

## **From student feedback to institutional quality enhancement initiatives that focus on supporting staff and students**

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### **Abstract**

The broader challenges posed for teaching quality enhancement through educational and academic development are many and include: information collection to identify possible reasons for a particular set of circumstances, planning and implementation of changes in a generally fluid situation, collection of evidence for outcomes, and provision of succinct reports to stakeholders. One common means for identifying both the needs and the outcomes is through surveys. In this respect, students views on the learning and teaching environment provided by an institution are typically collected through standardised questionnaires, though the use of such survey results has been frequently debated. This paper outlines the use of information collected through surveys of student views in order to better understand student learning experiences and to identify areas for further development. It also describes specific projects and programs that were aimed at caring for both staff and students in an institution with a strong commitment to the *dignity of the human person* and the *common good*. It is noted that in addition to policies and procedures that enshrine caring and ethical behaviour among staff and students, the institution actively promotes this culture through various practices.

**Keywords:** Quality enhancement, professional development, student feedback, student success, student retention

### **Introduction**

The processes for quality enhancement demand consideration of the context in which an educational development initiative is planned and implemented, since the natural settings for learning and teaching tend to be complex. Quite often a number of distinct projects may be needed to address a serious concern in such a setting. Another demand on those responsible for educational developmental is regular reporting to key stakeholder groups. It is critical that the stakeholder groups understand the purposes and processes, so that relevant groups remain supportive of the initiative. Therefore the challenges for quality enhancement through education development include the processes of:

- identifying possible reasons for a particular set of circumstances,

- planning and implementing changes in a generally fluid situation, and
- collecting and reporting on evidences for outcomes.

This paper outlines the use of information collected through surveys of student views, in order to understand student perspectives on their learning experiences, and to identify possible areas for improvement in an institution's offerings to students. It describes some of the institutional strategies that were aimed at supporting student achievement and retention, and discusses the direction taken to meet the challenges of evidencing quality enhancement at the institutional level. The desired improvements were planned through curriculum design, professional practice of staff and learning opportunities for students.

The authors of this paper are all involved, though in different ways, in the institutional approach aimed at supporting the quality of learning and teaching. The institutional approach is multi-faceted, including the establishment of processes for planning, implementing, reviewing and reporting on strategic programs and projects. The authors' roles frequently overlap, and they recognise the complexity in applying student feedback to educational development and evidencing the outcomes of specific initiatives. Through relevant literature and other means of communication, the authors recognise that the challenges faced by their institution are common to most higher education providers, irrespective of the country in which the entities operate. Therefore the study's findings are expected to be relevant to other educational institutions.

## **Background**

In 1998, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) organised a conference to discuss higher education, based on the rationale that there was 'an unprecedented demand for and a great diversification in higher education, as well as an increased awareness of its vital importance for sociocultural and economic development, and building the future, for which the younger generations will need to be equipped with new skills, knowledge and ideals' (UNESCO, 1998). As put forward by the UNESCO 'Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First century: Vision and Action' about a decade earlier (UNESCO, 1998), a later study found that the drivers for quality enhancement included: the growth of the higher education sector to become a significant economic entity, the increasing diversity among the student population, and the demands from both students and prospective employers to prepare graduates for the current and future work place (Hénard and Roseveare, 2012). Therefore it is not surprising that a public statement from a body like the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for the UK higher education states that

As UK higher education grows and diversifies, we safeguard standards and support the improvement of quality for students.... The scale, shape, structure and purpose of learning provision are changing in the UK and around the world. We are uniquely placed to anticipate and respond to these changes in order to safeguard the reputation of UK higher education, support economic opportunity for the UK, and provide assurance to those who invest in and undertake learning (QAA, nd).

The increased attention to numerous quality aspects of the higher education sector is evident in the membership of an organisation like the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), which has grown from eight members in 1991 to the current 280 members (INQAAHE, nd). The introduction of external agencies for the quality assurance of the higher education sector in many countries appears to have given rise to significant discussions on the broad topic of quality, such as the growing literature relating to: the effectiveness of external agencies; the tensions between accountability and improvement; and the use of performance indicators for funding allocation (Chalmers, 2007, 2010; Harvey and Williams, 2010).

While the influence of a national or transnational agency on improving the quality of teaching in higher education institutions may be difficult to identify, there appears to be a ground swell of recognition that quality teaching is important. For instance, one of the findings of a large scale study of 29 higher education institutions located in 20 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries was the awareness among institutions that an institution's reputation is not based on the research output alone, but also on the quality of teaching available at the institution and the employability of its graduates (Hénard, 2010). Even the universities that have a strong reputation for research, such as Stanford and Harvard in the United States, have initiated strategies and allocated funds to support and reward quality teaching (Marincovich, 2007: 25-26). The OECD study also helped to confirm that an effective approach to foster quality teaching is through the dual channels of (a) 'top down' institutional level direction, commitment and active support, and (b) 'bottom up' initiatives and interest from academic staff who are in direct contact with students (Hénard, 2010; Hénard and Roseveare, 2012).

Given the increasing focus on the quality of higher education, it is understandable that higher education institutions in many parts of the world are engaged in various quality assurance and quality enhancement processes, even though there are debates on what 'quality' means and how it should be measured, and there are multiple conceptions of the terms 'quality assurance' and 'quality enhancement' (Elassy, 2015; Harvey and Williams, 2010; Land and Gordon, 2013; Schindler et al., 2015; Wong, 2012). Quality assurance tends to be associated with audit, accountability, accreditation and other management processes that aim to meet or maintain a predetermined set of standards, and thus the quality assurance process can be viewed as a control mechanism (Wilger, 1997; Wong, 2012). Whereas, quality enhancement focuses on the improvement of a process and/or an outcome, and it can be expected to be on a continuum over a period of time (Elassy, 2015).

Some of the institutional quality assurance processes are for internal purposes (such as, the grading of student work and the promotion of academic staff), while others are for meeting external requirements. The external requirements include reporting to a government agency and to a professional body. An example in Australia is the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency or TEQSA that was set up by the Australian Government, with a main purpose of registering and evaluating 'the performance of Australia's higher education providers against the Higher Education Standards Framework - specifically, the Threshold Standards, which all providers must meet in order to enter and remain within Australia's higher education system' (TEQSA, nd). If an Australian institution intends to offer a course or a program of study for the award of a Bachelor Degree related to a particular profession,

then the institution's offering must comply with the Threshold Standards of TEQSA and the Higher Education Standards Framework, as well as meet the criteria set by the relevant state or national level authority for that profession, so that the institution is able to award a qualification that is acceptable to the professional body.

Based on a review of research literature that was commissioned by the Higher Education Academy in the UK, and after identifying a multitude of aspects that need to be considered when discussing the quality of undergraduate education, Gibbs concluded that the best predictor of educational outcome is 'what institutions do with their resources to make the most of whatever students they have', and in particular using 'pedagogical practices that engender student engagement' (Gibbs, 2010: 43). The argument for pedagogical practices also comes from other scholars who state that 'due to greater scrutiny from stakeholders, concerns about financial solvency, and the evolution of academic work, pedagogy will be central to transforming postsecondary institutions in the 21st Century' and that 'there is an increasing urgency for evidence-based decision-making on practical issues related to teaching and learning' (Perry and Smart, 2007: 3-4). Among the recommended processes to be undertaken by the higher education institutions for maintaining or improving the educational outcomes are the planning and development of strategic directions, and the implementation of processes and resources that are expected to support the institutional journeys in their chosen directions (Hénard and Roseveare, 2012).

Surveying student views has a long history with a large collection of research findings, and the use of student feedback for evidencing teaching quality has been contentious. The general consensus among the researchers who conducted large scale studies is that student feedback is a critical part of evidencing the effectiveness of teaching practice, and that it should be considered with data from other sources (Aleamoni, 1999; Benton and Cashin, 2014; Feldman, 2007; Kulik, 2001; Marsh, 1991; McKeachie, 1997; Murray, 2005; Strang et al., 2016). The collection of student feedback has become a standard practice in many parts of the world, and this practice is widespread in countries where there is a strong drive for education quality enhancement initiatives, accompanied by a higher education quality auditing agency (Barrie et al., 2008; Callender et al., 2014; Hénard and Roseveare, 2012; Soilemetzidis et al., 2014). For example, the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching website lists a number of benchmarking surveys conducted by the Social Research Centre on behalf of the Australian Government (QILT, nd).

Quality indicators based on periodic evaluations provide snapshots in time, however, they are not best suited to ascertaining the influence (if any) of a particular intervention aimed at improving the quality (e.g., learning and teaching) at any level of an organisation. The need to evidence quality enhancement, or to measure efficacy, has resulted in the growth of impact evaluation methodology in many fields (Taylor and Filipowski, 2014; White, 2005). An exploration into the widening adoption of impact evaluation led some scholars to discuss the 'use and usability of evaluation outputs' based on the social practice theory (Saunders, Trowler and Bamber, 2011; Saunders, 2012). Saunders (2012) proposed that: the 'use' is dependent on the capability of those expected to understand and apply the evaluation results, as well as on the culture and context of the organisation in which the individuals are located; whereas the 'usability' can be affected by several dimensions of the evaluation design. When the evaluation process is considered as a social practice, then some of the complexities in

demonstrating quality enhancement in the higher education context become easier to comprehend (Saunders, Trowler and Bamber, 2011).

The idea of meeting standards and criteria tends to bring to mind the notion that all institutions have the same or standard practices. However surveys that attempt to create a benchmark can demonstrate significant differences between institutions, due to a variety of reasons, including the diversity among staff or students. This raises the dilemma for institutional leaders, since they should ensure their institutions meet the standards created by an external quality agency, while providing an environment that cares for or nurtures diversity in an ethical way. The literature relating to ‘caring teachers’ and ‘caring institutions’ has largely focussed on school level education, but there are good arguments for embedding similar practices in the higher education sector (Noddings, 2006; Tronto, 2010).

The institution where the study described in this paper took place has a strong commitment to the dignity of the human person and the common good. Not only are there policies and procedures that enshrine caring and ethical behaviour among staff and students, the institution actively promotes the culture through various practices. The study investigated the use of information collected through surveys of student views to identify areas for learning and teaching enhancement, which then formed the basis for designing specific projects and programs that were aimed at supporting or caring for staff and students. The projects and programs were aligned to the institutional strategic direction.

## **Methodology**

The study relates to the Australian Catholic University (ACU), which has seven campuses located in four states and one territory in Australia. A qualitative research design was adopted, more specifically the descriptive approach, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the various aspects of learning and teaching development at the institutional level. According to scholars, ‘the overall purpose of descriptive research is to provide a “picture” of a phenomenon or intervention’, which is useful for identifying what has or is taking place, but not for identifying causal relationships (Bickman and Rog, 2009: 15-16). Further, ‘the process of describing something requires that we abstract the important parts: in painting a scene, we select the important features to sketch in’ (Krathwohl, 2009). Therefore the study identifies important features of, and reflects on:

- the student feedback collection in the Australian higher education context; and
- the interventions based on student feedback, and aimed at supporting staff and students.

The descriptive research was applied to specific programs and projects that have been, or are being, implemented in the University as part of a broad approach for enhancing learning and teaching quality. The specific initiatives include those with the aim of supporting: the access to degree programs offered by the University; the learning process and achievement in the units (subjects or courses) in a particular study period; and the retention of enrolled students in the University to reach successful completion of programs (i.e., graduation). While some of the initiatives targeted students directly, others were for the purpose of supporting staff to improve the delivery of units and degree programs.

The descriptions and reflections highlight possible pathways for using evaluation outputs, such as student feedback, for quality enhancement in other higher education institutions.

## Results

An overview of the many surveys that are conducted for collecting and reporting student views can help to provide the context in which most universities operate in the Australian higher education sector. Table 1 lists some of the standard benchmarking surveys that have been, or are being, conducted for specific purposes, and Table 2 lists the internal surveys that are conducted by ACU. The results of the external surveys are generally available to the public, as part of the Australian Government's strategy to increase the transparency of quality assurance. The findings of internal surveys are usually reported in a confidential manner for diverse purposes. The internal survey reports may inform: (a) all stakeholders at the institution, (b) specific internal stakeholder groups for their attention and further action, or (c) an external body responsible for the accreditation or funding of the institution. The information provided in Tables 1 and 2 highlight the multiple purposes for which student surveys are conducted, as well as indicate the evolutionary nature of some of the surveys.

Table 1. External surveys for evidencing quality

### External surveys – periodic and ad hoc:

- *University Experience Survey (UES)* – A benchmarking survey conducted for Australian universities. This survey has been replaced by the *Student Experience Survey (SES)*. The information collected through this process helps to inform student perceptions of their experiences at the higher education institution.
- *Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)* and *Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ)* – For collecting feedback on degree programs from recent graduates. These surveys have been replaced.
- *Graduate Destination Survey (GDS)* - For identifying employment status, etc. This survey has been replaced.
- *Australian Graduate Survey (AGS)* – For collecting feedback from recent graduates, within six months of completing their degree program. This survey has replaced GDS, CEQ and PREQ.
- *Graduate Outcomes Survey* – This survey will replace AGS.
- *Graduate Outcomes Survey - Longitudinal (GOS-L)* – New survey for collecting feedback from graduates, 3 years after completion of degree program.
- *Beyond Graduation Survey*
- *Student Barometer (SB)/ International Student Barometer (ISB)* surveys
- *Library Client Satisfaction* survey
- *Respect.Now.Always* survey

**Table 2. Internal surveys for evidencing quality**

**Internal surveys - periodic and ad hoc:**

- Student Evaluation of Learning and Teaching (SELT) survey – This has replaced the Student Evaluation of Unit (SEU) and the Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) surveys.
- Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) survey.
- IT Client Satisfaction survey.
- ACU Living and Learning Communities survey (for residents of ACU owned or managed student accommodation).
- Feedback from users of student services (eg Counselling, Academic Skills, Career Development)

In the following sections, the descriptions focus on the context within which learning and teaching are supported at ACU. Like all universities, ACU is committed to the pursuit of knowledge. More uniquely, the University's mission emphasises the dignity of the human person and the common good. Therefore the University aims not only to ensure that ACU graduates are highly employable and skilled in their chosen fields, but also that as students and as graduates they will serve the common good. Serving the common good involves making a difference in their communities locally, nationally and internationally. Students are provided with the opportunities to explore in their studies what this means, and to participate in community engagement experiences as part of their course completion, including working as volunteers.

ACU recognises the transformative power of education for individuals and the community. Programs offered for students, whether academic or co-curricular, seek to engage all students in their studies and more broadly in university life. There are also initiatives to promote the support that students may need to succeed in their studies and to graduate, and to ensure all students have access to the support. Within this context, a five-year strategic plan has been developed, which identifies the goals for learning and teaching at the University. The following section outlines the plan, and the utilisation of student feedback to achieve specific outcomes.

***ACU Framework for enhancing learning and teaching quality***

The *ACU Learning and Teaching Framework 2014-2017*, with the theme of *Learning for Life*, has six hallmarks which are expected to 'transform the future direction of learning and teaching at the University', and each hallmark has more specific goals which are expected to 'ensure the University's reputation for excellence in learning and teaching' (ACU, 2014).

Student feedback collected through various types of internal and external surveys (Table 1 and Table 2) became useful for identifying some of the specific goals. Not surprisingly, student feedback also features strongly in the evidence for measuring the success for these goals. Some of the goals specified in the Framework are listed in Table 3. For most of these goals, the role of student feedback is discussed as a source of data for evidencing outcomes.

Table 3. Selection of evidences listed in the ACU Learning for Life Framework

- Design and deliver curriculum through the lens of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, ensuring our graduates are known for having excellent discipline-based knowledge, are highly skilled in their chosen fields, ethical in their behaviour, have a developed critical habit of mind, an appreciation of the sacred nature of life and a commitment to serving the common good.
- Provide fit-for-purpose physical and virtual teaching and learning spaces. Develop, approve and implement the ACU Minimum Teaching and Learning in the Physical and Virtual Space Standards document, based on the Learning and Teaching Framework and with a 20 year horizon. The Standards will address how ACU teaching and learning spaces will help facilitate the move towards blended learning, the need for informal learning spaces, external and remote access, off campus sites (physical and virtual), satellite centres and more.
- Devise and deliver processes to ensure consistent, rigorous and whole-of-University implementation of educational technology measured by the timely delivery of the technologies and staff satisfaction with educational technology platforms.
- Improve student success and retention rates by improving the effectiveness of orientation, and improving both the transition and first year experience, to ensure greater success in later university life.
- Improve the seamless administrative experience for students, with user-friendly enrolment, timetabling, information technology and library systems.
- Professionally develop our teachers and their scholarship in learning and teaching, with the development and implementation of a teacher professional development continuum program, that includes the establishment of a profile for a Higher Education Teacher at ACU and establish a Scholarship of Teaching Index to guide staff achievements and rewards for excellence in teaching and scholarship.

### ***Case studies of 'Learning for Life' projects***

Each project has been proposed and planned for a specific need in relation to supporting staff and/or students in ACU. Some the projects that used student feedback as a basis for identifying the need are highlighted below.

#### Physical Teaching Space Standards

The ACU Physical Teaching Space Standards provided guidelines in the design and construction of new and refurbished teaching spaces across all areas of the University. It also provides the minimum standards of technology to be provided in learning and teaching spaces across all university campuses. The purpose of these standards is to ensure that teaching staff and students of ACU have access to high quality and appropriately equipped learning environments across all campuses.

#### Online Capacity Building (Developing Units and Courses at ACU)

This project has sought to address the needs of the three stakeholders who are typically present in any unit development or re-development project or activity. These are:



- Faculty Executive
- Unit Developers - Educational Designers or equivalent
- Nominated Academic Staff

By better understanding the specific expectations of each of these roles and seeking to provide a range of tools and resources to support the systems and processes that they use in the design and development of online courseware, it is intended to create both more consistency and more effectiveness in the materials that deliver an increasing component of the student's learning experience.

#### Blended Learning/Flipped Classroom (Using Technology to Enhance Teaching at ACU)

This project commenced with an extensive consultation with Faculty areas to seek better understanding of their expectations in terms of online delivery in order that they could be 'mapped' against the increasing student expectation for 'more' and 'better use' of technology to enhance their learning. By means of such engagement, both the 'communities of practice' at local campus levels and the 'online learning champions' were identified. It was recognised throughout that such communities, though vital input to the design of resources and tools to enhance practice, would only continue to exist within environments where they were curated by an external entity, which in this case is the 'Learning for Life' project.

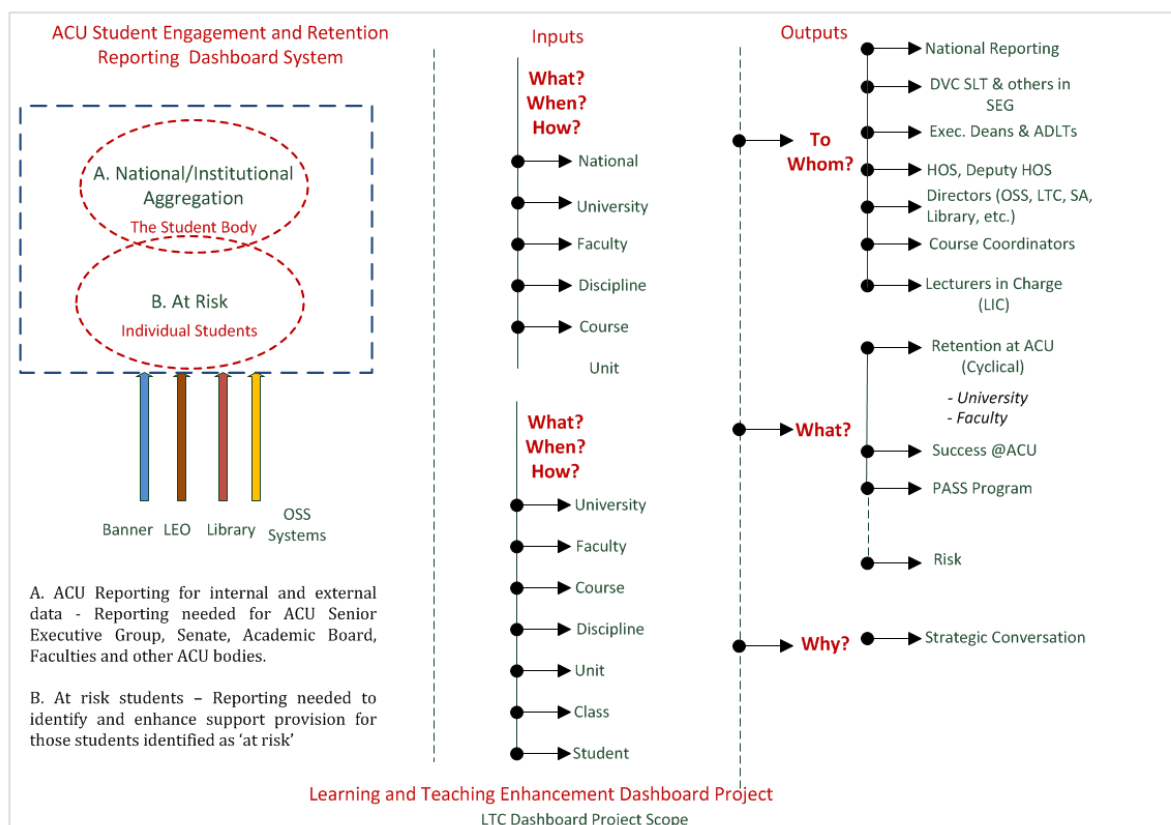
#### Indicators of Student Success Group (Proximal Attributes Project)

This project has considered the issues around the extent of the analytical data currently available to describe the 'student success', particularly where it relates to their capacity to succeed with their university studies and to be retained to completion of those studies. The project is predicated upon the notion that, within the vast array and range of available data, there will be certain data points that are more indicative of eventual student success than others. Moreover, there is the understanding that some of these data points may well be linked. If this is the case then it means that: firstly, the University will have better identified which specific behaviours it is worth reporting upon; and secondly, the University can develop an appropriate and targeted response and thus be able to respond when an early stage indicator has been triggered.

#### Learning and Teaching Enhancement Dashboard

This project is expected to enable the collation of evidence: from multiple sources and reporting to specific stakeholder groups and at various levels. This approach will be more holistic than the traditional consideration of evidence from a single source at a time, and will allow a deeper level understanding of the context in which learning and teaching occur. It is also intended that the data, managed and aggregated through the Dashboard, will be capable of being accessed by learning and teaching leaders within the academic community. The reporting on the outcomes of data analyses back to the community is expected to be at a range of levels, from the senior executive to the classroom teacher. The information flow through the Dashboard is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Information flow for proposed Learning and Teaching Enhancement Dashboard



### ***Programs for enhancing the quality of student learning experience***

Similar to most educational institutions, ACU students are respected as individuals and for their diversity in backgrounds, interests and ability. Student support in ACU is structured on a success model, rather than a deficit model. That is, the support programs seek to empower students to help themselves by providing access to opportunities to gain the necessary knowledge, skills and experience to succeed in their studies. For example, support services such as Academic Skills, Disability Services, Advocacy and Counselling are within the Office of Student Success directorate, with its title strongly indicating its purpose. The foundation of co-curricular programs (such as, student associations, clubs and societies, sporting and cultural activities) and the student leadership programs includes the University's Mission and the development Graduate Attributes.

In addition to projects that have been recently developed or are being developed as part of the Learning for Life Framework implementation, there is a suite of programs that have been introduced in ACU for the purpose of enhancing the quality of student experience, from entry point to exit point. Examples of these programs, which are expected to be ongoing, are described below.

### ***Case studies of programs for enhancing the quality of student learning experience***

#### **ACUgate**

ACU collaborates with primary and secondary schools, Vocational Education and Training providers and community groups to deliver *ACUgate* programs. The objective is to raise

awareness about university study and its benefits, to build aspirations to study at a university and to help prospective students prepare for and access the University. The partner schools are located in low socio-economic status communities, while other partners cater to students who may be less prepared for university entry or may not have had the opportunity to attend university immediately after leaving schools. Students entering ACU from these programs, or students identified as having challenging circumstances to university access, are offered 'ACU Smart' which is a pre-Orientation day program to support the transition to university experience. Students are provided with the opportunity to: meet academics and other university staff, hear from providers of various student services such as Academic Skills, make friends, access a peer mentor and arrive at the scheduled Orientation day for all new students with confidence and enthusiasm to be successful at the University.

#### Taskforce for Student Achievement and Retention (TSAR)

TSAR is chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students, Learning and Teaching) and the group has representation from key areas of the university. Membership of TSAR includes: the Executive Dean and the Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching) in each Faculty; the Academic Registrar; Directors of the Learning and Teaching Centre, the Office of Student Success, Student Strategies, First Peoples and Equity Pathways; the Associate Director of ACU International and the Evaluation Coordinator. TSAR sponsors a program of initiatives to support student achievement. These initiatives can be delivered through the faculties for supporting pedagogy, staff development or addressing course or subject 'hot spots' identified through the *Student Evaluation of Learning and Teaching* surveys, or programs that are directly delivered to students by other areas of the University.

Examples of Faculty projects that are endorsed or funded by TSAR are:

- Faculty of Health Sciences: Map and develop an embedded coordinated health sciences transition curricula in first semester, first year units, across Health courses. This ensures first semester units are clearly linked and scaffolded with an embedded transition pedagogy (including early low stakes, formative assessment; academic literacy integration; English language proficiency development; relevance so students understand what and why they are studying these units; and how each of the differing units build on each other and progress into future units etc.)
- Faculty of Health Sciences: Review second semester units to embed additional aspects of transition pedagogy, and to enhance the preparation of students for second year units.
- Various Faculties: Student mentoring programs, such as a program for Postgraduate students returning to university and managing work, family and new study demands.
- All Faculties: "Unit Hot Spot" projects, in which Faculties investigate units receiving lower student satisfaction ratings and work with academic staff to identify the reasons and provide solutions
- All Faculties and staff in other areas: The *Staff Referral Guide to Student Services* provides staff with a quick reference to available help in the University so that staff can assist students at the point a specific need is identified.

Examples of university-wide programs endorsed or funded by TSAR include:

- Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS): The program provides free, voluntary small-group study sessions to help students succeed in challenging subjects. Weekly PASS sessions are facilitated by current ACU undergraduate students who excelled in the subject in the recent past.
- Success at ACU: The program provides support to first year students whose backgrounds or attributes may indicate a potential risk of not achieving as well as most other students at the University. The ‘at risk’ students receive regular contact from the University by phone or email at critical points in the academic calendar. They are provided with advice and assistance in accessing services available at the Faculty or other areas of the University, co-curricular support and activities aimed at student engagement, and opportunities to meet their individual needs. These support services and opportunities are available to all students at ACU, but personal intervention is provided to the specific ‘at risk’ student cohort in the critical early days of starting a course at the University, in order to increase these students' awareness of available support and to ensure the provision of appropriate intervention.
- Early Intervention Response Taskforce: Students who indicate they will or may withdraw from the University in the first month of enrolment are offered the opportunity to discuss their decision with a staff member. Where relevant, options or interventions that may lead to the student’s continuation or return in the future are raised with the student

### **Discussion and implications**

Land and Gordon (2013) attempt to capture the meaning of enhancement in their book titled *Enhancing Quality in Higher Education: International Perspectives*, and their introduction to Chapter 1 is a good starting point for discussing some of the challenges identified through this study.

Enhancement is broadly defined **and** capable of operating at any scale. It can involve doing things better or doing things differently. A systematic approach to enhancement might be visualised as a succession of feedback, evaluation and action loops or ‘helixical’ processes. A sophisticated model might capture different scales of feedback, evaluation and action, across different settings or environments, into a multidimensional model. A constant challenge is to ensure that approaches to enhancing quality maintain a balance between the competing demands of stakeholder (self-)interests (Land and Gordon, 2013).

As part of the *ACU Learning for Life Framework* implementation process, goal-specific projects and programs were designed. Among the evidence sources for the effectiveness and impact of implementation process are the external and internal surveys.

However, there are many factors than can affect the plan to use evidence from surveys, in particular the surveys that are conducted by an external agency for benchmarking purposes.

One factor is that the external survey structure is not easily amenable to meet specific purposes from the perspective of an institutional strategy, since the survey design is based on a consensus reached among a number of institutions and other agencies. Another factor that has emerged very prominently is the lack of stability in survey designs, due to changes beyond the control of the institution. For example, some of the key benchmarking surveys used by Australian universities have been recently reviewed and modified (Table 1). Therefore the 'reliable and objective' evidence that was expected when the Framework was planned may not be available by the time the projects and programs are implemented. Even the internal surveys are subject to periodic review and revision processes, and the revised survey tools may no longer collect the type of data that was anticipated by those planning and implementing initiatives for quality enhancement.

The more common pathway, adopted by some of those responsible for projects and programs, is to conduct their own data collection through surveys of stakeholders. If students are among the stakeholders, then there is the very real danger of increasing 'survey fatigue' among students, reducing survey participation and obtaining evidence that may not accurately represent the stakeholder views. There is a grave need to balance the wide-ranging requirements for student feedback collection, and the critical aspect of collecting a representative sample of responses.

In order to counter this, the University has implemented a survey register so that the number of student focussed surveys conducted at any particular time could be monitored. However, in spite of the survey register, the proliferation of internal student surveys for multiple purposes has continued, due to the voluntary nature of reporting the surveys that were being conducted, and possibly the lack of awareness among staff regarding the existence of the survey register. It also became apparent that some students were ignoring important messages that were buried among a high volume of emails inviting students to participate in various surveys. ACU student representatives in University committees conveyed the frustration experienced by students, caused by the survey invitations and reminders that accumulated in their email accounts. In a further effort to reduce survey fatigue among students, the University has recently developed the *Survey Governance Framework* which has been approved by the Academic Board for implementation in 2017. The effectiveness of the new Framework, for managing the number of times a student is likely to receive an invitation or a reminder to participate in surveys, will be difficult to estimate; but the expectation is that there will now be a greater degree of control.

Another challenge that has been identified for the projects and programs is regular reporting to stakeholders. Since each project or program has been or is being funded by the University, there is a need for accountability. This accountability includes not only an explanation for the expenditure of funds, but also documenting progress and evidencing achievements. For the Learning for Life projects, each project team was expected to use a report template prepared by the Project Office, and this helped to reduce some of the time pressure for regular reporting. However, the relevant data collection and analysis that is necessary for evidencing project outcomes continued to be a challenge for some of the projects. Regular meetings of all project teams enabled sharing of ideas and resources; the

meetings supported the teams that had unique expertise which was necessary for a project, but not the knowledge and skills for successful completion of the project. In addition to this, the Learning for Life Program employed the services of an External Evaluator with a mandate to review and evaluate the implementation and uptake of the specific projects. In order to progress this evaluation activity, significant engagement was sought from the stakeholder community. The active involvement of the leaders for learning and teaching within the academic community was critical in reviewing the impact of projects.

The challenge of evidencing outcomes was found to be even greater for a student support program that was implemented across all campuses; the program leader who was located in one campus had to coordinate the program activities through other staff (frequently staff who were employed on a part-time basis for a fixed term) on every campus. Not only was there a significant delay in gathering campus level data, some of the campus-based staff decided to maintain records in a format that was familiar to them. The departmental area that was responsible for the multi-campus program has undertaken significant strides towards recording all data online, so that there is a standardised format for data input and the required data is available for analysis and reporting in a timely manner.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the difficulty in collecting sufficient evidence is the challenge of too much data that requires significant human input, such as, rich or extensive commentary from project/ program participants. This situation was identified in a few of the surveys that had open-ended items. The expectation is that the recipient of a report that includes responses to open-ended questions will undertake:

- reading the comments,
- coding the comments (either manually or with the support of an application), and
- summarising the coded comments into thematic categories.

The review of qualitative data can be supported significantly through the use of an application that can automatically code thematic areas, based on a dictionary that is compiled over a period of time. This strategy is being applied to one of the main periodic surveys that collect student feedback in ACU.

The above challenges and a number of other factors led to the start of a project to enable the reporting of learning and teaching evidence through an online 'dashboard' type of environment. The initial identification of requirements for a dashboard, from the perspectives of some of the stakeholder groups, has been completed. It is anticipated that the list of requirements will grow in the future, and some of the requirements which have already been identified may change. Therefore the applications that will be considered for supporting the dashboard will need to be amenable to changes through a relatively quick process.

In this regard, it is interesting to note some of the findings of a project sponsored by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the Institutional Management in Higher Education that focussed on quality teaching. The project goal was 'to highlight effective quality initiatives and to encourage practices that may help other institutions to improve the quality of their teaching and thereby, the quality of their graduates' (Hénard, 2010: 3). The 29 higher education institutions that participated in that study had indicated their commitment to enhance the quality of teaching, and the highest ranked item

for the vast majority was student evaluation, followed by program design, monitoring and implementation; support for teaching/learning environment and for students (e.g. counselling) shared the third rank while professional development for pedagogy was quite a number of ranks below the top three (Henard, 2010: 18). Whereas in ACU, the emphasis for many of the Learning for Life projects is to embed the principles of pedagogy in the initiatives, and to support the teaching staff directly or indirectly in their professional development.

This paper has both considered the inherent challenges, and responses to the challenges, when attempting to: enhance student learning and academic teaching experiences, and support students in their achievements. The paper has described some of the ways in which a particular university, in this case, the Australian Catholic University, has sought to respond to these challenges at the strategic, operational and tactical level. The approach taken at ACU has been to seek to ensure, that the response to the conclusions drawn from the data analysis of student learning experiences is considered alongside the academic teaching experiences, and that those academic teachers are engaged in the design and development of the solutions proposed.

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