovation**

Academic programs provided the basis for a number of activities: Program Annual Reports, a capability curriculum and Strategic Initiative Projects. (All these fall under Candy’s definition of academic development mentioned previously.)

#### ***Program annual Reports***

In 2001, the Faculty of Life Sciences piloted a system of Program Annual Reports. This was evidence-based reporting required for each diploma and degree program in an agreed format against agreed criteria. Program Annual Reports allowed the Faculty to gain an over-view of programs’ progress and make informed decisions. Program annual reports were used as a basis to share knowledge about good program performance and program management – through sharing reports on the intranet and conducting workshops on a School-basis.

The Program Annual Report acts as a tool for the PT to examine program performance closely based on evidence and data – and to identify reasons for poor performance and success. The next step is objectively identifying if, where and how improvements could be made. This is a highly complex and nuanced activity. The process can at times be understandably uncomfortable and confronting for PTs and it requires substantial trust and relationship building with the academic developer, as well as the engendering of excellent internal team leadership. To result in a benefit for the whole program also requires the involvement of a critical mass of PT members.

#### ***Capability curriculum***

Recently RMIT has moved to a curriculum model with a focus on graduate capabilities. A capability curriculum is designed to address the question: What will graduates need for capable practice in the rapidly changing environments of work and citizenship? (Reeders,

2002, p.4). In answering this question, a capability curriculum focuses on transferable skills, understanding and knowledge as the basic building blocks – rather than discipline or subject content.

OPQ staff worked with academic staff members on project teams that developed new degree programs with capability curriculum. Sometimes staff on these project teams were true innovators – as in the staff who developed the Scholarship and Research Portfolio as a strategy to integrate and embed research capabilities throughout a postgraduate coursework program. This was an innovation that saw benefits in a number of programs as it diffused through the university. It truly became a “beacon of influence” (Trowler, Saunders & Knight, 2003, p.7).

### ***Strategic Initiative Projects (SIPs)***

Through SIPs, academic and teaching staff were supported – both financially and through mentoring and capability-building – on a competitive basis to develop innovations in teaching and learning and conduct research into the process. SIPs had a multiple-project focus by requiring projects to be designed in ways that benefited more than one program. Staff in SIPs teams were often either early adopters (as in the staff who explored online uses of a teaching software developed by RMIT), or innovators (as in staff who adapted problem-based learning in the health sciences). Some projects, such as the use of e-portfolios in assessment to aid graduate capabilities, showed that innovation need be new to participants only. As the innovation diffused through the university, the news uncovered some other programs who had implemented e-portfolios for with various aims and gained momentum.

### **Communication channels**

To help the diffusion of innovations, OPQ staff systematically shared information using multiple channels: interpersonal channels, newsletters, websites, seminars and teaching awards. Reliably, an underpinning message was for staff to consider how the information and/or learning related to the program as a whole.

- OPQ staff used **interpersonal channels** (Rogers, 1995, p.203) to disperse innovations through face-to-face work with teaching staff on projects and other occasions. This approach included an emphasis on providing tools to support the adoption of an innovation, which is not only a useful but an unusual approach (Trowler, Saunders & Knight, 2003). An example of a tool is a checklist for the processes, tasks and timelines required to develop a new degree program.
- A weekly **e-newsletter** was circulated to all PLs, which included: resources to aid teaching practice; teaching and learning events, and scholarly opportunities; and developments in teaching and learning policy and procedures. Mostly read on-screen, the e-newsletter followed principles of web usability (e.g., Krug, 2000).

The e-newsletter was also designed to encourage the PTs to collaborate. The PL was responsible for coordinating with the team about: ways to share the information; issues arising; and possible decisions for change. The varying uptake of the e-newsletter by PLs as a tool to support their team cohesion and development was consistent with the variation in the adoption of new approaches and innovations.

- The OPQ **website** on both the Internet and intranet was up-dated regularly to provide information for just-in-time learning and represented a common resource for PTs.

- OPQ presented **seminars and workshops** with presenters from RMIT University staff and visiting experts. With at least one seminar per month, 15 were held in 2003. OPQ also hosted the annual Faculty of Life Sciences Teaching and Learning Forum. This one-day internal conference allowed staff to share their innovations in the scholarship of teaching.
- The OPQ also sponsored the **Faculty Teaching Quality Awards** – through coordinating the process, supporting staff through applications and providing award funding. Within Rodgers’ model of diffusion, those nominated for awards often took the role of “innovators” – as in the TAFE teacher who innovated with experiential learning.

There is some question of how the teaching awards in this form benefited a program. Nominations were taken from individuals or teaching teams based on their specific interests. Perhaps in future, seeking nominations from PTs might strengthen the focus on programs.

## Challenges

Change management activities by OPQ staff faced a number of challenges including:

- Management and others seeking superficial “quick fixes” rather than committing to longer term strategies for sustained improvement
- Structural challenges relating to lines of management
- Insufficient support from infrastructure such as data-management systems
- Academic resistance – including those resulting from limited resources and fatigue
- Negative emotional reactions

While there is insufficient scope to fully examine each of these, the notions of a “top-down agenda” and emotional reactions will be briefly discussed.

A potential criticism of Academic Development Units is that they can be simply a means to impose a top-down agenda of change from senior management on to teaching staff.

In contrast, the OPQ was funded and located in a faculty, not out side the faculties and departments. This translated into a high level of independence and ability to respond to genuine staff needs based on engagement with staff. While OPQ strategies were designed to translate into benefits for degree programs, this does not mean that individual staff needs were ignored. If it is staff who design and deliver degree programs, it is hard to imagine how a degree program could benefit without staff benefiting.

At the same time, collaborating with academic staff through times of change is a delicate and nuanced undertaking. Our human experiences naturally cause us to feel emotions. It is important for feelings to be acknowledged, respected and included in a change-management approach (de la Harp & Radloff, 2002), although this poses a challenge in organisational cultures where paradigms of logic and evidence have primacy.

## Evaluation

While there has not yet been an opportunity to evaluate the diffusion model at RMIT, evaluations into Program Annual Reports and SIPs resulted in positive findings.

The Program Quality Assurance (PQA) system pilot, incorporating Program Annual Reports and run in the Faculty of Life Sciences, was evaluated in 2002 by an independent, external

party. It aimed to evaluate the quality of the PQA system's "aims, focus, clarity, efficiency and support" (Scott, 2002, p.3) based on an "illuminative evaluation" method originated in the 1970s (Parlett & Dearde, 1977). Findings recommended the system be continued and expanded, with a number of recommendations relating to communication, the organisation of data, timing and support measures.

The findings regarding OPQ were positive (Scott, 2002, p.11): "In both the onsite and online interviews there was consistent praise for the commitment, responsiveness and support provided by the Faculty's Office of Program Quality." In the online survey, this item regarding OPQ attracted the highest rating of all 16 items.

The one point of criticism was that (Scott, 2002, p. 12): "...it is important for OPQ to remain conscious that their area of work covers just one part of the daily work of academic and administrative staff."

A formal evaluation of the SIPs scheme – using document and data analysis, reflective journals, evaluation questionnaires and interviews – found that despite the high time-commitment required, SIPs resulted in high levels of personal, professional and organizational learning (Jansz-Senn et al., 2003). Participants' feedback regarding the benefits included:

- "Learned more about the way that students learn."
- "Nurtured emerging interest in the scholarship of T&L."
- "I have better understanding of the difficulties involved in using meaningful evaluation methods."

Interestingly, SIPs enabled an action research methodology to diffuse through the faculty, as one participant responded:

- "Action Research in SIPs is a wonderful program. I have persuaded one of the colleagues to take part in next year's program."

## **Conclusion**

Using a case study of OPQ approaches, the degree program was examined as a holistic unit to provide a framework for academic development activities. This work is far from complete but continues with a commitment to strengthening programs' performance. It is critical for academic development units to employ systematic and focused approaches to their work in ways that can be firmly evidenced, or they are in danger of being wrongly perceived as expendable additions, rather than making demonstrably valuable contributions to the core activity of teaching.

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