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# A systemic approach to working with academic staff: addressing the confusion at the source

Alisa Percy

*University of Wollongong, [alisa@uow.edu.au](mailto:alisa@uow.edu.au)*

Jan Skillen

*University of Wollongong, [jskillen@uow.edu.au](mailto:jskillen@uow.edu.au)*

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# A systemic approach to working with academic staff: addressing the confusion at the source

## **Abstract**

The role of the learning adviser in the tertiary context could be argued to be in a period of transformation with the changing culture of modern universities. While in many respects we are still attempting to develop an appropriate and comprehensive definition of our role at the national level, the approach we take is often dependent on our university's organisation, philosophy and policy. In response to a number of educational and economic factors, in some universities the role of the learning adviser is moving from one that operates in the remedial mode focusing solely on student skills development, to one that transforms the culture of teaching and learning in the institutional by working with academic staff at the curriculum level. At the University of Wollongong, it is the latter systemic approach that is deemed the highest priority in providing the most equitable and effective learning support for all students. This approach aims to remove the sources of confusion for students by integrating tertiary literacy skills instruction into subject curriculum, training staff in providing explicit feedback on their students' skills and developing teaching and learning materials which further explain and model aspects of the feedback. This paper will present three crucial aspects of the systemic approach: the shift in focus from working outside the curriculum to one that addresses the issues inside the curriculum, or system, by collaborating with discipline staff; the importance of working at the faculty and department level to make these collaborations strategic; and the need to participate in and impact upon policy decisions at a number of levels.

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## **A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO WORKING WITH ACADEMIC STAFF: ADDRESSING THE CONFUSION AT THE SOURCE**

Alisa Percy and Jan Skillen  
University of Wollongong

*The role of the learning adviser in the tertiary context could be argued to be in a period of transformation with the changing culture of modern universities. While in many respects we are still attempting to develop an appropriate and comprehensive definition of our role at the national level, the approach we take is often dependent on our university's organisation, philosophy and policy. In response to a number of educational and economic factors, in some universities the role of the learning adviser is moving from one that operates in the remedial mode focusing solely on student skills development, to one that transforms the culture of teaching and learning in the institutional by working with academic staff at the curriculum level. At the University of Wollongong, it is the latter systemic approach that is deemed the highest priority in providing the most equitable and effective learning support for all students. This approach aims to remove the sources of confusion for students by integrating tertiary literacy skills instruction into subject curriculum, training staff in providing explicit feedback on their students' skills and developing teaching and learning materials which further explain and model aspects of the feedback. This paper will present three crucial aspects of the systemic approach: the shift in focus from working outside the curriculum to one that addresses the issues inside the curriculum, or system, by collaborating with discipline staff; the importance of working at the faculty and department level to make these collaborations strategic; and the need to participate in and impact upon policy decisions at a number of levels.*

In the CAUT commissioned report *First Year on Campus*, McInnis, James and McNaught (1995) discuss students' first year transition, as "characterised by...a series of gaps and gulfs, especially between school and university, and between students and academics". These 'gaps and gulfs', in part, represent two sources of confusion: the students' lack of familiarity with the academic learning context (generic skills) and the conventions and discourse of their discipline (discipline-specific skills); and discipline staffs' inability to clearly articulate their tacit knowledge of the discourse and conventions of their discipline and to provide students with developmental and timely feedback. It is these two sources of confusion that Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers deal with on a day-to-day basis. In the current educational climate that has highlighted the importance of quality teaching and learning in higher education, in many cases LAS advisers are moving away from the remedial and generic model of providing learning support, to one that is pro-active, systemic and developmental. This latter approach addresses the students' confusions at the source by working with discipline staff at the curriculum level. The curriculum is the 'bridge' where all groups engage, the students, the staff and LAS advisers: it is where confusions can be addressed in a contextualised, relevant and timely manner. This approach, however, extends the notion of integration by working strategically at the department and faculty level, and by ensuring that discipline staff develop the knowledge, resources and ability to continue with the teaching of the skills and discourse long after the LAS staff member has moved on to other subjects. The systemic approach is a long-term solution which has the capability of effecting real and lasting change in the teaching and learning culture of our institutions. This paper will present three crucial aspects of the systemic approach: the shift in focus from

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working outside the curriculum to one that addresses the issues inside the curriculum, or system, by collaborating with discipline staff; the importance of working at the faculty and department level to make these collaborations strategic; and the need to participate in and impact upon policy decisions at a number of levels.

## **Background**

There is no doubt that the modern university is experiencing a cultural transition or paradigm shift in the current economic and educational climate, particularly in relation to internationalisation, increasing student diversity and the subsequent need to ensure quality teaching and learning (eg. Adams et al., 1999; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Bryant et al., 1999; Candy et al., 1994; McInnes et al., 1995; Ramsden et al., 1995). This 'shift' is having a profound effect on the role of the Learning and Academic Skills staff in higher education and on the approach taken in surviving and/or facilitating this transition (Candy et al., 1994; Chanock et al., 1996; Hicks & George, 1998; Skillen et al., 1998; Van der Wal et al., 1998). The approach taken by a unit, however, will depend largely on the culture and policy of the institution and the unit's philosophy of practice.

Over the past decade, university policy has been conforming to increasing pressure to meet international and government regulations on quality, transparency and accountability (eg. Dearing, 1997; West, 1998). For many universities, this has placed a sense of urgency on reforming curricula and improving learning outcomes, a process that places extra pressure on discipline staff with regard to their teaching practice, and one which requires sophisticated approaches to supporting their professional development.

Learning advisers are in an ideal position to make a valuable contribution to curriculum reform, and in many universities they have moved beyond the remedial student-focused role to one which assumes a developmental and professional development role by working systemically with discipline staff. A number of Learning and Academic Skills units have developed approaches to learning support that are not only effective and equitable in terms of promoting quality learning outcomes, but are consistent with the values and goals of the university (Hicks & George, 1998), are cost-effective, and are capable of creating deep qualitative change in teaching and learning in the long-term (Angelo, 1999).

Additionally, educational theorists (eg. Baldauf, 1996; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Boyer, 1990; Ramsden et al., 1995) have been arguing for a paradigm shift in the teaching and learning culture of the modern university, a shift in practice from teacher-centred to student and learning-centred, a shift in curriculum from content-based to skills-based, and a shift from the perception that research is separate from teaching to the acknowledgement of teaching as a scholarly activity in itself. Such a shift requires an enormous transition for some discipline staff: in many cases learning and educational developers have been identified as the 'meta-professions' (Candy, 1996) responsible for assisting in the facilitation of such a shift (McInnes et al., 1995). As Candy (1994) claims, "the enhancement and the facilitation of learning should be viewed as the central purpose of the university, and accordingly student support services...should be regarded as full partners in the education process". This concept of partnership is a crucial element in the systemic approach. It represents the shift away from providing a service 'for' students and discipline staff from outside the curriculum, to one that

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collaborates 'with' discipline staff to enhance students' learning inside the system at the curriculum level.

### The systemic approach: addressing the confusion at the source

In order to achieve an effective and equitable approach to students' skills development, Learning Development at the University of Wollongong places an emphasis on the systemic approach as illustrated in the left arm in Figure 1 below.

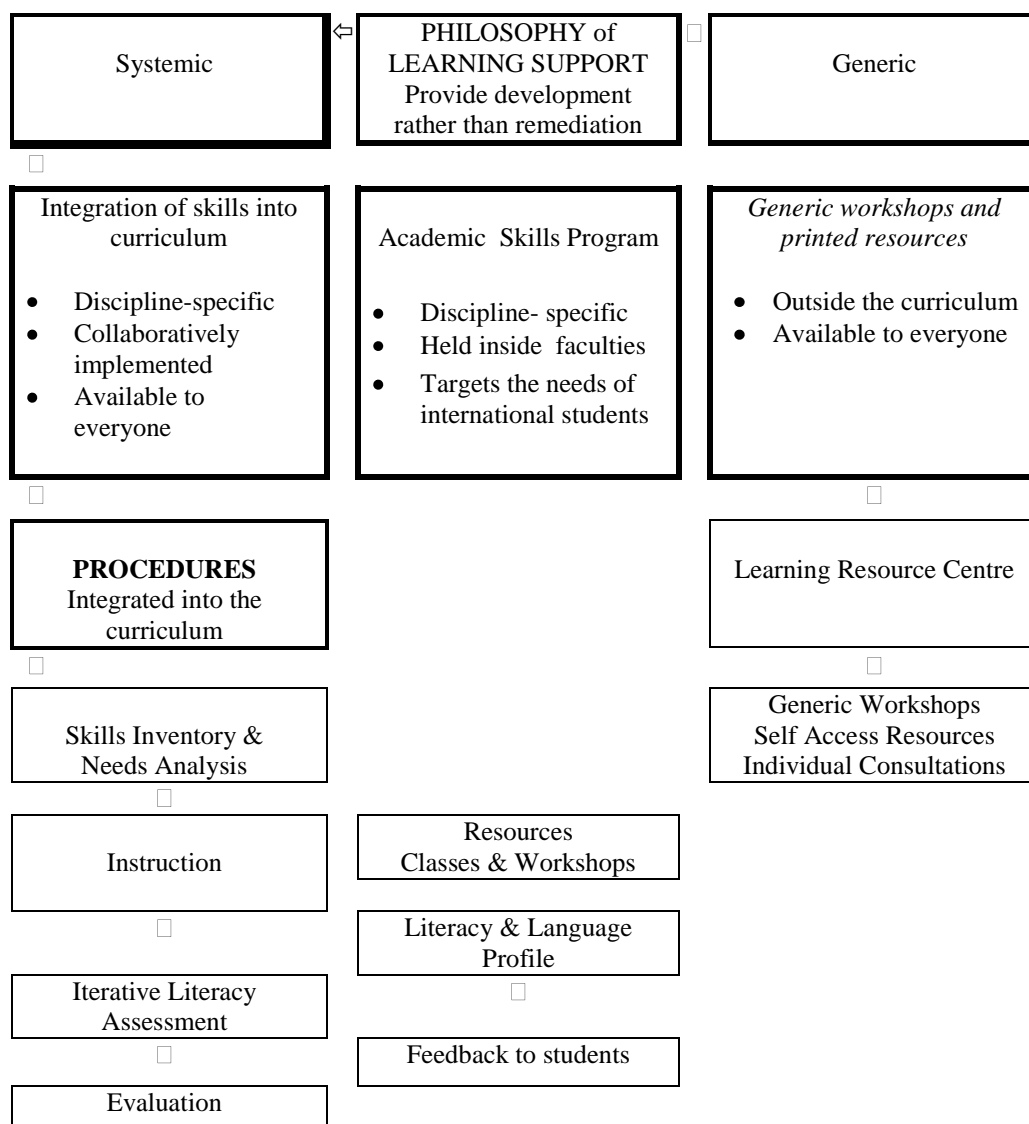


Figure 1. Model of learning support, Learning Development, University of Wollongong.

The emphasis on the systemic approach is based on the recognition that all students making the transition to university require assistance in acculturating not only to the academic context but to the skills and discourse of their discipline, and it is believed that this assistance is most relevant, effective and equitable when offered to students within the curricula. By making explicit the skills and conventions of the discipline and subject, and providing timely and relevant skills instruction and feedback inside the curriculum, the potential for students' confusion is limited and their potential for learning enhanced.

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To formalise the systemic approach, Learning Development developed a model called the IDEALL (Integrated Development of English language and Academic Literacy and Learning) approach which has been used extensively in collaborations with academic staff. The model has four basic procedures: collaboratively conducting a skills inventory of the subject, assessing students' literacy and language skills, designing and implementing skills instruction, and evaluating student learning outcomes (see Skillen et al., 1998 for more detail). This approach goes beyond the old model of integration where learning advisers came into subjects as 'literacy experts', delivered their knowledge to the students and left with that knowledge (Skillen et al, 1998). Systemic collaborations aim to develop the knowledge and skills of discipline staff that will assist them in improving their teaching practice in the long term beyond the single subject.

One example of this type of collaboration has occurred in the core 100 level subject for the Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Business Administration, MGMT110: Introduction to Management. The collaboration has been conducted using an action research framework to document and evaluate the effectiveness of the integration and the collaboration itself. In the most recent phase of collaboration, the planning stage of the cycle involved the following:

- a collaborative curriculum review and skills inventory;
- the strategic placement of assessment tasks to allow for an iterative feedback and development process;
- the development and use of explicit marking criteria to provide the feedback;
- the strategic placement of skills instruction in the curriculum;
- the development of a staff training manual and workshop; and
- the redevelopment of web-based and print-based learning resources to underpin the instruction and assessment.

The development of explicit marking criteria provides staff with the opportunity to articulate the exact skills that students are expected to master within their subject. It also allows for Learning Development staff to impact on their way of thinking about their role as teachers and assists them in clearly articulating the discourse and literacy conventions of their discipline. The use of such criteria to assess students' work means that students are receiving timely feedback that unpacks the requirements of their assessment tasks and makes explicit that which is valued. And it also provides a framework for the development of relevant learning resources.

The implementation stage of the cycle can be summarised as follows:

- essay lecture inside lecture schedule situated before the first essay, team taught by Learning Development and the subject lecturer;
- essay Preparation tutorial run by tutors before the first essay;
- first essay feedback using explicit marking criteria, marked by tutors;
- student essay example (Distinction level) annotated for linguistic and structural features placed on web and handed out to students;
- comprehensive self-access web-based and print-based Study Guide provides explanation and models of the various items in the marking criteria among other things;

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- individual consultations for students still having difficulties; and
- essay 2 feedback.

The staff marking workshop and team teaching activities that take place throughout the session are crucial for modelling and providing feedback to staff so they feel comfortable in taking ownership over this process.

In the evaluation stage of the cycle, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the integration. A student survey was used to gauge students' perceptions of the benefits (or otherwise) of the instruction to their learning process, and their essay marks from the first and second essay were statistically analysed according to whether, and to what extent, they had accessed the integrated support.

Of the 273 students enrolled in the subject, 159 (58%) were surveyed to gauge their perceptions of the usefulness of the integrated support. An analysis of the survey results indicated a majority of positive responses. With regard to the essay feedback process, 94% of students agreed that the process of getting explicit feedback on their essay and having online support was a useful concept for teaching and learning, 72% felt that the feedback from the first essay was clear and easy to understand, and 71% felt that the feedback motivated them to improve their skills. Thus, the collaboration did have some benefit for a large number of students who may not have received the same instruction otherwise. However, developmental instruction of this sort may not always meet the individual needs of students who have serious deficiencies in their skills, and therefore the provision of individual or group consultation to those students is still necessary.

Additionally, a random sample of 59 students (22%) was used to explore any significant differences between the timing of students' use of the Study Guide and their performance in the essay. This analysis was conducted using a two-tailed t-test. The students were divided into the following groups: those who accessed the Study Guide only before the first essay, those who accessed the Study Guide only after the first essay, those who accessed the Study Guide before and after, and those who didn't access the Study Guide at all. The average of each group's first and second essay mark was also used.

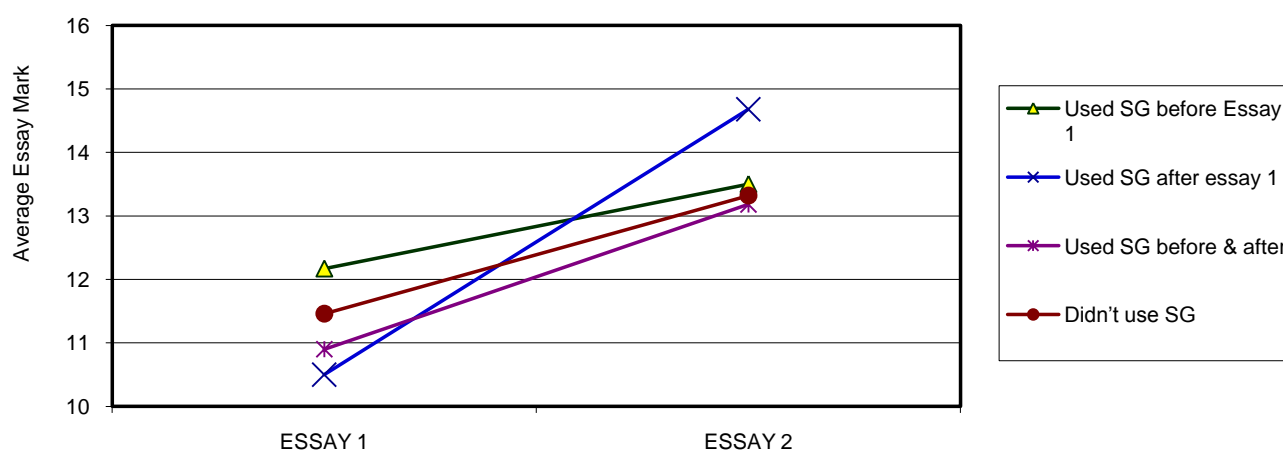


Figure 2. Students' improvement between the first and second essay according to their use of the Study Guide.

As can be seen in the Figure 2, the students who accessed the Study Guide only after receiving the essay feedback improved at a significantly higher rate than any other group

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( $df=10$ ,  $p<.0001$ ). This could be explained by the fact that they also rated the poorest in the first essay (10.05) and were strongly motivated to improve their marks. This assumption is supported by their survey comments stating the majority of this group had felt motivated by the feedback. Further, their use of the learning resources at this stage would have been guided by the feedback. Another theory could be that these students were in fact very capable but made little effort in their first essay, which they promptly changed for the second essay when they understood what was being valued in the assessment task. This is in contrast to the students who used the Study Guide only before the first essay. These students failed to make a statistically significant improvement ( $df=23$ ,  $p<.0083$ ), which could be explained by the fact that they did not capitalise on the feedback to develop their weaker areas.

Those students who did not access the Study Guide at all did make a significant improvement ( $df=36$ ,  $p<.0012$ ), yet it is felt that these students could have done better if they had accessed the Study Guide.

A perplexing result was that those students who claimed to have used the Study Guide both before and after did not improve as significantly as the 'only after' group even though they made a significant improvement ( $df=15$ ,  $p>.0019$ ). There could be a number of explanations for this lack of improvement, but further analysis showed that although they may have referred to the Guide before and after the first essay, they had not made extensive use of all the modules. Analysis indicates that the students who made extensive use of the Study Guide modules showed the most significant improvement. An Analysis of Variance using repeated measures indicated a ( $p<.0001$ ) significant improvement between students' first and second essay mark according to whether they accessed 1 – 25%, 26 – 50%, 50 – 75% or 75 – 100% of the Study Guide.

Despite the promising results and the positive feedback from students, this approach does not come without its limitations: it is a slow process, and without support at the institutional and faculty level initiatives could remain as ad hoc as past approaches to student learning. Successful and lasting collaborations require patience, persistence and often very careful management to keep the process moving and to maintain the participants' morale and interest, including one's own. One reason for this is that most discipline staff are already over-worked and they continually need to be shown how this process benefits them and their students. Also, discipline staff need to come to accept the fact that their students' skills development is their responsibility, so in some cases it takes some time before they are willing to work independently with the materials and modelling provided for them. Many still see the learning adviser's role as providing a service 'for' them rather than being collaborators 'with' them. There is also a need for LAS advisers to work simultaneously with Deans, Heads of Department and the Education Committees to influence their understanding and appreciation of the university's goals and provide them with strategic options for skills integration.

### **Working at the department and faculty level**

Providing consultation to faculties and departments, educating them on the importance of curriculum-integrated skills instruction for a diverse student population, and assisting in the development of strategies for curriculum reform from first to third year is an essential part of the systemic approach. Impact at this level is necessary to ensure whole degree approaches



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are taken and an emphasis can be placed on students' incremental skills development throughout their degree program. This requires LAS staff's participation in Faculty Education Committees (FECs), Strategic Review Groups and any other faculty level group that deals with teaching and learning issues.

Learning Development at the University of Wollongong has representatives in each of the faculties either working in teams or as individuals. These representatives are responsible for applying the systemic approach in their allocated faculties and have a formal place on each of the Faculty Education Committees. Being situated in such a position allows Learning Developers to provide comment on teaching and learning issues, provide the faculty with strategic options for curriculum review with regard to skills instruction, and makes the approach and achievements visible to the entire faculty.

In the Faculty of Commerce, Learning Development have been involved in the Department of Management's *Strategic Review of the Undergraduate Program*. The final report provides recommendations that the Department implement a team-based approach to strategically plan and implement skills instruction from first to third year (see Appendix A for an excerpt of the recommendations made in the Report). This report was finalised at the end of 1999, but its implementation has been slow. Despite this slow progress, Learning Development's involvement has raised their awareness of the importance of curriculum-integrated skills instruction, and has profiled Learning Development staff as facilitators in this process. Effecting change is not an overnight process. It requires participation at all levels to inform and influence those who have the keys to the curriculum and the power to effect change, and again it requires patience and persistence.

Understanding the limitations of working at the Program and Departmental level only, Learning Development has had extensive dialogue with the Dean and Sub-Dean of the Faculty about the core priorities of the University's *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 1997 – 2005* and the increasing external pressures for quality assurance in relation to teaching and learning, such as the recently introduced Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA). Learning Development provided consultation to the faculty as it underwent an External Course Appraisal Committee (ECAC) Review of its undergraduate programs, and is currently playing a key role in their subsequent project to 'map' the tertiary literacies in these programs. A year into this project, collaboration with the faculty executive (top-down) and discipline staff (bottom up) has resulted in a new project proposal for the systemic and strategic integration of skills instruction across the 100 level (core) and 200 level (large) subjects trialling innovative methods for professional development, such as action research and action learning. The use of these methods is the result of ongoing research into the most effective ways to promote a culture of inquiry and scholarship in teaching (see for example, MacDonald, 1999; Weeks & Scott, 1993; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992).

Thus, 2001 represents a new phase in the collaborations between Learning Development and the Faculty of Commerce that aims for improved teaching and learning outcomes for all students through the incremental articulation of integrated skills instruction from first to second year across a multi-disciplinary degree program, and through the promotion of professional development activities for staff that promote a culture of inquiry and scholarship in teaching.

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## **Impacting on policy at a number of levels**

Another level of action and influence lies in our impact on university policy through participation in University Education Sub-committees, working parties, and any other policy-making groups that deal directly with teaching and learning issues. Learning Development had direct involvement in the development of the University's *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan, 1997 – 2005* which provides strategic goals and guidelines for the enhancement of teaching and learning on campus (see Appendix 2 for a statement of its core priorities and a summary of our role). Learning Development has also made significant contributions to the Generic Skills Working Party, the Internationalisation of the Curriculum Sub-Committee, the Peer Review Working Party and the English Language Entry Standards and Ongoing Support Working Party, to name a few. Contributions at this level are characterised by well-researched reports, including qualitative and quantitative data reflecting the issues and needs of students and staff. Input such as this not only provides guidance and strategies for the university to move towards 'best practice', but in many cases also allows learning developers the opportunity to define their role and involvement in addressing these 'issues' according to our philosophy and practice.

## **Conclusion**

LAS advisers, or learning developers, have the opportunity in the current culture shift of the modern university to have a far-reaching impact on the skills of all students by working within the system, at the curriculum level with academic staff. Working at this level eliminates the confusions that are caused by the students' lack of familiarity with academic and discipline conventions and the inability of the staff to articulate this for them and provide them with developmental feedback. Implementing this systemic approach requires collaborating with academic staff in such a way that they finally take ownership over the skills instruction in their subject(s). Crucial to the effectiveness of the systemic approach is participation by LAS advisers at the department and faculty level to facilitate the strategic nature of the collaborations, and at the institutional level to impact on university policy. For LAS advisers taking a systemic approach, ongoing research into its benefits, pitfalls and long-term effects will provide invaluable data to inform practice at the institutional, national and international level.

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**Appendix A: Excerpt from *A Strategic Review of Undergraduate Programs*,  
Department of Management, September 1999**

**4.0 Major Recommendations**

Learning and Teaching

- R5** That the Department develop a team-based strategy for integrating Tertiary Literacies across all subjects offered in its undergraduate programs.
- R6** That the Department propose that the Faculty develop a team-based strategy for integrating tertiary literacies across all subjects in the C-1 Schedule.
- R7** That the Department develop a team-based strategy for the progressive development of its capabilities in flexible delivery.
- R8** That the Department integrate the proposed process for quality assurance with the above team-based strategies for improving the integration of tertiary literacies.

**Resources and Capabilities**

- R9** That the Department capitalise on its current specialist expertise in teaching and learning research and development, by encouraging and supporting the development of a team capable of: securing competitive research and development grants; designing and implementing initiatives in teaching and learning; designing evaluations of those initiatives; capable of publishing the findings in relevant journals; and leading skill development for all members of the Department in tertiary literacies and flexible delivery.
- R10** That the Department maintain the excellent relationships it has developed with both Learning Development and CEDIR as strategic alliances on which the enrichment of our teaching and learning capabilities depends.
- R11** That the Department make a major investment in the human and capital resources needed to develop, deploy and maintain leading-edge capabilities in providing computer and intranet based resources in support of its primary on-campus teaching as well as flexible delivery.
- R12** That the Department very carefully consider the opportunity costs of committing to these recommendations particularly in terms of the capacity to pursue individual and collective goals in research and career development.

Percy, A & Skillen, J. 2000, 'A systemic approach to working with academic staff: addressing the confusion at the source'. In K. Chanock (Ed.), *Sources of Confusion: Proceedings of the 2000 Language and Academic Skills Conference*, La Trobe University, Melbourne, pp244-254.

## **Appendix B: Summary of the Learning & Teaching Strategic Plan 1997 - 2005, University Of Wollongong**

The University of Wollongong's *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 1997 - 2005* states as its core priorities :

to provide an environment in which:

- a) students become skilled in actively pursuing discipline specific and tertiary literacies knowledge and critical understanding; and
- b) staff find rewarding opportunities for personal and professional development as educators" (p.1).

These priorities are in accordance with the philosophy of Learning Development staff.

The *Plan* identifies nine Attributes of a Wollongong Graduate which provide a framework of competencies for student learning outcomes and curriculum development. The *Plan* also provides a range of guidelines outlining the roles and responsibilities of the parties involved in implementing the *Plan's* objectives; these include education committees, service providers and academic staff. The *Plan* states that Learning and Educational Support services have the following role:

in addition to assistance for individual students and staff with particular needs, support units will assist individuals and faculties to develop sound teaching and learning practices in the context of curriculum development and review (p. 7).

Clearly, it outlines our role as developing programs which:

- Assist students in dealing with the transition to higher education;
- Provide a diagnostic service, in collaboration with faculties, to identify specific learning needs, especially in relation to English language;
- Support students at risk of failure for academic or social/ cultural reasons;
- Provide consultancy service to faculties regarding students' transition to university, student diversity and students at risk;
- Provide consultancy to Faculty Education committees in educational planning and instructional development for students-centred curricula and flexible methods of subject delivery and learning support;
- Design support to assist faculties and FECs in the integration of tertiary literacies into the curricula;
- Provide consultancy to faculties and academic staff in the principles and methods of program evaluation, teaching evaluation and quality assurance;
- Provide support and training for academic staff in the design and development of course materials and resources needed for flexible delivery;
- Provide support for academics in developing their skills in accessing information resources, particularly in electronic format (p.7-8).

As can be seen from the above policy statement, institutional policy places a greater weighting on the systemic approach to our work. It is clear that the roles of both the Learning Development Lecturers and Educational Development Lecturers are blurred, as they both play a key role in the provision of support to faculties, departments and academic staff. This 'blurring' of roles, a multi-disciplinary, approach is indicative of approaches to professional development that focus on reforming the entire institution, are integrative, collaborative and focus on reflective practice and organisational learning (Candy et al, 1994; Zuber-Skerritt, O., 1994; Richardson & Sylvester, 1998; Hicks & George, 1998; George & O'Regan, 1998; Adams et al, 1999). Thus, it is inferred that a cohesive approach must also be developed between the two units. This is something we are still working towards.