AUT University: Providing leadership for teaching and learning (and e-learning)

> Most institutions assign responsibility for teaching and learning to a member of the senior executive team. How this responsibility is interpreted will depend on a great many factors.

THREE YEARS AGO, an appointment was made to the newly created position of Pro Vice-Chancellor, Learning and Teaching (PVC, L&T) at AUT University. This was a dual appointment alongside the appointee's continuing deanship of one of the faculties at AUT University.

The PVC (L&T) brings pertinent views to this new position, having previously led units responsible for academic development, student learning and programme quality. He knows that teachers cannot be made to change the way they teach simply by managerial fiat. Similarly, he knows that a strong strategic statement about teaching and learning will have limited value unless it reflects the way teachers want to teach, are able to teach and can be persuaded to teach. He believes that we know a lot already about what constitutes good teaching and that his principal task is to assist and encourage his colleagues to apply that knowledge.

He also has some views specific to e-learning. He thinks that 'blended learning' is a more useful term than 'e-learning,' the former applying to a variety of delivery modes that can be combined in various ways to meet the needs of today's students, while the latter locks an institution into a more limited and dated approach to educational delivery. For the same reason, he is not interested in developing a specific e-learning strategy for his institution, preferring to keep his focus on whatever assists student learning.

The PVC (L&T) recognises that his is a change management role. However, he recognises that, like those in most other senior institutional positions with responsibility for teaching and learning, he has limited levers with which to effect such change. He cannot command a change in teaching methodology.

He sees his role as one of keeping the institutional focus on the continuing improvement of teaching and learning.

To this end, he has created a Learning and Teaching Committee comprising inter alia the deputy deans from each faculty, academic staff and the section heads of the various teaching and learning support services. The purpose of the Committee is to provide a forum for discussion and decision-making on teaching and learning matters and to provide a conduit for influencing both institutional policy and priorities, and the policy and practice of individual faculties.

He is also working to reshape the role of the staff development unit. At present they focus particularly on meeting the expectations and requests of individual teachers. The PVC (L&T) hopes that they can increasingly work with departments and programme teams to achieve more widespread change. One way of encouraging this change is increasingly to channel the $150,000 of annual grants for learning and teaching into subject-based projects. He also sees the institution's quality assurance policies and processes as an effective lever for enhancing standards of teaching and learning.

TAKING THE LEAD
Strategic Management for e-Learning

Case Study

The PVC (L&T) has taken a pragmatic approach to educational innovation. In general, he doesn't want his institution to be at the leading edge of educational technology. He would prefer to avoid the costs and risks associated with untested and under-developed approaches to educational delivery, particularly in the area of information and communications technologies. Not only do such approaches present a serious risk of failure, they also divert attention and resources away from the great majority of teachers and students who are not going to benefit from such innovation in the foreseeable future.

He is much more interested in helping this majority to implement some of the well-tested options that are already available. He estimates that there are generally only about 25% of teachers in any institution who will embrace new approaches without any direct encouragement. The PVC (L&T)'s great challenge, he believes, is to assist the next 50% of teachers to understand, to gain confidence in and to implement these approaches as appropriate. Equally pragmatically, he believes it is counterproductive to spend too much time or resource chasing the final 20% or so of 'late adopters'.

Another change tactic that the PVC (L&T) favours is to contain the options available to staff. It is important to encourage a variety of ways of teaching and assessing students, but it is equally important that the institution should be able to support the delivery of any approach that teachers adopt. Working through his Learning and Teaching Committee, and back through the Deputy Deans to faculties, the PVC (L&T) is trying to promote and support a manageable array of delivery options. Where possible, he wants the teaching staff to identify the sensible limits for this support. A very recent example is a recommendation from the Learning and Teaching Committee that all AUT University courses should have a Blackboard (AUTonline) presence and meet an agreed threshold of services.

This example highlights another of the PVC (L&T)'s working principles: a preference for establishing achievable thresholds in the field of teaching rather than overstating (though not neglecting) aspirational targets. The former represents a reasonable goal for the average teacher and the units and departments they work in; the latter will be seen as hopelessly out of reach for that majority. In his view, there will be sufficient self-starting individuals with such aspirations and, while they should be nurtured and supported, they should not be the primary preoccupation.

On balance, the PVC (L&T) is optimistic about the job in front of him. He is supported by a Vice-Chancellor committed to effective teaching and learning, and he works in a University that retains a stronger, explicit focus on teaching and learning than is common in the older universities.

Reflections

The position of institutional leader for teaching and learning is typically one of the most challenging roles in tertiary education. The incumbent can rarely rely on either regulatory or resource powers and usually needs to work through persuasion and encouragement.

The leader needs to be able to direct the work of the teaching and support units to ensure that their efforts serve the institution's strategies rather than answer the calls of a few individual teachers.

While opinions may differ about the relative prominence given to 'e-learning' in the institution in question, there may be greater consensus about the way in which blended learning is seen as the integrating principle.