COLLABORATIVE STAFF DEVELOPMENT ACROSS A DIVERSE ORGANISATION

Emma Felton
Australian Catholic University, AUSTRALIA
e.felton@mcauley.acu.edu.au

Peter Evans
NextEd Pty Ltd, AUSTRALIA
peter.evans@nexted.com

Abstract

This paper examines the role of staff training and support in the experience of staff with online teaching at Australian Catholic University. Australian Catholic University's online education is differentiated from other Australian universities for two reasons: 1) It has 6 nationally based campuses spread across a geographical reach of 2,500 kilometres, 2) It has no internal Flexible Learning or Distance Education unit as such, and out sources the provision of web based teaching and learning services to NextEd Pty Ltd, a commercial online education company. Both factors provide challenges and benefits to the effective training, support and co-ordination of online education in the university.

Keywords

Staff development, staff training, teaching, teaching experience, computer literacy, collaboration, pedagogy, outsourcing, partnerships

Introduction: The ACU Context

This research focuses upon the role of staff training and development in the effective use of the Internet as a medium for educational delivery. The aim of the exploratory research was to identify the perceived adequacy and key issues of staff training and support, and to gain some insight into the online teaching experience of staff. It examines staff use and experience of the interactive tools and communications features of the Learning Management System. These tools can provide student centred learning opportunities, involving various forms collaboration and communication in a way not possible with print based distance education.

Online teaching is in its third year of implementation (see http://www.acuweb.com.au) at Australian Catholic University (ACU), with approximately eighty staff being involved at some time in the online postgraduate programme. All online courses and subjects at ACU are fully online, that is, they are not available on campus as web enhanced courses, although students may still study in mixed mode, selecting to complete some subjects face to face, and some online. ACU is notable among Australian universities in the delivery of online courses for two key reasons. These factors, outlined below, should be seen as having a significant impact on staff experience of online education within the university. Both factors have provided challenges and benefits to the implementation and support of online education across the university, issues which are explored in this paper.

Firstly, ACU's online program of postgraduate courses is delivered exclusively in partnership with online education company, NextEd Pty Ltd (see http://www.nexted.com). The collaboration between a large organisation and a commercial company has been instructive and largely beneficial. NextEd's role is to develop and maintain the ACUweb website which houses the Learning Management System, an extensive student administration database, and a user information system. Students apply for courses,

enrol and pay online, independently of ACU student administration. ACU staff use the NextEd Continuous Publishing System (CPS) to develop and publish units which are delivered via NextEd's global server network. In addition, NextEd provides 24 * 7 customer service via email and 14 hours per day via telephone.

Currently ACU offers 14 postgraduate courses online across the disciplines of Education, Nursing, Theology and Business. NextEd have also provided staff training, initially as part of the contractual agreement and in the start up phase of the project, and in the past twelve months on a fee paying as required basis. Training is also undertaken by the ACUweb co-ordinator, and one administrative staff. The resourcing and support for this training is provided by ACU's Academic Staff Development Unit and the ACUweb office. The decision to partner with NextEd allowed ACU to quickly acquire a total online education service (training, publishing, ecommerce, student administration and delivery).

Training and support for the ACU*web* Online Education Programme

> Staff development for open and distance education is still largely seen by organisations as a cost, not an investment. It is often given low priority in organisational plans and funding allocations. Provision tends to be unsystematic, piecemeal or minimal, and staff are often left to pick up what knowledge and skills they can from doing the job. (Robinson, 1998; p. 33)

The importance of staff training in the effective implementation and use of learning technologies, and for the positive experience of the student, is widely acknowledged (Lai, 2001; Paloff & Pratt, 1999; Salmon 2000). Even though online teaching is not new, the importance of staff development has not diminished as we are now moving beyond the "early adopters" to the "early majority" or even the "late majority" (Roger, 1995). Slay comments that this includes many people who have "felt overwhelmed by learning new technology and appear so constrained by increasing demands on their time that they have not known how to follow institutional trends and moves toward online teaching" (1999; p. 1).

> For academics to successfully make the transition to online teachers or learning facilitators, they must do more than develop new technical skills. Online development and delivery requires new pedagogical approaches challenging previous practises … (it) challenges traditional notions of academics working in isolation and instead brings together teams of people each with unique skills. (Ellis & Phelps, 1999; p. 1)

Inglis, Ling and Joosten (1999) identified the need for three types of expertise: subject expertise, instructional design expertise, and expertise in information technologies. Furthermore only the first type is traditionally associated with the role of academic. In an analysis of reported staff development challenges Gruba (2001) identified the following issues:

- anxiety regarding the use of online technologies;
- scepticism of the effectiveness of online learning;
- lack of clear university policy and support;
- working in isolation with little support; and
- problems developing online materials.

Thus staff development is critically needed and multifaceted. Confidence building is required, not only with regards to the use of technology, but with the whole process of online delivery.

Due to ACU's geographical dispersion, 6 campuses across 2,500 km, and the lack of instructional design expertise on any single campus, it was decided that the most effective way to conduct initial training would be through a series of face-to-face workshops. NextEd undertook to provide training to the majority of staff using the NextEd/ACUweb learning platform. Although training via electronic tutorials would have been more cost effective, face-to-face was preferred to effectively deal with a wide range of computer competencies and existing attitudes to online teaching by academic staff. Training has consisted of a series of one-day "Designing Online Units" and "Teaching Online Units" workshops. Staff also had access to both the ACUweb office and NextEd Customer Services Centre for follow up telephone

support. A mentoring system on each campus was implemented a year after the project began, but its success appears to be somewhat sporadic and idiosyncratic.

The Research Project

The purpose of this exploratory research was to identify the perceived adequacy and key issues of staff training and support, and to gain some insight into the online teaching experience of ACU staff. In late July, seventy two academic staff who had taught an ACUweb course were invited to complete an online survey with the opportunity to win two movie tickets. Eighteen or 25% responded.

### Staff perceptions of computer skills and support provided

The wide range of computer literacy has been identified as an important issue in relation to online teaching. The resistance and sense of inadequacy which some staff inevitably experience with technology will have a determining effect on their online teaching and learning experience. Conversely, those high end users, usually in the minority of staff, will have a different set of concerns, frequently more to do with the features of a specific Learning Management System adopted by an institution.

When asked to rate their level of skill and confidence using computers, the majority of responses ranged from "medium" to "very high". Such a relatively high level of confidence and competence was something of a surprise, particularly given that in another question, 22% said that they experienced technical difficulties due to their lack of familiarity with the computer or software. This high level may be attributed in part, to the selection of online teaching staff, and/or training provided by ACUweb and NextEd.
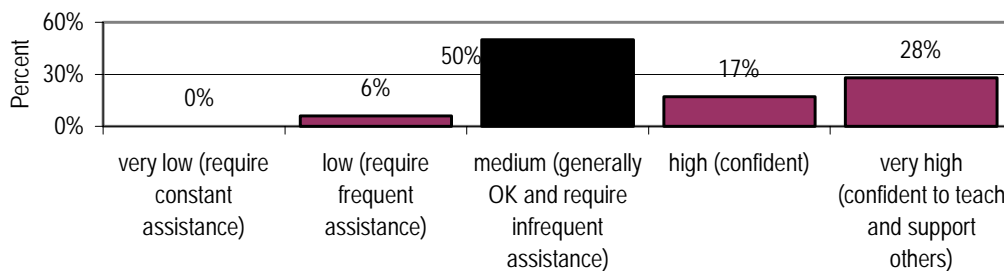

Q2: How would you rate your level of skill and confidence using computers?

Training and support is critical for the transition to web based forms of teaching. Limited resources, limited instructional design expertise, and the geographical spread of campuses provided significant challenges to achieving this. However despite this, 83% of staff reported that they were "reasonably" to "well supported" while they were developing their online unit. Similarly, 84% of staff reported that they were "adequately prepared" or "well prepared" for teaching online.
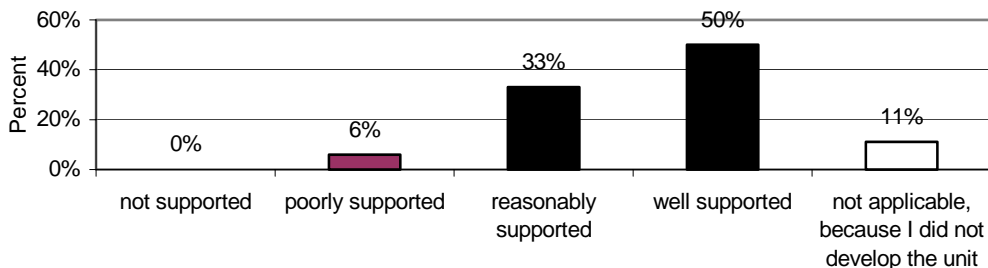
Q4: How well were you trained and supported when you developed your online unit?

In addition to writing their unit, about 25% of staff also uploaded and published their unit using NextEd's Continuous Publishing System. Several staff however, did comment that there should have been "more focus on the online design of the unit and the various teaching methodologies."

Q5: Before you started teaching your online unit, how well prepared were you for teaching online?
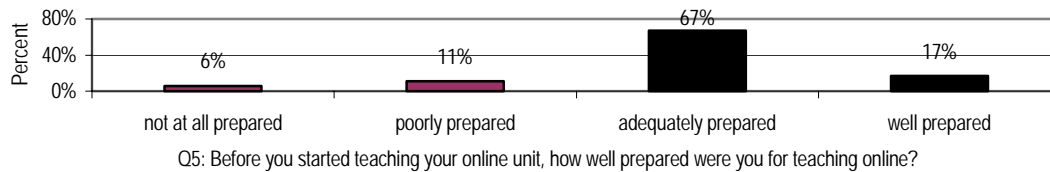
Future support strategies

While overall levels of satisfaction were quite high, several suggested changes will be investigated.

The workshops were a useful strategy to quickly provide training to a number of people. However, in future there will be greater emphasis on more informal, on-the-job, one-to-one activities. Despite some drawbacks, face to face workshops are the most common mode of staff development strategies used in Australian universities (Ellis, O'Reilly, & Debreceny, 1998). Staff commented on the workshop approach:

- *I attended a one day workshop with NextEd which was useful.*
- *Before teaching online, I would have appreciated some degree of one-to-one support and instruction.*
- *More one-to-one rather than workshop--especially once people are initiated and need advanced skills. The workshop approach needs serious thinking through in terms of being an effective strategy.*

Most workshops were held just before semester started. Several staff suggested that training just after the start of teaching might have been more easily integrated into their own work.

- *I would have liked a further session in week 2 of unit implementation to help with setting up announcements/gradebook/drop box. At that time I would have understood the relevance.*
- *Everything I needed was offered but as with most things I didn't really take it in as I was not involved yet.*
- *The semester prior to teaching online was bad for me and I had to get it all set up and ready for semester*

Conducting staff development throughout the teaching semester would also allow activities to be based around the participants' experiences rather than more passive demonstrations and discussions:

- *More input from people who have taught online re their experiences good and bad and hints and tips on how to facilitate online learning would have been useful. Also perhaps hearing from students about their experiences - what helped them what turned them off, what they needed help and support with etc.*
- *Sharing experience of staff involved.*
- *It may have been helpful to do the training for online teaching in the online learning environment and maybe set up groups of rotating lecturer role to experience the different management features*

Ease of use of the learning environment

When asked how easy it was to navigate around the course to find content and tools the majority (78%) of staff believed it was either "easy" or "very easy". However, staff perceived that students would have more difficulty and they expected that only 28% would find it either "easy" or "very easy".

These findings are reinforced by the number of comments from staff about student difficulties using the system. In particular, nursing staff have pointed to the low level of computer literacy among their main student group, women, usually middle aged and in the nursing profession.

- *The students don't receive adequate training or familiarisation with either the learning shell or computing in general. I've had LOTS of complaints / difficulties / frustration's from students.*
- *At least 2 students pulled out of my course because they couldn't manage computer stuff. Most of my online students are mature-age women (some VERY mature age) and they have found the computing and technical side overwhelming. Also, I don't think the NextEd shell is very user-friendly.*

This indicates a strong concern for student's computer competencies, and identifying the need for training for students. Peat, Franklin, Lewis & Sims (2001) recommend "staff need to understand that not all students will embrace the technologies offered … and that we must be more sensitive towards those who appear to need more support." (p. 478 –9). Several staff echoed these sentiments with these suggestions:

- *There needs to be a training session for students. I believe this should be given HIGH priority. It greatly concerns me that we have 40, 50 and 60 year old women enrolling for online courses, but don't give them the training needed to manage the technology. They are set-up for failure before they even start.*

Student perceptions of ease of use
While staff reported concerns with student computer literacy and ability to use the environment, an earlier survey of ACUweb students reported that only 5% of students found it was NOT easy to find information on ACUweb.

It is easy to find the information I require on ACUweb (student survey s1 2002)
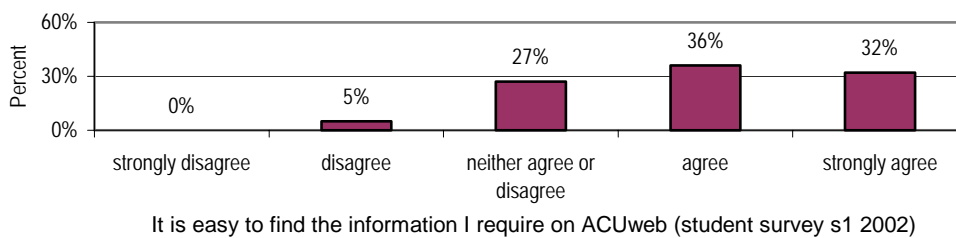
It is possible that staff are focusing on a minority of students who report difficulties, while the silent majority goes largely unnoticed. In a case study of staff expectations of student usage of computers and actual student usage, Peat, Franklin, Lewis & Sims (2001) reported that there was often "a degree of misalignment between the two". Again this suggests that collecting accurate data on student usage and communicating this to staff would improve the provision of online teaching

## Perceptions of the online teaching experience

General impressions
Before examining how to better support teachers it is important to have an understanding of the current perceptions of the usefulness and effectiveness of online learning.

ACU has a tradition of print based distance education, and the majority of online teaching staff had experience in this mode of delivery.. Of the 67% staff who had previously taught a print based course, the vast majority believed that the online nature of the course either "empowered" or "greatly empowered" their teaching and no-one believed that it detracted from their teaching.

This positive result is supported by the fact that the majority of staff (66%) felt that online education resulted in better educational opportunities than other distance education methods. Also, only 6% of respondents said that they would not recommend a colleague teach an online unit (Q 11).

These positive staff beliefs are also supported by a survey of students in semester 1 2002 in which the majority (80%) of students believed that the technological nature of the course enhanced their learning.
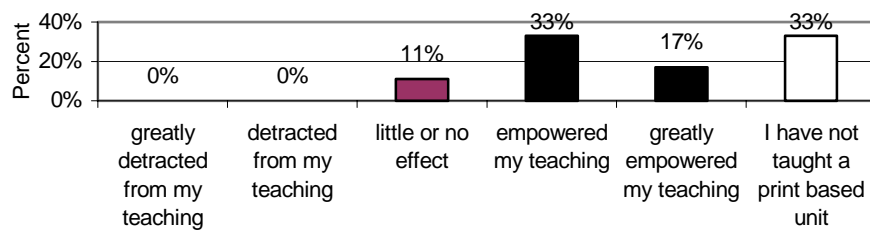
Q8: Do you believe that the online nature of the unit had a positive or negative impact on your teaching when compared to a print based distance education unit?
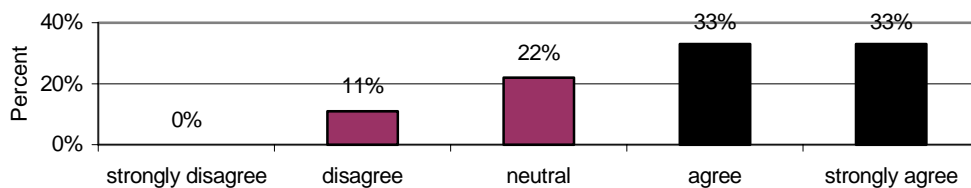
Q9: Online education provides teachers with better educational opportunities than other methods used with distance students?

Thus the overwhelming majority of staff and student report that they view online education more positively than other distance educational formats. We can now investigate the reasons for these positive views and then capitalise on them in staff development activities.
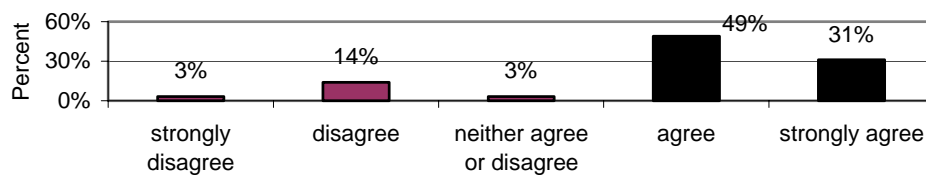
The use of technology in this unit has enhanced my learning expereince (i.e. discusiosn boards, virtual chat, announcements, email) (students s1 2002)

When asked to provide more information about their views of online education, staff often mentioned the flexibility, accessibility and convenience of online study for their students:
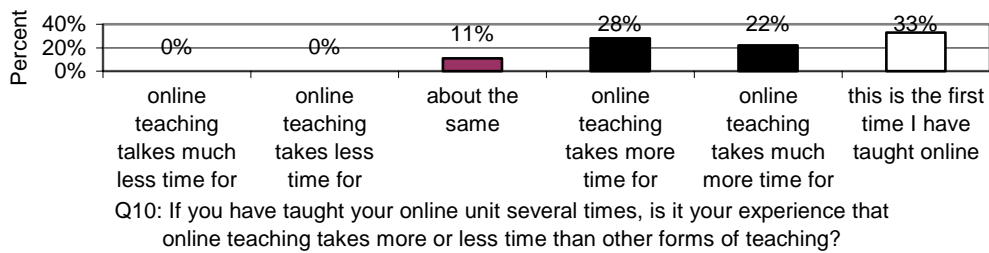
- *I see the greatest strength as the flexibility it offers for student/lecturer*
- *Higher level of engagement; greater student accessibility*
- *The flexibility it provides for students, especially those in remote locations.*
- *Convenience - my students are school teachers from all over the state. It is very difficult for them to meet at a central point for the time required to complete a course. They can make the time to do the work at their convenience.*

Staff also talked about the availability of the technical support from both the ACUweb office and the NextEd Customer Services Centre as a significant strength of ACUweb.

- *The technical support is an advantage.*
- *Helpdesk is very helpful*
- *The ease in the use of functions actually rested in the very supportive, helpful and quick response that I get from ACUweb support staff when I get into trouble.*

The provision of non-academic support through a centralised and specialised "call centre" type operation, rather than through the individual academics is one way in which online education can achieve economies of scale and cost reductions (Inglis, Ling and Joosten, 1999). However, of those who had taught the unit

more than once, 82% believed that the online version would take more time to teach than other forms of teaching to get comparable results.

Q10: If you have taught your online unit several times, is it your experience that online teaching takes more or less time than other forms of teaching?

We suspect that this is may be because staff are not:

- using the environment as effectively as they might (e.g. learning quicker way of navigating around the course or providing feedback to people)
- using features of the environment to create sustainable learning communities rather than respond to each student in isolation

The development of materials and sharing of strategies to address these issues may result in a reduction of the amount of teaching time without reducing the quality of the online teaching. For example, staff asked for the following improvements even though both things can be done in the existing system.

- *Being able to read all contributions to discussion board without having to keep opening various threads would make it less tedious. Perhaps an online tutorial (like the ones that go with computer software) for new students to guide them through what all the different functions are etc.*
- *I would like to be able to upload resources after the unit has commenced.*

Several people made the comment that online education requires the student (and the teaching staff) to be better organised. While some see this to be an advantage (better organised and more timely) others would view this as an imposition (needing their work to be more rigidly structured).

- *Self regulatory nature of the medium.*
- *Control of time factors.*
- *Forced to take a timely approach in an organised manner.*

This need to be more organised is related to the fact that online education opens up the teacher-student experience to examination by others (McDonald & Postle, 1999) and it requires the academic interact with other groups of specialists rather than be work more in isolation (Ellis & Phelps, 1999).

Staff commented both positively and negatively on the presentation of the online materials:

- *Attractiveness (was what I liked). User friendly compared to print based modes*
- *All units look the same - BORING! Lack of use of alternative mediums: pictures, audio, video... these are completely missing…. Monotonous and repetitious style and nature of all the online units! Ho-hum!*

The use of communication tools
Much has been written about the ability of the Internet to facilitate communication and collaboration which sets it apart from traditional print based distance education (Paloff and Pratt 1999, Salmon 2000) Learning via the Internet can allow for a Social Constructivist model of learning, whereby people learn through a process of social discourse and situated cognition, rather than the accumulation of facts (Phillips 1998). Because of the central role of communication tools to enhance the experience of staff and students, it is important to have a clear understanding of how these tools are used and perceived. Staff

also commented on the value of the communication tools as a way of interacting with students and students interacting with each other.

- *Use of Discussion forums, email, announcements*
- *Interactivity, superior communication*
- *... puts students in touch with other students.*
- *Time to consider responses in student discussion forums*
- *Gets students talking to each other*
- *Higher level of engagement;*

The following graph shows whether a lecturer used a tool and the tool's usefulness (not useful, adequate, very useful). For example, the digital drop box was not used by 17% of staff and of the ones that did use it, 11% found it not useful, 39% found it adequate and 33% found it very useful. Below is a list of the tools listed in order of usage and usefulness (the percentage represents the number who believed it to be either "adequate" or "very useful"):

- Email (94%);
- Announcements (94%);
- Discussion forums (89%);
- Digital drop box (72%);
- Online gradebook (50%);
- Unit statistics for tracking students (45%);
- Resources for uploading information within the semester (39%); and
- Virtual classroom for chat sessions (17%).
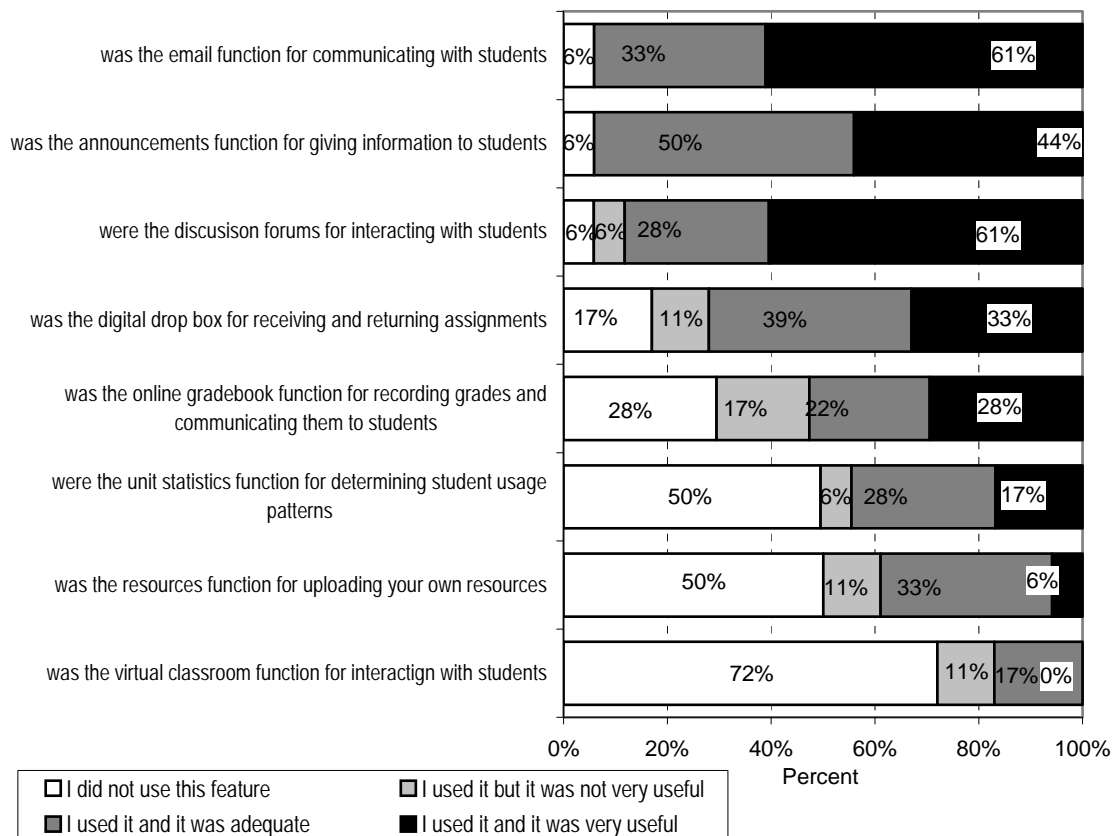
Q17 to 24: How useful (were these tools)

Email, announcements, discussion forums, digital drop box and the gradebook were the most valued tools. Perhaps this is because these tools all have close analogues in the face to face classroom or are in common usage (email). Or perhaps these tools are more inherently useful. The lack of use of chat as a way of interacting with students, is disappointing. Perhaps this is a reflection of lack of familiarity and timidity with synchronous chat. One person mentioned:

- *I no longer use Virtual Classroom as a teaching tool (use it only for communication) as it was a constant problem trying to 'manage' experienced and inexperienced students to 'get' to the site on time!*

In a recent paper Peat, Franklin, Lewis & Sims (2001) surveyed and interviewed staff on their expected and actual usage of communication tools. Generally they found that staff had higher perception of its use than the actual usage. In a recent student survey, the majority of students (67%) said that they were satisfied with the levels of communication between staff and students, yet there was a significant proportion (25%) of people who were dissatisfied and more research would be needed to identify the reasons.

Conclusion

Staff training and support and the online teaching experience was perceived by staff in a generally positive way. Despite the challenges discussed at the outset, the current training model appears to have been perceived as satisfactory with the majority of staff indicating that they felt adequately prepared and generally well supported by the workshop method.

Key findings
- Staff's experience of support, training and the online teaching experience at ACU was regarded overall, positively.
- The study identified a preference for more one-on-one training, particularly once staff began teaching online. Staff have a lot of processes to remember when using learning technologies which are quickly forgotten if not used immediately. This also highlights the need for greater on campus support for online delivery.
- Staff identified a need for more time than the Faculties provided for the development and teaching of their online unit.
- The necessity to prepare their online unit well in advance of delivery, for some, was seen as a limitation.
- A perceived need for some sort of training for students, particularly as ACU's online program serves postgraduate students only, who are mostly mature age and sometimes un comfortable with technology.

Concerns and challenges
While the majority of staff experiences are positive and most issues will be addressed with slight modifications to staff training, some issues appear more systemic. Perhaps the most critical is the need for staff to have more time to develop and teach their online units. Many staff see their working year as lurching from semester to semester, finalising the results for one group of students just in time to start teaching another group and trying to complete research, course development and other obligations in the remaining time. This list of staff perceptions can be used to further ensure that staff development activities emphasise the strengths and address the weaknesses.

The exploratory research highlighted the need for some additional alternative strategies to support staff, summarised as follows:

- Establish a viable mentoring system on each campus, though the use of this appeared to be idiosyncratic and on some campuses more informal networks of support were employed.
- Encourage staff to share their own online learning experiences as a way to build a sustainable network of campus based support.

- To ensure that all staff are shown concrete and practical examples of how to use different educational tools

Staff development should be seen as a core investment in the implementation phase of any online education program rather than an ad hoc add-on activity. This research highlights the need for staff to be allocated adequate time to develop online content and ensure that sufficient support mechanisms are in place on a continuing `as needs' basis .

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