

University of Auckland: Organisational restructuring to support e-learning

There are many different ways in which support services for e-learning can be organised. While some institutions choose to set up a unit dedicated to e-learning and separate from other support services, others believe there are greater synergies to be gained by embedding such services within a larger cluster of learning and teaching services.

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND recently reorganised its support services for learning and teaching. In 2006, the Centre for Professional Development, the Centre for Flexible and Distance Learning and the Student Learning Centre were brought together into one unit, the Centre for Academic Development (CAD).

Bringing the three autonomous units together enables greater levels of collaboration and better alignment of teaching developments and student support. In addition, the creation of CAD enables better promotion of the use of technology as a potentially integral aspect of a range of teaching and learning strategies, rather than as something distinct and separate.

When CAD was set up, the personal and organisational aspects of professional development, which were previously part of CAD's remit, moved to a new unit within Human Resources called the Staff and Organisational Development Unit (SODU). This move meant that CAD has a clear academic focus for its work.

CAD comprises five groups: the Academic Practice Group, the e-Learning Design and Development Group, the Photography and Television Group, the Administrative Centre and the Student Learning Centre. Within CAD itself, groups work together to develop a wider range of online resources for both staff and students, which promotes e-learning in different ways.

In addition to CAD, there are other units which support and promote e-learning. The Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, based at the Grafton Campus, has its own Learning Technology Unit and the Faculty of Education (established after the amalgamation of the Auckland College of Education with the University) has a Centre for Educational Design and Development which, in recent years, has moved from 'low tech' to 'high tech' strategies and resources to support students and staff. Staff from each of these three centres meet regularly to share expertise and skills, collaborate on projects and share resources. This e-learning network is much stronger as a result of the restructuring and refocusing of how technology can be used in teaching and learning.

These structural arrangements support a number of broader strategic and infrastructural commitments and services already in place at the University:

- Through its strategic plan, the University encourages and promotes the development of flexible modes of teaching and learning, the use of new teaching technologies and computer-assisted Learning Management Systems (LMS).

TAKING THE LEAD

Strategic Management for e-Learning

Case Study



- The proprietary CECIL (computer supported learning), originally developed by University staff and students in the Faculty of Business and Economics, provides electronic course-centred information and communication support for students and academic staff.
- The University offers Teaching Improvement Grants on an annual basis. Staff present applications for a grant, which are judged by a sub-group of the institutional Teaching and Learning Quality Committee. A sum of around \$150,000 is available annually, with the individual grants generally being around \$10,000. Over the last two years, a very high proportion of the applications has related to using technologies in teaching.

There are several operational consequences of the new structural arrangements. Moving from having a range of small support units (which can often result in a 'silo' mentality) to a larger centre, encompassing staff with a range of knowledge skills and expertise, has resulted in enhanced levels of communication and collaboration among academic developers involved in e-learning. The new model seeks to build academic staff capacity in e-learning through a partnership between disciplinary-based staff and academic developers. The overall idea is that staff, within their disciplines, develop their skills with support from the academic developers.

A research-led approach to e-learning and capacity-building also enhances the overall pathways of academic developers and institutional designers.

The University has a Teaching and Learning Technologies Committee charged with developing an institutional e-learning strategy which aligns with the University's overall Strategic Plan. CAD staff members are involved on this committee. CAD reports to the Teaching and Learning Quality Committee on all aspects of its work, including e-learning.

At the operational level, academic developers involved in e-learning do not work at the level of generic workshops. Disciplinary-based staff want support that is contextualised to their disciplinary needs. Academic developers therefore need to develop their understanding of a discipline and disciplinary-based staff need to learn the principles of instructional design. This collaborative approach builds e-learning capacity across the institution.

One side effect of the change is that academic staff are now writing research papers about teaching experiences within the discipline as well as performing normal discipline-based research.

Reflections

The University of Auckland made a strategic decision to reorganise its staff and student support centres into one overarching Centre for Academic Development, with a concomitant refocusing of how support and development for e-learning is provided. The restructuring and refocusing have resulted in more effective and efficient fostering of e-learning. The establishment of SODU enabled CAD to focus on academic development and enhance e-learning strategies. The partnership and capacity-building strategies, developed by the network of e-learning developers, are having a positive impact across the University. Linking staff and student educational and academic support services within one overarching Centre has created synergies which were previously absent. Oversight by a Teaching and Learning Quality Committee, to ensure performance of SODU aligns with overall University strategies, strengthens its role with senior management.

A single reporting line between the CAD Director and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) has provided the former with a clearer mandate and the latter with the means to maintain better regular contact with the work of CAD.

The new, consolidated structure is likely to be more responsive to changes in technology and changes in demand for various services.