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Mapping the tertiary literacy skills of the Bachelor of Commerce: a step towards inter-disciplinary dialogue and cohesive skills development in a degree program

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Abstract

This paper outlines a two-staged inter-disciplinary project in the Faculty of Commerce designed to identify, review and integrate the teaching of tertiary literacy skills within the undergraduate degree programs. The paper provides an overview of the process that involves three strategic learning partnerships: the partnership between the Faculty of Commerce and Learning Development; the partnership between Commerce academics and Learning Development staff; and inter-disciplinary partnerships within the faculty. The paper emphasises the importance of inter and intra-disciplinary dialogue and a whole degree approach as a means for ensuring articulated skills instruction across a degree program and improvements in teaching and learning outcomes.

Introduction

With the new Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA) being administered on final year students at two institutions of higher education in Australia, universities are becoming increasingly accountable for ensuring their students do develop the generic attributes or tertiary literacy skills that are stated in university policy and are valued by employers. The University of Wollongong has been actively encouraging the teaching of these generic attributes for several years: the University's Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan 1997- 2005 identifies as a core priority that "students become skilled in actively pursuing life-long learning skills and discipline-specific and tertiary literacies knowledge". This is a priority that is becoming increasingly acknowledged among higher education circles (eg. Baldauf, 1996; Candy et al,

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1994; Reid & Parker, 1998; Skillen et al, 1998). This paper represents a two-staged, institutionally-funded project being implemented in the Faculty of Commerce designed to identify, review and integrate the teaching of tertiary literacy skills within the undergraduate degree programs, the Bachelor of Commerce and the flexibly-delivered Bachelor of Business Administration. The initial stage of the project involves three key aspects: a skills inventory of all subjects in the degree programs; the first opportunity for inter-disciplinary dialogue; and the development of a multi-dimensional database to 'map' these skills across the various pathways students take through the degree programs. The data gathered and the processes established in this stage are being used to inform and coordinate a second and arguably more important stage. This second stage involves another three key aspects: a whole degree approach to reviewing the skills taught and articulated across and between levels of study; the fostering of inter- and intra-disciplinary dialogue initiated in the first stage; and the strategic integration of skills instruction inside subject curriculum across each level of study in each specialisation. The project represents partnerships on three levels: that between the Faculty of Commerce and Learning Development, between Commerce staff and Learning Development staff, and the anticipated inter- and intra-disciplinary partnerships formed as a result of the project. This paper provides a rationale for the two-staged project, outlines the process and discusses the anticipated issues and outcomes.

Rationale

The need to take a whole degree approach and identify, review and strategically integrate skills instruction in the Commerce undergraduate degree programs has a number of sources. Traditionally, the various departments with the Faculty of Commerce made their contributions to each degree program in isolation from each other as separate aspects of an

overall degree. Very little dialogue, planning or reflection had been developed between each of the departments, and as such, there had been no systemic method for ensuring clear articulation of skills and knowledge across and between the various levels and aspects of study within the same degree. While this may have been appropriate in the past, it is in no way appropriate for a university undergoing rapid and extensive change as has been seen in the past decade. Influencing factors such as increasing student diversity, commercialisation, current shifts in pedagogical practice and increasing regulation on quality standards has meant that institutions, their faculties and departments must be pro-active in developing their degree programs into 'products' that are equitable, accessible and high in quality. This cannot be achieved by the separate departments alone. To manage and survive change in a proactive rather than reactive way, dialogue needs to be fostered and partnerships need to be formed to create the change from within.

With the increasing commercialisation of higher education an emphasis has been placed on degree programs as marketable commodities and on the need for greater flexibility of course delivery. Degree programs must be competitive, supportive and provide students with a broad range of knowledge and skills. They also need to be sufficiently flexible to allow for their delivery in various modes and time frames, including face to face teaching, distance education, or more conveniently, accessible from home. The student has become the 'client', and academic staff have a greater responsibility to ensure their students have every opportunity to be successful. Rules, regulations, and instructions all need to be made explicit and transparent as academics are far more accountable than ever before (Adams et al, 999). In particular, for those students who access the flexibly delivered courses and spend less, if any, time on campus, learning support and the opportunity to develop the requisite life-long

learning and professional skills are a necessary part of the curriculum. The imperative to offer skills instruction as a seamless part of subject curriculum becomes acute as more courses are offered in flexible modes.

Additionally, due to increasing student diversity, it can no longer be assumed that students entering university study will have the requisite skills to be successful in their first or second year of study in the university. This has been evident in the Faculty of Commerce at the University of Wollongong where a number of students who received advanced standing into second year, based solely on assessed content, demonstrated a higher rate of failure than did those students who successfully transferred from their first year studies at the same institution. Assumptions regarding the level of generic skills are implicitly embedded within subjects and students who undertake these subjects without possession of those skills are more likely to struggle with assessable tasks. Thus, the development of a flexible degree program that supports students' learning and promotes their skills development at all levels is essential to avoid this type of situation. Embedding tertiary literacy instruction more formally and openly into the curriculum is the most equitable and effective means of ensuring *all* students' acquisition of the tertiary literacies (Baldauf, 1996; Skillen et al, 1998).

In reference to pedagogical factors, traditional teaching practices are becoming less relevant to the modern university context and the needs of their students. This is particularly relevant as the student population increases in diversity and, due to 'the knowledge obsolescence of five years' (Candy, 1995), students are required to graduate with life-long learning, academic literacy and the requisite workplace knowledge and skills. University courses are required to utilise student-centred paradigms of teaching, and develop in students not just an in-depth

knowledge of their subject, but a complete range of skills such that they are excellent communicators and continuous learners. In order to achieve this, academics must have the ability to teach not only the content but also make explicit the skills of their subjects. To do this effectively requires the development of non-threatening partnerships that promote professional development directly in their workplace (eg. Boud, 2000).

Finally, increasing regulation on quality standards, particularly in relation to teaching and learning, has resulted in the development of extensive policies for most universities, many of which require a substantial shift in the academics' perception and practice in their roles as educators. The *Teaching and Learning Strategic Plan 1997 – 2005* not only requires that the skills and knowledge encompassed in the graduate attributes are taught, but also that they are clearly documented and measurable in some way. As part of its stated strategies, the Plan states that discipline staff should work in partnership with Learning Development (LD) and Educational Development (ED) lecturers to strategically integrate these skills and attributes into subject curriculum. This can be threatening to academic staff who are more familiar with working in isolation and to having complete ownership over what and how they teach. Thus, the partnerships need foster rapport and trust and allow discipline staff to have ownership over the process.

This strategy, however, does not work as a bottom-up process alone. That is, the partnership between LD staff and individual lecturers can only be effective in a systemic way if it is part of a larger strategic plan within the faculty. For example, before this process was implemented, LD staff were working collaboratively with only a few volunteer discipline staff in Commerce over a three year period. Before the ECAC review, LD staff had already

been arguing for a whole degree approach to be taken in reviewing and strategically integrating skills instruction into the degree programs. The ECAC review, however, lent the necessary 'weight' to convince the Faculty of its importance, and the 'mapping' exercise provided a first step to the long-term goal. Thus, the top-down endorsement and the partnership between the Faculty Executive and LD has been a crucial factor in getting the project on its feet.

Stage one

After receiving the recommendations from the ECAC review, the Faculty of Commerce sought a partnership with the Tertiary Literacy Officer and Learning Development. The Faculty Sub-dean, Faculty Executive Officer and the LD staff formed the core group that planned, coordinated and implemented the workshops that would provide the skills inventory of all subjects across the Bachelor of Commerce and the Bachelor of Business Administration. These workshops provided for inter-disciplinary dialogue, and the data gathered was used to establish a multi-dimensional database to 'map' the skills of subjects and specialisations.

The workshops were facilitated collaboratively by LD staff, the Commerce Sub-Dean and the Faculty Executive Officer. This partnership was crucial to the effectiveness of the workshops overall. The LD staff guided the workshop, and the co-facilitation and presence of the Commerce Sub-Dean lent the necessary authority to the project as an educational imperative for the Faculty. For this project to work effectively, there must be top-down participation and support (eg. Bryant et al, 1999; Candy, 1995; Richardson & Sylvester, 1998).

The workshops were conducted with subject coordinators to identify the skills they felt their students learnt within their subjects. The first workshop covered the six core first year subjects that form the foundations of the Faculty's undergraduate degree programs. This was an inter-departmental gathering, and previous to this workshop some of these coordinators had never met let alone discussed their students' needs or their curriculum. The second workshop, again inter-departmental, covered the remaining non-core first year subjects. The third, inter-departmental, covered the largest second year subjects. The fourth and subsequent workshops were intra-departmental, each covering the smaller second year subjects and their third year subjects within each department's specialisations. This latter set of planned workshops is nearing completion.

The workshop program began with each coordinator sharing with the group their subject's focus and discussing how they saw it contributing to the overall degree program. This opening activity was called 'core stories', allowing the discipline staff to present their best side, to talk openly about their subject and share their ideas with the other staff members. This was followed by a short discussion on why this project was being implemented and their participation necessary. As part of the rationale, the core objectives of the University's *Learning and Teaching Strategic Plan* and the Graduate Attributes document were reviewed to link the project to University policy and organisational goals.

Once the participating discipline staff had familiarised themselves with the nine Graduate Attributes and their sets of sub-attributes, they were each asked to diagramatically represent their subject in relation to the attributes on butchers paper. This task summoned a few raised eyebrows, but not one of the participating members was unable to successfully complete the

task. An example of such a diagram can be seen in Diagram 1 below. These diagrams were then analysed along with the subject outline and the information was tabulated to identify the teaching and assessment methods used in each subject and the attributes and sub-attributes that were assumed learnt by students as a result of these. This was done for every subject and used to create the necessary fields on the multi-dimensional database that was being developed specifically for this project. Once the database was complete and ready for the data to be entered, the following process involved clarification of the tabulated information. LD staff used a laptop and print copies of the tabulated information about each subject to visit each of the participating staff members and review and alter the data to the satisfaction of each of the subject coordinators. This data, once finalised, provided the necessary information to identify gaps and overlaps in a review of the curriculum.

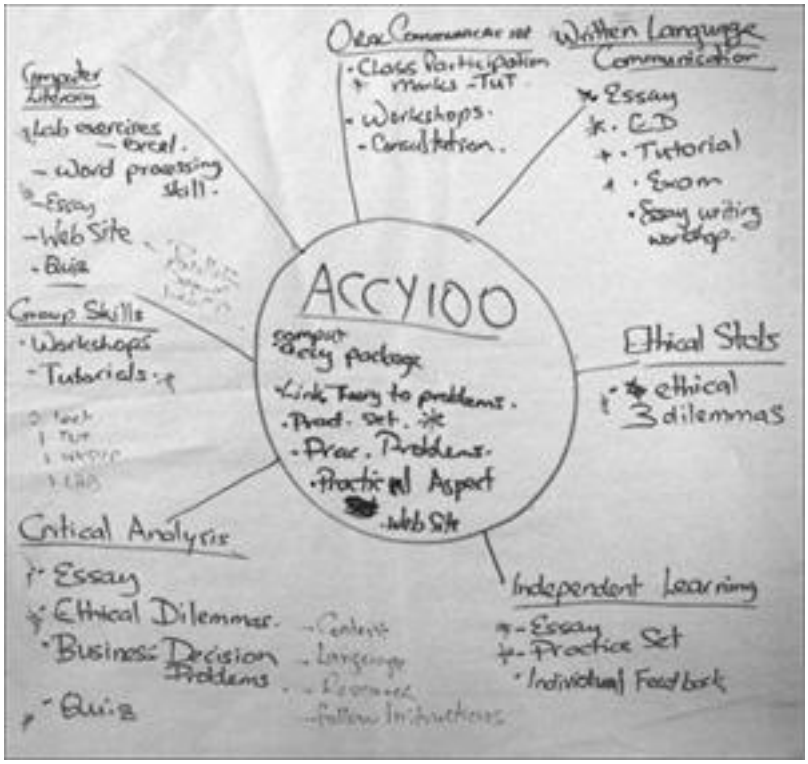

Diagram 1: ACCY100: Accounting 1A

Importantly, previous to the workshops, staff across the various departments within the Faculty of Commerce had had limited, if any, contact with each other despite teaching subjects within the same degree program. The workshops, therefore, provided not only the necessary data to 'map' the skills pathways, but also facilitated dialogue and networks between the separate departments to discuss their subjects and their students' needs.

Phase 1 Outcomes

While the data is still being confirmed and analysed, Diagram 2 below indicates the type of information that can be drawn from the database to be used in the review of the curriculum.

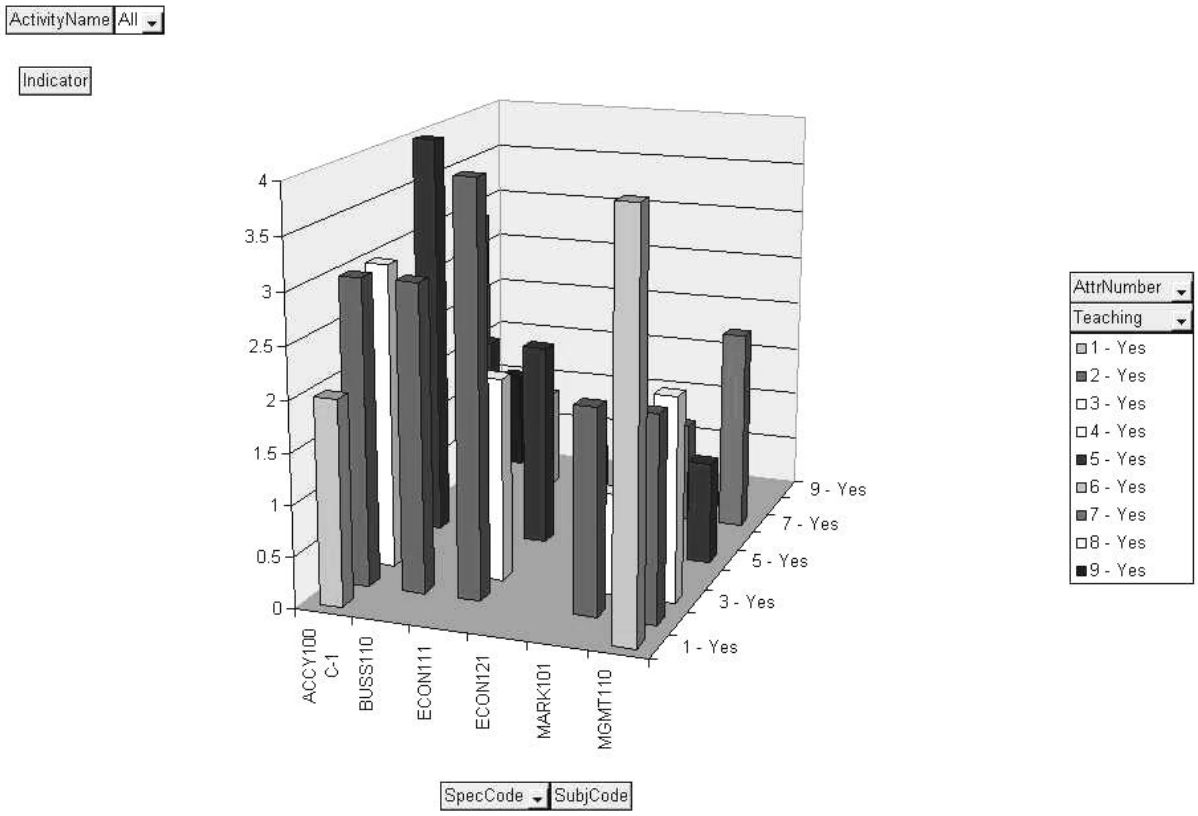

Diagram 2: The frequency with which each Graduate Attribute is 'taught' within each of the core first year subjects in the Bachelor of Commerce

The Graduate Attributes, indicated in the legend in Diagram 2 as the numbers 1 – 9, can be summarised as thus: 1 – independent learning skills; 2 – knowledge of discipline area; 3- advanced communication skills; 4 – teamwork skills; 5 – logical analysis and decision making; 6 – valuing cultural diversity; 7 – information literacy; 8 – continuous learning skills; 9 – knowledge of individual rights and responsibilities. The numbers on the Y axis refer to the frequency with which each of the sub-skills of each attribute are 'taught', as opposed to assessed, within each subject. Diagram 2 indicates there is greater emphasis on the 'teaching' of some skills over others. Whilst this is not necessarily the result of poor subject and skills design, problems may result if incorrect assumptions regarding generic skills are made by second year subject coordinators.

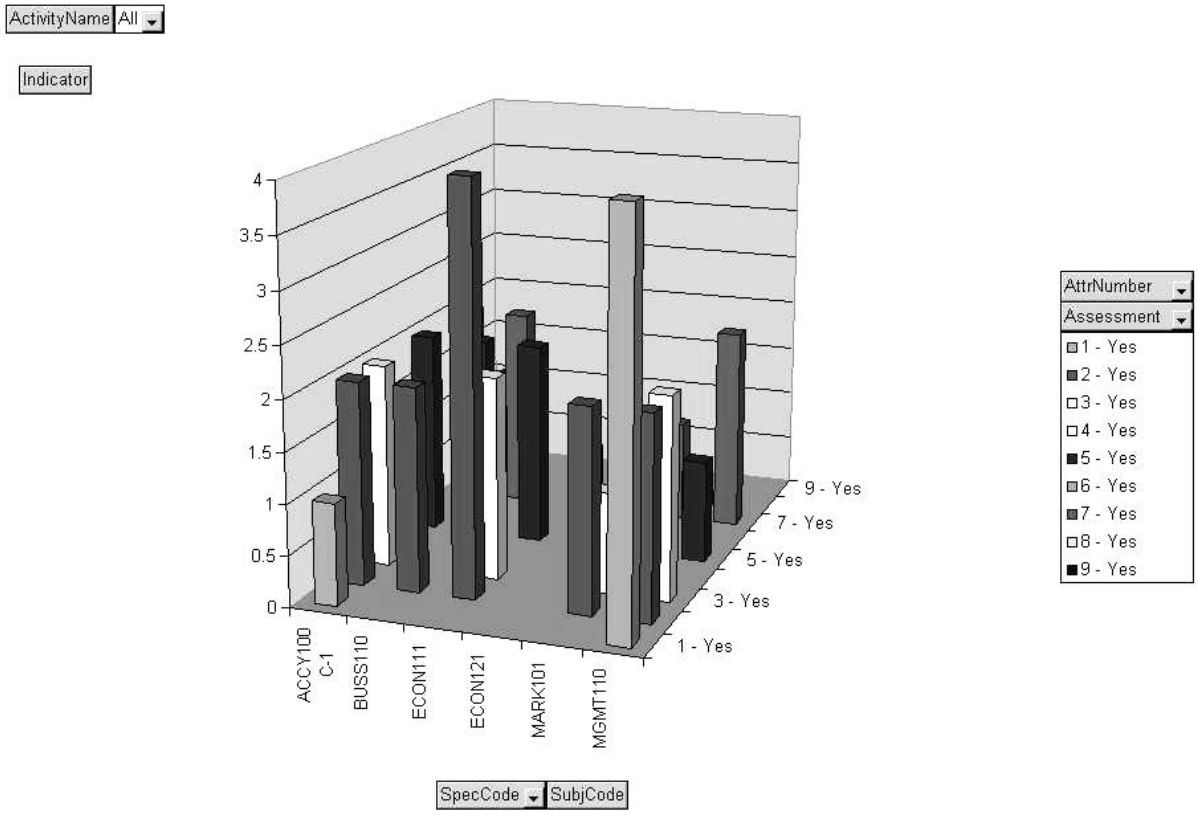

Diagram 3: The frequency with which each Graduate Attribute is assessed' within each of the core first year subjects in the Bachelor of Commerce

Moreover, during the course of the workshops it became obvious that whilst it was assumed that these skills were being developed in the students, they were not necessarily being formally taught or assessed on these skills. Diagram 3 indicates the frequency with which each of the attributes are assessed within the same subjects as in Diagram 2. A comparison indicates there are discrepancies between what is taught and what is assessed, but even where attributes are 'assessed', there is no means to indicate whether the teaching of these skills is as effective as is intended by the subject coordinator. Thus, the information regarding generic skills passed on to subsequent subject coordinators and which forms the basis for their subject design may be flawed.

There is a definite need for the database to be developed further to include weightings that discern between teaching and assessment. There also needs to be a review of how these attributes are 'taught' and assessed. This raises the issue that the second stage of the project aims to address, and that is that most staff assume their students develop skills through a process of osmosis: in most cases there is little explicit instruction, activities and developmental feedback that ensure students' acquisition of the necessary skills.

Stage 2

Currently, with the last of the workshops for Stage 1 well under way, a new second phase has been designed and internally funded to create new learning partnerships between the subject coordinators and LD staff. This stage involves taking a whole degree approach to review the skills articulation across each level of the undergraduate programs, and will result in the strategic integration of explicit skills instruction and assessment, where necessary, into subject curriculum. This process will be funded by an $20,000 internal Educational Strategies

Development Fund (ESDF) grant that was obtained specifically for this project. This phase involves another round of inter-disciplinary workshops with the discipline staff to reflect on the results of the 'mapping' exercise at the 100 level (core) and the large 200 level subjects. Building on the inter-disciplinary dialogue is essential for a 'big picture' of the whole degree to be shared and for strategic integrated instruction to occur. The integration will ensure cohesive and incremental skills development across the disciplines as students' progress within their degree program.

Strategy

The initial step is the creation of a Steering Committee including the Faculty Sub-dean, Executive Officer, the Learning Development lecturer, an Educational Developer and all Heads of Department or their nominated representatives, and other interested parties. This Steering Committee will direct the project and regularly report back to each department and to the Faculty Education Committee. In the meantime, the Learning Development lecturer will address each Department Meeting on the aims and objectives of the project, explain the strategies and expected outcomes, and summon support from the discipline staff.

Once the Steering Committee is established the first step should involve an inter-disciplinary workshop with staff teaching the first year subjects. This may involve both first year coordinators, lecturers and tutors and those of the core second year subjects for each specialisation. The workshop program will begin with a review of the results of the skills inventory and a discussion on any skills that are either not covered or are over-represented. This will provide a picture of which skills are most importantly developed at the first year

level and further discussion will identify whether or not they are explicitly taught and assessed or whether they are simply assumed learnt.

Given the size of the Faculty with over 100 academic staff, this will be a large and cumbersome task to coordinate, but it is a crucial one for the whole degree approach to occur. Without this dialogue, there will still be gaps in what is known about what each student is expected to develop, what is being taught, and where the appropriate skills instruction can and needs to be integrated. A portion of the grant money will need to be used here to ensure adequate departmental participation as it is crucial to the success of this project.

Once these discussion have taken place and a strategic plan for integration into particular subjects has been developed, a partnership between the Learning Development lecturer and the individual discipline staff members will be established as they work closely together to review the subject curriculum. It is of greatest importance here that the discipline staff retain ownership over the process and develop a relationship of rapport and trust with the Learning Development lecturer.

After the core first year subjects have been reviewed, a second step will require using the database to map students' pathways through each of the specialisations in second and third year. By mapping the pathways, the core subjects for each specialisation can be identified and the strategic planning of integrated skills instruction can occur. Again, this will need to occur within an inter-disciplinary workshop looking at the largest second year subjects first. Having planned for integration has occurred as a group, partnerships between the Learning

Development and individual staff members will focus on reviewing the curriculum of these subjects.

A final stage will involve each department holding an intra-disciplinary workshop involving Learning Development to map the specialisation (the smaller second and all third year subjects) and planning any necessary integration there. 2001 marks a process for academic staff in the Faculty of Commerce where inter-departmental planning and dialogue will achieve a comprehensive approach to ensuring a seamless and holistic degree for all Commerce students.

Issues

Whilst this mapping and skills integration process appears to be taking place at a point in time, the intent of the project is that it is dynamic and ongoing. The view of the Dean and Sub-dean is that it is to be regularly reviewed and updated as individual subjects are adjusted to reflect either changes in educational policy or disciplinary knowledge. To this end, the construction of a reliable database is critical to the future success of this project. Also critical is the ongoing cooperation between academics within the Faculty in sharing their subject and skills development information and the formation of partnerships that can transcend their individual disciplinary boundaries. Where the workshops have assisted in this partnership process, a major issue for the Faculty is to ensure that these partnerships are ongoing. The final issue is that whilst Commerce academics possess a high level of knowledge regarding their own discipline, effectively embedding generic skills within their degree program is now reliant upon effecting a strong partnership between the Faculty and its academics and academics within Learning Development.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of a two-staged project aimed at developing an effective and cohesive articulation of skills development across a degree program through the development of three levels of partnership: that between the Faculty and Learning Development; that between discipline staff across departments; and that between individual staff members and Learning Development lecturers. Previous to these partnerships, there had been little dialogue or inter-disciplinary approaches to reviewing curriculum within the same degree program, a practice crucial to the success of any comprehensive, competitive and supportive university course of the future. The paper has detailed aspects of each stage to inform the reader of the work in progress and emphasise the necessity of partnerships in its success. It is hoped that as each of the stages advance, more concrete outcomes and data will be reported in future papers.

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