

Australian Learning and Teaching Council update

Presenter: Barbara Olde*

The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) was formed with the express purpose of promoting excellence in learning and teaching in Australian higher education. The ALTC recognises, rewards and supports outstanding teaching and practice through a suite of awards, fellowships and grant schemes. Additionally, a key ALTC objective is developing mechanisms for the dissemination of good practice in learning and teaching. This paper provides an update on recent activities and changes at the Council.

The ALTC works with higher education institutions, discipline groups and individuals as a collaborative and supportive partner in change, providing access to a network of knowledge, ideas and people.

ALTC Programs

2008 ALTC Awards Scheme

The awards are an important part of the ALTC's mission to promote and advance learning and teaching in Australian higher education. The following five award programs recognise teaching excellence and outstanding contributions to student learning:

Citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning;
Awards for Programs that Enhance Learning;
Awards for Teaching Excellence;
Prime Minister's Award for Australian University Teacher of the Year; and
Career Achievement Award.

Citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning

Citations, valued at \$10,000 each recognise all university staff who have made a contribution to student learning. Last year nominations were received from 41 of the 44 institutions eligible to apply for ALTC funding with 210 Citations presented to recipients from 39 institutions.

Awards for Programs that Enhance Learning

Awards valued at \$25,000 are conferred in seven different categories: Assessment and feedback, educational partnerships and collaborations with other organisations, The first-year experience, flexible learning and teaching, innovation in curricula, learning and teaching, postgraduate education, and services supporting student learning. Of the 42 nominations received from 18 institutions last year, 10 awards were presented to recipients from seven institutions.

Awards for Teaching Excellence

Awards valued at \$25,000 are presented in eight different categories: Biological Sciences; Health and Related Studies; Early Career; Humanities and the Arts; Law, Economics, Business and Related

Studies; Neville Bonner Award/s for Indigenous Education; Physical Sciences and Related Studies; Social Sciences; and the Priority Area of work integrated learning. Some 96 nominations were received from 30 institutions, resulting in 21 awards presented to recipients from 15 institutions.

Prime Minister's Award for Australian University Teacher of the Year

This prestigious award is typically given to one applicant chosen from the winners of the Awards for Teaching Excellence. Due to the outstanding quality of the applications in 2008, two awards were presented. Each award is valued at \$50,000.

Career Achievement Award

The Career Achievement Award is presented to one or more individuals whose career achievements in learning and teaching in higher education have had a major influence and created an enduring legacy. The ALTC Board determines the recipient.

Recipients of the above Citations and Awards are listed at <http://www.altc.edu.au/carrick/go/home/awards>.

ALTC Fellowships Scheme

The aim of the ALTC Fellowship Scheme is to advance learning and teaching in higher education by supporting a group of leading educators to undertake strategic, high profile activities in areas of importance to the sector. Through their activities, ALTC Fellows have a positive and lasting influence on higher education practice in Australia.

ALTC Fellowships are awarded in two programs with a financial value up to \$90,000 or up to \$330,000 for Senior Fellows. In 2008, 10 fellowships, including two senior fellowships, were awarded with a combined value of almost \$1.4 million.

The ALTC Fellowship Scheme encourages excellence in learning and teaching in higher education by supporting individuals who have the educational expertise and leadership skills to:

- devise and undertake a significant program of activities that will advance learning and teaching in Australian higher education;
- identify educational issues across the higher education system and to facilitate approaches to address these issues;
- stimulate strategic change in higher education institutions;
- raise the profile of learning and teaching in higher education and the prestige associated with the pursuit of excellence in teaching;
- establish and build on national and international partnerships in learning and teaching in higher education; and
- foster national and international collaboration and collegial networking for sharing research, innovation and good practice in learning and teaching.

Grants Scheme

The Grants Scheme is a core activity of the ALTC and incorporates three programs:

- the Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Program;
- the Competitive Grants Program; and
- the Priority Projects Program.

The ALTC's core values and principles underpin the Grants Scheme. Long-term change is promoted through a focus on systemic change and capacity building. Diversity is fostered by recognising and valuing institutional and disciplinary differences and similarities and by ensuring an appropriate balance between generic and disciplinary approaches to the enhancement of learning and teaching. Collaboration is encouraged throughout the programs funded, respecting the existing strengths of the systems and of the people within the higher education sector nationally and internationally.

A total of 56 projects were funded across three programs in 2008. Some 17 projects were funded in the Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Program while Competitive Grants funding went to 17 proposals. A total of 22 projects were funded in the Priority Projects Program.

Learning Networks initiative

Interaction within and across disciplines is central to Learning Networks, a new element of the ALTC launched in late 2008. Learning Networks is premised on the idea that changing cultural practice is best achieved by working with existing networks of discipline leaders, groups and other associations to address national and disciplinary priorities in learning and teaching. Although many of the issues identified across the sector are common, the solutions need to address the particular circumstances of each discipline. This is the level at which the greatest number of academics will be able to engage with the issues and develop solutions.

Discipline Scholars appointed last month will play a key facilitative role within their discipline, and provide an interface between the ALTC and national bodies of deans or other discipline leadership groups. This will involve engaging with the work of the ALTC in their fields or disciplines to identify current and emerging issues, strengths and gaps and to build strong relationships with relevant ALTC projects, ALTC fellows and discipline leaders. They will be responsible for bringing the Learning Networks initiative to life, and for developing a continuing momentum of engagement in, and improvement of, a teaching and learning culture.

Three discipline scholars have been appointed in 2009 in the following broad areas:

- Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences;
- Business, Management and Economics; and
- Engineering and Technology.

Over the next three years, ALTC Discipline Scholars will be appointed for each of the nine broad discipline groupings that align with the majority of faculty structures in Australian universities.

NEW ALTC Corporate Website

Development of the new ALTC Corporate website is currently nearing completion. The site is being built using the latest Drupal technology which will replace the existing Jahia technology. The website is the ALTC's most crucial communications tool. A revamped website reflecting best practice standards in usability and accessibility is necessary to provide a sustainable platform for present and future needs. It will offer a new and exciting look as well as various new features which were developed on the request of internal and external users.

The key messages of the website will be:

- Celebrating and supporting excellent teaching in higher education;
- Rewarding and recognising achievements in teaching in higher education;
- Sharing practical solutions for creating positive learning environments;
- Promoting and supporting change; and
- Creating a bank of good teaching practice, largely through the ALTC Exchange.

The website aims to increase understanding and awareness of the work of the ALTC among key stakeholders such as:

- University PR and media offices;
- Sector and industry peak bodies;
- Scholarly academies;
- Professional associations;
- The media; and
- The wider community.

Additionally, the site aims to increase the brand recognition and visibility of the ALTC in Australia and globally.

We hope that the new website will allow you to find out more about the ALTC's aims and goals and that you will enjoy its new exciting look and functionality aspects. We hope to see you there at www.altc.edu.au.

ALTC Exchange

The ALTC Exchange is an online service for academics, managers and leaders of learning and teaching in Australian higher education. The service provides a repository of quality learning and teaching documents, and a suite of Web 2.0 tools to facilitate professional networking, sharing of ideas and knowhow, and collaboration among members. The Exchange is an integral part of the ALTC's strategy for disseminating and embedding change and development in learning and teaching across the Australian higher education sector.

Overview

The Exchange was developed after extensive consultation with the higher education community during 2006 and 2007 through a wide range of avenues including think tanks, forums, interviews, focus groups, pilot groups, and expert panels. On 1 May 2008 the Exchange was released from beta with the hosting and future development of the application moved in house in October 2008. Currently the development of a second version of the Exchange is underway and due for release in the second half of 2009.

The membership of the exchange has grown steadily and there are now more than 1000 members.

Services provided by the Exchange

A digital repository of quality learning and teaching documents is provided under a Creative Commons licence (Attribution-Non-commercial-Share-Alike). Members are encouraged to download, share and repurpose material if desired. A search facility providing keyword and advanced keyword search is provided along with the ability to browse content under various categories. A federated search function allows searching of other key digital repositories such as MERLOT (USA) and Intute (UK). Visitors may also browse the repository under the following categories; Discipline Communities, Learning and Teaching, Leadership and Change, and Technologies for Learning..

Tools are available to enable uploading files and publication allowing members to contribute their own insights, articles and teaching and learning ideas for the whole community. Members may use the above Discipline Categories or free tags to classify their contributions.

Collaborative work spaces known as groups are equipped with a suite of tools to enable sharing of content and collaboration on projects. The tools including group blogs and calendars, forums, survey generators and wikis. Additionally group tools enable the management of subscriptions to the group and group communications.

A personalised workspace, known as MyExchange, allows members to view links to their own contributions. A range of Web 2.0 features allow the ability to make links with other members, follow their contributions, bookmark links to valued articles from the repository, and invite non-members to the Exchange.

Access is open to all who agree to the Terms and Conditions of use and members are predominantly from the Australian higher education community. The number of international members is small but growing. Currently access to the repository for search, browse and download is available prior to login. After login registered users may contribute content, establish and join groups and establish their personal space.

Examples of current use of the ALTC Exchange

Most activity on the Exchange centres on the use of the Exchange to support ALTC-funded activities such as project team communications and management, sharing documents and dissemination of outcomes. As membership increases the likelihood of members finding like-minded colleagues and useful resources is growing.

The Exchange has been used as a mechanism to publish outcomes of ALTC-funded projects. The material may be accessed by performing a search or joining a group to find all related documents associated with the project. Exchange members are able to comment on items and begin a dialogue around particular learning and teaching issues. The project, *Embedding the development of intercultural competence in business higher education*, has used the Exchange to publish an extensive suite of resources for teachers. The Exchange group, *Bridging the gap between learning and teaching in engineering*, has been developed as a hub for sharing ideas and disseminating findings of the ALTC Fellowship program by Professor Ian Cameron of UQ.

As a complement to a national symposium, the Exchange has been used by the *Australian ePortfolio Project* to provide a virtual space for access to symposium documents and the event calendar. The Exchange is also used to support the development of a community of practice using a simple wiki for members to add and share resources. Discussion is encouraged by using the group blog and forum tools.

Other members have used the group space to collaborate on the preparation of grant proposals overcoming the issue of a dispersed project team.

Upcoming developments

A new version of the Exchange is being developed on the Drupal 6 platform and should be ready for release in the second half of this year. ALTC Exchange version 2.0 will implement a number of enhancements: improved extensibility of the application, additional Web 2.0 capabilities requested by members, and better site navigation and usability. The Exchange community, as well as having submitted enhancements, will also be invited to participate in usability testing.

There are numerous points of connection for IT directors and managers with the ALTC Exchange. The Council intends to develop the Exchange in such a way that it can intersect with existing systems to provide maximum leverage in terms of information sharing across the sector. There is a wealth of opportunities for IT directors and managers to engage with the Council in the future development of this project to ensure maximum impact in the delivery of a platform for collaborating around issues relating to learning and teaching.

***Barbara Olde is the CIO of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council**