

Changing the face of learning @ UWS

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This paper describes and analyses a whole of institutional transformation to blended learning at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) using the Moskal, Dziuban and Hartman (2013) model. An institution wide and a school (or faculty) lens has been applied to each of the components of the model. UWS previously operated as a largely on-campus institution with small pockets of innovation. While the transformation was a top down direction, it was based on analysis of students' needs and desires and has been characterised by flexibility in its implementation. The change has also been supported through funding and recruitment of learning design expertise. While it is still too early to be definitive about learning and graduate outcomes, indicative data such as student satisfaction and unit results is trending positive. Moreover, the transformation has largely been well received by the faculty and university staff as a whole.

Keywords: blended learning, institutional transformation, curriculum change, pedagogy, learning design

Introduction

A blended learning approach to learning and teaching has power in the simplicity, and in the complexity (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), yet it is entirely dependent on the context and definition (Bohle Carbonell, Dailey-Hebert & Gijsselaers, 2013). Designing the mix of appropriate learning activities enables academics to move from a place where there was a mix of on-campus and supplementary online learning, and pockets of innovation, to where we, as a higher educational institution want to be, which is to have vibrant on-campus experiences, online asynchronous and synchronous activities and community engagement to provide a richer learning experience for our students. An institutional wide direction/directive for whole of university transformation to blended learning needs to have room for local flexibility and implementation within schools. This is necessary to reflect the diversity of the school disciplines contexts, cohorts, accreditation requirements and enable academics to have opportunities to research, and reflect on, their own teaching practice (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Lopez-Perez, Perez-Lopez, & Rodriguez-Ariza, 2011).

The University of Western Sydney has embarked on a bold and ambitious plan to blend all undergraduate units within a three-year investment period. A strict definition of blend was not prescribed to the nine Schools involved in the whole-of-university transformation, but an 'essence' was in place to describe the type of learning experience the University wanted to provide for its students. This 'essence' recognised that within Schools, academics were already blending units and they were at different starting points, and therefore had different requirements in terms of support and infrastructure. This approach sees blending at four levels: unit, program, School and whole-of-university, and is a major capacity building exercise.

There are documented barriers to implementing and embedding technology within a curriculum (Ertmer, 1999) for it challenges academics (Bohle Carbonell et al., 2013, Ertmer, 1999) and challenges the institution (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Graham, Woodfield & Harrison, 2013; Moskal, Dziuban & Hartman, 2013; Ocak, 2011; Taylor & Newton, 2013). Despite these challenges, blended learning represents a fundamental change and reconceptualisation to the dynamic learning and teaching experience (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

This paper describes a whole of institutional transformation to blended learning and provides a lens into one school as an indicator of what is happening in all schools.

Blended learning described

Context plays a vital role in understanding blended learning and encompasses “characteristics of the student population, mission of the institution, the strategic planning processes, faculty responsiveness, student acceptable, community values, available resources, institution support mechanisms” (Moskal et al., 2013, p.15) to help frame blended learning.

UWS defines blended learning as the combination of times and modes of learning, and integrating the best aspects of face-to-face, community based and online interactions for each discipline. “The design of units and programs of study for optimum learning takes into account learner needs, discipline accreditation requirements, a mix of directed and self-directed activities, and available resources and infrastructure.” (<http://www.uws.edu.au/qilt/>). This approach aims to increase flexibility in how, when and where students learn. It does not preclude units (or indeed whole programs), being fully on line where appropriate.

Specifically, UWS describes this mix of learning activities as:

Some on campus experiences. When students come on campus the experience should be designed to be engaging and an experience worth making the effort to attend and in a space and context designed to foster interactive learning. UWS also wishes to stream some "lecture" between campuses.

Online experiences including synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. This includes structured and self-directed learning activities. In some cases a whole unit may be delivered on line but it is not expected that whole courses or programs would be delivered on line at undergraduate level.

Community based activities. This can include external projects, work placements or community and workplace practice. These activities of taking UWS learning into the community or bringing the community into UWS learning is important for a university with a vision to improve access and participation in university study.

The above aspects or categories, comprising blended learning are agnostic with respect to specific technologies, and are more related to curriculum design needs. They are aligned with the strategic objectives of the learning and teaching plan. (<http://www.uws.edu.au/qilt/>)

Institutional transformation

Moskal et al. (2013) describe a model for operationalising transformation of blended learning and Graham, et al's (2013) model takes a similar view of the importance of having a strategy (defining blended learning, identifying its purpose, and policies); a structure (addressing technology, pedagogical issues and governance); and support (the design, technical, pedagogic support and incentives). Other factors for success include a structure for changing organisational routines with established expertise to handle the innovations (Bohle Carbonell et al., 2013), a paradigm shift to more active learning approaches (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Bohle Carbonell et al., 2013) and embedding changed practice into the way academics work in order to empower them to innovate (Bohle Carbonell et al., 2013). The Moskal et al. (2013) model has been used as an evaluative framework.

Goals and objectives

Institutional perspective

UWS has a diverse student population of approximately 40,000 students and a rich history of on campus teaching and learning spanning 25 years. In 2012, the UWS Executive endorsed a whole of institutional transformation to blended learning. More than 1,000 undergraduate units would be blended over a three year investment period. The blended learning strategy was intended to increase flexibility and improve access to university study, and improve the quality of learning outcomes of our students. The first stage of the transformation was to blend 283 first year units for delivery in 2014 with a further quantum of effort in 2014 to blend 493 units and 455 for delivery in 2015 and 2016, respectively. With this approach, no unit would be left untouched as the design of units were linked to major curriculum design activities. A key principle was that the process of designing for learning would involve a team approach of specialists rather than individual efforts largely on the part of the academic. At the same time, the university was also embarking on another major

initiative, compressed teaching over a Summer session. Although this posed challenges to the implementation of the blended learning strategy, it also enabled schools to move forward on their blending of units for Summer delivery. Supporting the transformation of learning across the University has been a 3-year investment funding cycle incorporating initiatives such as the provision of 30,000 iPads to all commencing students and the recruitment of nearly 40 learning design specialists within Schools and in a small central team (known as BLADEs - Blended Learning Advisers and Designers) and E-learning specialists. The purchase of the iPads has given the academics a “licence to thrill” (Rankine & Macnamara, 2014).

A school perspective

The School of Social Sciences and Psychology (SSAP) is one of nine Schools and one of the most complex in terms of programs. For example, undergraduate programs alone include: psychology, social work, community welfare, policing, tourism management, urban planning, criminology, criminal and community justice and a Bachelor of Social Science with six majors. Many units have large enrolments, with the social sciences ‘core’, taught across three campuses, having enrolments up to 1,500 students. The complexity in terms of programs, campuses and large enrolments means that blended learning is a particular imperative and engenders particular challenges.

While a good number of academics had been doing blended learning for some time, the UWS-wide and School-wide resourced strategy was a unique opportunity to blend all of the School’s units, starting at level 1 in 2013 (for commencement in 2014) and levels 2 and 3 in subsequent years. One of SSAP’s strategic responses was to appoint an academic Director responsible for the carriage of the project.

With few exceptions, the School listed all first year units in the Blended Learning Strategy for completion in the first year (2013) for delivery in 2014; all second year units for 2014 (delivery in 2015) and third and fourth year units in 2015 (for delivery in 2016). The principle was that students commencing a three year bachelor degree in 2014 would be the first to have a coherent and consistent blended learning experience throughout their course. An indication of the scope of blended learning is that, in 2013, the blended learning team worked on 41 units; all but eight were ‘delivered’ on time. These were mainly level 1 units, but included a few level 2 and still fewer level 3 units that were taught in Summer. There is similar number of units for 2014 and 2015, making a total of approximately 120 units.

In the first year of the Blended Learning Strategy, the University also launched its Summer sessions, which presented both opportunities and challenges. One of the opportunities was that units that were selected for the shorter Summer sessions could also be targeted to accelerate blended learning. One of the challenges was that the scope of work – the School’s ‘priority’ units – substantially increased. While the more compressed Summer teaching period was an opportunity to blend units, the blends were often reconfigured for the longer semester when they were usually (and still) taught, thereby adding to the work required.

Alignment

Institutional perspective

The transformation of learning not only impacts on the units and courses being designed and delivered, teaching and support staff as well as Deans and Executive have key roles to play. Academics “tend to be suspicious of top-down initiatives that impact teaching and learning” (Moskal et al., 2013, p 17), often lack institutional support and need access to both technical and pedagogic support (Ocak, 2011). Incentives such as relief time can be valued incentives that increase the likelihood of successful blended learning designs and implementation (Graham et al., 2013). The challenges to institutional alignment of blended learning is established in the literature (Garrison et al, 2004; Graham et al., 2013; Moskal et al., 2013; Ocak, 2011; Taylor & Newton, 2013) and relevant to UWS. In aligning blended learning within the overarching UWS learning and teaching approaches, systems, governance and support services, the blended learning strategy was positioned under a broader umbrella of institutional transformation. UWS embarked on a major institutional overhaul known as the Our Future Program, which outlined a major suite of projects to change our course delivery approaches, enable innovation in both teaching and technology, provide greater access opportunities for university study and position the university within a framework of financial sustainability (http://uws.edu.au/our_future_program/our_future_program/about). The transformation of the university to blended learning units and programs intersects with these other important university domains, services and infrastructure.

To achieve successful blended learning transformation across the institution, staff at all levels of the organisation need to see this as the way of doing business. Teams working on blended designs use blended

learning unit plans to identify current teaching practices and discuss opportunities for designing learning that is more student focused and school-based coordinators manage reporting on progress of blends as this is tied to funding, allocation of support staff and academic relief.

UWS has developed a hub-and-spokes expertise infrastructure to develop blended and online learning programs. A small central team is pivotal in leading and operationalising institutional strategies for learning and teaching, providing quality assurance and serving as a central reference point for consistency in the student experience, improving the quality of teaching practice through capacity building of academic staff and the use of learning technologies to support student learning. School-based positions are essential for workplace efficiencies and changes to daily academic practice with specialist professional staff providing curriculum and educational design advice and developing engaging student-centred courseware and resources. Embedding specialists at the academic coalface with a dotted line to the central team provide the University and Schools with a diverse asset pool that is responsive to strategic imperatives and enables holistic learning design and resource development processes. This hub-and-spokes approach enables cross-discipline participation in sharing experiences and progress on blending units across the institution is reported quarterly to Executive. Progress updates are provided to various university teaching and learning committees as blended learning of programs and units is a standing agenda item.

A school perspective

The first six months of 2013 was 'gearing up' in which project and blended learning professional staff were recruited and trained, processes bedded down and School academic staff informed about and included in the project. Launching into the blended learning strategy at the School level and, as previously mentioned, layering the University's first Summer sessions, meant that the blended learning professionals and other technical and project support available in the School were at (and beyond) capacity to deliver on the targeted units.

The UWS approach to blended learning is to value and involve academics who are the content experts and responsible for the teaching and learning related to their units. The BLADEs are allocated units and unit coordinators with whom they build a rapport and work from 'where they are at'. The aim was to start blending all units, even if the transition was modest, and to encourage and support all academic staff to move as far and as quickly towards optimal blends for their units. Bearing in mind that most units were level 1, a number of unit coordinators were concerned that students have a consistent on-campus learning experience and that moving too quickly to online teaching and learning could jeopardise student learning and their on-campus experience. First year students often do not yet have the study and independent learning skills for a significant amount of content (e.g. lectures) to be online. Other unit coordinators embraced flipped designs and pre-recorded slide casts and reconfigured tutorials to provide flexible learning opportunities and more intensive, engaging on-campus classes.

Bringing a whole University to the blended learning table is a mammoth undertaking. Doing this at the School level is not as complex, but still challenging. There are two main challenges. First, as with any rapid change, particularly driven from the 'top', academics may be resistant, reluctant or reticent. In SSAP, there has been very little resistance. There was reticence and reluctance due to being sceptical that blended learning would deliver better learning and having the skills and wherewithal to produce quality online materials and learning activities.

Workload was a consistent concern and the blended learning strategy funded workload for unit coordinators so that they could 'buy' time to work on their units with the blended learning professionals. Some academics were either over 100% workload or were not able to buy out teaching or marking time (either because they did not have it to 'sell' or because of the time it takes to arrange it). Nonetheless, the allocation of workloads was symbolic of the investment in blended learning. The School was also able to provide other incentives and recognition for a commitment to blended learning, such as research assistance.

The second challenge was that academics were not always available. Their busy schedules often meant that meetings might not happen in a timely manner and some academics were on various types of leave (e.g. conference, annual, personal and maternity), which meant that there were unavoidable delays in progress of some units.

Organisational capacity

Institutional perspective

Enabling this transformation is a hub-and-spokes model of School-based academics, learning advisors, learning designers, and technology specialists working in close partnership with a central team of blended learning specialists. This model has created a lively and engaged community of practice supporting staff and students in their use of learning and teaching technologies.

Creation and curation of resources relating to blended learning and the iPad initiative have also provided a foundation for staff designing student centred, blended learning activities. The Quality in Learning and Teaching (QILT) website (commended in the AUQA audit of 2011) has been re-designed and re-scoped to focus on support for use of rich media, strategies for blended learning and blended assessment, mixed mode design models and resources specific to using iPads in learning and teaching (<http://www.uws.edu.au/qilt/>). The central team also uses social media such as Twitter, Facebook and ScoopIt to curate selected links to scholarly articles related to blended learning for distribution to followers both within UWS and externally.

This extensive and rapid reconfiguration of communities of practice, professional development, resources and communication strategies has been instrumental to the success of the blended learning strategy, as well as building organisational strength and sustainability through networks of constantly evolving expertise.

Communities of practice are recognised as a significant factor in changing both individual and organisational knowledge, but are challenging to design and manage. The central team have established multiple broad, engaged and expanding communities of practice through initiating and managing ongoing Blended Learning Forums for academic, professional and blended professional staff. The forums are held on different campuses and feature presenters from all Schools and different departments to share experiences and perspectives in designing for blended learning. They are designed to share experiences in terms of successes and lessons learned, showcase innovations and discuss issues that are relevant to designing learning in higher education. Presenters at the forums include academic staff and professional staff involved in supporting blended learning who are located within Schools and in organisation areas (eg IT, Library). Open discussions and panel debates have proven to be popular as they provide opportunities to share concerns and discuss strategies to address issues that are impacting on blended learning. These events provide a valuable networking opportunity and enable academics and blended professional staff who may not normally get together to share experiences, showcase teaching innovation and debate issues affecting them and their students.

The large scale hub-and-spokes model is temporary for the three year investment in blended learning to build capacity of academics, but it is recognised that at the end of the three years, part of the organisational transformation is the need to have a permanent appointment of a sub-set of specialists to continue the harmonised approach to teaching and learning.

A school perspective

The 'Blended Learning Strategy' released central University funds to Schools to achieve the goal of having all units blended before the 2016 academic year. This major investment put three blended learning professionals into the School, dedicated to blending its units, and a project coordinator who, among other duties, monitored progress against project timeframes and reported to the University so that the Executive could monitor value for money. With any new project, the processes and reporting took a while to bed down at the School and University levels and to ensure that the essential information was gathered and meaningfully aggregated. School-level reporting has undergone several iterations since the start of the project.

Even though the School received central funding and support via the 'hub-and-spokes' model, including project coordination and blended learning professionals, from the School's perspective there is always a need for more resources and funding. This is clearly the case if a continuous improvement approach is taken; a unit may be reported as 'blended', but that does not necessarily mean that an optimal blended learning design has been achieved, or can be achieved without on-going, evidence-based, iterative improvement. As previously mentioned, some academics in the School have been doing blended learning for some time supported by its 'Academic Innovations Unit' (AIU), an initiative of the School's Deputy Dean. The AIU essentially provides technical support for blended and online learning initiatives of individual academics. It has taken the investment in blended learning to make larger scale transformations. Over time there is an intent to build the academics' confidence and competence by maintaining a team-based approach, not returning to the academic sole trader.

Staff development and unit/course development

Institutional perspective

Blended learning offers affordances in increasing access to learning, enhancing quality of units/courses and improving efficiencies in class management (Bohle Carbonell et al., 2013; Ertmer, 1999; Griffin & Rankine, 2010; Moskal et al., 2013; Vaughn, 2007;), however it challenges staff in fundamental ways. Effective design of blended learning involves challenging the norms, beliefs and values and involves developing a psychological safety net for the development of innovation (Bohle Carbonell et al, 2013), as well as providing academics opportunities to develop their technical skills and learning design expertise (Correia, Malfroy, Griffin, Ireland & Rankine, 2008).

The University of Western Sydney uses a hubs-and-spokes model and team approach to designing for learning. Academic specialists and content experts work closely with learning designers, curriculum advisers, and technical specialists to design and develop synchronous and asynchronous learning resources and activities. These specialists are positioned within the schools and at the centre (Figure 1). This model has been a key driver of the successful implementation of blended learning because of the distributed, yet connected, expertise of blended professionals who offer “multiple understandings of the institution”, “embed and integrate professional and academic knowledge”, and “form alliances” (Whitchurch, 2009 p. 410) both within their discipline contexts and also across the breadth of the institution. At the hub, a small team provides core functionality to facilitate consistency, standards and efficiency of effort and fostering of communities of practice to bring academics and blended professionals together. The development of teaching capacity also happens in a hub-and-spokes model and in three harmonious parts. The first part is professional development, the second is communities of practice and the third part is showcasing good practice as exemplars and case studies.

Professional development in blended learning is both across the breadth and into the depth of the institution. An institution wide designing for learning program provides opportunities for skill development in using blended learning technologies and reflection of teaching practice in designing learning experiences to engage learners in on campus, online and in community settings. The Quality in Learning and Teaching website (<http://www.uws.edu.au/qilt>) provides a hub of resources and information on designing for blended learning. Institutionally supported and recommended learning technologies are described in a Blended Learning Technology Toolkit and coupled with learning and teaching strategies and good teaching practices. Embedded specialists provide ‘just-in-time’ and ‘just-for-me’ pedagogic and technical support in the design of units and courses, and small group professional development sessions to progress blending of units/courses. Approaches to learning design through interactive toolkits, strategies for learner engagement, curriculum mapping tools and quality standards (e.g. Basic Standards in Blended Learning) are also available on QILT and used in both institutional, and school based, blended learning professional development activities.

Regular blended learning forums provide opportunities to share experiences and raise issues impacting on blending units and courses with both academics and blended professionals showcasing their work or engaging in panel discussions. In 2013, an inaugural showcase event drew 46 presentations and over 350 staff to share designing for learning experiences.

Empowering academics to examine, explore and reflect on their teaching practice is also occurring via exemplars and case studies. Teaching practitioners share their experiences, and approaches, to blending units via video-based case studies. These case studies are intended to encourage “practitioners to evolve their own practice through engaging in experimentation and ... to go through their own cycle of evolution to change the way they work’ (Porter, cited in Ireland, Correia & Griffin, 2009, p. 232).

A school perspective

Capacity and skill building happens in the design and build of units and the partnership between the blended learning professional and unit coordinator. The hub-and-spokes model is effective for the professional development of blended learning professionals who then inculcate their skills in the School with academics. It is a ‘train the trainer’ model. Within the School, there are more formal showcases of blended learning approaches in School staff meetings, academic (discipline) groups and a whole-of-School blended learning forum.

The School has invested significant resources in the professional development of sessional staff in small group learning and teaching, recognising that that sessional staff do most of the teaching and that blended learning places increased emphasis on the quality of learning when students are in class. There has been an even more intensive investment in the professional development of teaching staff for the Summer sessions.

Support for students and staff

Institutional perspective

Blended learning is not a solo activity on behalf of the individual or the institution, with teachers, students, administrators having direct, and indirect, experiences (Vaughn, 2007). Support for students and staff is a key requirement to effective blended learning implementation (Graham et al., 2013; Moskal et al., 2013; Ocak, 2011), and at the University of Western Sydney, this support occurs in a hub-and-spokes model. Technical support is provided by a central helpdesk operated by the IT department and a self-help access portal provides 24x7 information and support. We are trying to build in more intervention avenues and insights for continuous improvement with initiatives such as learning analytics; however this has been slower than expected in getting off the ground.

As schools implement blended learning designs, a working party has been established to weave together the student support options, resources and services into a cohesive web presence. Additionally, interactive iBook's have been created to support students in their numeracy and literacy skill development. These are available from a student portal area as well as from the learning management system and from the University's iTunes U presence. The Library offers roaming support services to help students use their iPads, find resources and use the library facilities. There is more work to do to align student support services within a blended approach to university 'business', because student support at the institutional level is quite disparate with different organisational areas having different areas of focus.

Flipping the classroom without preparing students can be a shock to students if they expect a more traditional learning experience of didactic lectures and weekly tutorials. A flipped classroom shifts more of the responsibility for learning onto students and requires them to be more organised and prepared for on-campus activities.

A school perspective

One of the limitations of the 'horizontal' strategy of blending first year units, then second, then third, is that the vertical scaffolding of blended learning (e.g. student self-direction) is more difficult to concurrently achieve. The School is aware of this limitation and is working within as well as across programs to ensure a consistent and scaffolded blended learning approach. At the time of writing, the first cohort of students who have experienced consistent and extensive blended learning have just completed their first semester, the evaluation of their experience is planned rather than complete. It could be argued that 'blended learning' means little to students. 'Flexibility' is far more relevant and this is what is articulated to students in terms of the type of learning activities they can expect at UWS as well as "engaging" and "exciting". The School is working on a 'desk audit' of first year learning guides and timetables, comparing 2014 to 2013. If there is more flexibility for the first blended learning cohort, this is where it should be revealed and will provide evidence for optimising flexibility across students' patterns of study.

Robust and reliable infrastructure

Institutional perspective

Blended learning environments utilise IT infrastructure in more stringent ways in terms of "reliability and consistency of performance" and availability (Moskal et al., 2013, p. 17), and a transformed university to blended learning approaches impacts on more than just networks, services, Wi-Fi and access. Scheduling of classes challenges the timetabling systems and processes. Gone are regular, weekly, lecture and tutorial activities week-in-week-out, planned and booked in advance of teaching, to more flexible spaces and times. Balancing the optimisation of resources and returns on capital investment with more flexible approaches to learning is challenging and takes time and effort to work through.

The affordances and ubiquitous nature of mobile devices gives rise to the use of mobile apps that are used in learning and teaching, for better organisation and productivity as well as simply for fun. These apps are not often part of the university infrastructure suite of recommended and supported technologies, but there may be legitimate reasons why apps are used in learning and teaching contexts. Navigating this landscape of an app for just about everything can be challenging for teaching staff; which app is good for what they need? It can also provide an inconsistent learning experience for students if they use a particular app in one class and then have to use a different one in another class for the same or similar learning activity. Layered on this is professional development to help staff make suitable choices of apps, and technologies, and to this end, a Blended Learning Technology Toolkit has been developed (<http://www.uws.edu.au/BLToolkit>). This toolkit articulates recommended, and some supported, apps and technologies for use in four discrete areas: content and learning

resource creation, synchronous activities, asynchronous activities, and assessment. A mix of tried and tested apps and technologies are mapped within the Toolkit and linked to good practice guides and teaching strategies as well as opportunities for professional development to build capacity of individuals and teams of staff.

The development, acquisition, use (e.g. free external to UWS technology or mobile app) and deployment of learning technology becomes more intricately interwoven into the curriculum and day-to-day learning and teaching activities. The Blended Learning Technology Toolkit outlines the current landscape, but there is also a need to show what's in development and possible in the future for learning technology. Addressing this is the development of a Learning Technology Roadmap, which aims to:

- inform and support executive management decision making on technology acquisition and deployment;
- inform staff of emerging developments, what's coming up and provide opportunities for their input;
- help staff see if the product/service they want is available, evaluated and funded at UWS;
- consolidate standard services under one product rather than many competing products; and
- increase the understanding of technology issues across UWS.

The implementation of blended learning at UWS throws into sharper focus other university activities such as timetabling class activities in non-standard times and occurrences; designing learning spaces to service formal, informal and social exchanges and opportunities for learning, and building in sustainable financial modeling.

A school perspective

At the school level, the blended learning roll-out comes face-to-face with the necessarily slower roll-out of new space arrangements, new timetabling approaches and general administrative infrastructure changes. This throws up frustrations and to some extent, can cause delays in the take up of innovative approaches. While some staff are adept at working around infrastructure impediments, others either get thwarted in their endeavours or even use these as an excuse not to change practice. The logistical challenges of matching changes to learning and teaching practice with administrative infrastructure changes is a whole of institution one, but at the school level it is a local challenge. Over time new practices will drive new arrangements. In the short-term, though these things get out of alignment.

Evaluation

Institutional perspective

Concurrent evaluation and research activities have been initiated in 2013 and preliminary results are emerging in 2014. Most students who have iPads are using them in all of their study units and students report that using mobile technologies may help with their future careers and with their learning, particularly in collaborative and community-based engagement activities. Students are heavily engaged with the Blackboard learning environments and survey results indicate that frequency of interactions has increased using iPads for most activities including open-book exams. Institutional survey instruments have been modified to include specific feedback items on blended learning experiences by students at unit levels. Combined with other institutional data sources such as commencing students surveys, Blackboard Analytics for Learning, and student progression data, this will give curriculum design and development teams targeted feedback on the quality and achievement of educational outcomes of the unit.

In 2014, there is a plan to set up a Participatory Action Research project to support individuals and teams who want to gather and use additional data from students to evaluate their blended learning innovations. Early indicators from evaluations of blended learning so far have indicated improvements in student performance. A case in point is a large first year unit which had a successful completion rate increase of 10 percentage points following a student-centred blended design of the unit.

A school perspective

The Blended Learning Hub has promoted an emphasis on design for learning in blended learning. The School has adopted this message and de-emphasised learning technologies and emphasised how and when students learn; on campus, online and elsewhere (e.g. their communities). For example, rather than focussing only on replacing traditional face-to-face lectures with alternatives, such as slide casts, there has been a complementary focus on enhancing the students' on-campus, in-class learning. Recasting and redesigning assessments to encourage engagement and participation has also been a key aspect of design.

Earlier, it was stated that students commencing in 2014 would be the first to have a coherent and consistent blended learning experience throughout their course. The School achieved its target of blending its priority

units, so all commencing students will have experienced some form of blended learning in all of their units. As previously mentioned, there is an evaluation of ‘student flexibility’ under way.

While students’ experience of blended learning has been consistent (in that all first year units have been ‘blended’) they will have experienced different blends. Some unit coordinators, as previously mentioned, have enthusiastically flipped their classes and placed online all content that would previously have been delivered in lectures and enhanced their in-class teaching. Anecdotal feedback from students is that some unit coordinators have gone too far too quickly. Students are understandably confused when one unit has no face-to-face lectures and another has only face-to-face lectures. In some cases at least, creating online content had less to do with pedagogical effectiveness than unit coordinator efficiency; whether this matters to students is a question we are asking.

Policy development

Institutional perspective

“Universities need a more formal approach to policies and the operationalizing to support blended learning approaches” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 100). Blending of units for an enhanced and vibrant learning experience is only part of the institutional plan. There are governance issues around the acquisition and deployment of technology in an environment where learners are mobile and there is a raft of technologies useful in learning and teaching beyond tools provided in a learning management system. There are timetabling considerations where flexibly designed collaborative learning spaces may also be needed for formal examination activities, and there are important issues around the allocation of workload to academics who are already heavily committed in their research and university governance activities, in addition to teaching. The University is playing catch up to a large extent. We are reviewing policies and governance arrangements in parallel with the blending of units. For example, we are addressing what it means to have iPads in open book examinations and the implications this has on relevant policies and practices of university operations.

A school perspective

At the school level, there is a need to both interpret institutional policies and lobby for adaptations to policies. Some of the policy challenges are the result of administrative infrastructures not moving quickly enough to match changing teaching practice. An example of this is the payment of sessional staff or tutors which has traditionally been based on face-to-face teaching. Online tutoring does not really fit into this policy constraint.

Effective funding

Institutional perspective

The three-year investment in blended learning has benefits and drivers to realise the intended outcomes and financial impact of the investment. Improving educational outcomes and increasing flexibility in time and place for students to learn, there are also enhanced on-campus experiences and greater community engagement. There is an intended outcome to increase retention rates of students and staff, increase enrolments and graduate students who are well equipped for careers in their chosen profession. Changing the face of learning at UWS involves a participatory revolution across the organisation and with this comes challenges of sustainable financial modeling, and impact. The blended learning strategy has this in mind and aims to contain costs within growth, as shown in Figure 1 below. The financial investment for blended learning may be modest but the academic returns can be enormous (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

Blended Learning Benefits Realisation Flow Charts: Spanning the period 2013-2020

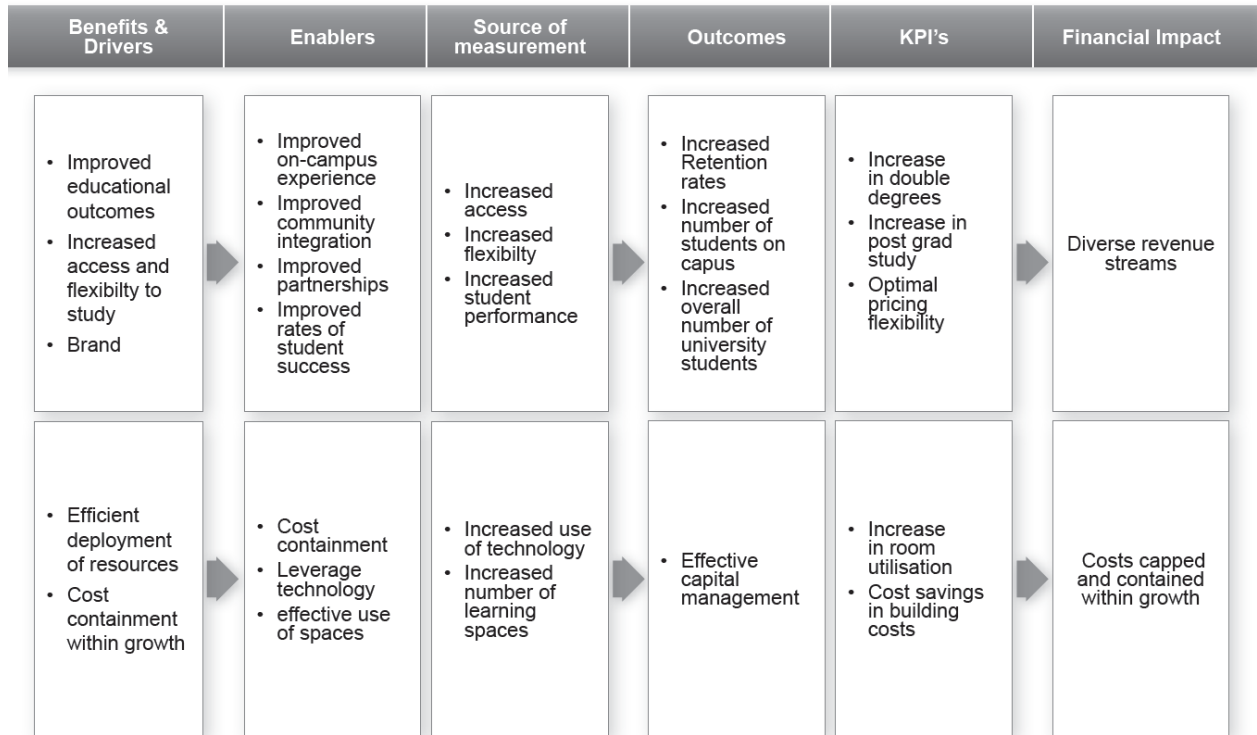


Figure 1: Blended Learning Realisation Chart

A school perspective

Funding has been directly given to the school in the form of specialist staff and teaching relief. While the school will always feel it could have been given more in order to do a higher quality job, the fact that the institution has ‘put its money where its mouth was’ is welcomed by the school. This is an initiative where funding and expectations are aligned. Notwithstanding the funding, there is still a challenge to find time and space in the academics’ busy schedules to make the changes. This is especially challenging when asking academics to do work for their 2015 units while they are focusing on the delivery of their 2014 ones.

Conclusion

The whole of university transformation to blended learning is changing the face of learning at UWS, and it is changing the way we, as a University, do business. It is a bold and comprehensive institutional transformation and while we recognise that we are playing catch up on learner supports, policy development, evaluation and getting the balance right between individual flexibility and quality control, we are making sustained changes to the way the university operates. Some of the issues outlined in the paper can be addressed at the institutional level while others sit within the realm of the school. During this investment period we are trying to create the institution we think we will become, and although we can get indicator data along the way that things are working (e.g. satisfaction rates) we are 3-4 years away (as evident through graduate outcomes) to know just how successful the strategy was.

Realising the benefits for blending all units and programs is likely to be seen in the coming years. Done well, blended units enable improved on campus, online and community engagement opportunities and improved rates of student success. The increase in student performance affects retention rates and potentially impacts student on-going enrolment in double-degrees and postgraduate study. From an institutional perspective, effective blended learning transformation enables cost containment within growth and effective capital management. Over the course of the next few years, evaluation data will paint a picture about how effective the institutional transformation to learning and teaching has been. Until then, the team will continue to collect and analyse data to demonstrate whether the transformation moves UWS beyond the rhetoric that is often associated with institutional directive driven efforts to transform learning.

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