

Otago Polytechnic: Strong strategic leadership

Strong strategic direction from senior leadership seems to be an important factor in the uptake and direction of e-learning. Otago Polytechnic provides a clear example of such leadership.

OTAGO POLYTECHNIC'S STRATEGY on e-learning and blended delivery modes is driven by two related objectives. The first objective goes to the heart of the institution's purpose. "Our primary motivation was to do a better job as a regional polytechnic" (Phil Ker, Chief Executive). The leadership team identified a large group of learners in its region that the institution had not been able to reach by conventional campus-based teaching. These learners were in the full-time workforce and scattered through its regional catchment. Blended learning offered the best way of reaching them.

The leadership team realised that it could not depend on the unilateral efforts of individual teachers or even of programme leaders to achieve this new emphasis on blended learning. They needed the sustained attention of the senior team as well.

They went about achieving this in a number of ways. They spent a couple of years consulting and debating the matter with middle management and staff in order to reach a strong institution-wide consensus on this new approach; they set aside a substantial annual fund to help meet the development costs of approved new programme initiatives and blended learning conversions; they required all schools and departments to develop business plans for their move into flexible learning; and all such plans had to be accompanied by comprehensive budgets involving approval by the senior team.

Initial attention was given to offering blended delivery for a handful of campus-based programmes where staff were finding it difficult to attract sufficient students, particularly to the Polytechnic's campus in Central Otago. These included programmes in horticulture, viticulture, hospitality and tourism offered at Central Otago as well as programmes in computing, veterinary nursing and business education offered at the Dunedin campus. Currently, programmes in midwifery and occupational therapy are being systematically redeveloped for blended delivery – the former in collaboration with Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT), and the latter to be delivered in collaboration with Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec). Some of these offerings have boosted enrolments significantly and have been very important in securing a more certain future for the Central Otago campus.

More recently, the leadership team have been promoting another objective in focusing on blended learning. As with most other medium-sized New Zealand polytechnics, Otago Polytechnic faces a significant

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Case Study



teacher workload problem. According to this analysis, teachers are teaching too many courses, investing too much time in developing course content, spending too many hours each week in face-to-face teaching, and over-assessing their students. Each new delivery mode threatens to increase this workload as teachers struggle to maintain existing teaching practices alongside the new modes.

The leadership team believe that a more thorough approach to blended learning may provide the answer. It is hoped that blended learning will become the primary mode of delivery for both campus-based and off-campus students, rather than an alternative to existing conventional study modes. Teaching staff are being encouraged to move to a model of delivery based on alternating periods of face-to-face and independent study. For example, two weeks of conventional classroom teaching could be followed by two weeks of self-paced learning supported by online or printed study material and a range of student and peer support services. It is hoped that this approach will assist teaching staff to manage their workloads more effectively and, in particular, free up time for intensive work on course development or research.

Again, the senior leadership team recognise they carry a major responsibility for promoting and embedding this new strategy. They are actively promoting it to teaching staff as a way of better managing their workloads. When addressing students, they suggest that online learning skills are a core competence for today's workforce and not simply a second-class option for the off-campus student. They have created a network of nine Community Learning Centres through the region and appointed a Flexible Learning Manager to ensure that students can use these centres to support their blended learning studies.

The senior team identify several other developments that are supporting this overarching strategy of blended learning. The new role of the Educational Development Centre (EDC) is one such development. Until two years ago, the EDC, a unit of five staff, saw its role as one of staff development and specifically helping teachers to become confident with the new teaching technologies. However this approach tended to focus mainly on the early adopters and the enthusiasts. As one member of the leadership team said, as an approach to encouraging whole-of-institution change, "it was like pushing water uphill with a rake." The staff of the EDC also found themselves doing anything and everything in response to myriad demands and expectations from teaching staff.

The senior team had to persuade three of the staff of the EDC to see themselves as a dedicated production team, working with teachers to produce high-quality, blended learning programmes. Initial resistance to this new and specialised role soon abated as members of the EDC came to recognise the key role they had been given in introducing the new strategy. They now had a strong mandate from senior leadership and a serious budget to work alongside teams of teaching staff on the redevelopment of targeted programmes. This role is now seen as critical to the success of the institution's blended learning strategy.

Alongside this focus on blended learning, the senior team has also worked to ensure that institutional infrastructure and student services can meet the demands of this delivery medium and the needs of students studying this way. There is an ongoing programme to deliver student services online and a greater commitment to student advice and orientation. At least three schools are piloting a mentoring service to address the needs of new and blended learning students.

The senior team have also accepted the importance of keeping up-to-date with the technologies they are introducing. To this end, they conduct an increasing proportion of their work in a virtual and paperless environment and have a commitment to doing so in a sustainable way. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this task, according to Phil Ker, is to identify the next iteration of technology that needs an institutional commitment and to make that commitment in a timely and cost-effective way. These are high-risk, potentially expensive, strategic decisions that require the full attention of the institutional leadership.

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Reflections

This case study suggests that it is not enough for an institution to develop a strong e-learning strategy. The senior leadership needs to play a continuing role in negotiating, communicating, promoting, resourcing and finally driving that strategy.

In this case study, the senior leadership team set out to persuade teachers to concede the loss of some autonomy in the preparation of course materials in exchange for an improvement in the management of their workload and the security of their employment. This strategy is only likely to succeed where the leadership can demonstrate that the exchange benefits teachers as well as learners.

This case study illustrates the difference between marginal revenue and marginal costs. The primary purpose of the Polytechnic's investment in blended learning was to increase enrolments in selected programmes and districts. This affected the marginal revenue available from these programmes which is best illustrated by the boost in enrolments at the Central Otago campus. A secondary purpose was to produce marginal cost savings by reducing the per-capita costs of delivering a programme to additional students. This has been achieved at Otago Polytechnic through the development of blended learning components for a wide range of its programmes. Institutional leaders need to be aware that investment in e-learning or blended learning may achieve either, neither or both types of savings.