

# Establishing quality online

## *Supporting productive academic teams*

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**Abstract:** Quality online education requires successful management of resources and services. This paper examines the increasing need to support productive academic teams and foster collaboration in developing a high quality online environment. The paper is based on a study into academic support services and collaboration at Deakin University. The provision of quality support was found to be increasingly challenging given the complexity of the online university environment. A number of recommendations arise out of the study including some practical changes to service, the need to commit to innovation, the importance of frameworks and standards as well as a range of broader cultural, organisational and political changes.

**Key words:** Academic support, collaboration, academic teams, professional development, course development, organisational change, online education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The transition to online education is argued as changing the nature of teaching and learning within universities and distance education institutions (Hazemi & Hailes 2002; Collis & Moonen 2001). Not only are traditional notions of teaching and learning being challenged but the structures that support the teaching and learning process within universities are also being transformed. Quality online education is increasingly dependent upon quality technology, quality support services and the creation of productive academic teams and collaborative activities. There is an increased need for a seamless and flexible learning culture. The complexity of the online environment is, however, also creating a range of issues and pressures on structures, cultures, roles, processes and individuals. This paper examines the implications online teaching and learning is having for the support of

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productive academic teams. It explores the current experiences of both academic and academic support staff and examines ways of better facilitating effective academic support services and collaborative activities.

## 2. ESTABLISHING QUALITY ONLINE

As higher education institutions worldwide are beginning to use information and communication technologies to provide courses via the Internet, maintaining quality in online teaching, learning and support has become an important issue. Frameworks for quality online learning which are being developed internationally require a committed and informed management of resources, access and support by the institutional leadership. Particular focus is placed on technological provision with staff and students requiring high quality support as they learn to use the online environment (Inglis, Ling & Joosten, 2002). Benchmarks for Internet-based distance education such as those developed by the The Institute for Higher Education Policy in the United States (Phipps, Merisotis, & Harvey, 2000) detail such benchmarks for measuring quality through *institutional support* benchmarks such as plans for electronic security, reliability of system and centralised technology infrastructure and *course development* benchmarks such as minimum standards of design and delivery at a high level of cognitive engagement with a regular review process. The benchmarks for *teaching and learning* require student –teacher interaction as essential through use of technologies such as email and voicemail for timely and adequate instructor feedback. *Course structure* benchmarks which require student access and understanding of the technology, provisions of course information and agreed assessment expectations with access to library or virtual library facilities and *student support* benchmarks of information, training in use of online tools, technical assistance and administrative support are framed by benchmarks of *evaluation and assessment* that set standards and reviews effectiveness. Underlying all of these are the *Faculty support* benchmarks which include course development assistance, training in teaching online, mentoring and print resources to support online technology use and it is the quality of this provision that is discussed in this paper.

Deakin University, as well as many other Australian universities (McNaught, 2001) is beginning to develop its own criteria for quality that reflect a worldwide trend in such policies. Deakin has drafted a *Policy on Online technologies in Course and Units* and a *Code of Good Online Practice* which provide guidance for administrative and academic staff and students “to ensure that programs and services reflect good practice,

resulting in a high standard of quality for the online teaching and learning environment.” (Deakin University, 2002). These define criteria for high quality practice for all members of the university, providing technological access and support for staff and students and describe quality assurance mechanisms for all criteria. They particularly describe the way Learning Services will support academic staff as they develop and teach courses online and it is this important collaboration that is the focus of our paper.

Our research has shown that to take the greatest pedagogical advantage of the online environment is to use it to develop communities of learning and to enable collaborative learning in small groups. Online discussion in such learner facilitated groups, structured and monitored by the teacher can progress learning through a social constructivist process in which participants share their diverse perspectives and use the online discussion to clarify ideas and articulate their own understanding (Stacey, 1999). Teachers of quality in such environments have to be prepared to change their traditional roles and become facilitators of student centred discussion. Stevens-Long and Crowell (2002) reiterate that that the use of the World Wide Web has changed the nature of distance learning and that interactive group learning at a distance is the quality mode of learning. Such new ways of learning and teaching require academic staff who are confident users of online technology, who can develop online resources and who can facilitate online discussions.

The quality of academic support services is seen as an essential element in the provision of quality distance education. Although academic support services exist within most universities and distance education institutions, the role and importance of such support appears to be changing significantly with the movement towards online education. Collaboration is being espoused as essential to meet the demands of online teaching and learning (Ellis, 2000). The transition to online education is also seen as challenging traditional boundaries, roles, staffing structures, work approaches and processes. Our experiences in both support services and academic teaching have identified tensions that exist between the rhetoric espoused in the literature and university planning documents about the use of new media and the actual reality relating to effective support services and collaboration to support technological innovation. Academics have a large number of concerns and difficulties relating to the use of online media in their teaching. It is in this broad context of changing needs, skills, expectations and pressures that the research study we describe has provided greater knowledge and understanding of the changing need for academic support services.

### **3. ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT**

Australian universities are becoming innovative to support online teaching. Restructures that merge previously autonomous academic support divisions and facilitate collaborative endeavours are reported at a number of universities. Communication and collaboration are being facilitated by a range of initiatives including the development of liaison positions (McKnight, 2002), learning technology mentors (McNaught, 2001) and collaborative action-learning teams (Ellis, 2000). Collaboration is seen as a key means of providing the necessary support for online teaching and learning. Bell (2000) advocates the need for a seamless learning culture that involves shared vision, collaboration, cross-functional dialogue and systemic change

Studies by Taylor, Lopez and Quadrelli (1996) and McNaught's (2000) research reveal a number of issues relating to the provision of quality online teaching including staff development, clarification of roles, university policies, funding, intellectual property, reward structures and cultural differences. There is seen a need to create explicit policy frameworks that take into account practicalities such as funding, time release and infrastructure (Littler, 2001). The increasingly competitive drive of universities and the reality of budgetary constraints can result in an emphasis on production efficiency rather than learning efficiency and impede the creation of quality learning experiences (Kandlbinder, 1999). Organisational culture is identified as a critical factor affecting academic support (McKnight, 2002; McNaught, 2000; Taylor Lopez & Quadrelli, 1996). Effective academic support services are seen as being collaboratively based and therefore strongly influenced by cultural factors (Donovan, 1999). A need is identified for collaborative structures to be wide rather than deep and to be dynamic and flexible (Mitchell, 1998). Reward structures in higher education are argued as needing to support and reward online teaching efforts more actively. The traditional focus of universities on scholarship rather than pedagogy is seen as an inhibiting factor for collaborative endeavours (Katz, 1999). Much of this literature espoused the concepts of support and collaboration and gave descriptions of exemplars and innovations but did not explore the issues relating to changing structures, cultures, roles and processes which is attempted in this study.

### **4. STUDY OF COLLABORATION FOR QUALITY**

The study described in this paper researched the following questions:

- How is online teaching and learning influencing the need for academic support services and collaboration?
- How is online teaching and learning influencing the roles and activities of academic staff and academic support staff?
- What are the current experiences with academic support services and collaboration?
- How can effective academic support services and collaboration best be facilitated?

To explore the research problem the study used Deakin University as the research setting. Deakin University is a dual mode university with five campuses across both capital city and regional areas. With five faculties and 29 000 students, 40% of whom are off campus and often based in other states and other countries, Deakin has continued its policy of teaching the same course on and off campus using technological means of delivery and interaction where appropriate and achievable. Deakin University is currently mainstreaming and systematising the use of online pedagogy in all courses throughout the university through the establishment of the Deakin Online Campus with policy and quality assurance mechanisms developed by a representative body of academics, information technology managers and administrators.

The focus of the study was specifically on the academic support services provided by the Learning Services division at Deakin University. The Learning Services division is a centralised academic support division comprising four main units: Learning Resources, Teaching/Learning Support, Library Services, Access and Information Resources. A number of restructures in recent years has brought the four divisions together under one management and realigned staff resources in various ways to try and better support the growing online developments.

An ethnographic approach was adopted for this study using interviews, document analysis and observation as the main research tools. In-depth, informal interviews were conducted with sixteen participants comprising eight academic staff from four academic schools and eight staff from the Learning Services Division. Observation of the experiences of individuals, interactions and organisational structures and processes also formed an important source of data and allowed themes and issues to be identified and explored more fully. Documents produced by the university, the faculties, the schools and the Learning Services Division were used to provide both policy and strategic information relating to online teaching and the development of the online campus, as well as more specific information relating to school and divisional policies, structures and activities.

## 5. PROVIDING QUALITY SUPPORT

The results of the study showed that the introduction of online teaching and learning was significantly influencing the need for effective academic support services and collaboration. Many academic staff were found to be struggling with increased pressures in terms of technological skills, design and development work, administrative and organisational changes, increased student contact and support, pedagogical considerations, increased workloads, competing priorities, increased administrative and organisational duties and increased collaboration. The online environment was found to be exacerbating a range of existing difficulties for support services and also creating a range of new problems.

The key support needs identified in this study include: technological support, professional development support, course development/production support, teaching/learning support and information resources support and services. Although these services are far from new, the nature, roles, activities and interrelationships between them were found to have altered in the online environment. The area of technical support was found to be increasingly difficult with the demands for immediacy and availability needing to be balanced by the challenge of selecting and implementing large scale, cross-university systems. The potential flexibility of the online product was, at times, not being realised due to lack of support for updating, evaluation, innovation and change. There was found to be a need to balance better the practical support with the innovative.

Professional development was seen as increasingly essential for developing an online environment. As one participant interviewed explained: 'For me, doing the job better comes down to staff development' (Female academic, Arts). There was a need for a more multifaceted, collaborative and integrated approach. A broadening of professional development to include technological innovation, online pedagogy, effective online management as well as 'how to' training was seen as important. A broad range of potentially effective strategies for quality professional development were identified including mentors, teams, flexible programs, web sites, workshops, online forums, high quality staff and time release. The availability of technical and subject specialist support staff located in the faculties and the use of faculty mentors were advocated in order to facilitate the informal sharing of skills and ideas.

Online teaching and learning was found to have extended the roles of both academics and academic support staff. The role of the academic had broadened most notably in terms of their technical role, course design role, teaching role and administrative role. The role of academic support staff was found to be more complex and more directly related to course development. The integration of content and delivery has resulted in the interrelationships

between roles becoming more complex and some traditional boundaries being blurred. Conflicting perspectives on roles were particularly evident in the areas of technical support, pedagogy and information literacy.

A strong resentment of traditional linear course development/production workflows was identified with a need for more dynamic and flexible processes. There was a need for evaluation and maintenance to become integrated into the development process and be supported by appropriate staffing structures. New models for teaching and learning were identified as important by the study's participants: 'The whole online learning process has to be a different model rather than just an adjunct to what we already do' (Male academic, Business & Law). Some voiced a strong need to be pedagogically driven rather than technologically driven. Quality online education requires teams that reflect on teaching and learning outcomes: 'We need to look at the broader questions, we want to get it right, not be beholden to the technology' (Female academic, Arts). The need to reconceptualise teaching in terms of online pedagogy was found to be limited by workload pressures and lack of funded support.

Collaboration was seen as increasingly important in the online environment, more of a partnership than a service. However collaboration was also seen to be increasingly problematic. Cultural differences between academic and support staff were identified as important with differences in priorities, pressures and operational styles all creating pressures on collaboration: 'Respect for procedures ... that's a very minor thing in the academic's lives. To them it's a means to an end, to us it seems to be an end in itself' (Male, Learning Services). 'There is no understanding of the pressures involved in academia, they have a deadline in their mind and that's all they care about' (Male academic, Business and Law). A focus on shared outcomes, flexibility of processes and support for informal collaboration were seen as important.

Fundamental issues associated with management policies, priorities, work practices, funding, resourcing and workloads emerged as important. A 'top down' online imperative was found to be placing great pressure on academics and team activities. Lack of recognition for online development work was also seen as an issue: 'People say I'll just do it and get it over with and get back to my research' (Female academic, Arts). Motivation rather than enforcement, strong leadership, shared vision and clear priorities were found to be necessary for effective academic teams.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Academic support services were found to be a vital link in the achievement of high quality online teaching. The support of productive teams requires a two-way collaborative relationship with support services being responsive, flexible and multifaceted and encompassing practical, theoretical and innovative elements. The complexity of the online environment combined with cultural and organisational differences makes the effective support of academic teams difficult. It is important that leadership, policies and practices culturally and practically support a shift towards collaboration and flexible processes for the creation of productive academic teams. The policies for quality online being developed by Deakin University, as well as many other institutions worldwide assist the support process by detailing quality practices and processes and should help address the needs identified in this study.

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