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Teaching with Technology: The Space between Strategy and Outcomes

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Abstract

System wide structural change, resource reductions, increasing competition and requirements for accountability have accompanied a fourfold increase in the number of students in the Australian university system over the last fifteen years. Greater student numbers and diversity has been reflected in a stronger focus on the provision of high quality teaching and learning that is flexible and responsive to the needs of students. In their vision papers and strategic plans, many universities are looking towards the enabling power of advanced information technologies to provide such flexible, student centred teaching and learning environments. The passage from strategic vision to university wide teaching change is, however, a complex and largely uncharted one. This paper draws upon research in the Australian Technology Network universities to provide case studies of implementation issues that arise from changes in the higher education sector and approaches that have been developed to extend and embed the use of technologies for teaching.

Introduction

System wide structural change, resource reductions, increasing competition and requirements for accountability have accompanied a fourfold increase in the number of students in the Australian university system over the last fifteen years. Greater student numbers and diversity have encouraged a focus on the provision of high quality teaching and learning that is flexible and responsive to the needs of students.

In their vision statements and strategic plans, many universities are looking towards the enabling power of advanced information technologies to provide such flexible, student centred teaching and learning environments. The passage from strategic vision to university wide teaching change is, however, a complex and largely uncharted one. [top](#)

Research scope and method

The ATN universities are a network of new universities comprising, Curtin University of Technology (Curtin), Queensland University of Technology (QUT), RMIT University (RMIT), the University of South Australia (UniSA), and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS).

The purpose of this research is to understand how these universities are *implementing* change in teaching and learning. The focus is on modes of implementation, rather than on the choice of directions for strategic change in teaching, although the two are clearly related. Data for this project was collected from two principle sources – the formal documents of each university’s implementation practice (Teaching and Learning Strategies or Plans, guidelines for teaching and learning grants, reporting and performance planning instruments etc) and interviews with staff at a variety of levels within each university.

The sample of staff interviewed at each university was determined by staff of that university in accordance with a schedule identifying the range of staff positions desired.

At each university the person occupying the most senior position with direct responsibility for teaching and learning was interviewed, some Deans or Heads of School, the Director of the central staff development/support unit as well as lecturing staff from two faculties.

Interviews were conducted in the form of informal conversations. In most instances they were of approximately one hour duration. They commenced with a request to describe how the subject was involved in implementing change in teaching and learning. Follow up questions followed the flow of the conversation with the exception that almost all subjects were asked at the end of the interview to describe what they thought were the major impediments to change. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The relatively undirected nature of the interviews produced very wide ranging and detailed data. They reveal a myriad of different stories about the university and a diversity of organisational realities which are expressed in significantly different languages. Morgan (1986) noted that organisations are sites of multiple meaning, contradiction and paradox. Despite the very different perspectives concerning the role and effectiveness of implementation practices, relatively few different approaches were described. The data was disaggregated into a matrix based on these commonly described structures and approaches and the different roles/positions of the subjects. Aspects of implementation practice described in the interviews by staff at all levels of the organisations were found to cluster around the 'standard package' of managerial reforms introduced into the public sector during the 1980s. Painter and Considine (1997) suggest these include, comprehensive corporate planning based on centrally determined goals, budgets allocated according to policy and management directions, the emergence of a defined senior rank of managers with increasing management authority over programs and increased requirements for accountability and performance monitoring.

This paper draws upon aspects of this research to provide insight into the implementation issues that arise from changes in the higher education sector. The focus is on the broad structural arrangements within the corporatised university and the ways in which these affect implementation practices. The paper makes no attempt to present arguments in support of or against the strategic choices of universities to pursue technologically mediated, flexible approaches to teaching and learning, nor does it review the arguments developed by staff concerning that choice. It details two case studies of current approaches to resourcing change that are designed to extend and embed the use of technologies for teaching in all academic units within these universities. These cases illustrate some of the assumptions about organisational change implicit in the corporate model. Following the presentation of these cases some of the responses of staff to this implementation approach are discussed (The full report from this research can be obtained from the author). [top](#)

Changes within universities

The ATN universities have responded in a variety of ways to the changing environment of tertiary education. The most important of these changes, from the perspective of the

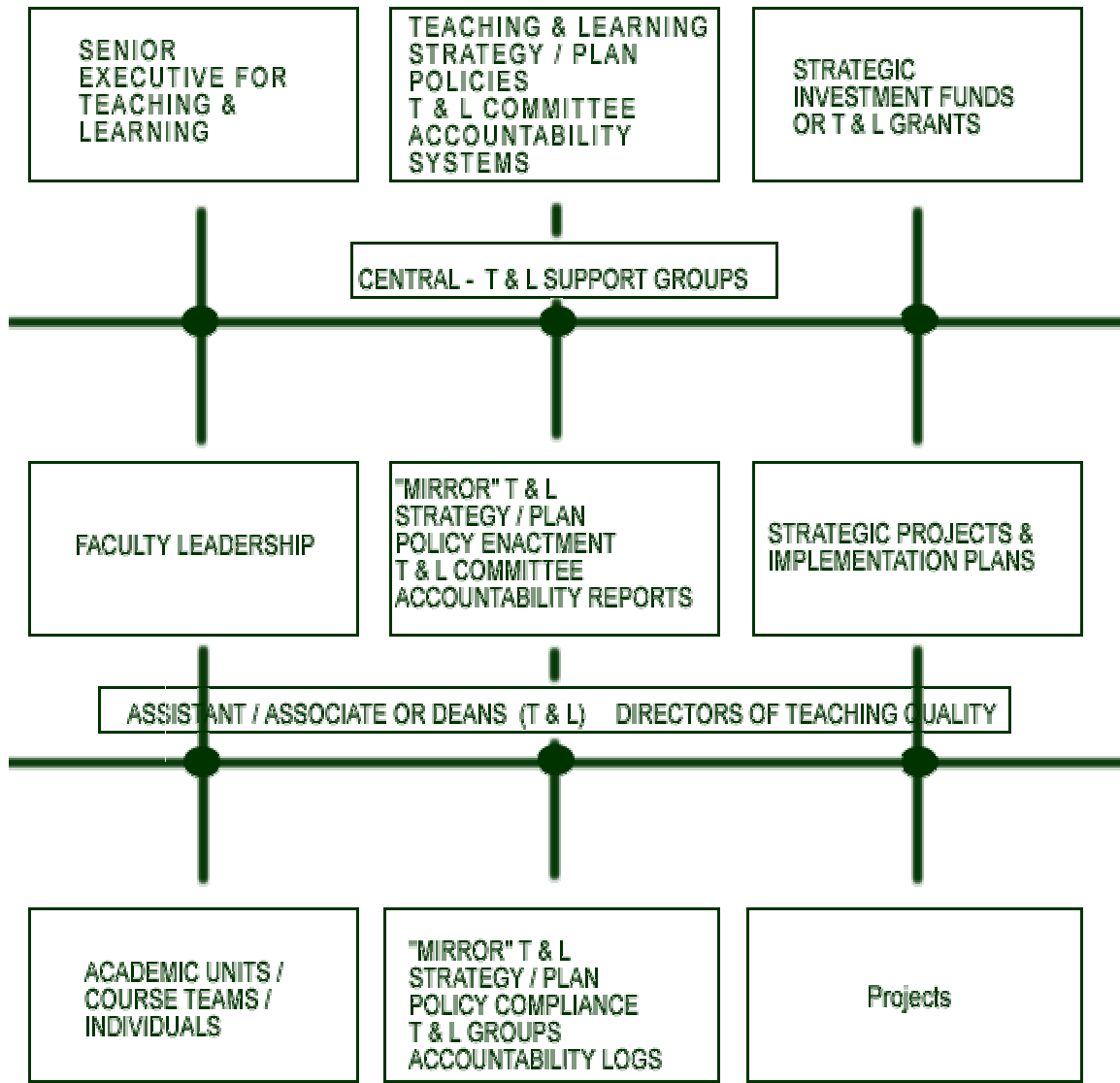
adoption of technology for teaching, are the introduction of comprehensive, centralised corporate planning and the consolidation of a hierarchical, line management systems. The university level strategic plans for teaching and learning in each of the ATN universities identify the development of *flexible* education, incorporating the use of information technologies as a priority. Some examples are:

"Priority will be given to enhancing the flexibility of QUT's teaching and learning programs in place and time...using the latest technology appropriate." (QUT Teaching and Learning Plan, 2000-2004)

"The search for innovative applications of technology to educational purposes and other social needs, emphasising continuous improvement."
(Curtin Mission and Values)

Management structures designed to support the implementation of these priorities within the five universities studied vary in detail, however, there is a strong convergence in overall approach. The key features of strategy development and management for teaching and learning are represented in Figure 1. Responses to this system are discussed later in the paper.

Figure 1: Organisation and teaching and learning strategy and implementation



The Teaching and Learning Strategy System

Each of the five universities has a formal Teaching and Learning Strategy or Plan. These strategies set the overarching directions for teaching and learning development for the whole university and are themselves, a subset of the university strategic plan. Many of these plans develop the overall directions into quite detailed operational plans and projects with designated targets and measures. Working from the university level plan, the major organisational units (Faculties or Divisions), develop their own Teaching and Learning Plans. Such plans may be further developed at the School or Course Team level. Workplanning and performance appraisal systems establish the connection at the level or individual staff.

In addition to the Teaching and Learning Strategy or Plan, each of the universities has a suite of policies relating to aspects of teaching and learning. These policies establish frameworks and procedures for such things as educational quality assurance, student feedback and course design and administrative practices.

An organisational mechanism for teaching and learning strategy and implementation issues has recently emerged at most of the universities and takes the form of a cascade of Teaching and Learning Committees at the levels of University, major academic unit and in some cases, School, Department or Course Team.

Accountability systems often involve the setting of performance targets for Faculties, Schools, Departments and individuals. Approaches to aligning accountability with reward for teaching and learning achievements include the establishment of teaching excellence awards and the use of teaching portfolios to evidence teaching quality in promotion processes.

The final common element across the universities is the allocation of substantial central funds for teaching and learning initiatives. There are two principal mechanisms in use. These are the designation of Strategic Initiative Funds both from the centre to the Faculties and from within Faculty budgets and the distribution of significant funds through small and large teaching and learning grants. Funds in both systems must be used for projects aligned to centrally determined teaching and learning priorities.

All of the elements of the teaching and learning system detailed so far, emanate and are controlled from the top of the university and are subsequently developed at the local levels. In the majority of universities surveyed, there are two elements that operate across this hierarchy. At the University level, each university has a central teaching and learning support group. These vary considerably in size and constitution. All, however, have a brief to support the implementation of the Teaching and Learning Strategy or Plan with a very strong focus on embedding the use of educational technologies. In four of the five universities, a position has been created at the Faculty or Division level with a similar brief. These positions are variously named, Dean, Associate Dean or Assistant Dean with responsibility for teaching and learning or Director of Teaching Quality.

These elements constitute the apparently ordered world of teaching and learning development within the corporate university. [top](#)

Case studies of the system at work

The following two examples detail implementation approaches within the system described. One example is of a grant system for teaching and learning and the second of a strategic investment approach. Both implementation mechanisms attempt to embed the use of technology for teaching across the university in sustainable ways and aim to accelerate the rate of their adoption. These examples only highlight aspects of the overall implementation approach at the two universities featured. In practice, hybrid models are

the norm. Both approaches are initiated at the top of the university and seek to filter down to the academic unit and individual levels. [top](#)

Case Study 1 - Teaching and Learning Grants

The most enduring teaching and learning grant scheme within the ATN universities exists at QUT. It was established in 1992 to reflect similar approaches to fostering the growth of internal research. Initially there were three categories of grant, small, large and technology. The scheme commenced with an annual allocation of around \$400,000 but had increased to \$700,000 by the mid 1990s. The scheme was not initially a great success in terms of achieving the broad organisational change desired, although many relatively small, highly innovative developments were funded. These were usually conceived at the unit (subject) level, were most often conceptualised as making content available online, were slow to completion and often ran into difficulties if more complex technologies were involved. Continuing use of materials developed through the scheme was highly dependent on the continuing employment of the individual creator. This initial phase of the scheme was described as "academic centric", suggesting that the motivation for engagement was enhancement of the reputation of the academic involved.

The observed difficulties with the scheme led to the commissioning of a major external evaluation. The recommendations of the evaluation suggested substantial redesign to enhance the scheme's chances of creating enduring, university wide change. From 1997 the scheme required that only the Dean of a Faculty could make a large grant application (up to \$150,000) and in so doing he or she attested to the incorporation of the initiative into the Faculty's programs. The guidelines specified that significant organisational change was desired. The duration of grants was extended to two years to address the original underestimation of the time needed to complete complex change programs. Reporting processes were also redeveloped. Small grants have been maintained for pilot projects or subject level innovations.

Improving the Quality of Applications

Two practices were introduced aimed at improving understanding of what a significant change project might be, therefore, improving the quality of applications. The first of these was the introduction of a pre proposal meeting. This meeting involved staff at the university level who would be awarding the grants, staff from the central staff development and support group and faculty staff. It provided an opportunity for initial ideas to be tested and suggestions made for reframing or redeveloping a proposal. Opportunities for collaboration across faculties could also be identified.

An internal consultancy team that became known as the "flying squad" supported faculties in the period after this meeting. The squad consisted of senior staff from the central support group with experience in flexible education, teaching with technology and evaluation. Upon request the coordinator assembled an appropriate team to support the specific faculty proposal.

"We called it the flying squad because the idea was you go in quick and you get out quick. It helped people frame the scale or size of the project – the things they'd have to consider... We used to run workshops every year to help people and it never had any impact at all. We gave that away. That didn't work. The flying squad definitely did." (Member, Teaching and Learning Support Service)

At the Faculty Level

One disadvantage of an open grants system is that the distribution of grants to the Faculties can be uneven. At QUT there are some faculties that have not applied for or received large teaching and learning grants. Other faculties have embraced the system enthusiastically.

"Our large teaching and learning grants are somewhat equivalent to ARC grants in that they go out to external reviewers. I like that about them because you know if you get them, they've stood up to pretty powerful scrutiny. And that is a very powerful thing to tell Heads of School who were initially inclined to dismiss it as not as important as research." (Assistant Dean)

In successful faculties one approach to achieving the outcome of the large grant has been to call for expressions of interest for a coordinated array of small faculty grants. This structure aims to ensure staff participation by a large number of faculty staff. It relies upon extensive consultation in preparation of the grant and the identification of the problems already experienced by staff and students that can become vehicles for the more system wide change process. It is producing a, "slow snowballing effect." (Assistant Dean)

Doing the work

Faculties are supported by a large, consolidated, central design and production facility to detail and complete the project. The Software, Multimedia and Internet Learning Environments group (SMILE) uses a quality assurance, project management team approach to develop the project in partnership with the Faculty. Faculties are discouraged from engaging their own instructional design or production staff. For small projects, SMILE has managed the development of QUT Virtual, which is a university wide online system as an adjunct to face to face teaching using a set of templates requiring no html knowledge.

Dissemination

To build upon these initiatives, methods for disseminating the outcomes of the grant scheme were developed. An annual, half day large grants forum is held at which presentations are made by Deans. In any year this will include the presentation of

submissions that have been recently funded, progress reports for those mid way and reports from completed projects. The presentations are video taped to provide an ongoing resource. Written reports are also required.

"We had some terrific feedback. A senior academic said at Teaching and Learning Committee that in all my long time in academia, that was the best activity I've been to." (Member, Teaching and Learning Support Service) [top](#)

Case Study 2 - The Strategic Investment Funds Approach

This approach differs from the grants system in that the focus is on the establishment of a system rather than on specific projects. The example comes from RMIT where the system contains both central and distributed elements. This approach was developed after review and reflection on a largely project based Strategic Investment Fund (SIF) model introduced in 1996. The SIF model suffered many of the same shortcomings outlined in relation to the early grant scheme at QUT.

In 1998, RMIT commissioned a project known as the Information Technology Alignment Project (ITAP). This project investigated ways of aligning information technology with the teaching and learning strategy priorities of the university across all aspects of its work. ITAP's brief is to review, establish and align an adequate IT infrastructure with an automated student administration system, a Distributed Learning System (DLS) infrastructure for flexible/online teaching and learning and to provide professional development for the system. The DLS is a suite of interlinked, proprietary software suited to a range of teaching and learning approaches. It can be used without html expertise. The ITAP report recommended that \$50 million be allocated to the project over three years. Some of this funding is from central Strategic Initiative Funds and some is provided from the faculties as an agreed percentage of budget, quarantined for use on specific, approved elements of the ITAP program. One of these areas is the development of teaching and learning in flexible mode. The university requires, "all courses to be refurbished to include flexibly delivered courseware within five years:60% by 2000" (RMIT Teaching and Learning Strategy, 1998-2000).

The responsibility for developing a detailed strategy and implementation approach is devolved to each faculty within highly specified centrally developed guidelines. In 1999, these guidelines required the development of faculty guidelines and processes for course and subject renewal, a plan and rationale for projects to be undertaken and a measurement approach that could verify that the Teaching and Learning Strategy targets would be met. All elements of the faculty approach required central approval prior to the release of funds.

Key elements of the evolving ITAP system can be divided into central elements and distributed elements. Central control and responsibility is maintained for large infrastructure, system wide interfaces and templates, professional development of key staff and high end multimedia production. Responsibility for extended staff development

and software training, lower end online and media production and implementation of and support for specific projects is distributed to the faculties. This is undertaken by faculty Educational Support (or Services) Groups (ESG) which, at a minimum contain a Director of Teaching Quality, a Director of Information Technology and a significant number of staff called Learning Technology Mentors (LTM).

Learning Technology Mentors are a key to this system. The university has centrally trained 75 staff, at least one from each school or department. These staff have one day's time release per week to work with their colleagues on centrally approved technology teaching projects with support and supervision from the faculty ESG. In 2000 the plan is to increase this to 150 staff.

Improving the Quality of Faculty Plans

Planning and implementation at the faculty level acknowledges the considerable differences between faculties and the possibility and desirability of differing approaches to the use of technology in teaching to suit discipline, pedagogy and culture. The quality of faculty plans is critical to the success of the system. In its first iteration the process for achieving approved faculty plans was cumbersome, generating considerable tensions between centre and faculties, and the central approval process was slow.

At the Faculty level

With the possibility of faculty specific responses to the use of technology in teaching comes the responsibility for interpretation of the broad university initiative in the specific context. One faculty response has been to create a discussion forum outside the line management system for ongoing consideration of the meaning of flexibility, the role of technology in teaching in relation to past practices and what is valued in teaching and learning.

Dissemination

At the university level, a web based Clearinghouse has been established to record the outcomes of projects and to act as a resource for staff commencing projects. An annual conference has been organised by university staff to share learning. At the faculty level a range of fairly traditional approaches are used including forums, teaching and learning days, presentations and demonstrations. [top](#)

The other side of the system

These descriptions of the system at work reinforce the perception of an orderly, smoothly functioning, well oiled machine based upon a shared understanding of where the university is and should be heading. This study suggests that the reality is somewhat less ordered. The change process is revealed as threatening, painful, confusing and accompanied by a great sense of loss.

Underpinning the commitment to corporate planning is an assumption about the need for *unity of purpose* within the university in order for *strategic* change to take place and an assumption about who should be responsible for determining the strategic directions that will be adopted by all.

In one university, a letter from the Vice Chancellor to staff accompanying the Strategic Plan made the assumptions clear.

The Strategic Plan is the key plan of the University. It establishes the University's overall direction and shapes resource allocation. It outlines **my vision** for the University, and describes the objectives and targets **we will seek to achieve** over the next five years." (Emphasis added)

The creation of *shared visions* has been the focus of considerable debate in the business management literature. Perhaps the most famous formulation is Senge's (1990, p20). "...[C]aring is *personal*. It is rooted in an individual's own set of values, concerns, and aspirations. This is why genuine caring about a shared vision is rooted in personal visions... If people don't have their own vision, all they can do is 'sign up' for someone else's. The result is compliance, never commitment."

Hough (1999) argues that the assumption of a unity of purpose is a new phenomenon even in the managerialised public sector. In his view, this assumption results in the imposition of a suffocating monoculture through, "the denial that groups of workers might have a collective interest – professional or industrial – separate from it" (p46).

The creation of a unity of purpose relies on the cascade of plans to codify the university's strategy and translate it into objectives with targets and dates. As such, the strategy document at each level is required to act as both a communication medium and a control device.

This model of corporate planning has been subject to criticism, not only with regard to its appropriateness in the university sector but also for its effectiveness in the private sector. Mintzberg (1989) has described the extensive use of predetermined goals and objectives as leading to organisations that are over managed and underled. Further criticisms have suggested that such rational systems of planning and control have little chance of prevailing in the face of increasing complexity and increasingly rapid change

The development of a corporate, managerial culture creates a particular framework for university operation and initiates the implementation problem. If goals and key strategies are centrally determined, they must be widely promulgated and effort expended to acquire the "commitment of all staff to the University's mission, goal and values" (RMIT Strategic Plan, 1999, p5). As Considine (1997) notes, if objectives and goals are set at the top, the "primary issues which must be resolved inside the organisation concern systems of implementation or service delivery. These in turn are viewed as matters of administrative technique." (p52)

"I think we are reasonably good at planning. And we put a whole lot of effort into evaluation, like measuring outcomes, having performance targets, whatever, but there is this implementation in the middle that is like this huge, black hole." (Director of central support unit)

Peattie (1993) described the three underlying assumptions about implementation within the corporate planning process. First that reasonable people will do reasonable things given adequate information and analytical tools. Second, that a correctly formulated strategic plan will be straightforward to implement and thirdly that strategy formulation and implementation are separate and sequential activities.

Implementation, however, is rarely a purely technical task because "agreement on means and ends is rare and because the interests and values of various stakeholders differ" (Gregory, 1997). Peattie's (1993) research in the private sector affirmed planning as a political rather than a purely rational activity. He suggested that the role of internal political forces on strategy planning and implementation as it is actually done has been underestimated.

Within these universities, some attempts have been made to address these criticisms of the corporate planning framework. Approaches to improving the likelihood of successful implementation have taken a number of directions. These include the development of practices to cultivate prior group commitment through the active involvement of larger numbers of staff in the detailing of strategic themes, refinement of the corporate planning process itself through better alignment of planning with measures and resource allocation, or have been articulated in terms of more successfully communicating the corporate message to build a corporate culture. (Bourgeois and Brodwin, 1984)

Despite these efforts, the majority of current approaches to achieving the commitment of staff are akin to transmission approaches to teaching. The university strategy is published and launched. There is little opportunity for staff to contribute to its development or for dialogue about its intentions or meaning. The cascade of Teaching and Learning committees is concerned with removing local impediments to the implementation of the strategy rather than on questioning the strategy itself. Questioning of strategic directions is often treated as resistance rather than an opportunity to forge a shared understanding. One staff member commented, "This stuff about just go and do it. As if it is like breathing. I think it is bloody rude and insensitive of management. It just rolls off the tongue. Just go and do it!" (Lecturer)

The development of a line management hierarchy places, "managers at the centre of a logic of transformation and ...privilege(s) the knowledge that managers possess as the key to reform success." (Considine, 1997, p6) One consequence of importing this business practice into education is management acceptance of the "prevailing focus on action and immediate results, which often leaves little time for reflecting on our work and reaching shared understanding." (Allee, 1997, pxii) The turbulent nature of the environment of higher education, however, is no longer well served by traditional

planning or implementation processes. Reflection is precisely what is needed to make sense of the changing world of teaching and learning.

Most staff within the universities surveyed give a reasonable level of support to the overall directions of university teaching and learning strategy and see some value in the use of new technologies to support teaching. The university's broad strategy statements were characterised, however, by a faculty staff member as, "a lot of parenthood statements that anyone left alone for an hour would say about teaching and learning." (Lecturer). It is the interpretation of these "motherhood statements" for specific contexts that challenges existing practices and values and foreshadows the possible loss of professional integrity or even employment. And it is at this level of meaning making that the implementation systems described are silent. The implementation "black hole" might be conceptualised as the space between the organisational boxes represented on [Figure 1. top](#)

Working across the grid – Central Staff Development Units

The two elements of the current organisational system that work across the line management hierarchy, central support groups and Associate Deans Teaching and Learning, attempt to provide some opportunities for dialogue and discussion. Central staff development units, however, have been undergoing a transformation themselves in order to find their place in the newly corporate university. This means that they are sometimes considered part of the problem; seen only as agents of management sapping much needed funds from the faculties. In one university they were described as, "the central bloated bureaucracies."(Lecturer)

The nature of the change in staff development was described by Warren Piper (1994, quoted in Webb, 1996). He suggested two different approaches which he called Model A or Model B. Model A units were concerned almost exclusively with teaching and learning improvement of the individual academic. Model B units, on the other hand, were focused on the need to support organisational change and were more management and policy oriented. A clear trend towards the Model B conception of staff development could be observed through the interviews.

"It's shifted from what is currently, what you might call very much a professional self-improvement model to a more managed model." (Central unit staff)

Advocates of the new role for central staff development units spoke often of *change management*, rather than staff support or development. There was a perceived need for "mass" staff development to meet new strategic challenges (particularly around the use of technology) for which the old, one on one approaches were no longer appropriate. This change management approach involves the central group in orienting staff to the core values and strategies of the university so they might support staff "to make the 'right' and necessary contribution to the success of the organisation for which they work." (Du Gay, 1996, p57)

The task of the large, centralised unit dedicated to achieving strategic, organisational change was described by three interviewees as "winning the hearts and minds" of the staff. Other formulations included, "communicating a lot of policy", getting academic staff to "sign on", "it's basically sales really...and I try and recruit customers", creating programs in digestible "lumps they can bite off and chew" and "transferring skills from the centre down into the faculties."

One of the key approaches to the provision of mass staff development that is particularly relevant for teaching with technologies, is the attempt to embed pedagogy into a sequence of digital templates. The example of QUT Virtual mentioned in case study one is an example of this approach as is the development of the institution wide UniSaNet at the University of SA. Limitations of this approach were identified by staff. The first critique characterised it as a "factory model" in contrast to the "team based model" that was deemed necessary for developing appropriate approaches suited to diverse contexts especially ones which effectively utilise technologies. Template based, factory models were seen to have little chance of changing a staff member's underlying conception of teaching from a teacher centred, transmission model (still seen to be dominant by many) to a student centred one. Learning on the part of the academic was likely to be superficial.

A related criticism was that the embedding of pedagogy itself represents a transmission approach to staff development. Solutions, known in advance by the developer, are passed on to the academic. In this conception, staff development is a one way rather than a two way experience of learning - the expert transmits to the novice.

Central groups still do conduct traditional workshops and forums where there are some opportunities for discussion and 'sense making' concerning the changes to the context and nature of teaching and learning. These are not capacious 'spaces' fostering questioning and debate concerning the overall strategy but smaller 'spaces' that help to link the strategy to individual and specific aspects of teaching and learning such as assessment. These activities have, in any case, become peripheral to the units' major roles in selling the strategy and managing and supporting university wide and faculty based key strategic projects. [top](#)

At the Faculty Level – Teaching and Learning Roles

The other role that has emerged that acts across the hierarchy but at a Faculty level is variously named Dean, Assistant or Associate Dean Teaching and Learning, or at RMIT, Director of Teaching Quality. Throughout this paper it will be referred to as Associate Dean, T&L. The positions tend to be "very broadly described in relation to improving the quality of teaching and learning." They turn out to "include anything to do with the teaching and learning environment that nobody knows what to do with." In a number of faculties, complementary positions are emerging at school level, where a staff member is given some time release to pay attention to teaching and learning issues and liaise with the faculty position.

While staff in the Faculty level positions were often members of the Deans Advisory Committee (or similar forum) and contributed to strategic and management work in the faculty, in all instances, the position had no line management authority.

"I'm almost in a totally powerless position. I have no line authority, and so my role is one of catalyst, communicator, bridge builder...as an innovator, as an encourager." (Associate Dean, T&L)

Incumbents of the role emphasised the importance of the creation of spaces for conversations of all types. The "well oiled machine," corporate approach to implementation does not accommodate this need.

The whole assumption on which the university assumes it operates is that you have comprehensive, upfront, imperative planning. That is what goes on all the time. If you seriously look at what actually happens, none of that happens, ever, in the way that was intended...It's not that the imperative planning and the trying to measure outcomes is wrong – simply. But it is seriously incomplete. If you say that's all there is - then you're stupid." (Associate Dean, T&L)

Staff in these roles are trying to add a dimension to the implementation approach through the creation of a range of conversational or discursive forums. These range from individual conversations with course leaders and other staff, occasional contributions to established School or course team forums, seminars and conferences around particular aspects of teaching and learning strategy and especially created groups with a brief to discuss strategy issues and contribute to implementation planning at the faculty level. Forums like these, were not understood as 'spaces' for the simple and direct transmission of the university plan. Staff were not conceptualised as empty receptacles waiting to be filled with wisdom from above. Nor were the messages from above seen to be clear or complete.

These discursive forums recognise that staff who do not have any control over the content and meaning of their own practice become alienated and despondent. The forums were described as vehicles for staff to both accept the responsibility but also have the capacity to 'shape how things happen'. They are part of a practice at faculty level that tries to create the conditions for staff to undertake *adaptive work*. Heifetz (1994, p22) described adaptive work as, 'the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face.'

The forums are also based on a recognition that shared discussion is necessary for all university staff to come to 'a more sophisticated understanding of what various teaching initiatives mean.' The discussion concerning implementation, in fact, clarifies the goal and strategic direction. Rather than being sequential activities, strategic planning and implementation are intertwined.

Providing a place for reflection was seen by staff as essential to the implementation of change. Time for reflection was being squeezed out by the demands of work and demand for constant activity around initiatives. The forums described provided some space but informal reflective spaces were also important.

The role of language was a critical consideration in these forums. Many staff involved in the implementation of teaching change at Faculty level talked about the importance of language. This was predicated on the understanding that language is used "to bring facts into being and not simply to report on them." (Du Gay, 199, p42)

This perspective sought to sustain a space for multiple languages – one interviewee called it a multiliteracy approach. The role of the faculty is to reappropriate the language from the central plan where it has been appropriated and ‘overdetermined’ and to reinvest the initiative with the richness of the discipline languages.

"I don't think having monocultural understandings are either desirable or possible. It's fine for staff to make sense of something from where they've started. Once you start using a particular language - the sort of language has embedded in it a particular view of what you're doing. I think you have to be intelligent about it and not use that language in unthinking ways. (Associate Dean, T&L)

One significant aspect of the role of the Associate Dean, T&L becomes that of translation between languages.

"I think the language that we use is absolutely crucial and **I run between languages**. And I think, quite literally, organisations are talked into existence ...and I try to talk them into existence in various ways." (Associate Dean, T&L)

Education, more obviously than any other "business" is part of the knowledge economy. The capacity to make envisioned changes, including the adoption of technology for teaching, rests with the staff. To undertake this task, staff need to find or reconnect with their purpose in the changed circumstances of higher education. Allee (1997) calls this *renewing knowledge*, a process of creating new knowledge but also letting go of old knowledge. Renewing knowledge requires group dialogue and social learning events. Current implementation approaches at the corporate level do not acknowledge this need and have no explicit approach to addressing it. [top](#)

The Future

If the *implementation black hole* is to be addressed, organisational structures that create the space for group dialogue and social learning need to be made central to the implementation of change at all levels of the university. The challenge is to go beyond better communication systems or improved project management. To do so, however, requires a willingness to question the corporate approach and to explore more distributed,

team based practices. Some insight into alternatives to the current, authorised approaches can be found within these universities themselves.

Despite the overall trend towards hierarchical, corporate practices and the transformation of central staff development groups into units which operationalise strategy and policy into "mass" implementation practices, alternative approaches can be found. At each university a small number of individual staff were identified for interview because they were deemed by their respective universities to be contributing effectively to the implementation of change, especially with respect to new educational technologies. It is interesting to note the practices of these individuals and their relationships to their central support groups. Ten interviews with staff in this category were recorded.

Of these ten, three were working in self managed teams with little or no connection to the central units. The teams were possible because funding had come from outside the university or the work could be undertaken unfunded because of the exceptional commitment and talent of the lead teacher. In each case the groups identified the team orientation as vital. It provided the opportunity, through extensive discussion and testing of ideas to establish a collective response to a teaching and learning issue identified by the team. They also identified their authority and control over all aspects of team production as essential. One group styled itself as "the ferals" and was actively modelling a team based, collaborative alternative to the "factory model". Another was spreading its own group learning through a staff development resource generated from the team's work aimed at encouraging and assisting colleagues in the Faculty.

Two staff were working with an outstanding teacher in their School. This teacher had pioneered teaching innovations and was widely recognised as a leader. This mentor and motivator was described as going through a "conceptual change in teaching" by participating in a fellowship program with a central group. These long term, discursive programs where a staff member worked in a collegial relationship with staff developers have, "run out of favour and money" in the universities that used to promote them and have been discontinued.

Two staff who were recipients of grant money were working with a central group for academic guidance but had devolved technical and production support. In the teams headed by these staff, the central staff member was a consultant to the team rather than a project manager. Control of the project and the team outcomes rested very firmly with the faculty staff.

Of the remaining three, one had participated in a Graduate Certificate course and was a highly independently motivated teacher working with a subject team. One had worked independently for many years, had benefited from small grants and the advice and support of the central academic staff. The last was working on a project, which is part of a centrally supported and managed project.

The work described in interviews with these staff, the work singled out by each university as of such value that it might provide a showcase for an outsider was not a

result of template or guideline based mass approaches to staff development. Nor was it inspired by or initiated in response to a received teaching and learning strategy. It was driven by the intrinsic motivations of staff, their passion for teaching and commitment to students. In the most part it was also team based, socially mediated work where the team engaged in continuous discussions concerning the nature of their context and the direction of their efforts. Examples such as these need to be studied in detail as the clearest signposts towards effective implementation approaches. Whether or not we build upon them will depend upon the extent to which we are willing to recognise the differing positions of staff and management, address the tension between strategic centralisation and the multiple, diverse sites within our universities, recognise that the social creation of renewing knowledge is central to implementation and realign our practices. [top](#)

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