Revitalising distance learning: stakeholder led transformation for the digital age

The University of New England (UNE) was the first Australian university established outside a capital city. UNE is located in Armidale, a major centre in Northern Inland in the State of New South Wales, Australia. UNE has a well-earned reputation extending back to the 1920s (founded as a University College of the University of Sydney in 1938, became a university gaining autonomy in 1954) and is one of Australia's great distance education teaching, training and research universities. UNE's distance education programs have over the years been successful in addressing the problems and needs of off-campus students by providing extensive support systems to overcome those challenges. This paper addresses one aspect of a major transformation of teaching and learning at UNE through a case study of the development of a new model of distance education.

Introduction

UNE has a well-earned reputation extending back to the 1930's and is one of Australia's great distance education teaching, training and research universities. UNE's distance education programs have been successful in addressing the problems and needs of off-campus students by providing extensive student support systems to overcome those challenges. In 2009 UNE undertook a major project to look at itsdistance education practices and through a comprehensive consultation process developed a business case for moving towards a revitalisation of its approach to teaching and learning. Unlike many contemporary virtual/online focused universities, UNE has both advantage and disadvantage attached to its history and experience of distance education. Transformation needed to take into account a long history but also be future focused to meet the challenges of a soon to be deregulated higher education market place. This has resulted in a comprehensive transformation process which included the development of a new learning model underpinning the future direction of UNE's distance education programs. The model, drawn from consultation with students and other stakeholders, the literature and desk-top searches places students at the centre of UNE's study programs and uniquely integrates community engagement at the course/program level which links to specific learning areas through four main quadrants. This paper discusses the transformation process of creating the new model, the challenges and opportunities for students and key stakeholdersanddetails the model.

Approach

Case study is a clearly defined and acceptable form of empirical enquiry. While numerous research methods were explored the complexity and challenge posed by the purpose and

intended audience of the case provided justification for a case approach being selected over other approaches. This case attempts to illuminate a decision or set of decisions about specific focal areas (Schramm, 1971, cited in Yin). Case study was also logical in this instance as the project had at its heart decision making. The research design included collection of data from key stakeholders in a variety of ways. A mixed methods approach was drawn upon to collect data and aimed to reduce bias (Yin, 2009). Selecting multiple data points allowed for triangulation amongst a variety of stakeholders and revealed the distinctiveness of the context. While three focal areas were identified, questions were varied and emergent during the collection of data. Data was collected from key stakeholders through surveys, focus groups, facilitated work groups, discussions, consultant investigations, literature reviews and desk-top analysis of informal data from across the University sector. Data converged during analysis around the three focal points and was considered by statistical analysis and through the four main focal points or aims of the project. Concurrently the story of the case emerged through the descriptive framework that was used for reporting (Yin, 2009).

The case

Overview

The University of New England (UNE) was founded in 1938 as a College of the University of Sydney and became fully independent in 1954. A year later the University began teaching in distance education mode and became known as an innovative distance education institution. UNE is known for providing quality distance education with a commitment to social inclusion through providing broader access and alternative entry pathways for many diverse groups. This in part reduces some of the barriers of educational disadvantage for students who for numerous reasons are unable to study on campus. This includes students who are working and who may have family commitments or other financial or personal reasons for being unable to study without an income. Other groups also include mothers or early school leavers who are returning to study after long breaks. There is also a growing group of professionals who are in the workforce and looking to expand their career options. About half of UNE's students live in metropolitan areas andhalf comefrom rural and regional Australia.

UNE, like many large distance educational providers globally,now faces a range of significant challenges in its quest to compete in a distance education market that has moved towards web-based courses. The advancements in using web-based technologies; demand from new student cohorts for increased connectivity; new government policies for higher education; and the capacity of any University to develop more flexible study options, mean that where once there were only a few providers of distance education there are now many. Over the past few years UNE recognised this and as a major institutional priority undertook to analysethe situation comprehensively in order to adjust to new market conditions and changed student expectations.

The key purpose of the analysiswas to to develop new directions in the three key focal areas. This included amongst other requirements a review of:

- UNE's market and course offerings—with the aim of strategic course selection and redesign;
- information technology infrastructure and business processes required to support new courses and the institution more broadly;
- student support needs and professional staff development requirements (academic and general) to support any proposed changeswith a further key goal beingto increase retention by at least 1% annually, building on existing initiatives.

The analysisto form the business case took 6 months to undertake and was based on a call from the University Council to do so after it analysed a previous report called the Distance Education Review which was undertaken in 2008. In order to develop the business case i a large cross-section of UNE staff and studentswere involved anda range of methodologies were drawn on to ensure thorough consultation with stakeholders across the university.Additionally, we drew on a number of external consultants. In a relatively short time given the scale of the task, a large amount of data was collected and analysed and several major recommendations formed toinclude the development of a new distance education model.

Stakeholder consultation

A range of stakeholders was engaged in consultation and included leadersof specific portfolios orin administrative roles, and staff representatives of particular groups (egGeneral staff/ Academic staff groups). Consultants were also sought for specific expert advice for market analysis and financial modeling. Students were consulted and more than 4000 replied to a survey or participated in focus groups to providetheir input. Three large working groups were key in driving the process. These were:

1. **Courses Working Group**

The objective of this group was to address UNE's capacity for market sustainability, particularly through strategic course selection and redesign of current courses.

2. **Organisational Capacity Working Group**

The objective of this group was to assess whether UNE has the appropriate infrastructure, systems and business processes to support attainment of the project.

3. **Staff and Student Capacity Working Group**

This group's objective was to identify appropriate levels and means of support for students through their UNE journey (the Student Lifecycle - from first point of contact through to alumni) and the professional development and support required for staff.

In addition consultancy support was sought within the review in the following areas.

1. Market Analysis

Two detailed market analyses were undertaken to assist UNE in understanding its position and to propose course directions and revitalisation. Analysis was performed

from domestic and international market perspectivesand included predicted trends across a range of suggested courses.

2. Information Technology
To assist the Organisational Capacity Working Group (OCWG) in their analysis of IT infrastructure, systems and business processesto support new courses and broader infrastructure across the University,consultants provided assistance with 'diagnostic' and 'design' workshops to perform gap analyses around the themes of People, Process and Technology. They additionally performed a comprehensive IT Architecture Review.

3. Financial modeling
Financial modeling also assisted in the decision making.

By drawing upon the extensive consultation and a variety of data the project was able to develop recommendations for further consideration.

Why change?

The 6 month projectcreated more than 600 pages of data not including the literature or desk-top search. The analyses involving the many stakeholders were brought to reveal a general consensus for new ways in which UNE could address the changing higher education landscape. Although UNE was one of the first distance education providers in Australia it was obvious that the sector had matured and many others now competed in the area. Although UNE is recognised as "one of the most prominent DE institutions" in Australia, other "significant providers" at the tertiary level now include Charles Sturt, Deakin, University of Southern Queensland and the Open Universities Australia consortium (IBIS, May 2009 p. 25). Distance education has become possible for more providers and not just in the higher educator sector with many companies and private providers now providing online courses.The internet is all pervasive and 'anywhere, anytime, anyhow' is a reality and students appear to engage at many levels with it. This naturallyopens the market for new providers and gives future students more choice. It was also evident that there was a need to consider how toapproach leadership for strategic change and impact; the use and integration of information and communications technology into learning and teaching designs and daily work lives of students; process improvement and staff development. The internet and web 2.0 technologies have brought new levels of disruption by providing immediacy, transparency and expectationwhich has not gone unnoticed by students.

Figure 1: Key areas
The student journey
Enhanced student support
Staff workload
IT application and infrastructure
Retention and Engagement
Distance education model

As expected several key areas emerged some of which are shown in Fig 1. The focus here however is on one area, the model of Distance Education.

.Future challenges and opportunities

The Australian Higher Education sector has undergone some significant change over the past 18 months. The election of a new Labour government after 11 years of a Liberal government has seen a review of the sector and significant policy shifts. Of significance was the Bradley Review (Bradley et al 2008)

On 4 March 2009, the Commonwealth announced its response to the Bradley Review**.** This included a public commitment to the rapid expansion of student numbers and to improved access for students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. The Commonwealth's targets include:

- 40% of 25–34 year olds to attain a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2025;
- 20% of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level should be people from low SES backgrounds by 2020.

The ambitious nature of these goals is clear. Currently, only 32% of 25–34 year olds in Australia have degree-level qualifications. Reaching the target figure of 40% will involve an extra 544,000 graduates by 2020, or the equivalent of 20 new institutions of around 12,000 students each (Massaro 2009b). At present, no more than 15% of the students in the higher education system come from low SES backgrounds. This figure has changed little since the early 1990s, despite repeated attempts by the Commonwealth to broaden access.

As part of its package of reforms, the Commonwealth is moving towards a "student-centred funding model". From 2012, Australian universities will be funded on the basis of actual enrolments. There will be no limits on the number of students that they will be able to admit and institutions will be able to set their own entry standards. In part, this move reflects the priorities of the Bradley Report in terms of flexibility and the quality of the student experience. Equally important, however, is the Commonwealth's access and equity agenda.

The new system will see a shift of students and funding toward those institutions most willing and best able to attract students.Those institutions unable to defend their market share are expected to lose funding. This pressure will be greatest in the case of regional institutions, which have relied on regulation to help protect their market share in the past. Despite the expansion of the system as a whole, there are fears that the demand-driven model will have an adverse impact on regional universities. Many of these institutions, which include the major distance education providers, may have little choice but to reduce entry scores or to increase the number of students places offered through alternative entry pathways. It is perhaps for this reason that Massaro refers to a "new binary system" (2009a).

Universities across the sector face numerous challenges over the next 5-10 years as the market deregulates further with the change away from 'capped-student' places. The consequences of the Bradley Review are yet to be fully felt. Universities will have to position themselves to take advantage of the opportunities provided by targets set for achieving a larger number of 25 to 39 year olds with an undergraduate qualification and meet the expectations for low Socio-economic participation. The focus on serving students from rural communities is equally important for promoting and expanding rural economic development and a further goal of the Government. Additionally the recent approval of a

National Broadband Network (NBN) opens doors for increased web-based learning to areas where access and connectivity have been limited. Already

- 78% of Australian households now have access to a computer.
- 72% of these households have a home Internet connection.
- 86% of households with home access had broadband (ABS 2010).

The Internet is not yet ubiquitous, but it soon will be when the NBN arrives.

We should not forget that as social media move into the mainstream, new opportunities will arise for making learning communities. Already on a per capita basis, Australia has one of the highest uptakes of social media in the world. According to DigitalMarketingLab (2010) Australia's social media audience has been estimated at 9.9 million, 59% of Australian Internet users have a Facebook profile and in January 2010 there were 1.2 million Australian users of Twitter and by June 2010 2.2 million. Australian's internet enabled mobile ownership is 43% with 29% searching, using Facebook, using email, Twitter and My Space. Searching the internet is the most popular activity with searching up from 30% in 2009 to 73% in July 2010.

However, while technology has long been heralded as the answer to the feelings of isolation felt by distance students it remains that early efforts to build student communities using online chat and bulletin boards have only been partially successful and easier to use, more intuitive tools such as Moodle are providing a better way. Additionally there is increasing evidence that students are making use of social networking tools such as facebook to create their own online learning communities (Andrews, 2011; Madge et al, 2009,) Skype, MSN and twitter also appear to be used by students in this way (Andrews, 2011). Consequently a new approach to building online course communities may be better cast through social media. As Hitwise (2011) observes Australian's are very comfortable with social networking and as the*all categories* indicates for the week ending 10/1/11 Australian favourites are Facebook and YouTube which areovertaking popular search engines. Consequently, how students learn, the role of the university and their teachers is under new scrutiny. As Barnes and Tynan (2007) noted:

> few of the current generation of teaching staff have been online learners. With some exceptions, teaching staff and the latest cohort of undergraduates live in different technological worlds… Beyond conventional technologies (such as personal computers, the Web and email), younger students have also embraced mobile technologies. Almost every undergraduate has a digital device of some kind: a mobile phone, PDA, digital camera, iPod or MP3 player. Many have devices which fulfil multiple functions (the iPhone is only the latest example of digital convergence). The extent of this transformation is staggering (Barnes & Tynan, 2007, p.189-190).

Other more recent forthcoming worktitled*Ubiquitous learning: Issues in the Australian Higher Education context* by Andrews, Tynan & Stewart (2011) explores the opportunities and challenges of ubiquitous learning in the Australian context.

> The ability for populations to contribute information to the global masses rather than just assimilate it is made possible by the technologies supporting the creation of borderless web-based communities. The introduction of portable devices from lap-tops, e-readers, personal organizing devices, gaming consoles and the mobile phone to name but a few, are integrated into our everyday activities for work, learning and managing our personal lives. Higher education has in many contexts only experimented with the affordances of potentially new learning environments enabled by this ubiquitous access and has been slow to fully theorise and introduce scaled solutions. The trend towards the use of mobile devices is without boundaries (forthcoming).

The domestic market in Australia is becoming increasingly more challenging and competitive. It has become even more important that each University understands its strengths, capabilities to take advantage of possible opportunities. Population changes, global trends, changing government policies, personalisation of student preferences and student mobility trends, greater use of learning analytics, connectivity, geographic influences and challenges, competitor activity and industry trends are each topical for informing the new learning model. It will come as no surprise that most distance education providers globally are engaged in processes of change.

Existing model at UNE

Essentially distance education is not viewed as unusual or different in Australia.In fact as Jones & Pritchard (2000) have stated this “debate is long over in Australia” (p.32). Universities, employers and policy-makers regard distance study as the equal of traditional face-to-face instruction. This has been the case in Australia for more than 25 years whereas in many global contexts this is not the case. This means that Australian universities do not need to supply arguments about the quality of distance education as it has high acceptability. The University of New England developed what would now be termed a “dual-mode” approach to distance education. The dual mode approach consisted of the same courses being taught by the same academic staff either on or off campus and with complementaryand at times compulsory residential schools. During this time and well into the 1990’s UNE became well known and highly regarded for the quality of its correspondence materials and “dual mode”.

This was essentially the “New England model” which influenced other Australian and distance education Universities internationally. Distance and on-campus students were taught by the same academic staff. Both sat the same examinations, were taught using the same curriculum and received identical awards. The guiding principle was “equivalent” not “identical” teaching. Internal students attended lectures and tutorials whereas distance students benefited from intensive schools, study guides and academic support by telephone/post. In 1961 an Enquiry began into the Future Development of Tertiary Education in Australia and the resulting Martin Report (1965) concluded that distance students at the University of Queensland and UNE had achieved “outstanding” results. After 1965, the number of Australian universities offering distance programs continued to grow and the number of distance education students also increased to about 50,000 students enrolled in distance programs. By the early 1990s, 32 universities were offering

distance education programs with the great majority of distance learners beingmature-aged students.

Since the 1990's the 'New England model' has morphed in response to contextual influences. New media has been added to the correspondence approach including audio and video cassettes which have now themselves been replaced with pod/vod casts. CDRom's, Video conferencing and distributed access centres also make it possible to reach into communities andto distributed learners. The introduction of learning management systems have become the norm and social technologies such as wikis, blogs and virtual worlds have diluted the model on the one hand and enhanced it on another. As aptly coined, it is the 'perfect storm' for reinvention while drawing upon a tremendous tradition.

Model of distance education

The analysisrevealed that the 'clip-on' of technologies and processes in UNE's current distance education model had compounded workload and was confusing students with the lack of consistency. The correspondence model, while acknowledged for past success, and the addition of CDRom's, web pages, virtual classrooms, pod/vodcasts while all excellent in their intention had not been applied and combined into a holistic learning experience.

A newand seamless online environment was required both for learning and for the administration of teaching. It was recognised that there was a need to consolidatethe distance education modalities (such as correspondence, CDRoms, residential schools), integrating with other systems (such as student records, assessment engines and libraryresources) other learning tools (such as video conferencing, Skype etc) and other media (eg. pod/vod cast)s within a coherent and comprehensive learning model..

Students were seeking increased interaction and at times when they most needed it, with a consistent themebeing'outside of usual business hours'. Students were in part still feeling isolated and wanted more peer and teacher interaction. They also wanted accuracy, consistency, timeliness electronic formats for learning materials and they found great value in audio/visual downloads, such as presentations and seminars. Students also wanted quality video and podcasts across all study areas, particularly to accompany other more static learning materials and resources. The timing of material accessibility turnaround times for marking and feedback were also seen as critical.

The Staff and Student Working Group identified a wide range of student support activities. These activities emanate from the faculties, schools, directorates, residential system and through affiliate organisations such as Services UNE. Many of the identified activities have been individually recognised for best practice through Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) awards. The provision of strategic support services to students was seen as imperative and a standardised approach to services needed to be investigated. Staff indicated that they wanted pragmatic pedagogical strategies, support for developing expertise with technology and more time to engage with both students and their teaching.

Developing the new model

In developing the new distance learning model for UNE, as stated previously, it was paramount that the new learning experience be: personal, relevant, situated and contextual, time and place dependent, social and interactive. Integration of the activities of both learners and staff members would representa new way forward. Data had taken us towards a change in communications with students and a thrust towards a new distance education learning model where resources, organisational support in relation to students and staffsupport and IT infrastructure key areas for development. It would be important to integrate and consolidate quality resources, extended support services used during learning and develop ways in which to become timelier in our institutional responses. Furthermore, there would need to be scope for a wide variety of approaches to learning. That could include single and multiple user models of learning alongside mixed mode (blended learning) as well as wholly online learning. This brief was and remains not without its challenges and several Wordles(Fig 2)were created to help think creatively about what ideas were emerging.

Literature as data

In order to develop the new model literature review and desk-top analysis neededto be undertakenin several areas. While the model needed to be simple and easy to articulate developing the model would be far more complex once the analyses combined all data available. While quantitative and qualitative data was obtained from stakeholders and was invaluable, scrutiny of literature, policy and desk-top documents was another source of data that needed to be folded into the mix.

As numerous terms and definitions are commonly used interchangeably among researchers this compounded the on-going analysis of the literature and what appeared initially to be a straight forward investigation to wrap around our own findings became necessarily more complex. Givena confusion of terms (including distance learning, elearning, online learning and blended learning (Guri-Rozenblit, 2009a:b) were being used in the literature and their meaning could only beunderstood from those varied contexts. The lack of definition and differing terminology has added to the confusion around what constitutes distance learning for the University in an environment where learning, regardless of modality is increasingly supported by a range of technologies that rely on connectivity. This increasing use of

technology is impacting on all students and distance students in particular, in ways that are not necessarily well understood (Andrews & Tynan, 2010). Our interest thereforehas at its heart the 'student experience'.

The distance student voice is increasingly recognised as a vital aspect of ensuring quality teaching and learning but little has been done to ensure their contributions are included in the design of learning models, particularly in relation to distance learners. (Andrews &Tynan, 2010). There is increasing evidence that the voice of online distance learner's is largely overlooked in many institutions and where it is collected, it does not necessarily reflect the experience of the distance learner or utilised in appropriate ways to enhance the distance learner's experience (Jara&Mellar, 2010) The needs of distance learners are different to on-campus students and this can have a direct impact on attrition (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Angelino, William &Natvig, 2007; Diaz &Cartnal, 2006; Tyler-Smith, 2006).Drawing on data we had collected from students and staff was to be a critical aspect of developing the new model.

The ways we learn, acquire, transfer and develop knowledge has challenged and interested philosophers, intellectuals and educators for centuries. In order to make sense of how people learn and the learning process itself, several theories were reviewed and developed and continue being developed as our understanding of how we learn evolves (Pritchard 2005). Similarly, there might be as many definitions of the learning process as there are theories of learning. Despite the differences amongst the learning theories they do tend to have similarities in their definitions (Driscoll 2000). Driscoll (2000) defines learning as "a persisting change in performance potential that results from experience and interaction with the world" (p.3) . For many, learning is a process of experiencing and understanding the world around us, which might be influenced by previous experiences, the environment we live in, our values and views (Biggs 2003; Bowden and Marton 2003; Ramsden 2003). Amongst the learning theories developed, behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivismare the most common ones applied in contemporary educational contexts (Driscoll 2000; Pritchard 2005; Siemans 2005).

Each of the above theories have evolved, had new ones attached to them and we should not forget originated from other theories themselves. They have been interpreted by others. The work of Chickering and Gamsen(1991) a point in case and an excellent example of how the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education have gone on to influence higher education globally. And the influential work of Bowden, & Marton (2003) in the University of learning: Beyond quality and competence. Or the work of Ramsden (2003) in Learning to teach in higher education.Webb (1996) in Understanding Staff development and Laurillard in Changing higher education: The development of learning and teaching(2006).

The scan included other frameworks and models of learning within web based environments and how quality learning was identified and qualified. This included Marshalls (2006) eLearning Maturity model; exploration of the JISC (2009) effective practice documentation; looking into European frameworks such as those offered by the European Foundation for Quality in e-learning (EFQUEL). More recently furtherpreliminary review of

regulatory frameworks across borders has included the work of ReVica, UNESCO and Commonwealth of Learning included. The area is decidedly vast and defining boundaries was problematic.

A review of quality frameworks such as the Australian National survey tools such as the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) and the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS),provided insight into how quality learning and teaching was measured within the higher education sector in Australia. This would assist in understanding how other stakeholders measure and fund higher education and was an important consideration in the model development.

Numerous conceptual models were drawn upon to assess how others had considered the issues toinform the new model.The seminal work by Taylor (2001) and the 5th Generation of distance education was a starting point for understanding UNE's current situation and we were able to identify our current approaches as being situated between Generation 4 and 5. What the conceptualisation did not detail was the 'wrap-around' of services, analytics, the use of more 'open' approaches to curriculum development nor learning approaches that could meet the needs of a connected student cohort. Our analysis obviously needed to be deeper and essential to designing for the future was the development of an holistic view of learning and lens that all aspects of the University business could be viewed.

Other areas that were also considered include: curriculum design; staff workload; equity and access; learning informatics; digital and emerging technologies; student support, administration, technological and academic; and retention and institutional change- each in part adding to data to be considered.

A desktop search of policy and practice across the higher education sector was conducted and had as its focus large reputable distance education providers. We were asking the question 'What are our colleagues doing" and "how were they addressing the changes within higher education and the pervasiveness of the possibilities that the web provided'? We looked into and drew upon our knowledge of many Universities internationally and nationally. These included Australian Universities such as Charles Sturt University, University of Southern Queensland, Deakin University (eg. The Trading Room as a community), Monash University, the Open Universities of Australia and in New Zealand, Massey University, Otago University and in Canada, Athabasca University (eg. The Landing) plus the Open University in the United Kingdom.Howeverone model captured our attention for its simplicity. The University of Catelonya in Spain: (http://www.uoc.edu/portal/english/la_universitat/model_educatiu/introduccio/index.html)

The model is surrounded by three dimensions which support the learning activities of students. This model explored the dimensions that the analysis so far had revealed. However, it lacked the staff interaction which we needed to highlight for internal reasons. It is put simply through the following three dimensions:

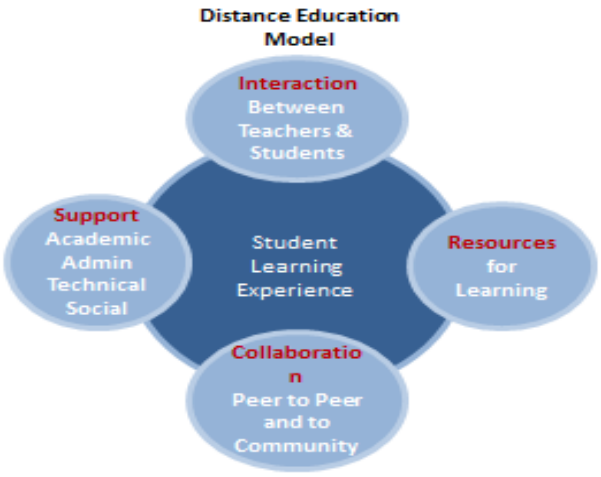
- **The resources:**
  They include the content, spaces and tools necessary to carry out the learning activities and their assessment.
- **Collaboration:**
  This is understood as the set of communicative and participative dynamics that favour the combined building of knowledge among classmates and teachers, through teamwork to solve problems, develop projects and group product creation.
- **Accompaniment:**
  This is the group of actions carried out by teaching staff to monitor students and to give them support in planning their work, in resolving activities, in assessment and in making decisions. The student receives personalised guidance from the teacher during his/her academic path and s/he establishes relations and communication with the educational community.

Extensive literaturewas also considered around staff engagement and while few would dispute that the last decade has seen unprecedented innovation in the area of Web-based learning and teaching in higher education the adoption remains well behind the affordances of the technology. Kirkup and Kirkwood have observed that:

> teaching staff appropriate those technologies which they can incorporate into their teaching activity most easily, that offer affordances for what they already do, rather than those which radically change teaching and learning practices (2005, p. 188).

Barnes and Tynan (2007) also observed that part of the reason for this conservatism is the extent to which teaching modes in higher education are shaped by convention. University teachers have "traditionally progressed from the experience of learning in the classroom to teaching in the classroom" (Jamieson 2004, p.22). Few of the current generation of teaching staff have been online learners. With some exceptions, teaching staff and the latest cohort of undergraduates live in different technological worlds.

In distilling the enormous amount of data and realising the influence of the analysisa new model emerged with an additional fourth dimension and which placed students at heart of the learning experience with increased staff and community engagement. The model went through many draft iterations decreasing in complexity in its representation. Four words were agreed to describe very simply the dimension: Interaction, Support, Resources and Collaboration.



Support

This aspect of the model has a focus on supporting student learning through three key dimensions:

1. Academic
    a. Academic writing and research support
    b. Administrative support
    c. Monitoring engagement
    d. Support by students for each other
2. Technical
    a. Access and connectivity
    b. Technical support
3. Social
    a. Student support services such as counselling; financial; engagement etc.

Interaction

Interaction is a complex dimension but is stated simply as:

- Peer to peer connections
- Student to teacher actions, teaching and feedback
- Student to learning activities, resources the WWW
- Student to experts within their professional disciplinary areas
- Access to tools for interaction such as skype etc.

Resources

This dimension refers to all learning objects that might include:

- Materials
- Course and unit guides
- Learning activities
- Library resources such as eBooks
- Podcasts
- Vodcasts

- Other software required within courses/units

Collaboration

This dimension includes collaboration as follows:

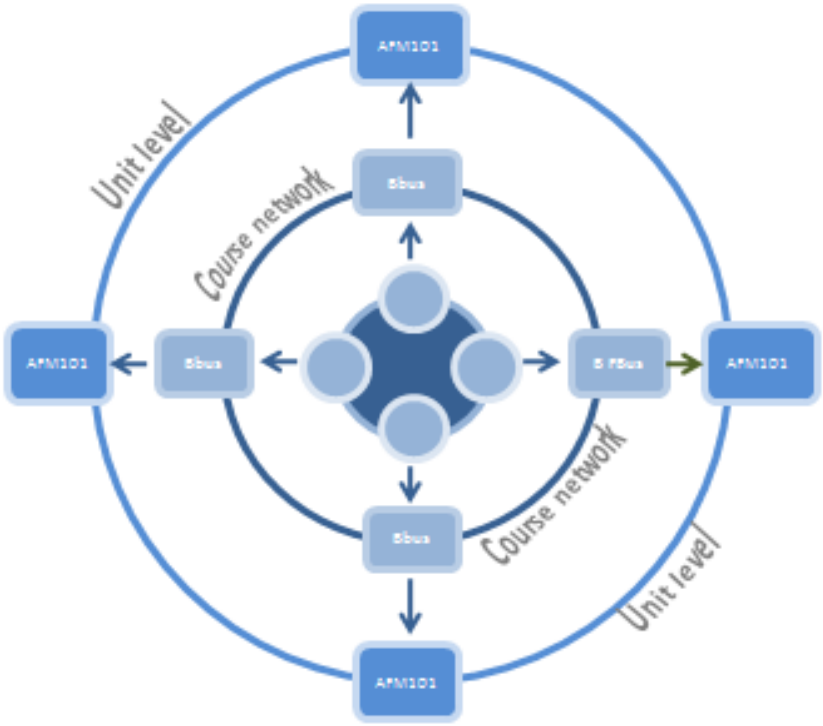
- Within units through curriculum design with a focus on 'learning activities' with peers, teachers and disciplinary experts
- Tools to enable collaboration such as Web 2.0 social networking

Course level community

Having determined the 4 elements of the model it was then suggestedthateach course should have a new dimension: a course level community. This was considered important to address data provided by students around isolation and additionally to connect students more broadly across enrolled units. Most students were enrolled in single units where they engaged with their peers but there was very little interaction vertically through the course at different year levels. There was little scope for students to understand or feel part of a 'community' within their discipline and so the course community concept was included to address this. Also, for staff, there was duplication of information across courses that could create inadvertent inconsistencyin versions of materials and there appeared to be efficiency gains in bringing together students at an entry point for their studies to reduce this. The course community would also provide staff with new opportunities in how they went about designing their learning experiences and they could now consider new learning approaches across year levels.

Course communities would have:

- consistency in interface design, structure and organisation;
- learning activities designed to ensure students could achieve outcomes and graduate attributes relevant to the discipline;
- interactivity between learners, teacher and content;
- informal interactivity between students;
- information accuracy and integrity;
- accessibility and standards compliance;
- student support (integrated);
- assessment relevant to career learning and meeting disciplinary norms



Concluding comments

Australian universities face the challenge of a transition from “mass to a universal higher education system” (Massaro 2009,a) and regional universities, which are the major providers of distance programs, are under the greatest pressure. In meeting this challenge, they have begun to experiment with new approaches and pedagogies. The emerging models are very different to the traditional ones andmuch of this demand will be met through increasing access to distance and online education. In addition, the composition of the distance student cohort will change considerably as a result of the federal Government targets and the new student-centred funding model which is intended to improve flexibility and the quality of the student experience. Equally important, however, is the expected impact in terms of access and equity. The main distance education providers are the smaller, regional universities.In the past, these have relied on regulation to protect their market share. After 2012, they will be under pressure to reduce entry scores and to increase the places offered through alternative entry pathways. As a result, there are fears of a “new binary system” (Massaro2009a). However, traditional distance education approaches have depended on the motivation and academic skills of students.These qualities can no longer be taken for granted.

UNE has entered a period of implementationof its new distance educationmodel. Having assessed data,the new model for learning isan emergent one which has moved it away from the previous ‘New England model’ to something far more responsive to external and internal pressures. It has at its centre students and their new connectivity and desire to be connected with their peers, teachers and the University itself.

The model was presented to the Vice Chancellor and approved for consultation. It was also presented at the kick-start and closure meeting of the ex-Staff and Student Capacity Working Group (SSCWG) and the New and Revitalized Courses initiation meeting all held in May 2010. TheSenior Deputy Vice Chancellor and Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic)presented the model across each of 10schools with visits to various school-based meetings during May and June and agreement was has been sought from both academic and general staff on the proposed new distance education model. Other presentations were provided for Academic Board and at the Managers forum held monthly. Furthermore, each New and Revitalized Courses discipline groupings have had separate presentations and are designing curriculum with this in mind. It has had high acceptability for underpinning a new direction.

While the model will no doubt alter it is intended to be responsive and has a new found agility.

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