Framing the role of technologies in the recognition and development of staff capacities to enhance learning in higher education

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There are practical initiatives which can be taken by university management to move institutions forward by engaging a broad range of staff and in cultivating leadership capabilities in teaching and learning. These initiatives are considered in terms of 12 'levers of engagement' currently being implemented in our university, and shown below. Deakin, as a major flexible education provider, is used as an institutional case study of the role of technology in supporting organisational change in higher education. Many of the levers of engagement are evident in other Australian universities.

Lever 1: New visions/new times

Deakin has set its goal for 2008 to 2012 to be: 'To develop partnerships between students, staff, industry, employers and government which ensure that academic programs are of high quality, relevant, informed by contemporary research and create a unique Deakin student experience; to be recognised as a national leader in teaching, especially through flexible delivery; and to be recognised as Australia's premier university for *research and scholarship in flexible education* (our emphasis added)'. This highlights the commitment at the highest levels of management within Deakin to achieving pre-eminence in flexible education.

Lever 2: Preparation of new continuing academic staff

Deakin has a compulsory and highly flexible Graduate Certificate of Higher Education (GCHE) [http://www.deakin.edu.au/education/gche/] that allows each new staff member to develop the knowledge and skills. It also has a one day induction program for all staff with a teaching role that includes the essential information about Deakin's academic processes and teaching support processes.

Lever 3: Compulsory casual teaching development program

Deakin has a compulsory program that is intended to be completed in the first semester of employment as a casual academic - Tutor, Demonstrator or Marker - at Deakin and is a condition of continuing employment in this role.

Lever 4: Recognition, use and expansion of education 'Experts'

To draw upon the knowledge and experience of its best educators, Deakin has created Teaching Scholars and a College of Distinguished Deakin Educators whose members will be recognised as experts and leaders in teaching and learning in the institution and who will contribute to developing the next generation of teaching and learning experts.

Lever 5: Just In time/Just sufficient/Just for me professional development

Professional development online should be available in a geographically dispersed organisation just in time/just sufficient for the individual staff member's immediate needs/just for them. At Deakin, the environment will be driven by a searchable database to allow the material to be viewed by key domains.

Lever 6: Communities of Practice in teaching and learning

By building up a pool of 'experts' in different areas of teaching it is intended that Deakin will create a resource bank of potential mentors. Such a pool of experts could also be called upon to oversee or drive innovative teaching developments across Deakin, including in 'Communities of Practice' to support excellent teaching through activities such as recognition of new outstanding educators and dissemination of outstanding teaching practice.

Lever 7: Renewing leadership in teaching and learning

It is the task of academic leaders to revitalise and energise their colleagues to meet the challenges of tough times with eagerness and with passion. The emphasis in Deakin is reviewing the roles of Associate Deans and Associate Heads of School, Teaching and Learning, with the view to refocussing their contributions around quality improvement, development and innovation in realising the scholarship-driven vision for flexible education as well as the expansion of scholarly teaching leaders and their mobilisation

Lever 8: Strategic funding for teaching and learning development

Encouraging innovation is an important aspect of demonstrating major strengths in teaching and learning. At Deakin, innovation is encouraged by a substantial strategic institutional fund devoted to projects directed towards innovation in teaching/learning.

Lever 9: Supporting teaching excellence through awards and Fellowships

Teaching awards and fellowships are powerful ways of recognising excellent teachers, and providing them and their colleagues with development opportunities. Professional Development Fellows are used to develop material to assist the teaching and learning development of their colleagues.

Lever 10: Disseminating exemplary practices online

As related to higher education, the value of cases of good practice as an integral resource in e-supported professional development environments has been argued. They supplant the experience that the novice teacher lacks. Deakin has an online case resource to support the professional development of staff. [http://www.deakin.edu.au/itl/teach-learn/cases/]

Lever 11: Establishing reliable IT infrastructure

Encouraging adoption of educationally sound use of technology requires reliable and effective IT infrastructure. Deakin like most universities has invested considerable funding into developing such an infrastructure for both production and development systems.

Lever 12: Enhancing the use of student evaluation to improve learning and teaching online

Evaluating the quality of teachers and the teaching program is important as a means of recognising those with expertise and motivating other staff. Deakin has compulsory evaluations of named individual teachers that are available to both the individuals evaluated, and those with line management responsibility for their performance. However, student feedback is only one dimension of measuring the quality of the teaching program.

Conclusion

Universities committed to flexible education need to engage their staff in teaching, learning and leading effectively online. Valuable and timely resources and collaborative online spaces is a starting point in achieving broad and productive engagement by teaching staff. However, the mere existence of useful resources and avenues for communication is not enough to move a whole organisation forward. Such engagement requires a reconceptualisation of what it means to be a capable educator, what means of recognition and development are required institutionally, and what career paths can be pursued to allow staff to develop as excellent teachers with their institutions' support. An integrated set of practical initiatives is also required.

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