

## Good Practice in Practice

### **GREAT IDEA! BUT HOW DO WE DO IT?**

#### **Mobilising internal networks to get innovative projects off the ground**

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The importance of internal organisational networks can be demonstrated through the use of a case study of a project to improve student experience and success through the introduction of an English for academic purposes course. In complex organisations, such as universities, using these networks to inform and negotiate the inevitable academic hurdles is essential to successfully progress novel and/or innovative student experience projects. Strategies for developing and maintaining internal networks that can come together for a rapid response in getting innovative projects off the ground are explored and factors that impact on creativity in teaching and learning are also examined.

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Student progress and retention are considered measures of student academic success. They are also two of the eight measures currently used by the Australian Government to monitor the performance outcomes of Australian universities (DEST, 2005). Supported student transition is recognised as a key factor influencing student progress and retention (Carey, 2005; Moxley, Najor-Durack, & Dumbridguez, 2001) and hence, improvements to student transition are integral to student progress and retention.

The Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) Portfolio at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia has nominated improvement to student transition as one of its three teaching and learning priorities for 2005. A number of relevant activities have been established with this aim, that is, to improve student experience and success, in addition to and subsequently to improve performance outcome.

The ten schools within SET currently provide standard transition activities including orientation to facilities and services, IT induction and training, social events and access to learning support. In 2005, each school has nominated a project to address a specific student transition need. These have included evaluation of orientation programs, an early intervention program for students 'at risk' and improving student articulation between TAFE and higher education programs. A part-time teaching and learning project officer has been dedicated to collectively support these projects.

A transition priority for the School of Civil and Chemical Engineering (SoCCE) is the successful progression of non-English speaking background (NESB) students, both local and international.

A recent internal RMIT report (2005a) has identified the key reason for specific cohorts of students to cancel from their programs. International onshore NESB students are more

likely to report “academic difficulties” and domestic NESB students are “more likely to say the program was ‘not what they expected’ “ (RMIT, 2005a, p.1). This is consistent with the anecdotal findings of SoCCE staff who have previously found these students lack the English language and learning skills necessary to successfully engage in their program of study. (Note: RMIT terminology denotes a sequence of units of study leading to an award as a program and the individual units of study as courses.)

To address this priority, SoCCE has identified a project to develop and offer an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) credit-bearing course, contextualised to teach and/or consolidate the English language and learning skills specifically required to successfully engage in the core courses undertaken by first year students.

In this paper, we firstly provide a background for the importance of innovation in teaching and learning to respond to student needs and suggest approaches for doing this. Secondly, we outline the actions, hurdles, negotiations and resolutions experienced by the project team using the case study of taking the idea for the EAP course and actioning it to the approval stage within an eight-week window of time. Finally, we examine the role of internal networks in the success or otherwise of the project and how these can be mobilised for rapid and effective responses to innovative teaching and learning ideas.

#### **EVIDENCE BASED CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND ACTION RESEARCH**

Our commitment to continuous improvement encourages and provides the impetus to better understand the student experience and to find innovative solutions to students’ learning needs. This professional commitment is reinforced at the organisational level by internal and external management drivers in the collection and reporting of performance measures and improvements (AUQA, 2005; DEST, 2005).

Further than just monitoring, Carey (2005) says in relation to student progression and completion rates, the data must be analysed

and used to create new approaches and innovations to teaching and learning; “[I]t matters whether administrators and faculty monitor student progress, taking advantage of new data systems to tease out patterns of student success. Successful schools use that information not only to help individual students but also to make needed changes in policies and practice” (Carey, 2005, p.2).

Scott (2001) supports the need to link improvements to relevant data and further, refers to the constancy of the need for change in response to changing data, as the relationship between “continuous quality improvement and innovation” and “effective change management” (Scott, 2001, p.2). The resulting application of these combined processes, amongst other factors, produces “evidence-based action priorities” including research into what others are doing in the field, recognises that there is some inherent uncertainty in the change process, and takes an “action oriented” approach which includes on-going monitoring, evaluation and further improvement, and the creation of learning from this work. Scott (2001) refers to the methodology as a workplace action research approach.

Similarly, Cherry’s model of action research is a “continuous cycle of planning, action and review of the action” (Cherry, 1999, p.1). Like Scott’s model it results in improvement and learning; providing “an opportunity for a different kind of knowledge -making; the creation of knowledge by taking what is already known and applying it in conditions that are different” (Cherry, 1999, p.23). The project team in taking existing knowledge and understanding of the transition needs of NESB students and applying them to the development of the new EAP program used an action research approach.

Scott’s (2001) work links innovation and change together, which suggests both non-standard approaches and/or standard approaches to new situations; hence, his reference to the uncertainty associated with change. Cherry (1999) recognises this also, “the action work on offer is by no means assured and is never a matter of simply following the program, rolling out the plan or joining up the dots.” (Cherry, 1999, p.17). Additionally, both

acknowledge there are factors outside of the control of the action researcher.

In a university setting, acting on an innovative idea for change requires planning, seeking approval and implementation which can use significant resources, and requires a comprehensive understanding of how the organisation works and possibly long lead times. Budget and policy considerations and organisational politics can all create a series of unforeseen hurdles for the action researcher.

Each hurdle needs to be deconstructed into its elements and these elements must be negotiated, in order for the project to progress. Thus, a range of skills and areas of expertise is required, leading to the need for an action team to undertake action research (Scott, 2001). This team should be made up of people “already active in the area and who are willing to work collaboratively to develop their common innovation further” (Scott, 2001, p.2). He stresses the need for the team to be trained in an action research approach.

Gladwell (2002) in relation to change management argues there is a point in the change process “when everything can change” (Gladwell, 2002, p.8). This is the tipping point. Once the tipping point has been reached, the existing conditions make implementation of the change self-sustainable. Hence, the key task of the change manager or action researcher/team is to drive the change process to the tipping point.

The necessary conditions to achieve the tipping point are set by three elements; appropriately skilled people to drive the change, the nature of the change itself and the appropriate environment into which to attempt the change (Gladwell, 2002). The appropriate skills for the change managers are the ability to make and maintain strong and relevant yet varied professional networks, the specialist knowledge to recognise linkages between aspects of the change and the ability to be persuasive (Gladwell, 2002).

In relation to teams Belbin (2004) has found in addition to a range of attributes such as leadership (also in Kotter (2001, 1995)), creativity and intelligence there needs to be “a good match between the attributes of members

and their responsibilities in the team [and] an adjustment to the realization of imbalance” (Belbin, 2004, p.90) within the team. For a small, yet responsive, team this can mean recognising expertise outside of the group will be needed. Hence, the network of each team member becomes an attribute in itself and must be exploited to make up for gaps in team skills and/or knowledge.

Whilst referring to corporate alliances, Kanter (1994) also stresses that successful collaborations rely on the strength of the partners and their commitment to positive outcomes. Like Belbin (2004), Kanter (1994) also referred to the range of skills brought by the different members of the group, saying “neither can accomplish alone what both can together” (Kanter, 1994, p.100).

If a team understands its skill gaps and has complemented these with established and effective networks, it can set out with an action research approach and be flexible enough to undertake innovative change projects.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **The opportunity**

In the School of Civil and Chemical Engineering School, up to 40% of students identify as either local or international non-English speaking background (RMIT, 2005b). Statistically, SoCCE student records show student progress and retention rates for NESB students studying engineering programs were poorer than the overall average. SoCCE staff anecdotally reported NESB students’ English skills as particularly lacking in the areas of written and oral communication and analytical skills and studying in a second language. Difficulty also occurs in team-based project work where confidence in communication in English is important.

Having the required International English Language Testing System (IELTS) entrance requirement does not guarantee that international students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) achieve early success in their studies, due to gaps in English language and study skills. Equally, local NESB students are recognised as having special needs in these

areas. For instance, in regard to learning Krause et al. (2005) found that NESB students:

- “have difficulty comprehending the material, with 30 per cent agreeing that this is the case
- have more difficulty adjusting to the style of university teaching, and
- are more uncomfortable in class discussions.” (Krause et al., 2005, p.75)

A number of SET Schools have strategies in place to support students in study, professional and/or communication skill development, which can include some support in English language enhancement. However, most of these do not formally address the needs of students who lack the English language skills necessary to engage successfully with program requirements.

Additionally, students can voluntarily access the RMIT Learning Skills Unit (LSU) where they can receive English language skills support and study skills support, including through online materials, one-to-one and small group teaching or drop-in centre support. LSU staff have also successfully team taught with context-based lecturers in core courses, focussing on the needs of NESB students.

### **The idea**

The initial idea was to make a new English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course available to NESB engineering students. The course would be owned and offered by SoCCE, and be driven by the language and learning needs of its students. The course would complement students’ existing studies by providing language development skills and approaches to learning as a NESB student using their other studies as the learning context, in this case, focusing on the English requirements of the engineering programs.

EAP courses are particularly valuable in terms of building student awareness of, and abilities in, the discourses (ways of talking, reading and writing) used in the higher education field generally, and where contextualised, specific discipline areas. These courses are different to general English as a Second Language (ESL) courses in that they focus on the ‘context-reduced’ language which is often abstract

and more difficult to learn by ‘osmosis’ (Cummins, 1982; Jordan, 1997).

Much research points to the usefulness of EAP courses, particularly those that are content-based, that is, those built around a general discipline area. Kasper (1997) for instance reports improved language and content performance and higher scores on measures of reading proficiency among students who have completed content-based EAP courses. However, they do more than address language issues; they address a range of issues in learning in an unfamiliar learning culture. Ballard (1996,) states that language problems often mask ‘the much deeper problems of adjusting to a new intellectual culture, and new way of thinking and of processing knowledge to meet the expectations inherent in the Anglo education system’ (Ballard, 1996, p.150).

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### **Using the networks**

#### *The action research team*

Within SoCCE, the original need to support NESB students was recognised and responded to by the SoCCE Director (Teaching and Learning); a co-author with teaching and learning and engineering expertise.

At the same time the SET Portfolio was encouraging targeted action in relation to improving student transition, by requiring each School to identify a project to address the transitional needs of a particular student cohort. This brought the involvement of the Manager, Strategic Teaching and Learning Projects; a co-author with educational development, teaching and learning and academic policy and administration expertise, who works in the SET Portfolio office.

Brainstorming based on some initial research suggested a range of possible solutions. An EAP course was one appropriate solution,

but it seemed an ambitious option. Its form and how it might be offered, and by and to whom were initially unclear.

In the previous year, the University's Teaching and Learning Committee had made a top-down recommendation that an EAP should be developed in each portfolio of the university. However, the proposal had languished without a champion. It was recalled and revived in this case only once a clear need emerged from focussed staff exploration of data and practices around supporting student transition in Schools which recognised the benefit of embedded support for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

The initial discussions highlighted the need of an expert to comment on the English language and learning skills aspects and options within the project. A colleague, a co-author, from the Learning Skills Unit (LSU), a provider of services to students from across the University to support their learning, who had previously supported NESB students was contacted and agreed to become involved. She also had close knowledge of EAP courses offered elsewhere in the University.

The course could be service taught by RMIT's Learning Skills Unit, whose staff have substantial experience in teaching academic literacy and supporting NESB students in developing the English language and study skills required for higher education study.

The formation of the project team with the added resource of each members' own networks and commitment to positive outcomes created the tipping point for the project. Despite the small size of the team, the commitment and networks of each member created the necessary change environment to progress the project.

### *The networks*

This section briefly describes the process used by team members to progress the project. It includes references to the broad expertise accessed by the team through their networks.

With a narrow window of time, consultation from across the Portfolio was needed to determine which other Schools were interested in collaborating on such a course. Collabora-

tion would involve staff input to contextualise the course to the needs of students from a range of programs, resourcing and administration.

The consultation was organised and facilitated by the Manager, Strategic Teaching and Learning Projects using Portfolio contacts. Five of the ten Schools were represented at a meeting where participants provided indications of interest and raised suggestions and issues with the project team. A possible scenario for the EAP course had been provided to School representatives to give some framework for the discussion. Input and comment from the other engineering schools was gathered using existing relationship amongst the respective Teaching and Learning Directors of these schools.

To be offered, the course needed to be cost neutral or return a profit to SoCCE. Financial projections were needed. The University's finance department provided an income and expenses costing based on a model which applied a range of assumptions prepared by the team. The assumptions included minimum and maximum class sizes, teacher skill level and mode of delivery.

This costing was subsequently not used as the model could not account for the specifics of this case. Using the same set of assumptions, a second costing was prepared by the Manager, Strategic Teaching and Learning Projects and validated by the Portfolio's Finance Manager.

Further expert advice was sought from those with experience in teaching an existing EAP course, in another discipline area. School based content experts, who would advise on how to contextualise the course to their disciplines, academic policy experts on what was allowable within the University's policy framework and the approval process, were also involved. This led to determinations on the following details about the course:

- The course content would be individually contextualised to supporting the English and study skills needed by students in their other courses, to ensure that students find it beneficial, highly relevant and engaging.
- As each RMIT undergraduate program requires students to include two or three stu-

dent electives, whereby students may enrol in any course offered by the University (some conditions do apply), the EAP course could be offered as an elective.

- The timetabling concern that students may need to take an above load enrolment would be mitigated by the fact that they were receiving learning skills support that they might otherwise have to be resourced outside of their courses. Additionally, students would benefit by lightening their load later in their program. The EAP course could be seen as visiting a private tutor for assistance, not as another course with a large burden of content to be absorbed.
- The pass only grade status of the course will make it unattractive to over-qualified students.

Finally, the course once finalised, needed ownership. This was left to the Director, Teaching and Learning in SoCCE to seek the endorsement from the School and to subsequently present the course for Portfolio approval.

The course has now been approved and with further implementation work by the project team it will be offered in 2006.

#### **WHY WE NEED TO BE RESPONSIVE AND WHY THERE IS OFTEN A LAG?**

Student centred practitioners often use an action learning approach to meet the learning needs of their students. They will regularly “take the pulse” of the student experience by collecting feedback to determine what and how students learn in their classes, courses and program (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). They then come up with continuous improvement and innovation strategies, to make the student experience more effective to achieve the learning objectives of the program. Such strategies may be modifications of existing practices, applications of practices from elsewhere, or genuine innovations, and selection of one over the other will depend on a range of factors, including needs of the various cohorts of student, degrees of risk attached to various options, the background and creativity of the practitioner themselves, and the resources and support available.

There is often a significant lag between the conceptions of teaching and learning innovations and their implementation, as they often require either policy or budgetary responses or a shift in the culture from traditional modes of operating in the organization which can impact on uptake. Knight and Trowler (2000) put this down to a reduction in the “time, energy and mental space available to improve teaching and learning practices” (Knight & Trowler, 2000, p.71) available to staff for teaching and learning improvements.

In this case study, the project group has been able to respond to a complex problem in a short time. The task was complex because it required a non-standard response, that is, setting up of a course from another discipline (English language) within an engineering school for a particular cohort of students. There was no existing precedent within the school for this proposal. It had to be conceived from the ‘first principles’ of change and project management (Ciacoppe, 1997; Kotter, 1995) and innovation was needed (Senge, 1990). Despite the complexity involved, the time taken to design the course and have it approved was approximately eight weeks.

Of greatest importance is that if the project had not been picked up by the team members and acted upon as described, this project would not have been attempted this year, and subsequently, the needs of the student cohort could not have been addressed in this innovative way.

#### **The importance of internal networks**

Knight and Trowler (2000) found that due to the current inherent pressures on academic staff “[R]educed self-esteem and self-confidence reduce the capacity to take risks and innovate” (Knight & Trowler, 2000, p.72 in teaching and learning. The use of networks can assist staff to feel better supported in relation to this work.

This project had a core team of three, each with different areas of expertise which was substantially complemented by the team member’s own networks. The additional expertise provided by the combined networks of the

team members was critical to the success of the project.

Using networks, such as the consultations, not only confirmed that NESB students required targeted strategies to achieve academic success, but provided invaluable feedback which assisted the project group to see the deeper issues to offering the course, including issues relating to assessment and grading, mode of delivery, timetabling and the role of existing support for NESB students.

Using an action research approach, the project team consulted within its professional networks from which options for the project were identified and analysed. This subsequently led to the final form of the EAP course.

### **Establishing and maintaining internal networks – valuing skills and abilities**

Building networks relies on the range of professional and social avenues available to the individual (Gladwell, 2002) but also it is about being able to engage them to contribute. This requires taking the time to build mutual respect and recognition (Kanter, 1994). For the authors this occurs through participation in strategically useful working groups and committees.

Networks can involve engaging socially and can be strengthened by such, but do not have to be to be effective. Knight and Trowler (2000) note that academic staff do not find the opportunity to discuss teaching and learning because of limited opportunities to socialise. Such opportunities must be created to allow networks to grow and consolidate. The qualities of collaboration (Kanter, 1994) can be applied here to really strengthen networks.

### **Effective governance and management systems**

Strong governance and management systems, primarily policies, which are rigorous yet flexible, map out frameworks in which staff are encouraged to innovate. These systems require boundaries and parameters that are clearly understood and outcome focused and risk managing, rather than risk averse. These provide a form of leadership for the project and in this case, leadership was provided by the SET

Portfolio's decision to target efforts to improve transition and provide the assistance to do so.

### **CONCLUSION**

The use of a range of networks was essential to the success of this project. The critical mass created by the combined networks and subsequent access to skills and knowledge was able to negotiate the policy hurdles which can exist for innovation. Thus, despite the brief time-frame, the project team was able to successfully achieve the approval of an innovative new course for NESB engineering students to enhance the student experience and student success.

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