

# Staff Development For E-Learning: New Playing Field, New Rules

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## Abstract

Staff development is often conducted away from the workplace on a different field where academic staff are given a new game or training session and then required to go back to their School or Faculty and be confident and comfortable in being able to enhance their learning and teaching activities with these new skills and strategies. Staff development units are required to look at this playing field and devise new ways of working with their players. This paper, by way of two case studies, presents examples of how a central academic unit in an Australian university has approached new ways of working with staff and the resultant impact of these new strategies.

Keywords: teamwork, collaboration, staff development, online, standards

## Introduction

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) is a multi-campus university with five teaching campuses geographically separated across the Greater Western Sydney region. Staff and students are often required to travel between campuses for lectures and tutorials. This dispersed nature has required the university to adopt a range of appropriate models of staff development that help break down the travel barriers and encourage staff to take part in these activities. Jensen and Morgan (2009, p.3) commented that reducing the amount of time travelling between campuses or in scheduled training sessions was of vital importance to UWS academics who have a “burgeoning work volume associated with the university’s unique structure and profile”. This paper describes how an central academic development unit has changed its mode of operation in order to work with the players on their playing field in order improve their usage and understanding of how technology and associated strategies can improve their teaching and engagement with students.

## Background

In previous years, the central academic development unit at UWS offered open workshops for staff to attend at a central location. They were perceived by many staff, including the presenters, as a strategy that often accommodated the ‘converted’ and those who enjoyed the interaction of group discussions about teaching. They did not contribute to substantial institutional change. In 2008 the central academic development unit was faced with the challenge of introducing the first part of an E-learning Quality Framework to all teaching staff at UWS. This was in response to the increasing uptake of e-learning in the university and the need for all teaching staff to have some knowledge about e-learning design standards and benchmarks that promote accountability and quality improvement (Oliver, 2005).

Much of the literature on standards focuses on the technical and pedagogical principles of web design and standards (Milne & Dimock, 2005) and focuses less on the strategic approaches for embedding the standards across institutions in ways that both develop and maintain the quality of the online learning environment. Whilst the development of standards and evaluation tools provides the foundation for quality improvement, they are insufficient in achieving quality if the tools are not adopted by staff, or if staff do not have the required skills to effectively implement those standards (Correia, Malfroy, Griffin, Ireland, & Rankine, 2008). This challenge prompted the academic development unit to review the literature on organisational change (Garrison and Anderson, 2003) and to conceive a new, multi-tiered approach that acknowledges both the importance of individualised interests of the teaching staff and the more strategic focus of senior staff (Cummings et al, 2005). Therefore, in 2009, this unit garnered support from senior executive staff within the university for a ‘whole of institution’ approach, then targeted each School (faculty) as the primary pathway for embedding the first stage of the E-learning Quality Framework. An initial meeting was held with each Head of School to explain the purpose and importance of building staff capacity in e-learning, and the obvious benefits for students learning. Staff from the unit then gave a presentation at a staff meeting to engage staff with the overall objective of the project.

It was at this point that the institutional ‘rollout’ took on different pathways. To the surprise of the central academic unit staff working on this project, the new playing field meant that there were different rules, cultures and opportunities in each School that were quite unique to that School. This paper explains the work that was initially the focus of the

institutional approach to embedding e-learning standards and then examines how in two different Schools this activity took on quite different pathways.

## **The E-Learning Quality Framework: Basic Standards**

The E-Learning Quality Framework focuses on the improvement of individual sites and the development of academic staff skills, for the explicit purpose of improving student learning in the online environment (Correia. *et al*, 2008) The framework consists of three 'layers': Basic Standards, Advanced Standards and a Staff Development Toolkit. This enables designers to develop their own e-learning design skills from a basic level right through to advanced, pedagogical uses of e-learning. The framework provides explicit support systems in place at all stages. The focus of the work in this paper is the initial rollout of the basic Standards.

The Basic Standards uses a self-review framework supported by a peer review process to enable staff to meet good design principles. The self-review framework consists of the following four basic standards, each of which has associated criteria:

1. Organisation and Appearance emphasises principles that support easy to follow structure and appearance of the site (eg "Site design promotes ease of navigation")
2. Consistency and Compliance emphasises institutional and legal aspects such as copyright, privacy and currency of information (eg "Resources are appropriately linked to avoid Copyright infringements ")
3. Appropriate Use of Tools focuses on effective use and management of tools (eg "Tools added have a clear purpose and rationale")
4. Learner Resources and Supports focuses on providing supports and resources to students (eg "Links to learning supports are contained in the site")

A full copy of the booklet, developed for staff at UWS, to use is available from <http://tdu.uws.edu.au/qilt/elearning.html>

## **Implementation process**

This section uses two case studies to highlight both the different types of implementation processes adopted in two different Schools, and the different types of staff development that were utilise in these environments. Generalised results of an institutional implementation process only collate overall outcomes but miss the particular and specific outcomes in each different context. As Stake (2003) highlights, instrumental case studies are useful when a particular case is examined in order to ' provide insight into an issue or re-draw a generalisation'. In this paper, the case studies are used to both provide an insight into how professional development for academic has changed in nature and practice.

### *Case 1: Playing Field – Business Studies*

A key outcome of the implementation of the Basic Standards was embedding sustainable quality in e-learning in a collegial and developmental way (Rankine & Malfroy, 2009; Correia, Malfroy, Griffin, Ireland & Rankine, 2008). A strategy adopted for Case 1 involved meeting with the Head of School to understand the academic culture, staff motivation, structure, philosophy and challenges being faced in the School (Ellis and Phelps, 2000). This is crucial in determining a suitable implementation strategy for sustainable e-learning (Robertson, 2008). In this particular school, the academics tended to work individually rather than in small discipline based groups and there were expected high levels of resistance to change. Typically the learning management system (LMS) was being used as a content repository for lecture notes and links to journal readings, and most staff were not keen to explore other ways of using the LMS to engage students.

The implementation strategy involved individual consultations and local support. Staff were invited to meet with a member of the central academic development unit who were implementing the Basic Standards in the School, to go through the self-review framework with their LMS site. Some staff initially refused the meeting invitation or replied that they were already proficient in meeting the standards and didn't require any further assistance. However a follow up discussion reinforced the benefits of implementing the Basic Standards in their LMS site, and specific staff development issues were identified as a focus of the meeting. The majority of staff responded positively to the invitation for a one-on-one consultation about the Basic Standards and an opportunity to have individualised support for improving their LMS site. A local support person was assigned by the Head of School to provide ongoing support beyond the initial consultations.

Individual consultations were initially done in the academic's office and took between 45 minutes to an hour. A self review of their LMS site was followed by targeted development in the site to address areas that were not consistent with the Basic Standards. This provided just-in-time opportunities for staff to discuss learning design issues, management strategies for efficiencies in using the LMS (eg grading assignments, setting up discussion boards) and specific questions they had about tools or functionality in their LMS site. Following the initial consultations, phone and email follow-ups

took place and the local support person provided ongoing support, targeting the specific areas identified in the self-review process.

These individual consultations had a dual purpose; addressing the individual e-learning staff development needs as well as addressing the broader areas of improvement that were identified during a snapshot review of all LMS sites in the School using the Basic Standards self review framework.

Figure 1 below shows the school’s snapshot analysis of consistency with the Basic Standards prior to commencing the implementation project within the school. This data clearly showed strengths in Standard 1, in the organisation and appearance of the LMS sites, eg unit outlines were largely accessible from the homepage and navigation promoted ease of use by students. The data also identified areas for targeted improvement, particularly in the areas of appropriate use of e-learning tools, copyright and supports for learners. (Standards 2,3,4)

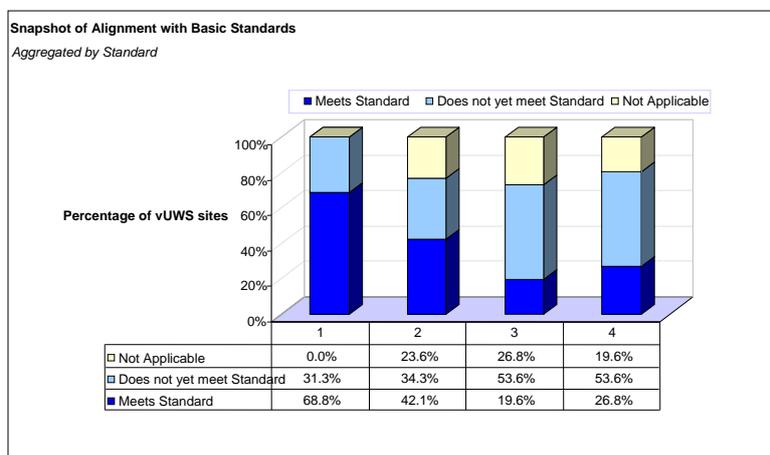


Figure 1: The school’s snapshot analysis of consistency with the Basic Standards –Prior to intervention

To address the provision of learner supports, copyright and appropriate use of e-learning tools, all key areas of improvement, a whole-of-school template was developed to visually brand the LMS sites for the units taught by the School and to provide a consistent approach to learning design for e-learning. In the consultations with academics, the template was applied to existing LMS sites and set up for future use by new academics to the school.

Following implementation of the Basic Standards in the School and the deployment of a LMS template, there was marked improvement across the School in meeting the Basic Standards criteria, as shown in figure 2. While Standard 1, organisation and appearance, was already a known strength of the school prior to the commencement of the project, the consultations with staff and development of a template almost doubled the consistency with this standard across the School’s LMS sites. Initially, the integration of scholarly resources was not consistent across the School and some staff were not aware of the complexity of copyright obligations in the digital use of resources. Consultations with staff were opportunities to discuss copyright and avenues for accessing open content to enable staff to embed a broader range of learning resources within their LMS sites. Standard 3, which focuses on the appropriate use of e-learning tools, showed marginal improvement in consistency across the LMS sites and this is an area of ongoing staff development as staff explore more interactive collaborative tools for student learning. The last standard, focuses on learner supports shows almost 100% consistency across the LMS sites following the implementation of the Basic Standards and introduction of a template. Discipline specific resources, information for students with a disability and advice for students who were new to e-learning were easily available to learners through this template.

**Snapshot of Alignment with Basic Standards**

Aggregated by Standard

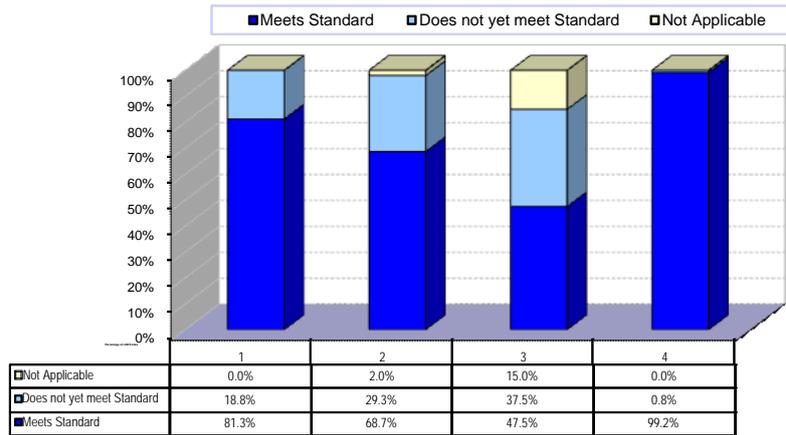


Figure 2: The school’s snapshot analysis of consistency with the Basic Standards –Post intervention

**Case 2: Playing Field - Health Sciences**

The modes of operation of this central academic unit has varied in recent years in an effort to try and cater for the changing learning and teaching environments of this multi campus university. In addition a conscious effort was made to increase the presence of unit personnel on the local playing fields of the various campuses. In this particular example it was decided to locate one of the unit’s specialist academics (in e-learning) at one of these campuses, one day per week to work more closely with the ‘local team’ in developing and expanding their understanding and use of technologies as part of their teaching. Initially, following the institutional approach to improving the Basic Standards this academic met with the Head of School, various key academics and heads of teaching programs to help gain an insight into the needs and readiness of staff.

The academic developer, keeping in mind the workload demands of staff and the idea of ‘taking on something extra’, was able to work with individuals on the Standards but at the same time gain a closer understanding where there might be possible avenues for extension of the e-learning possibilities. In these discussions with staff it was important to reduce the “technological overload” and keep in mind that “technology was a time-hungry learning curve not scheduled into WLAs (workload agreements) (Jensen & Morgan, 2009, p.41). Through working across the School and then with smaller groups and individuals the cycle of plan, act, observe, reflect was used to review their sites and initiate often small but important changes “*is that all it takes to do that?* (A reluctant academic). As in Case 1 there were also staff that tended to work on their own but within this School there were a few cohesive and enthusiastic teaching teams. It was with group academics from the Occupational Therapy team that a more consolidated approach was taken to devise and implement a new look and feel for their LMS sites by applying the set of Basic Standards. This strategy and selection of the group was largely based on the cohesiveness of the OT team and their willingness to “get the job done”. In the past the individual members of this team had designed their own sites, resulting in different looks and feels for each unit of study. As a method of enhancing a sense of professional identity for the students, it was agreed that all OT units should adopt a common design template and layout. With the support of the e-learning specialist a common ‘enhanced’ template was achieved through team collaboration and applied seamlessly across all OT teaching units with the minimum of upheaval prior to the start of session.



Fig 3: The Occupational Therapy site template

This strategy of being present and working with staff 'on the ground' was successful in that it provided an avenue to explore initiatives involving individual forays in integrating technology components into their teaching. The rapport that was established during that process facilitated a more open approach for others to investigate new strategies or further develop ideas that they had been tinkering with for some time. The following examples give an insight as to how this collaborative, in-situ e-learning project gave the impetus to particular individuals within the team to look at small but significant extensions to their existing use of e-learning strategies.

1. Online reflective journals

One of the lecturers required her students to use a private online learning journal in the LMS to improve their reflective processes to better understand her unit. Active reflection has been used to help students come to terms with disability issues (French & Swain, 2007). The students completed a compulsory but non-assessable journal consisting of six entries with each entry referring to a stimulus question that related to the work that had been completed that week. The final entry required the students to summarise their experiences in the unit and encouraged them to consider what action they could take as new therapists and within the broader context. This lecturer was a competent user of the LMS but had previously not used this strategy with her classes. She was encouraged by student feedback and with the skills to use and manage this tool, will extend its use to other teaching units.

*"Reading through my previous entries I can see that this exercise has encouraged me to think carefully and from the perspective of others, and pushed me to use my knowledge and research skills as an occupational therapy (OT) student, to reason through circumstances that people with difference and disability face on a day-to-day basis (student)*

2. Using audio to enhance case studies and provide feedback

Another member of the team was excited by the possibilities relating to the use of audio to better engage her students. Given the support to become familiar with the simple audio recording capabilities within the LMS this lecturer then felt confident to try giving a more authentic context to patient/therapist interviews by providing audio clips of a variety of these scenarios and then requiring students to comment, applying their reasoning skills to adjust, adapt and accommodate this information into their task of developing an occupational therapy treatment plan. The ease and success of this strategy then encouraged her to apply these 'new found' audio skills to use the same tool but for a different purpose. This tool was used to provide quick and timely audio feedback on recent assessment tasks. Generally broad in nature, this feedback was able to allay the barrage of questions usually received via email or face to face, and gave the lecturer more time to provide more individual and less detailed comments at a later date.

3. On-line simulation of client interviews to enhance clinical reasoning

For another team member, who was also a competent user of technology, it was exploration of a less traditional use the discussion board in the LMS. A final year cohort was required to engage in a simulated initial interview with an 'aged client' online with the lecturer role playing the client and the students asking questions. This interaction, which was conducted in real time, ensured students were asking relevant and non-repetitive questions. Exposure to this 'close to authentic' interview scenario facilitated student's clinical reasoning and problem solving and resulted in noticeably improved questioning skills.

*"this case study - this helped to develop clinical reasoning, gave me an idea of the info I would need to obtain when conducting an interview"(student).*

## Impact

The impact of these game changes has occurred at both at both individual and whole staff levels. This has become evident through:

1. An improvement in quality of sites with regular semester based surveys of sites showing an increased awareness of and consistency with the Basic Standards.

2. Positive feedback from heads of school and academic staff.

Through both formal and informal channels Heads of Schools have enthusiastically commented to peers at institution wide meetings and have encouraged individual and team initiatives in e-learning and lecturers are starting to see some of the benefits of some of the 'not so difficult' tools and strategies.

*"Using online resources, I can try and make the learning more 'real-life' for students. Through our online discussions students can get immediate information about patients just as they would in a real-life clinical (lecturer)*

3. Increase in confidence and skill level of academic staff

Through providing the 'local playing field' support, staff have shown increased involvement in e-learning strategies that have been of benefit to both them and their students. They have been willing to go outside their comfort zones with technology once they have seen positive outcomes for their teaching.

*"The partnership [with the central academic unit] has been very beneficial for our team. Increasing our elearning expertise was something we identified as a team interest and we have been able to work on both department based and individual initiatives. I think we all had ideas and some skills but needed some expertise to turn our ideas into reality"(lecturer)*

#### 4. Catalyst for sharing with each other & the whole staff.

Through formal and informal discussions, staff became aware of each others' attempts to incorporate approaches to using technology and the associated e-learning strategies. They discussed not only the 'how to' part relating to the use of technology but also began to evaluate the e-learning strategy in terms of learning potential. Presentations to the staff at whole School and Program meetings often initiated discussions with other team coordinators with comments such as "how can I do this?" and "I would like to try this with my team". (lecturer). These meetings and presentations served as a time for team building, for collaboration, for reflection and for sharing ideas. As noted by Collis and Moonen (2002): 'An individual's likelihood of voluntarily making use of a particular type of technology for a learning-related purpose is a function of four 'E's: the environmental context, the individual's perception of educational effectiveness and of ease of use, and the individual's sense of personal engagement with the technology' (p. 219). This 'osmotic transmission' of ideas and skills has meant that it was not just people on the help desk providing support but the person in the next office. By working on changes on the whole of the course's website, and individual activities, it put the use new technologies firmly on the agenda.

## Conclusion

Engagement and interaction through technology is an essential aspect of many of our students' lives. For students are able to engage with and utilise the affordances of ever changing online environments and associated technological tools we need to develop and understand different ways of teaching and learning. In order to provide the pedagogy and skills central academic development units need to be adaptive and not rely on a 'one size fits all' process. These approaches have shown positive results through modifying the support and implementation strategies to suit the local environment.

The way in which an academic developer/e-learning designer works changes and it becomes more important to be able to read the context, understand the signals, then adapt to the different learning and teaching situation. Also, as suggested by Olney & Lefoe, it was found that "access and use of informal support and just in time support"(p.801), has been a major component of these 'rule changes'.

Even with the work being carried out at the local level the power of a 'top-down' implementation, supported by senior staff, cannot be underestimated. Used wisely/carefully, it can be used as a 'trigger' for staff engagement with teaching development activities, even with those who usually resist participating in these activities. This also tends to build a strong sense of partnership with heads of school, teaching teams and individual lecturers and the breaking down of the 'us' and 'them' syndrome. "Faculty development for existing and future faculty is a pivotal investment for integrating technology in higher education; it can catalyze innovations in learning across generations." (Moore, Moore, & Fowler, 2005, p.11.1). Academic staff are working harder than ever, and unless the rules change in the way support is approached new strategies won't get off the ground. These case studies are just two instances of where there is change taking place. Staff are now talking about doing more – but it has to be real, worthwhile, educationally matched to outcomes, and more importantly, on their own playing field.

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