SIX MONTHS IN A LEAKY BOAT: FRAMING THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS NEEDED TO TEACH WELL ONLINE

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Abstract
Effective academic staff development in teaching can be difficult to achieve. One reason is that there are often limited funds available. Another is that the diverse skills and knowledge required for effective university teaching are not formally described.

*Griffith University's Academic Development and Professional Training (**adapt**) program attempts to provide academic staff development for teaching in a flexible learning environment. It tries to be cost effective by providing a self-help component that models flexibility. Additionally, it classifies the skills and knowledge that make a good online teacher. This became the **adapt** framework, which also helps academics identify their own level of development.*

*This paper describes the reasons for the development of the **adapt** program and the principles that went into its design.*

Introduction
Beneath the surface of the sea of learning
Within the "Sea" metaphor of this year's conference title, professional development has been put into the sub-section "Beneath the surface". This position has two implications: Firstly, something beneath the surface is not visible. This suggests staff development might often be overlooked. In fact, it is frequently forgotten in the planning stages of ventures into digital learning environments, especially when it comes to budgeting and time allocation for professional development. The second implication is the difficulty of determining the size, breadth and depth of something that is beneath the surface. Where does it start? Where does it end? How can navigators identify the areas that are crucial for them to move towards a successful future? And where are the dangerous areas and black holes that present risks to all involved?

This paper reports on a staff development project at Flexible Learning and Access Services of Griffith University (GU) that - after determining the "boat's position in muddy waters" - attempted

- to define the breadth and depth of knowledge and skills needed to teach well online
- to develop a practical learning framework for academic staff
- to model flexibility on as many levels as possible.

Changing weather and muddy waters

Griffith's Logan Campus is a physical expression of the University's commitment to flexible learning. Logan, the University's first flexible learning campus, opened to students in 1998. Developing an online presence for all courses involved staff development on a one-to-one basis.

Originally, the delivery environment for Logan courses consisted of a set of delivery and administrative interfaces, integrated in a way that appeared seamless to the students and staff. The delivery interface (shown in Figure 1) was based on static HTML pages, built in a frameset to allow navigation and location information to stay on screen. This technical environment meant that academic staff were unable to create or modify their own course web sites.
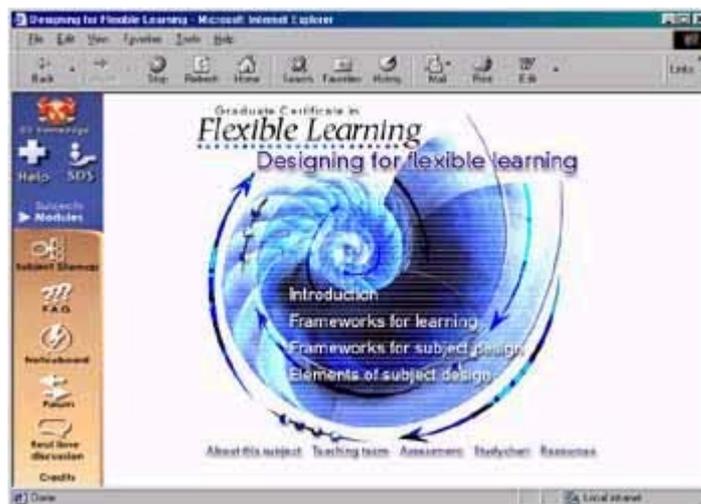

Figure 1: Example of a Logan course homepage

With an increased demand for online learning resources and the spread of the flexible learning initiative to Griffith's other five campuses, the in-house learning environment was replaced by a more integrated learning environment, the Learning@GU portal utilising Blackboard software. The introduction of Blackboard provided an integrated set of tools, and its easy-to-use interface allowed academics to take control of their course web sites.

The implementation of Blackboard as the GU delivery platform brought about changes to the way flexible learning materials are developed. While the multimedia team continues to design and develop high-end flexible learning resources, academic staff have increased possibilities to develop their teaching and learning materials more autonomously.

Resulting changes in staff development practices

The shift of roles in the design and development process renders a more efficient staff development program indispensable, as the one-to-one staff development model used for the Logan courses is not sustainable on this large scale. In recognition of the change, Flexible Learning and Access Services (FLAS) devised the **adapt** (Academic Development And Professional Training) program to assist academic staff in the design and development of flexible learning resources.

Directions from the helm

> *"The starting point for any staff development strategy is the support of senior management [...]."*
>
> *(Robinson, 1998, p. 35)*

As mentioned earlier, staff development is still seen as a costly and doubtful enterprise by many institutions, rather than as an investment. In her article "A strategic perspective on staff development for open and distance learning", Robinson (1998) stresses the importance of a strategic approach to staff development programs and discusses the factors essential to success as well as the dangers inherent in not having a strategy.

There are recent imperatives that call for improvement of quality of teaching. For example, an Australian Federal issues paper (DEST, 2002) states "The quality of teaching is absolutely central to the learning experience" and calls for professionalisation of teaching practice while Gilbert (2001) identifies changes in education that mean "lifelong learning, for educators, is no longer a choice, it is a responsibility".

Adapt is firmly built on the University's strategic perspectives. The Griffith University strategic plan identifies the need to provide staff development and training in a range of flexible learning design, development and implementation methods. The **adapt** program is designed to support academics to teach well online. Since **adapt** focuses on outcomes that impact on teaching strategies, the program supports academic staff in development and maintenance of their own high quality teaching and learning materials for Griffith's flexible learning environment, in accordance with minimum quality standards.

With these parameters set, the challenge was to design and develop a flexible, integrated and holistic staff development model to meet the needs of a very diverse academic audience.

Design Parameters: Adjusting the Compass

The design of **adapt** had several influences. The design team considered:

- the existing practice in staff development activities of Flexible Learning Services
- client needs (identified in a small-scale needs analysis and from the experience of educational designers)
- issues and constraints associated with the characteristics of the client base.

From these factors, a more specific set of outcomes emerged that ultimately shaped the nature of **adapt**. Questions about whether the outputs meet the customers' needs can only be answered in the future and will be part of the **adapt** evaluation.

Existing Practice
In a transition period from the existing Logan interface to the full roll-out of Blackboard, a rather patchy training program attempted to bring academic staff up to date with the possibilities of preparing learning materials for online delivery and the various possibilities of teaching online. However, these activities had some major disadvantages in that they were:

reactive	occasional workshops were held at occasional times when it was thought academic staff would have the need for the skills and the time to attend.
non-flexible	the existing face-to-face workshops were not presented flexibly in either the delivery medium or time of delivery.
piecemeal	the existing workshops were not coordinated in a manner that either covered the entire range of skills needed by an academic or that allowed academics to progress through them in a meaningful way.
not targeted	participants were often frustrated by content that was too simple or too advanced for their needs.

These drawbacks had to be taken into consideration when designing the new program. However, several additional parameters impacted on the design of **adapt**.

Client needs
Broadly defined, the potential users of **adapt** are academics teaching at Griffith University. However, this client base consists of :

- full time (career) teachers and researchers
- PhD students (tutors, specialists)
- external casuals and sessional academics (tutors, convenors, specialists)
- administrators (Heads of School, School Administration Officers, DVC, VC)

All of these have different interests in the delivery of flexible learning, different needs in terms of time, access, and content, and different motives to invest time and effort in professional development for online teaching.

Recognising individual needs

A survey conducted before the start of the project showed that respondents had very different needs but four rather generic areas were considered important by the surveyed academics:

- Planning for flexible and student centred learning
- Managing for flexible and student centred learning
- Better resource preparation for flexible and student centred learning
- Better teaching for flexible and student centred learning

This provided us with a very general framework, but the needs analysis clearly demonstrated that we had to recognise and cater for a wide range of individual needs.

A common language

In the design process, the **adapt** team considered a search engine approach which would bring academics the required information per request. However, this raised the issue of academics not necessarily having the pedagogical and technical language we use to describe things. We were made aware of the need to use a common language, to avoid educational jargon, and to be as inclusive as possible, but at the same time to introduce important terms and concepts in a non-threatening language.

Local context

Some aspects of teaching and learning are generic whereas others reflect local conditions and systems. Making **adapt** immediately relevant - especially in providing a local context - for our clients' day-to-day working practice will help academics deal with changes associated with the paradigm shift towards flexible learning. (cf. Abdullah, 1998)

Constraints/Issues

Just as there were common needs, there were also constraints and issues that had to be considered in the design of the program:

- The majority of lecturers have no specific teaching qualifications, and even those who have obtained these at one stage rarely regard re-examination and questioning of their teaching as a necessary part of their own professional development (cf. Johnston, 1998 in O'Reilly & Brown)
- The quality and level of resources developed and services delivered need to take into consideration different levels of academic staff experience and proficiency.
- Like other universities, Griffith employs high numbers of sessional staff from external fields with little or no training or teacher education. These present a group that needs special attention.
- The scope of resources and the length of workshops and courses offered need to take into consideration academic staff time.
- The scheduling of training sessions needs to coincide with academic staff availability.

Outcomes redefined

Informed by the directions from University management and the strategic plan, the drawbacks of existing staff development practice and the client needs, the **adapt** team refined the original desired outcomes of the project in order to make them more specific. **adapt** is designed to achieve the following goals:

- Academic staff will engage in thinking about their teaching practices.
- Academic staff have access to a variety of resources and services that help them achieve better teaching and learning practices, especially in support of Griffith's Flexible Learning Agenda. More specifically, **adapt** aims to improve academic staff competencies in preparing and delivering high quality teaching and learning materials, and encourages academics' appropriate use of electronic tools and resources in their teaching.
- Academic staff have identified their development needs for both professional and skills activities.

- Academic managers have identified ways they may encourage all types of teaching staff to improve their teaching practice.

In order to achieve these goals, **adapt** is designed to provide a suite of resources and activities so that individuals can use separate components, or educational designers can prepare and facilitate a customised course or workshop for a school or a program group, drawing on the 'off-the-shelf' components. These components have to be customisable, flexible and modular in order to make them useful for the client base's diverse needs. However, offering a modular suite of resources harbours the danger of ending up with the very fragmentation (piecemeal, reactive) we were trying to get away from with **adapt**. Therefore, we decided that we needed a framework (or organiser) for the **adapt** program that would put every modular unit into a bigger picture and would inform academics when they chose to participate or work through parts of **adapt**.

Defining the Framework: "Land Ahoy"

The framework is an organiser for the **adapt** user to decide what activities and resources they should engage with, now or in the near future, to acquire the skills and knowledge needed in their current situation. The framework for **adapt** helps users define:

- the breadth and depth of knowledge and skills needed to teach online well
- an overall picture of where modules and units of resources and activities belong, what precedes them and what follows them
- where to situate themselves, with their existing knowledge and skills, in the framework.

Models or References

There were no directly applicable models for the framework at the core of the **adapt** program. A broad survey of other university's staff development programs for flexible learning showed that most institutions offered a variety of resources of activities, but that none of the models fit our needs completely. To name only a few examples of the universities surveyed which inspired our thinking:

Curtin University: The Curtin Internet Based Learning Construction Kit (http://cea.curtin.edu.au/ibl/) deals with many areas related to online teaching, but there is no guide as to what is needed, in which order, and at what level.
Penn State World Campus: (http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/facdev101/index.html) make use of their learning environment for delivery of staff development (WebCT) and have some of their resources built as a course. Again, they do not cater for different levels of experience.
Massey University: (http://hrs.massey.ac.nz/) astounded by the sheer number of workshops offered, but there were no online materials or online courses, and flexibility in terms of modes of delivery is limited.
Flinders University Teaching for Learning: (http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/) has some great resources for a variety of teaching and learning areas. We missed an underlying structure for the users' orientation.

Late in 2001, a very small number of initiatives around the world emerged showing some common threads, such as recognising the current status and needs of the user and organising staff development offerings into a sequence of development and delivery activities. One of these, Cycle of Improved Practice, offers user level definitions and a 4-step cycle, so it has some resemblance to **adapt**. ANTA's FlexWays program for Vocational Education and Training offers web-based support for planning professional development, and takes a different organisational approach. Other programs, such as ANTA's Working Towards 2010 - Flexibly Delivered Staff Development, offer a comprehensive program but without obvious recognition of different needs of users. A model described by Ellis and Phelps (2000) refers to different stages of expertise, assuming a linear progression of academic staff through staff development for online delivery. While we found the categorisation into different levels of expertise useful, the needs of our client base did not suggest that an action learning model would achieve the required outcomes.

Underlying Principles

Since there were no useable models available for the systematic approach to developing a framework, the design team turned to existing best practice principles for (online) teaching and established a set of underlying principles specifically for adapt. These principles are:

1) Base the framework for **adapt,** and the selection of resources and activities, on The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee's "Guidelines for Effective University Teaching", which specifically state:

    "The AVCC believes that the promotion of effective teaching should be a matter of highest priority for each university and that each institution needs to develop a coherent set of policies and practices which demonstrate that the institution values above all else the education of its students and the contributions that academic staff make to the enhancement of student learning." (AVCC, 1993)

    These Guidelines for Effective University Teaching are based on research into teaching and learning, on good practices in institutions and on criteria used in teaching awards, and in tenure and promotion procedures.

2) Model good flexible learning practice in all enterprises.

    - use a framework familiar to academics, e.g. reflecting academic structures, i.e. program/course/module; year one, two, and three; core and elective courses.
    - model sharing of resources
    - create alternative modes of delivery
    - use the program as a model for good program design, e.g. reflective exercises, plain English, and clear objectives.

3) Focus on the participants in terms of :

    - their role and career status
    - their level of knowledge and skills in teaching online
    - their overall understanding of the teaching-learning nexus
    - their willingness to engage
    - reflecting on their own learning
    - maintaining their level of comfort
    - valuing their personal practical knowledge.

4) Emphasise practice and decision making, but use appropriate theory to scaffold the practice and provide theoretical resources as a secondary support, for learning and for research. Meet immediate needs with resources that allow easy access to 'bite-size' ideas or solutions, especially in **online** resources (eg. 5-minute tip or reading).

The Result

The framework (see Figure 2) maps the breadth and depth of knowledge areas and skills needed to teach well online. At the same time, it helps academics to recognise their strengths and to identify gaps in individual development. This enables participants to consciously plan their own learning activities to improve their online teaching skills.
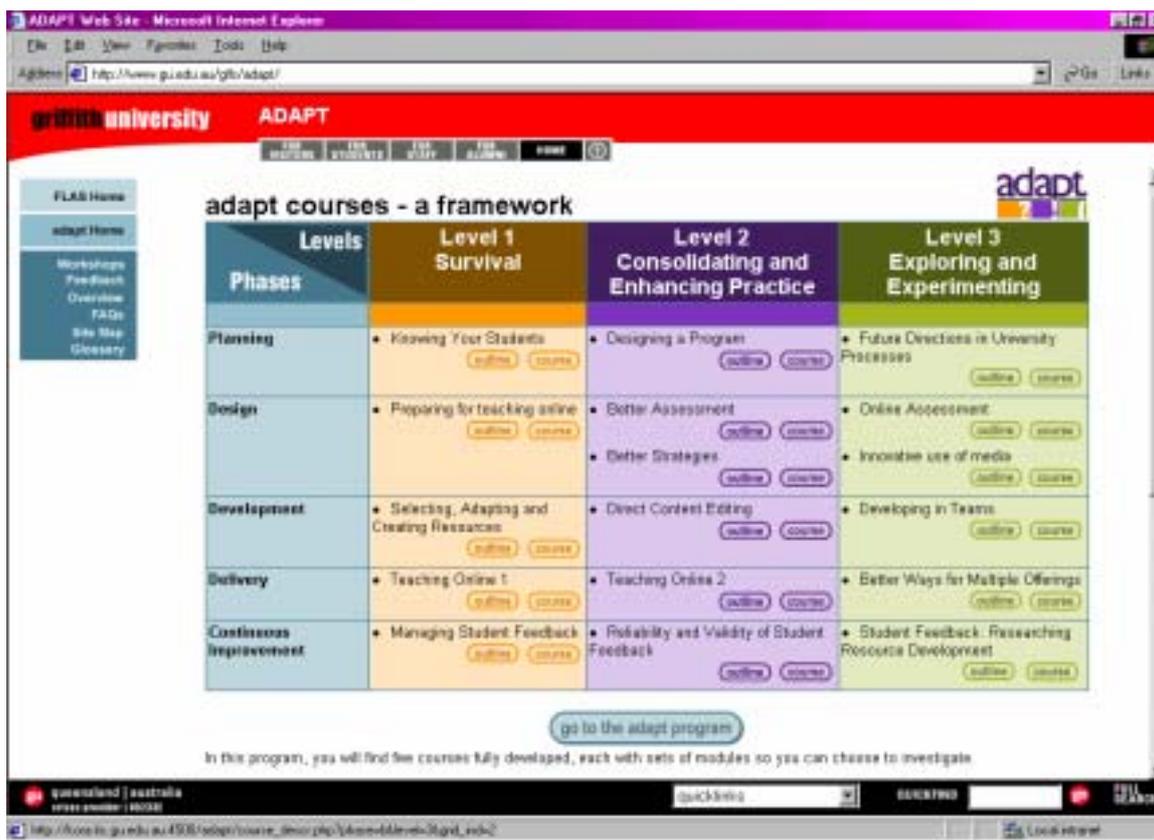
*Figure 2: Framework for **adapt** courses*

With this clearly stated curriculum in place, **adapt** ensures improvements can happen in several directions:

- all modules are compatible and complementary so staff development organisers can plan for their department
- leaders and heads of school can map their discipline and course demands, to recognise and acknowledge strengths and quality teaching, and to identify gaps in organisational development
- individuals can choose basic, intermediate or advanced learning activities, appropriate to their needs.

Levels

In recognition of the fact that people have varying levels of needs and skills, **adapt** is organised in three different levels: "Survival", "Consolidating and Enhancing Practice", "Exploring and Experimenting".

Level 1: 'Survival'

Level 1 consists of easily accessible, bite-sized resources and short topics. It is designed for users who are not familiar with the principles of online teaching and would like to learn more about GU's interpretation of student-centred and flexible learning. The typical users at Level 1 would have no or very little experience in using technology in teaching at GU. They need quick and easy access to resources that help them improve their teaching on a step-by-step basis.

Level 2: 'Consolidating and enhancing practice'

Level 2 is designed for users who have some experience teaching in a flexible learning environment but would like to enhance their online teaching practice, using technology in their teaching. The materials and resources for this level are generally longer and contain more reflective exercises, including theoretical background to consolidate the users' knowledge also on a theoretical basis.

Level 3: 'Exploring and experimenting'
Level 3 is designed for users who are familiar with the GU flexible learning agenda and have experience with planning, designing and delivering courses **online**. The **adapt** offerings for this level are less resource-based but are intended to facilitate the dialogue of a learning community in order to foster and encourage peer-based, interactive learning. This level especially is also aimed at administrators and managers who are involved in decision making regarding flexible learning and staff development.
We recognise that these predefined levels are not categories any individual will fit into. An **adapt** user may be at level 2 in some skills and level 1 in another, but can readily use or revise materials anywhere in the program. The framework is designed to help users do so. All resources and parts of **adapt** that are associated with one particular level (e.g. online courses or print materials) are colour-coded so that users can immediately identify what level they are at when they engage with the **adapt** program.

Phases
The second dimension consists of "Phases", which emphasises good practice and practicality. Since the program is intended to be an integrated model that embraces all stages of teaching in an online environment, it is divided into five phases. These represent the process of preparing, designing, developing, delivering and evaluating online education. For a more detailed description of the individual phases, visit the **adapt** web site (http://www.gu.edu.au/adapt) and select "Overview".

Modes
The **adapt** program recognises that staff have different learning preferences and needs (just as students do), and are dispersed geographically. Consequently, the topics are offered in a variety of modes (online, face-to-face, and print as appropriate).

Modelling: Waving, not drowning

Modes
The program aims to model good flexible learning practice through alternative modes of delivery, through well organised online resources, scheduled and customised face-to-face sessions, print materials and, eventually, facilitated online courses and video resources.

The University's definition of 'flexible learning' was not widely understood or implemented when **adapt** was launched. The diagram in Figure 3 was used to help academics relate their learning experience in **adapt** to the concept of flexible learning, and to translate the elements of flexibility to their teaching practice.
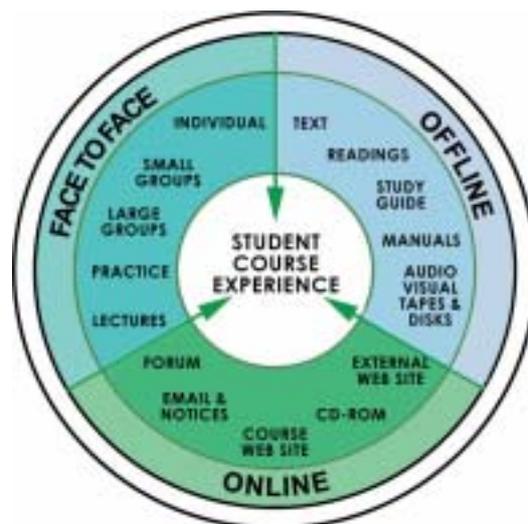

Figure 3: Dimensions of flexible learning modes

Immersion
In Griffith there are a number of examples of flexibility in teaching and learning practices that do not require information and communication technologies. However, these technologies offer many

opportunities for meeting students' needs for flexibility. The aim of **adapt** is to support academic staff in their use of the Griffith learning environment, Learning@GU. For this reason it is suitable and highly appropriate that the professional development for flexible learning is immersed in the use of Griffith's course management software, Blackboard. Therefore, **adapt** is constructed across the corporate web site and Learning@GU. This follows the model used by some other universities (e.g. Southern Cross University, O'Reilly & Brown, 2001) of moving beyond delivery in traditional modes to immersing staff in the experiences of learning online.

Deliverables

In its very construction, the **adapt** online products are examples of good practice in using technology appropriately. For example, it features

- a dynamic web site which functions as a portal and provides easy and intuitive access to **adapt** resources and information
- a database which stores the dynamic information of **adapt** and makes the web pages more easily editable and maintainable
- online and printable resources for independent, just-in-time learning for academic staff with content developed specifically for the Griffith context, and selected articles and resources from other educational institutions that are also relevant to this context.

Language

The online environment requires a shift in pedagogical approaches, so the **adapt** courses model a writing style appropriate for the online environment. Facilitated online discussions will model skills for online communication.

For users, consistency in presentation can be a great help in navigating and locating information. **adapt** models the consistent use of language by beginning each module in a templated fashion. Modules are structured with clear objectives, are written in plain English and incorporate reflective exercises.

Conclusion: Changing Tides

This paper has reported on the planning and design stages of **adapt**, an academic staff development program for online teaching and learning at Griffith University. Based on the University's strategic plan, client needs, the experience from existing practice, a set of underlying principles, and acknowledged constraints and issues, a framework was developed to map the breadth and depth of knowledge required to teach well online. The **adapt** framework:

- helps academic teaching staff identify their strengths and gaps in knowledge in individual development for online learning
- supports academic teaching staff in choosing and planning a learning path to further their knowledge and skills in this area
- aids heads of schools and administrators to identify broader needs in staff development on a school or program level
- assists the **adapt** team in developing a coherent and integrated staff development program rather than an ad-hock and piecemeal offering

For the **adapt** team, it seems that now, having developed a comprehensive framework, the waters are getting clearer. It is getting easier to navigate, to determine the danger zones, and to plug the holes in the boat. Even so, **adapt** is an ongoing project and will probably never be "finished". It will be susceptible to changes in technology, strategic directions, and - most importantly - the dynamic nature of online learning.

For more information, refer to the **adapt** website: http://www.gu.edu.au/adapt.

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