



Working in Partnership: An authentic professional learning program to promote sustainable curriculum change

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This paper describes a program that reframes professional development through a partnership model underpinned by an authentic professional learning approach and incorporating elements of design-based research and communities of practice. A secondary underpinning of the program is the development of key skills by the educational design and development group in both project management and evaluation of learning and teaching projects as well as effective online learning design.

The outcome sought from the partnership model is to promote sustainable curriculum change through the development of staff capabilities. Using curriculum design projects as the catalyst, the partnership program integrates faculty and centrally based approaches to design solutions to authentic teaching and learning problems. The collaborative nature of the program encourages scholarly dialogues between academic and professional support staff enabling increased output in scholarship of learning and teaching.

Keywords: professional learning, partnership program, authentic practice, curriculum design

Introduction

The need to support the continuing development of university teachers in terms of understanding teaching practice, student learning, different models of education and educational technology is well understood. Methods and practice to support this development are many and varied. Kennedy (2005) suggests a framework based on nine identified models of continuing professional development. Ferman (2002) describes what teaching staff find valuable, number one being collaboration with an educational designer, followed by attending workshops and short courses. Professional development activities are traditionally designed around the development of technical skills, teaching approaches, assessment and are primarily delivered through workshops, seminars and lecture programs. These activities are not always effective in transferring skills, especially given that the type and number of tasks that a University teacher is expected to engage in are becoming more complex (Ramsden, 2010). Lecturers also report having less time to undertake all the tasks necessary to be successful in their careers and so professional development activities may have low priority, as they are seen as disaggregated from their main job (Carter, 2005). Research has shown that the reasons for lack of participation in professional development opportunities, includes “a lack of time, a lack of expectations that they should, and the lack of infrastructure to support the training” (Johnson, Adams and Cummins, 2012, p.19). Furthermore this research found that the appropriate processes to accommodate this sort of professional development are rarely established and that “a cultural shift will be required before we see widespread use of more innovative organisational technology” (ibid.).

Overall, university models of support traditionally vacillate between faculty, school or departmentally based and those, which are centrally based (Hicks, 1999). In the former scenario, knowledge, skills and resources are

maintained in silos often producing individual solutions to problems repeated across the institution. In the latter scenario, support is organised more systematically and efficiently but can suffer from disconnect with the academics' needs in relation to their specific concerns. Both models can suffer a lack of alignment with the institution's strategic priorities.

How do we develop meaningful activities that engage staff and that take account of faculty and centrally supported development and the strategic directions of the institution? This paper describes how one Australian university, through understanding what staff find valuable and using an integrated support model for professional learning, implemented a new program with the aim of enabling academics to develop new approaches for their teaching.

The model draws on the concept from situated learning environments that useable knowledge is best gained in learning environments which feature: authentic contexts; authentic activities; access to expert performances and modeling; multiple roles and perspectives; collaborative construction of knowledge which prompt reflection, articulation, coaching and scaffolding and; authentic assessment (Herrington and Herrington, 2008). The program has gone through a number of iterative development and review cycles, including stakeholder feedback, self-reflection by the program coordinators and team members, and evaluation from the academic leads. This process has helped shape the continuous improvement of the program.

This paper describes how on-going professional learning can be achieved when tied to collaborative development with central support staff and authentic learning activities not disaggregated from one's main work.

The Faculty Partnership Program

Overview

The Faculty Partnership Program enables academic staff to work in partnership with professional staff from within a central Educational Design and Development (EDD) group at one Metropolitan Australian university. The Program draws on the expertise of the EDD group in a way that optimises use of central resources, and aligns with faculty aims in learning and teaching. Submissions are invited twice a year (refer to FPP overview in Figure 1.) from teaching staff who will be convening a unit in the session following the expected delivery of project outcomes. All project submissions are ranked and approved for submission by the Faculty Associate Dean Learning and Teaching and Executive Dean and are submitted to the EDD group for possible resourcing. Based on an established set of principles underpinning this transformative, authentic learning program (Carter 2003, 2005, Cram & Kennedy 2009) submissions are assessed against criteria that projects need to: address in some way a strategic initiative or Faculty priority; develop or improve the learning design of activities and/or resources in at least one teaching unit; have outcomes with the potential for wider use in other units; and consider accessibility and universal design principles.

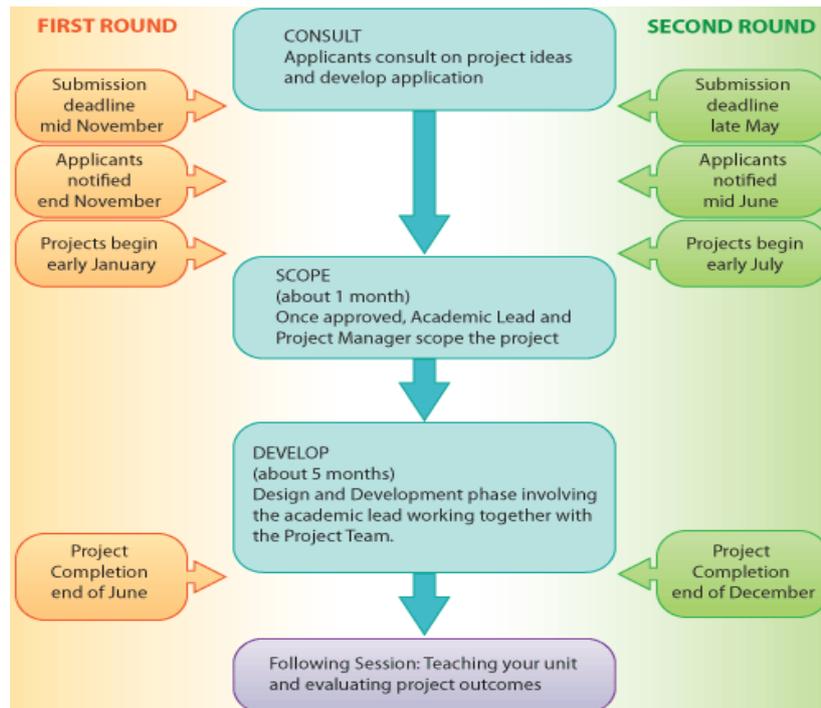


Figure 1: FPP overview and timeline

Once approved for resourcing, projects are assigned a team from within the EDD group, including a project manager. Team members meet regularly with the project's Academic Lead, and provide regular updates to the faculty and key stakeholders. Part of forming the project team entails brokering support from other central services which may include an academic developer, an accessibility services consultant, a media production professional and/or a liaison librarian. Each of these additional team members generally act in a consultative role within the project. While not using a formal project management methodology, nevertheless, projects are tightly scoped and closely monitored to achieve goals within a timeframe of six months of design and development. This short timeframe (as shown in Figure 1.) requires a concentrated investment of time from teaching staff which means that projects must have targeted impacts on learning and teaching.

Academic staff who participate in the Program benefit from receiving expert design support and pedagogical advice from EDD and other support staff, as well as developing their own confidence and skills. Many projects also include the creation of professional-standard, learning and teaching resources for use in a teaching unit. Project outcomes are designed to be sustainable, have the potential for broader application and contribute to the applicant's professional development. Projects that have external grant funding are not eligible, as this program offers in-kind support rather than financial support.

In summary, the aims of the Faculty Partnership Program are to:

- increase the impact of educational design services by strategic selection of educational design projects;
- increase staff confidence and skills in educational design and development;
- increase institutional use of learning and teaching systems and educational technologies;
- support the professional creation of teaching and learning activities and resources.

By bringing together faculty priorities and concerns with centrally based expertise, a true partnership can be developed to produce meaningful and sustainable outcomes. Examples of projects that have been completed under this program are shown in Appendix 1. These examples show how a learning and teaching problem such as a need to compress content or external students need for more feedback, drives a pedagogical solution.

Project Management

Each project within the FPP is managed through a cycle consisting of six phases, ensuring consistency between team processes (see Figure 2). The FPP project management phases define processes for inviting, collating, scoping and conducting projects. The phases allow for the redefinition of project scope in consultation with the academic lead and the implementation of both outcomes and documentation of the process for future

development.

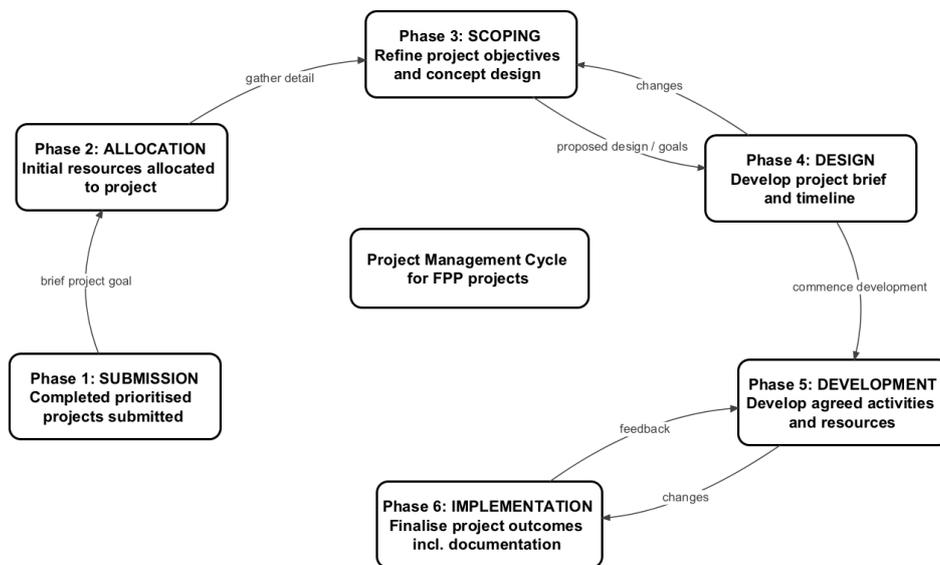


Figure 2: Project Management Phases for an FPP project

Submission, Allocation, Scoping (refer to Phases 1 – 3 in Figure 2.)

Academics are encouraged to meet with their EDD representative to discuss ideas and provide as much information as possible in the online application form. In addition to a brief project description, the applicant must provide the learning issue or problem area that the project will address, and explain how their project will benefit other staff, other units or courses. They must also indicate how many hours per week they can commit to the project and whether they have negotiated release or administrative support for their project. Finally they must indicate whether they are planning to be away during the life of the project and if so, how the project will be managed in their absence.

At a large group meeting of relevant EDD and other support staff, submitted projects are allocated a project team. The team composition is based on requirements articulated in their written submission and some pre-scoping by the Educational Developer allocated to that faculty. The first month of the project is taken up with scoping and development of a project brief. This work is then detailed in the first report that goes out to the stakeholders in each faculty including the Executive Dean and the Associate Dean, Learning and Teaching.

Designing, Developing, Implementing (refer to Phases 4 – 6 in Figure 2.)

Projects generally take a design-based approach whereby the relationship between pedagogy, learning artifacts and practice is explored (The Design Research Collective, 2003). Development of a design brief in collaboration with the academic lead is central to this phase ensuring their issues are met whilst at the same time producing innovative and fresh ideas for implementation. Using a design brief in this way encourages a collegial environment in which to capture the ideas, opinions and perspectives of all project team members. The projects are worked on for a total of six months. Various factors impact on the output of the project during this time, including availability of the content for the unit, and availability of the academic lead, as often there are competing priorities on their time such as teaching, marking and research. The mid project report is written after approximately 3 months and details the work carried out to date. At all times, the scoping document is used to guide progress and by the mid report project teams have a clear understanding of whether the initial stated aims are going to be realised, sometimes adjusting these to suit the contextual factors. The final report is written at the end of the project and contains examples of the completed project.

Project Evaluation

Each project in the FPP introduces evaluation in the scoping phase and details are included in each of the three progress reports to stakeholders. A Realistic Approach to evaluation (Datta, 1997; Pawson and Tilley, 1998) is used within the program as this enables the investigation of how projects are “effective in certain circumstances for certain groups of participants in certain contexts” (Owen, 2006, p.261). As can be seen in Figure 2, there is

no specific evaluation phase completing the development cycle. The short duration of the projects is conducive to formative evaluation and some summative evaluation in terms of meeting objectives and reflecting on processes. Impact evaluation may be carried out once any changes or improvements in a particular unit are delivered to the students. As this tends to be some time after project completion, it needs to be considered either as a separate project in and of itself or as something carried out at a later date by the academic involved and guided and supported by a member of the EDD group. This aligns with the Action Learning Projects described in Kember (1998), whereby the educational developer acts as a critical friend “helping the participants to develop the necessary expertise rather than doing the evaluation for them” (ibid., p.58), thereby equipping teachers for continuous monitoring and improvement of their own teaching.

Stakeholder Reporting

In the first round of the FPP, project activities were reported to key stakeholders on a quarterly basis. This ensured any issues such as identification of resources, staff unavailability or any other potential risks could be addressed promptly. It also ensured transparency of processes and stakeholder engagement. In subsequent rounds, reporting has been simplified to three periods, which is better aligned with the project phases of the FPP and is more manageable given the short duration of projects. The first report now comes after the scoping phase, which is key to ensuring the project has buy-in from staff and quickly identifies any potential issues or risks to the project’s completion, particularly around adequate resourcing. The second report comes mid-way through the project cycle, ensuring progress and then a final report upon project completion. Throughout the project, teams meet regularly and there is also a monthly meeting of all FPP project managers to share concerns and resolve issues collectively.

Ethics

To report on any evaluative outcomes in a scholarly fashion to the community, ethics approval is needed. This can be a long and drawn out process, often taking longer than the six month duration of a project, and therefore not practical to submit such applications for each individual project. In this instance, an application was made for ethics approval to cover all individual projects collectively in the program. This request was successful and now the program can further benefit the institution by enhancing scholarly output.

Evaluation of the Partnership Model

Introduction

Ultimately, the Partnership Program aims to enhance the student learning experience through building capacity in the design and development of learning environments. Evaluation of the program as a whole is necessary and utilises both formative and summative strategies. This can produce valuable empirical evidence to support the continuation and enhance the quality of the activities.

Approach

Educational designers and developers are increasingly using a design-based research approach to their work in this program, looking at what works and what doesn’t and building on strengths during each cycle based on the skills and inclinations of the academic lead. As Dimitriadis and Goodyear (2013) state “Design methodologies need to be robust and general enough to cope with face-to-face, online and blended contexts, with synchronous and asynchronous interactions, as well as situations where teachers’ time, skills or attention are limited ...”. Similarly, the program coordinator has adopted a developmental approach to review, reflect on and evaluate the program. This is also known as MERI - Monitoring, Evaluation, Review, Implementation (Wadsworth, 2011). The program is currently in its third round of operation and has gone through a number of small iterative developments to improve outcomes, based on feedback from the EDD group and other stakeholder groups.

Review of the first round of the FPP

In Semester 2, 2012 of the FPP, there were 13 Faculty proposals, 3 projects were delayed due to academic leads availability at initial scoping phase and 11 projects were scoped and implemented within six months. The remaining 2 were re-scoped and completed in January 2013.

The projects represented a broad range of learning and teaching support activities. While the majority of projects represented the immediate needs of academics, all related to University-wide strategic directions and all supported the broad objectives of the FPP. For example:

- all Faculties submitted educational design support proposals;
- media or online learning / assessment resources were created collaboratively to support eleven teaching

- programs;
- seven projects focused on increasing staff confidence and skills in educational design and development; and
- all projects contributed to increased use of educational technologies.

Feedback from the Academic Leads

At the conclusion of FPP Round 1, a survey was sent to the academic lead of each FPP project to gather feedback on the Program by identifying successes and areas for improvement. There were 8 responses from a possible 13. Management of the projects called for a variety of skills and expertise from LTC staff. The following table provides an analysis of major tasks carried out for FPP Round 1 projects. (Note that projects may fall into more than one category):

Table 1: Summary of Faculty Partnership Program project tasks in Round 1

Design - assessment events	4
Design - interactive learning activities	4
Design - media objects	4
Design - new course/unit/curricular	3
Total design tasks	15
Development – learning activities/elements	7
Development – audio-visual media	6
Development – new unit guide	3
Development – graphics	1
Development – template for online units	1
Total development tasks	18
Review – course/unit/curricula	4
Total review activity	4
Workshops – introduction to [LMS]	2
Workshops – online learning design	2
Workshops – other	1
Total workshops run	5
Other activity	1
Total other activity	1

The academic leads were invited to rate their confidence and skills in educational design and development after participating in an FPP project. 50% of the respondents agreed that they were ‘quite’ confident in this area and 25% ‘somewhat’ confident. 40% agreed they were ‘quite’ skilled and 40% felt ‘somewhat’ more skilled in this area. Academic Leads also responded about effectiveness of support in achieving project goals with 50% finding support ‘extremely’ helpful and 37% ‘very’ helpful. General comments reflected this appreciation of support and one participant cited the short length of projects as a limiting factor for successful outcomes.

Feedback from the Design and Development Group

Summative feedback was sought from the EDD group at the end of the first round of projects via a survey tool. Results were combined with formative feedback obtained through regular reflection and discussion during team meetings, and the following issues and solutions emerged:

- *Long lead-in time to start projects due to availability of academic leads and lack of clarity in the project proposal.* This was resolved by creating a proposal checklist for use by the EDD when consulting on applications. Also, by bringing forward the closing date for applications by a week more time could be spent on pre-scoping and clarification of project aims before academics leave for their breaks, thus supporting more efficient project start-up;
- *Internal team allocation meeting.* All members to be briefed fully beforehand such that decisions on team members can be made at that meeting;
- *Communications need to be wider and more timely.* Welcome letters were sent out to all project team members from within the LTC, including their supervisors. Also, the FPP website was redeveloped and more channels of communication were used to promote the program including both centrally and faculty based methods.
- *Following up on student outcomes (where applicable) after the project has finished.* This was discussed earlier under project evaluation.

Based on the feedback from both groups and critical reflections of the program coordinators, adjustments were considered to three areas of the program:

Project planning

A range of software solutions for project management were reviewed and discussed. We hoped to select one that was easy to use by EDD staff and also one that would not add to the cognitive load of academics who were already learning to use new tools and processes within their online learning environments. Asking them to learn a new software system within the project was not deemed feasible. It was decided to make use of an in-house project management software for reporting and documentation as this was integrated with other systems including single sign on and authentication. Support and advice was given on how to manipulate the software to serve the needs of our program, however, the initial system trialed was too complicated for managing our particular type of projects specifically within the short timeframe. After consultation within the EDD group, a more flexible technology solution was chosen. It was decided to use the University Wiki for documentation and storage, as the ubiquitous use of such technology at the university enabled its seamless uptake by all members of the project teams.

Project management approach

A common approach to project management is by use of a timeline and milestones. Often such milestones can appear artificial, as many of the project managers felt in this program. Instead, a more realistic approach is taken to reporting, which includes information on the activity completed in that phase/period as well as achievements to date. Most importantly identified issues are presented with identified solutions to overcoming them. This iterative scoping approach allows the project teams to reassess priorities based on time available. Outcomes may well end up being scoped 'down' but overall this leads to an effective model whereby the academic can feel that they have made some relevant steps forward and they are themselves transparent to others.

Project length and timing

The current rounds of projects run January to June and July to December. Whilst this aligns well with the teaching semesters, there are also large periods of time whereby academics are unavailable such as the summer months (January and February), and conference season in July. The EDD group are also very busy with higher than average support duties around the start of each semester (February and July). This limits the project duration and in turn, the project outcomes. Much discussion was had within the EDD group and with the Stakeholders on when best to run the projects and whether actually 12-month projects would be better. There was no 'best' solution found and therefore reiteration was made of the importance of the scoping stage and revisiting through the design brief as the individual time restrictions play out in each project. A question about availability was also added to the application form to highlight the partnership arrangement in that both sides have to allocate sufficient time to the project.

Effectiveness of the Partnership Model

Analysing the effectiveness of the partnership model using the 4 key issues identified by Hicks (1999) when considering alternative models for the delivery of academic development.

- Access to development
- Resourcing and ownership
- Impact on student learning
- Generic versus discipline-based scholarship

Access to development

By situating development activities in the academic's context, the Faculty Partnership projects provide an authentic setting for learning to take place. There are no barriers, either physical or conceptual, to participation as can sometimes be found in centrally run development programs. The FPP offers an opportunity for central support teams of educational design and development experts to collaborate with local discipline experts. This opens the way forward for professional development and learning to take place that is discipline specific but also strategically driven to provide sustainable outcomes that can be of use across the institution not only in the local context. At this point the Associate Dean Learning and Teaching in each faculty has the ultimate say in prioritizing who can access this learning opportunity but everyone now has the ability to apply for inclusion in the program.

Resourcing and ownership

The first iteration of the program planned to open applications to all faculty based teaching staff with applications prioritised by the faculty Associate Deans (ADs) of Learning and Teaching (see Figure 2, phase 1).

Initially the ADs themselves nominated projects depending on their faculty's priority. Whilst this met their needs, it was not ideal as some of the Academic Leads were not familiar with the program's processes, having not applied themselves, particularly the short time scale for project completion. A consequence of this was difficulty obtaining the Academic Lead's buy-in to the project, resulting in a longer scoping phase, and shorter available time for design and development. In addition, two of the thirteen Academic Leads in the first round were unavailable during the initial scoping phase, which meant projects were extended into the seventh month. In subsequent rounds, this limited availability at initiation has been dealt with in two ways. A pre-scoping meeting was held where possible, such that the team could be correctly resourced and set up ready for project scoping. Then at project scoping, the deliverables were scaled back to take into account the shorter timeframe (rather than keeping to the six months and running over into the next round).

Feedback on this limiting factor regarding ownership was given to the faculties and in the second round of the program one of the four faculties did open up applications to their staff rather than pre-selecting projects. In the third round, three of the four faculties did this, although this wasn't without issue. Opening up a program of support with no financial backing may not be encouraging to staff. Time pressures for academics can often be alleviated by the possibility of 'buy-out' of teaching or marking time thus allowing time to work on a project. Without this financial support, academics may be reluctant to commit to such projects. This appeared to be the case as one faculty received no new applications once opened up to staff. The applicants that did come forward however were those who had been involved in the first round of projects and saw value in the expertise and resources provided by the program and felt ownership of the outcomes. In fact formative feedback has shown this to be the case in all of the projects initiated by an Academic (Lead) as compared to those initiated by the ADs. A strategy to publicise the benefits of the program along with some concrete examples of previous projects has now been developed to encourage this ownership in alignment with faculty priorities.

Impact on learning

Learning through the FPP is taking place across a number of dimensions (refer back to Table 1) and the results of this learning can have a beneficial effect on student learning through the design of more engaging and aligned activities (Dimitriadis and Goodyear, 2013). It is often difficult to measure impact of centralised development programs on student learning, as teaching success can be attributed to a range of interventions not to mention the teacher's and the students' individual characteristics (Hicks, 1999). In the Partnership model, preliminary feedback from the Academic Leads has demonstrated an improvement in their skills and confidence in educational design and development. The next step will be to incorporate student evaluation through questions aligned to the targeted project activities. This will enable impact on learning to be more effectively measured.

Scholarship

Hicks (ibid.) identifies that high quality and relevant research can be produced when there is partnership between an educational researcher and a faculty-based teacher. The Partnership model provides such an arrangement and in order to communicate findings to the wider education community, the program coordinators and EDD group members applied for human ethics approval from the university's ethics committee. This was made difficult by nature of the fact that approval was being sought for projects in the future, which are not yet able to be defined. All FPP projects, however, have a common goal in terms of curriculum improvement and a bank of questions were created that could be used in the evaluative inquiry process. There is no 'one type fits all' approach to evaluation (Mark, 2001; Torres & Preskill, 2001), however questions were grouped thematically and participants would come from one or more of three groups: the teaching staff; the students; and the project team members. This means that data could be collected ethically and used to write up research papers and conference presentations, furthering the success of the program in terms of its reach.

Conclusion

Whilst the program is still in its infancy, it is clear that progress is being made in terms of moving to a more sustainable model of professional learning and enhancement of curriculum design as demonstrated by the alignment with Hicks' (1999) criteria. The Faculty Partnership Program enables staff to engage in critical discourse about learning and teaching issues in an authentic context and through a community of practice. Such communities pave the way for professional learning and resonate with the words of Brown and Duguid (2000) that "practice is an effective teacher and the community of practice the ideal learning environment" (p.127). The human ethics approval for the program to collect evaluative data will allow further research and scholarship in collaborative curriculum design to be undertaken in future rounds.

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APPENDIX 1: Examples of Faculty Partnership Program projects

Problem	Solution	Outcome
Compress a 13 week course for delivery in a 6 week session	Redevelop the unit for fully online delivery in a way that was engaging for students, presented a clear learning structure and employed some principles of the flipped classroom.	Student feedback and level of engagement indicated a very positive response to content and structure. The unit is now being explored as a potential model for adapting other units for compressed curriculum delivery.
Deliver content in an engaging way in a new Doctor of Physiotherapy program	Develop high quality online audio-visual resources to support the student learning experience in the new program.	81 videos were recorded and a template for iLearn was built for use with all the videos, including key learning content. A video production guide was produced to support Physiotherapy staff to embed video from Vimeo into the learning management system (Moodle), themselves.
Provide a uniform approach to online content delivery across a program	Across four units, design a template, which is pedagogically sound but flexible enough to enable customisation for each unit's requirements.	A new Moodle template was developed with a common look and feel in Topic Zero, followed by scaffolding in each proceeding topic to structure resources and activities. Short welcome videos were developed for all conveners to introduce themselves to students. The units appeal in particular to students unable to attend traditional face-to-face lectures and tutorials.
External students were missing out on teacher interaction and feedback in internal class discussions and presentations	Investigate, trial and then implement a free virtual classroom tool. Combined with a Smartboard, this allows students to draw on the whiteboard from home and explain 'how to' do the task.	Using Scribblar, external students were able to interact with the teacher in an online synchronous exchange. file://localhost/See a video here/ http://player.vimeo.com/video:11281701
To master the skill of writing computer code students must learn how to translate applications into somewhat abstract algorithmic problems.	The project explored the use of collaborative tools, such as wikis for testing algorithmic logic.	Content, resources and activities were added to an OpenLearning environment. Using the openlearning API, assignments are downloadable and able to be run through the stand-alone compiler/auto-marker that the computing department has developed.

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