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An evolutionary approach to strategic planning for eLearning

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The University of Wollongong has undertaken a process of interviews and consultation with committees, deans, managers, academics, students and support staff to develop a coherent strategic and educational vision for the use of eLearning, that is framed by a commitment to teaching in a blended learning environment, rather than in a wholly online or distance mode. After four years, and many draft versions, this process has resulted in a *Strategic Plan for eLearning and eTeaching 2008-2010.* The key to the final structure of this plan is its total alignment with the university's *Learning and Teaching Plan*, released as part of the suite of Strategic Plans which will guide the University of Wollongong through 2008-2010. In this paper, we describe the processes involved in developing the plan, and share the simple lessons we have learned that may be relevant to other universities, including issues raised by the implementation of the plan.

An evolutionary approach to strategic planning for eLearning

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Abstract

Although all Australian universities have University-level strategic plans as well as Learning and Teaching plans plus underpinning Information Technology plans, it is estimated that only 11% of universities have a separate plan for eLearning. Instead eLearning is often integrated into either an *Information Technology Plan* or a *Learning and Teaching Plan*. As a result, the specific needs of eLearning can be overlooked, underestimated or tokenized.

The University of Wollongong has undertaken a process of interviews and consultation with committees, deans, managers, academics, students and support staff to develop a coherent strategic and educational vision for the use of eLearning, that is framed by a commitment to teaching in a blended learning environment, rather than in a wholly online or distance mode. After four years, and many draft versions, this process has resulted in a *Strategic Plan for eLearning and eTeaching 2008-2010.* The key to the final structure of this plan is its total alignment with the university's *Learning and Teaching Plan*, released as part of the suite of Strategic Plans which will guide the University of Wollongong through 2008-2010. In this paper, we describe the processes involved in developing the plan, and share the simple lessons we have learned that may be relevant to other universities, including issues raised by the implementation of the plan.

Index Terms **— Blended Learning, eLearning, Strategic Planning.**

The planning options: discrete or integrated plans

Ten years ago, a team of nine researchers, including this first author, collaborated on a national report for the Australian Government titled *Managing the Introduction of Technology in the Delivery and Administration of Higher Education* (Yetton et al, 1997). Through interviews with senior managers of twenty universities, we investigated IT planning. All universities had published University Strategic Plans as well as IT Strategic Plans that mentioned the importance of IT in teaching and learning. However only one, The University of Melbourne, this first author's previous university, had a separate Strategic Plan for IT in Teaching: *Interactive Multimedia Learning Unit Strategic Plan* (1992). At that early stage, the focus was on CDROM, videodisc and multimedia, rather than on eLearning or web-enabled learning. A decade later, despite a substantial increase in eLearning in Australia-wide[1], a recent survey (Inglis, 2007) indicates only 11% of Australian universities have a published separate plan for IT in Teaching and Learning.

Table 1: Institutional approaches to documenting e-learning strategies (Inglis, 2007)
Rounding of percentages to the nearest whole number means these do not sum to 100

Type	Number	%
Integrated into general plans	14	39
Discrete e-learning strategy	4	11
Discrete e-learning strategy under development	9	24
Related strategy	2	6
Related strategy under development	1	3
No attempt to document strategy	7	19
No response	1	3

As this study notes, institutions that have subsumed their strategic planning for eLearning into their core teaching and learning plans have done so at some cost to the specificity of eLearning issues and needs:

> *The study found that two distinct approaches to documenting institutional e-learning strategies are being adopted. Some universities are developing discrete strategies whereas other universities are embedding their strategies in more general documents… Comparison of the documents provided by institutions*

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[1] The last major survey of online education in Australia was in 2001. At that time it was estimated that 46% of units at Australian Universities were web supplemented. 54% of units had some web content. Bell et al, *Universities Online: a survey of online education & services in Australia*, Higher Education Group, Department of Education Science & Training, Commonwealth of Australia, March 2002
http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/indexes/by_series/documents/02_a_pdf.htm

showed that when e-learning strategies have been embedded in more general documents the range of aspects of elearning that are covered tends to be less wide-ranging than is the case when discrete strategies have been produced. (Inglis, p.419)

A similar lack of dedicated institutional planning for e-learning was noted in a recent report from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK on institutional support for e-learning, as culled from institutional audits[2]. One institution demonstrated good practice in the way it mapped its draft e-learning strategy on to that developed as part of the national Joint Information Systems Committee's e-Framework programme, which began in 2005 [University of Huddersfield, paragraph 137]. One further institution which was committed to the development and validation of distance learning, identified as a feature of good practice that it had established an e-learning policy, claimed to be among the first of its kind [Staffordshire University, paragraph 127]. The report confirms the importance of distinguishing between plans, strategies, documents and policies. It also shows that distance education universities are more likely to have plans in place than those offering "traditional" on-campus education.

In describing the consultation and drafting process undertaken to develop a discrete plan at the University of Wollongong, our aim is to address the gap identified by Inglis, who notes that:

While the educational literature is replete with papers describing innovation projects of various types, papers describing the institutional strategies in e-learning are quite rare, while descriptions of the approaches used in developing institutional strategy documents are even rarer.

In this paper, we address the institutional context that shaped the development of the University's Strategic Plan for eLearning. In particular, we describe the relationship between the timing of the introduction of a new Learning Management System (LMS) and the implementation of an eLearning Business Plan, which proved to be a critical institutional 'placeholder' while the Strategic Plan was in the early, and lengthy, consultation stage. We also address the challenges faced in the implementation of a strategic plan, and briefly discuss the approach that we feel will best enable the university to meet these challenges.

The institutional context: eLearning at the University of Wollongong

The University of Wollongong has a national and international reputation as an early adopter of eLearning as part of the Wollongong student experience, rather than as a form of distance learning. The growth in eLearning at UOW since 1999 has been driven by three key factors:
- student demand for flexible access to content, including lecture notes and slides, electronic library readings, audio recordings of lectures, and associated learning objects;
- academic staff interested in developing innovative ways of teaching, particularly those involving collaborative learning and online social networking; and
- the growth in multi location teaching, via regional and offshore campuses and centres.

Despite rapid uptake of eLearning, the absence of a specific strategic plan had made it surprisingly difficult to demonstrate the university's appreciation of the importance of eLearning as part of core business. The university needed to develop the appropriate structures to promote detailed strategic goals and objectives for the growth and enrichment of the eLearning experience, both for staff and students. Without these, the UOW eLearning experience had tended to develop more organically, driven by environmental factors such as the growth of staff expertise; the transformation of students' skills in online environments; global changes in eLearning systems, including those driven by corporate eLearning vendors; and other extrinsic pressures including changes to the nature of academic (and student) workloads. Communication even among early adopters and enthusiasts was sporadic, and planning for appropriate staff development was often tactical and responsive to particular circumstances, rather than oriented towards defined institutional goals. Crafting a strategic vision in such a volatile climate, while enabling the university to pursue its core teaching operations without interruption, presented a challenge at the level of workflow, to say the least.

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[2] http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/SupportforElearning08.pdf

During the earliest planning discussions, we expected to develop a five year strategic plan followed by a three year business plan covering operational aspects supporting those directions. In hindsight however we have in reality adopted what Inglis (2007) labels an "evolutionary approach" which is in contrast to the "condensed approach" described in Kohrman (2008). Obtaining clear consensus about long-term direction can take a very long time, and in this case operational aspects for a university which had already been active in e-learning for a number of years could not wait. Therefore planning has moved through three phases in a different order than anticipated, and as we approach the fourth phase—evaluation and review—we are now positioned to inform the next business plan and lead into the next cycle of university strategic planning.

Phase 1	2004-2007	Consultation & information gathering	data, discussion papers & draft plans
Phase 2	2005-2008	Implementation of a replacement LMS	3 year Business Plan for immediate implementation issues
Phase 3	2008-2010	Implementation of Strategic Plan	3 year Strategic Plan for longer-term direction
Phase 4	2008-2009	Evaluation and review	focus groups, surveys & public fora to evaluate progress against plan and to emerging stakeholder needs & expectations

As is clear from this timeline, there is a degree of overlap and simultaneous activity across the four phases, and so the first and simplest lesson that we can share from our experience is the importance of making an early commitment to clear communication among key institutional stakeholders. This is critical to managing the risk that the strategic vision for eLearning can splinter into separate realms of institutional (and infrastructural) activity.

Phase 1: Consultation and information gathering

A decisive step in advancing the University's strategic planning for eLearning was prompted by a factor that might be considered strictly external to the ideal, pedagogically focused planning process. In 2004, for reasons of corporate contractual timing, the university undertook an extensive consultation and testing program to scope the upgrade to a new LMS. One very positive outcome of this consultation process, however, was that key groups of institutional and academic stakeholders were brought together. In the lengthy discussions that formed the heart of the three-phase consultation, these stakeholder groups significantly increased their understanding of the very different purposes to which eLearning was being put, both domestically and internationally, across the disciplines and at all levels of the curriculum. This made it possible to identify some priority areas for development and to clarify the critical issues for management and support.

At this stage, we found that there was some confusion concerning the definition of eLearning, and some persistent assumptions that this involved a form of distance learning. The University's eTeaching Steering Committee therefore decided that the term "blended learning" best described our approach, and developed a communication strategy to improve staff and student understanding of our goals in this area. In order to emphasize the face to face element of a blended learning environment, we defined eLearning@UOW as:
- blending face-to-face and technology-based classes
- linking all University of Wollongong locations world-wide
- using a range of technologies and services
- occurring in various learning spaces.

The range of technologies promoted under the heading of eLearning included the main LMS, the videoconferencing system, the use of electronic resources via the university library, the ongoing testing of electronic portfolio approaches, and the audiostreaming of lectures. In an early indication of a strategic priority, we summarized on the university website that UOW was committed to *"blending teaching and technology to create global learning communities"*.

Preliminary to drafting a strategic plan, we undertook an environmental scan, checking other

universities' plans[3] and analysing actual usage of eLearning at the University of Wollongong. We found that in 2005, 40% of subjects offered by UOW blended face-to-face teaching with some form of eLearning[4]. In about 5% of subjects, students can participate in a wholly online mode. Nearly 20% of UOW subjects are taught at multiple locations: 375 subjects involving over 100 teachers.

In 2004 and 2005, a first draft Strategic Plan for eLearning and eTeaching (SPELT) was discussed in a round of presentations to the University Education Committee and its sub-committees; Faculty Education Committees; Deans, Directors and Senior Executive. The proposed strategic directions for the next five years were summarized in quantitative terms in Fig. 1.

Directions for eLearning and eTeaching at UoW

2005
40% of all UoW subjects blended
20% of subjects multi location
10% network of multi location classes

2010
80% of all UoW subjects blended
40% of subjects multi location
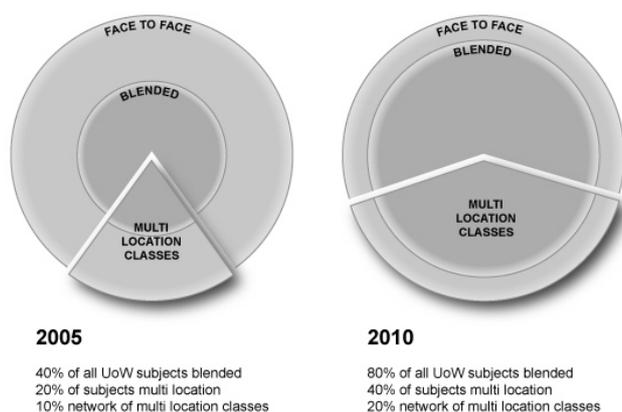20% network of multi location classes

Fig. 1. First draft UOW Strategic Plan for eLearning and eTeaching

As the figure indicates, the expansion of university operations to five other regional domestic campuses or education centres, and the establishment of a UOW presence in Dubai, as well as 14 key offshore teaching locations, meant that multi location teaching (MLT) had become a key driver of demand for effective eLearning solutions. In addition to support for MLT, the draft plan identified an increase in active learning, and internationalization of the curriculum, as key institutional goals that could be enhanced by the use of eLearning. These goals were mirrored both in the University's strategic plans, and in the emergence of the UOW Graduate Attributes (now Graduate Qualities) as a framework for curriculum development. The first draft plan therefore recommended that:

> *The specific Graduate Attributes of multiculturalism and team work will be fostered by introducing **Global Learning Projects** in subjects that are blended and multi location so that by 2010 all courses incorporate at least one Global Learning Project: students collaborating online with students in the subject taught at an another location or with students in another University.*

This recommendation was derived from a similar vision statement for the Global Learning program at Wichita State University:

> *Our **vision** is to provide all students with at least one global learning experience during their program. Our **mission** is to combine **Global Reach**, through modern communication technologies, and **Global Perspectives**, through interaction with learners and faculty of diverse cultures, to produce the **Global Graduate**. Our **Values** are honor, respect, curiosity and critical self-reflection about the many cultures of this world with a view to peace, prosperity and collaboration for mutual benefit.[5]*

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[3] Although there were few university plans that could inform our background scan, there were some key **national** strategies that were useful for reference. See in particular the New Zealand Ministry of Education *Interim Tertiary eLearning Framework* (www.elearn.govt.nz), the UK Higher Education Funding Council for England *Strategy for eLearning* (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05_12), and the Australian Vocational Training & Education *Flexible Learning Framework* (http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/flx/go/home/about)

[4] In 2007 the number of subjects grew to almost 60%. This confirmed the estimate that by 2010 the percentage would be 80%.

[5] http://gl.wichita.edu/

At this stage, a critical test of the planning process became clear. We felt it was increasingly important to foreground the university's commitment to an eLearning strategy driven by concern for pedagogy and curriculum, rather than by corporate, contractual, infrastructural or technological demands—while at the same time we acknowledged that without a robust, scalable and secure eLearning infrastructure, the university's core teaching operations would be placed at an unacceptable level of risk. As most large higher education institutions have found, this can be a difficult balance to maintain to the satisfaction of all stakeholders. The planning "conversation" (Laurillard, 2002) is one in which conflicts between innovation and creativity on the one hand, and risk minimization on the other, are regular. Although these conflicts can become ingrained, they offer potentially valuable insights to the planning process, if they are handled well. Our second simple lesson is therefore that to achieve the full institutional benefit that a diversity of opinions represents, the planning conversation needs strong facilitation, a clear timeline for achieving milestones, and an optimistic sense of purpose.

Phase 2: Operational planning

> *Technology in itself does not change or improve teaching and learning. Attention to management processes, strategy, structure, and most importantly roles and skills, are key to successfully introducing technology in university teaching and learning.* (Wills and Alexander, p.72)

The Strategic Plan was under discussion for an extended period, during which the university could not afford to suspend its normal operations, including contractual forward planning. At the same time as developing a strategic approach to our future institutional goals, we therefore operated under an *eTeaching Business Plan*, which contained 22 actions to accompany the implementation of the replacement LMS and associated systems. The actions were presented as Discussion Papers to a range of executive committees, and the actions outlined in the plan were reported against twice a year to a broad range of university Education and IT committees. This gave the eTeaching Business Plan a profile among key decision-makers and Faculty leadership, while the Strategic Plan remained in the consultation phase. We want to reiterate the importance of this third simple lesson: institutions which have already made a significant commitment to eLearning must continue to operate even while strategic plans for the future are being developed. The most likely consequence of this is that major purchasing or licensing decisions may have to pre-empt the finalisation of the strategic direction. Good strategic planning needs to be able to take account of this, and develop flexible pedagogical objectives that have the potential to operate across different systems.

The 22 actions in the Business Plan were derived from interviews and consultations with committees, deans, managers, academics and support staff. Although a number are only relevant to the University of Wollongong context and may not be able to be generalized to other universities, they are reproduced in Table 1 and categorized according to the five factors in the Yetton report mentioned above (and as previously outlined in more detail in Wills, 2006). It is not always clear-cut which action belongs to which category as some actions cross boundaries. However they have been placed in the category which best represents their main thrust. (Of course this categorization does not reflect the amount of activity against any one action: for example, "Increase staff development opportunities" is a very large area compared with "Revise intellectual property statute".)

The key purpose of this table is to reinforce that even in business planning, managing the technology was not the dominant realm of activity generated by the LMS implementation process. The majority of actions are in the categories of Management Processes and Roles and Skills. In addition, a number of the Technology actions, such as "Underpin with Content Management System" include sub-projects focused on roles and skills and culture change.

There are five actions that may be generalized to other universities, and these are expanded in more detail in the following sections[6]:
  i.   Structure: establish eTeaching committees
  ii.   Strategy: strengthen focus on active Learning Designs
  iii.   Strategy: design new spaces for eTeaching and eLearning
  iv.   Roles/Skills: increase Staff Development opportunities
  v.   Roles/Skills: increase and vary student support options

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[6] Information about some of the other actions in the Business Plan can be found in Pennell & Wills (2006) and Wills (2006).

Table 1: 22 eTeaching actions categorised by the Yetton Framework

Structure	Strategy	Technology	Management	Roles/Skills
Establish eTeaching Committees	Strengthen focus on Learning Designs	Select new Learning Management System	Reformulate Service Agreement between CEDIR & Faculties	Increase staff development opportunities
Integrate eTeaching administration, Learning Design unit & media production	Analyse, articulate & support Multi Location Teaching	Underpin with Content Management System	Coordinate a whole of CEDIR approach to client contact & client tracking	Increase and vary student support options
	Design new spaces for eTeaching & eLearning	Review subject & course database	Revise intellectual property statute	Increase use of courseware for staff training
	Create a brand image for eLearning	Integrate emerging technologies	Improve quality assurance of sites	
		Evaluate & implement ePorfolio	Review Teacher Survey	
			Revisit responsibilities for system admin, site admin, student support & staff support	
			Facilitate evaluation & purchase of published courseware	
			Evaluate & benchmark	

i　　　　*Structure – Vice Chancellor's eTeaching Steering Committee*

In a university where the central services that impact on the provision of eLearning (IT Services, Registrars Division, Library, Academic Development, eTeaching Support, Learning Design, Materials Production, Teaching Spaces Support) all belong to different divisions with different reporting lines, and nine different Faculties "own" the teaching and learning materials, it was important to develop a committee structure that would sit outside existing university divisions in order to bring together the views and expertise of all these groups in the new enterprise of mainstreaming eLearning. The Yetton report discusses different structures that universities adopt for management of IT (federal, divisional, and subsidiary). The university executive considered it too disruptive and time-consuming to try to change the divisional structures of the university, so a central committee was deemed the best means of developing strong cross-divisional collaboration.
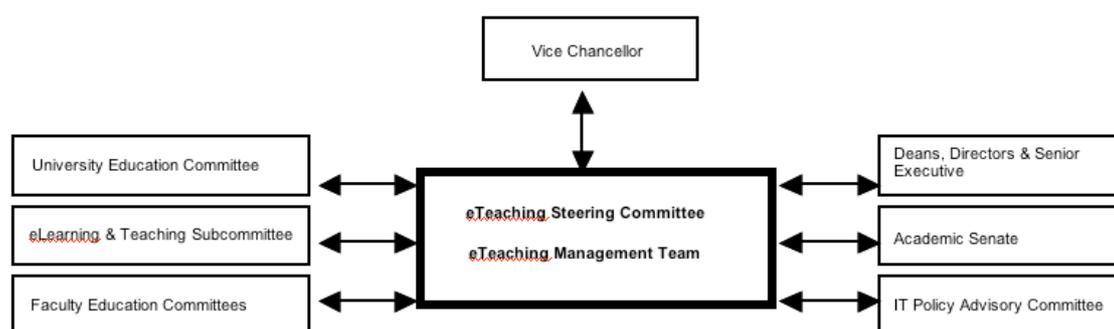

Fig. 2. Structure for Planning of eLearning & eTeaching

The eTeaching Steering Committee was established in 2005, and is chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic), who reports directly to the Vice Chancellor. Committee membership includes senior representation from the Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR), Information Technology Services, the Academic Registrar's Division and the Library, as well as representatives of Deans and Course Coordinators. The committee receives input from the University Education Committee, especially from its sub-committee on eLearning & Teaching, as well sa the IT Policy Advisory Committee. Negotiating the structure, membership and reporting relationships of this committee, took many months. Our fourth simple lesson is therefore that it is vital

to build a strong committee process early in the planning cycle, to establish a clear sense of ownership for the plan as it develops, and to take the time to test the information flows between key points in the institution's existing divisional structures.

ii Strategy – Strengthen focus on active Learning Designs

During the LMS transition, we maintained our focus on improving the University's approaches to teaching rather than on merely improving technology-based access to teaching materials. The emphasis on Learning Design in the *eTeaching Business Plan* flows from our participation in the national Learning Designs Project funded by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (2000-2003). The aim of this project was to assist dissemination of the best online and multimedia projects previously funded by the Australian government by distilling the essential Learning Design behind the project (Hedberg, Oliver, Harper, Wills and Agostinho, 2002). The three year national project culminated in a website which contains exemplars, guides and tools for supporting design of quality online learning in universities.[7] Learning Design is a relatively new but rapidly developing area of e-learning. Since our Australian project, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) in the UK has initiated the eLearning programme with one of its themes being Learning Design.[8] Britain (2004) in a JISC report identifies three ideas that are central to the concept of Learning Design:

- The first general idea behind learning design is that people learn better when actively involved in doing something (i.e. are engaged in a learning activity).
- The second idea is that learning activities may be sequenced or otherwise structured carefully and deliberately in a learning workflow to promote more effective learning.
- The third idea is that it would be useful to be able to record 'learning designs' for sharing and re-use in the future.[9]

Although there were in fact many innovative and well designed eTeaching initiatives in the Faculties, we had not at that stage brought these together to create a coherent, consistent message about the core values that underpin the design of eLearning at the University. Strengthening our focus on the importance of learning design is part of the process of developing and promoting approaches to active learning (Biggs, 1999) that will support the university's commitment to good pedagogy. This focus now underpins staff development, the production of web resources, guides and templates, and reinforces the work of CEDIR's Learning Design Unit, which was established in 2002 to coordinate Service Agreements with the Faculties for free design and production on educational resource projects (Lambert, 2003).

iii Strategy – Design new spaces for teaching and learning

Given our emphasis on blended eLearning, the spaces used for face to face learning require as much attention, and budget, as the modes used for online learning.[10] For example, like most universities, the University of Wollongong has implemented wireless access at almost all of our locations. As wireless laptops become more common for our students, demand is easing on fixed computer labs, as students can now access their eLearning within their normal physical classrooms, as well as in places not previously viewed as learning spaces, such as outdoor areas and coffee shops. Mobile access to eLearning has implications for the design of formal teaching spaces, as well as for the furniture used in them, so that these spaces can equally well accommodate online and offline interactions between academics, students and learning content or tasks. We are also increasingly moving videoconferencing out of purpose built studios into normal classrooms.

Our aim is to include technology in the design of our physical facilities in ways that are flexible and non-intrusive. We have developed a website to help teachers think about teaching space design, collecting together examples, resources and links from around the world, as well as describing

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[7] www.learningdesigns.uow.edu.au
[8] http://www.elearning.ac.uk/subjects/ldfold
[9] In keeping with Britain's third idea, a key action in our eTeaching Business Plan was to underpin the LMS with a Content Management System. It is important to note that although we refer to the need for a Learning Object Repository, the CMS must be capable of storing not only objects but also Learning Designs.
[10] The importance of Teaching Spaces as a strategy integral to the eLearning strategy is reinforced by the guide released by JISC on *Designing Spaces for Effective Learning*. In addition Australia's Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (now named Australian Council for Learning & Teaching) has specified Learning and Teaching Spaces as one of three priorities under its Priority Grants Scheme.

Innovative Learning Spaces at UOW as they are under development: from problem to draft solutions through evaluation and next implementation and re-evaluation.[11]

iv   Roles and Skills – Increase staff development opportunities

One of the most significant activities during the two year implementation of the replacement LMS has been to focus on staff development. Key features of this program are:

- Modelling good practice through the provision of blended learning programs for staff development
- Developing training materials, workshops and self-paced resources which place emphasis on good teaching using the LMS, rather solely on the new features of the LMS[12]
- Providing personal support from a Learning Designer for all teaching academics in their own office at the time of migration to the new LMS
- Providing hotline assistance for all teaching academics and Faculty based support staff once teaching is underway
- Augmenting the University's good practice showcase with eLearning exemplars, to more openly value the work of our early adopters and innovative teachers[13]

By committing in our Business Plan to develop a comprehensive range of workshops, resources and personal support options, we have not only overseen a smooth transition to a new LMS, but at the same time used this to continue the process of consulting with the academic community. The implementation process has strengthened relationships between key units, in part by challenging residual assumptions about the instrumental nature and process of eLearning, and it has further shaped our sense of what a strategic plan for eLearning could achieve.

v   Roles and Skills – Increase and vary student support options

Until recently, students have been offered only limited technical support as required, predominantly in order to resolve issues such as dial-up access problems, and browser configuration. The burden of providing student support for use of the previous LMS (how to navigate around sites, how to use the communication tools, and how to find resources) had been carried by teaching academics. However, our survey results indicated students are becoming increasingly competent computer users, and many more have well-established home broadband connections.

As a result, the focus of our support strategy has shifted. We have developed new student support pages that place eLearning in its pedagogical context, and these have been elevated to the home page of the University's website. There is information about all components of eLearning at the University of Wollongong, not only the LMS, but also videoconference, eduStream, teaching space technologies, wireless access, Student OnLine Services, and Library Online. New student guides stress the importance of the mix between face-to-face and online learning, and outline the characteristics of a successful eLearner.[14] This has been followed up with the development of a CD explaining the university's approach to eLearning, mailed to all staff and students. We have become more aware of the kinds of support we can provide to students, including conveying a better sense of what to expect from blended learning, and in doing this we have begun to think of ways to address the hidden cost to academics of providing de facto learning support services to students.

Between 2005 and 2008, activity in these five focus areas of our Business Plan formed a critical part of our ongoing institutional "conversation" (Laurillard, 2002) within and across key divisional units about the best strategic direction for the University of Wollongong. During this period, we consolidated our committee structures and reporting relationships, and exploited the implementation of the new LMS as an opportunity to collect first hand feedback from our front-line academic users on their everyday experiences, good and bad. At the same time, we attended to the immediate imperatives of our operational context in ensuring that the new LMS provided an effective working environment for the

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[11] Innovative Learning Spaces cedirsd.uow.edu.au/ils/
[12] For this purpose we have used an adapted version of training materials purchased from the University of Tasmania (Australia) and the University of Waterloo (Canada)
[13] Good Practice Examples: http://teaching.uow.edu.au/ltgp/; http://edsnet.cedir.uow.edu.au/fls_cases/index.aspx; http://staff.uow.edu.au/eteaching/ShowMeHow/Basics.html; http://www.uow.edu.au/cedir/spotlight/index.htm
[14] Being an eLearner uow.edu.au/student/elearning/guide

rapidly increasing number of permanent and sessional academic staff who were blending eLearning with their face to face teaching.

Phase 3: Drafting and redrafting the eLearning Strategic Plan

Thanks to the generally smooth implementation of the new LMS, and the effective operation of the eLearning Business Plan, background consultations on the appropriate direction and scope of the eLearning Strategic Plan proceeded without distraction. Finally in 2007, it was time to complete the process of drafting the Strategic Plan itself. In a fortuitous piece of institutional timing, this coincided with the final phases of consultation for the higher level University Strategic Plan and University Learning & Teaching Plan 2008-2010.

The original draft Strategic Plan for eLearning and Teaching (SPELT) plan had five objectives, each with a number of underpinning strategies:
1. By 2010, the University will expand the blending of face-to-face and online teaching from 40% of subjects to 80% of subjects so that teachers and students are operating flexibly in extended classrooms.
2. The University will increase the number of learning experiences that are active and collaborative in part by appropriate use of technology and by attention to learning design.
3. The University will improve its support of multi location teaching, in part by appropriate use of eTeaching technologies, to increase the number of subjects taught at multiple locations from 20% in 2005 to 40% in 2010.
4. The University will foster and monitor students' perceptions of Graduate Qualities by supporting the implementation of an online Graduate Qualities ePortfolio.
5. The specific Graduate Qualities of multiculturalism, internationalisation and team work will be fostered by introducing Global Learning Projects in subjects that are blended and multi location so that by 2010 all courses incorporate at least one Global Learning Project: students collaborating online with students at another UOW location or with students in another University.

Our first action was to compare these independently conceived objectives with the University's draft objectives for Excellence and Innovation in Learning and Teaching (2008-2010), and we found that they were generally well matched. This was no surprise, as our objectives had been developed within a general environment of consultation, discussion and meeting attendance that meant that key eLearning managers and stakeholders were well-aware of the University's general strategic intentions. The University's overarching objectives were:
- Graduates equipped for productive roles in society and the workplace
- An active, collaborative and flexible learning experience for students
- Quality programs relevant to the evolving needs of students and the community
- An international focus in learning and teaching
- High quality teaching.

However, by 2007 three of the SPELT objectives (1, 2 & 4) were substantially underway already as part of normal business whereas the other two objectives seemed to be too far-reaching for some parts of the UOW community. There was also an evident risk that an eLearning Strategic Plan that was being developed in isolation could be overlooked, as the University approached the climax of its regular planning cycle, in which eLearning had not previously been a discrete presence.

We therefore decided to re-style the plan to take advantage of the significant activity and attention surrounding the development of the Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 2008-2010. As the university executive, its key planning departments and the wider academic community seemed to understand and accept this planning activity, we felt that the relevance and importance of eLearning objectives would be clearer if this link between our objectives and the University's wider goals in this area was made obvious. We therefore took a step in the direction of a closer harmonization between the two plans, by laying out our objectives in tabular form, and explaining which Learning and Teaching Objective each supported.

eLearning & Teaching Objective	Learning & Teaching Objective (*with relevant strategies shown in italics*)
1. The University will expand the **blending** of face-to-face and online teaching so that teachers and students are operating **flexibly** in **connected classrooms**, doubling the number of blended subjects by 2010.	An active, collaborative and flexible learning experience for students *Optimise the use of teaching spaces and technical facilities to provide a physical environment that is engaging, collaborative and flexible*
2. The University will increase the number of learning experiences that are **active and collaborative** partly by appropriate use of technology as well as by attention to **learning design** and **educational research**.	An active, collaborative and flexible learning experience for students High quality teaching *Promote innovation in teaching and learning which is based on sound educational research*
3. The University will improve its support of **multi location teaching,** in part by appropriate use of eTeaching technologies, in order to double the number of MLT subjects by 2010.	An active, collaborative and flexible learning experience for students *Optimise the mix of delivery methods to enhance the learning experience of students across all teaching locations* Quality programs relevant to the evolving needs of students and the community *Monitor and improve practices to ensure the quality of course delivery and outcomes across teaching locations, including UOW Dubai and other off-shore sites*
4. The University will develop and monitor students' perceptions of Graduate Qualities and support the Work Integrated Learning program by implementing an online **Graduate Qualities ePortfolio**.	Graduates equipped for productive roles in society and the workplace *Develop and implement institutional approaches to evaluating the attainment of Graduate Qualities* *Work with employers to integrate workplace and community experiences for students into the curriculum in all discipline areas*
5. The specific Graduate Qualities of multiculturalism, internationalisation and team work will be fostered by increasing the number of **Global Learning Projects** in subjects that are blended and multi location.	An international focus in learning and teaching *Promote international learning experiences for students through electronic communication* *Develop academic collaboration between domestic and international students* *Prepare graduates for employment in a global labour market*

Our second step was influenced by feedback from the academic community via the eLearning & Teaching Subcommittee, which indicated a reaction against the definite quantitative targets that had been the focus of the original draft plan. This was a valuable objection. Although quantitative targets can be visually persuasive indicators of growth, they can also mask the shallowness of this apparent expansion in activity. Strategic planning can too easily become hostage to quantitative performance indicators, when our real goal was to plan for the consolidation and enrichment of the growth that had already occurred in developing draft objectives that would call for measures of the quality, depth and innovation of the UOW eLearning experience. A new version of the plan was produced, this time deleting specific targets.

At the same time, we reversed the relationship between the two sets of objectives, this time starting with the Learning and Teaching Objectives, and matching each of these to one or two eLearning objectives. In doing this, we took the significant step of structuring our plan so that eLearning objectives appeared as a consequence or outcome of the University's overall objectives. At the same time, we tried as far as possible to preserve the original impetus behind the development of our objectives. Our aim was to demonstrate that the alignment with the Learning & Teaching Plan was becoming tighter, but the primary impetus behind each eLearning objective still remained independent, initially at least, of the overall planning framework.

UOW L&T Objective	UOW eLearning Strategic Objective
Graduates equipped for productive roles in society and the workplace	Graduates experienced in working in eLearning environments relevant to lifelong learning in their future workplace and community

An active, collaborative and flexible learning experience for students	Active, collaborative and flexible eLearning and eTeaching experiences, especially within multi location subjects
Quality programs relevant to the evolving needs of students and the community	Clear quality standards for eLearning at UOW eLearning used to support regional, national, international and local community engagement
An international focus in learning and teaching	eLearning used to support UOW's international focus in learning and teaching
High quality teaching	Well-established high quality eTeaching projects A culture of research and innovation in eTeaching practice

Finally, we edited our seven objectives down to five, and on the advice of the Strategic Planning Unit, reversed the alignment between the two plans once more, with the result that each eLearning and Teaching objective clearly mirrored one of the five Learning & Teaching objectives, but that eLearning was placed in the more logical dominant position in the table.

eLearning & eTeaching Objectives	Relevant UOW Learning & Teaching Objectives
Graduates who can use eLearning appropriately to contribute to society and the workplace	Graduates equipped to contribute to society and the workplace
Active, collaborative and flexible eLearning experiences, including within subjects offered at multiple locations	An active, collaborative and flexible learning experience for students
Quality eLearning experiences appropriately integrated into UOW programs	Quality programs relevant to the evolving needs of students and the community
eLearning used to support UOW's international focus in learning & teaching	An international focus in learning & teaching
High quality eTeaching supported by a culture of research and innovation in eTeaching practice	High quality teaching

Having harmonized the objectives of the two plans, we then drafted the underpinning strategies for achieving these. The relevant overarching strategies for achieving objectives in the Learning & Teaching Plan were mirrored with strategies in the eLearning Plan. For example, under the fourth objective, we developed very closely matched strategies, and in some cases used this opportunity to clarify what had been somewhat vague hints in the Learning and Teaching strategy that eLearning might somehow be involved ("through on-line delivery", for example):

eLearning used to support UOW's international focus in learning & teaching	An international focus in learning & teaching
Use eLearning with targeted international partners to complement participation in Study Abroad programs	Promote international learning experiences for students including through Study Abroad and electronic communication
Use eLearning to increase collaboration between students from all demographic groups across all Wollongong campuses and locations, onshore and offshore	Develop academic collaboration between domestic and international students
Support staff in identifying and developing resources for on-line delivery that assist the acquisition of foreign language skills and cultural awareness	Promote opportunities, within degree courses and through on-line delivery, for the acquisition of foreign language skills and cultural awareness

The process of redrafting occurred relatively quickly towards the end of our long, slow planning conversation. As the very small and detailed changes in these final drafts show, the University of Wollongong Strategic Plan for eLearning had benefited from a very close and cooperative consultation process across many divisional units and committees, from conversations with many individual users,

and finally with senior members of the university's planning units. As these detailed steps show, in the later stages, we were given very specific drafting advice by the University Strategic Planning Unit, whose experience in writing the rest of the suite of 2008-2010 plans proved critical. The significant result of this kind of consultation with a divisional unit that had not previously been asked to comment on eLearning matters was that a Strategic Plan whose status might have been marginal at best, and treated with hostility at worst, went through the complex university committee approval process with the supportive endorsement of critical friends at each stage.

Overall, we learned that while a thorough approach to consultation might at times seem frustratingly slow, the close harmonization with the university's overall strategic planning framework now reassures even the most ambivalent university teacher, manager, or member of the Senior Executive that eLearning is a mainstream activity at the University of Wollongong. The Plan was approved by University Senate at the first 2008 meeting without comment.[15]

Phase 4: Review and evaluation

Now that we are commencing the period of implementation, review and evaluation of the plan, we might hope to proceed smoothly, given the significant internal advances that were made during the planning process, particularly in raising the profile among divisional units and managers who might previously have thought of eLearning either in terms of web access to uploaded lecture notes, or as some kind of distracting teaching hobby for the technologically gifted. However use of eLearning changes rapidly. Since completing the plans, academic units around the university are now piloting the use of Web 2.0 and open source systems and there is more activity with electronic Portfolio systems.

In addition to coping with technological change, in reality, the implementation of the plan will face considerable challenges. Chief among these is that institutional performance against the plan will depend on the University's capacity to engage Faculties in developing curriculum for the kinds of active, multi location learning experiences (including Global Learning Projects) which eLearning has the capacity to support. Curriculum, quite properly, remains outside the terms of reference of the University's eLearning committee structure. But as many higher education institutions have noted, the professional incentives to engage in curriculum development can be much weaker than the pressures to focus on research output. While the stereotype of the change-resistant academic probably persists in the minds of some eLearning advocates (Haymes, 2008), the reality is more likely to be that academics who are keen to make changes are effectively discouraged from doing so by their increasing workloads, including globally increasing staff-student ratios. (Kandiko, 2008).

While offering appropriate incentives for the development of curriculum, the university will also need to provide for:
- continued and effective means of staff development support, that extends to the large number of sessional teachers who now work in eLearning, including at other locations
- the regular and timely development of resources available to students at all UOW locations, so that the burden of explaining the operating details of future LMS upgrades does not fall back onto academics
- the provision of effective technical assistance to academic and general staff using eLearning technologies
- regular monitoring of the articulation of eLearning practices to core UOW plans and policies
- the development and implementation of a robust and comprehensive performance review framework which will maintain UOW eLearning environments at a high standard
- the development and implementation of an appropriate risk monitoring framework which will enable academics working in Web 2.0 and open source environments to do so in a manner that is clearly and demonstrably consistent with the university's policies on teaching, learning, assessment, privacy, and records management

Critical to the success of all of these initiatives is the continued enhancement of our eLearning communication framework. The positive outcome of the lengthy strategic planning process is that key divisional units now agree that eLearning is an important and mainstream part of the University's

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[15] The complete Strategic Plan is at: uow.edu.au/content/groups/public/@web/@spq/documents/doc/uow046341.pdf

business, and some stakeholder groups are better able to communicate with each other through the committee process. At each stage of our institutional conversation, however, we learned that even the most engaged academics had some unhappy experience of finding out about a key eLearning development by accident, or too late. Our eLearning communication strategy now needs to reach beyond the committee structures to become part of the everyday working environment of the whole university community, from the Senior Executive to the support staff advising students in the Faculties and at other UOW teaching locations. An effective communication strategy is particularly important given the dynamic nature of technological change in this sector. There are new and exciting opportunities appearing each day, and even those whose research focus is eLearning will admit it is a challenge keeping up with all of these opportunities and ideas.

Most of the methods which large public sector and higher education institutions have relied upon for formal and informal communication particularly global email and staff intranet bulletins, are beginning to fail as ways of maintaining a meaningful dialogue with large user communities. The eLearning early adopters are increasingly moving into other forms of online social networking and information sharing, and in general universities have been slow to work out communication strategies that address this important professional shift. At the same time, some traditional forms of workplace communication, including quarterly print flyers, webpages whose content is known to change reasonably regularly, and public meetings held at the right time of year, remain surprisingly effective means of promoting particular issues to busy academics and their students.

So the final simple lesson that we can share from our experience of developing a discrete strategic plan for eLearning at the University of Wollongong is that this document by itself, no matter how thoroughly workshopped in the planning stage, and how minutely redrafted to match institutional styles of public communication, cannot on its own cause these strategic objectives to be met. We now need to ensure that the university community is aware of the existence of this plan, and that measures are developed to assess the progress made towards its goals. Reporting against these targets will need to be effective but also consultative. Our early experience with implementation has shown that dialogue within and across units about strategic planning for eLearning will need to be persistent, and properly supported as the senior institutional level for the life of the plan, rather than simply in the period of its development. When this happens, as we are learning, the opportunity to place eLearning at the heart of a University's sense of its core business is an exciting one.

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