

# Leading the evaluation of institutional online learning environments for quality enhancement in times of change

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This paper reports on findings from a nationally funded project which aims to design and implement a quality management framework for online learning environments (OLEs). Evaluation is a key component of any quality management system and it is this aspect of the framework that is the focus of this paper. In developing the framework initial focus groups were conducted at the five participating institutions. These revealed that, although regarded as important, there did not appear to be a shared understanding of the nature and purpose of evaluation. A second series of focus groups revealed there were multiple perspectives arising from those with a vested interest in online learning. These perspectives will be outlined. Overall, how evaluation was undertaken was highly variable within and across the five institutions reflecting where they were at in relation to the development of their OLE.

Keywords: online learning environments, evaluation, quality enhancement

## Introduction

The paper is based on findings from a nationally funded Australian Learning and Teaching Council project being undertaken over 2011-2012. The project addresses the key question of how universities best conceive of and implement, through distributed leadership structures, a quality management framework for online learning environments. The project is drawing upon the combined expertise and strengths of five universities using different learning management systems and at different stages of

deploying their next generation online learning environment. One of the key aims of the project is to design and implement a quality management framework for online learning environments (OLEs). Evaluation is a key component of any quality management system and it is this aspect of the quality management framework that is the focus of this paper. An overview of the project and the framework that is being developed will be given, followed by an exploration of current practices and issues encountered when evaluating OLEs.

## **The framework**

Two important domains were considered fundamental to the development of the framework namely: the nature and value of distributed/shared leadership in educational settings; and the quality management of teaching and learning in higher education in technology rich environments (Holt, Palmer & Dracup, 2011). Distributed leadership recognises that no single individual possesses the capacity to effectively undertake all possible leadership roles within an organisational setting (Conger & Pearce, 2003). This is particularly applicable to the development and management of online learning environments because to be effective, inputs and expertise from all parties contributing to the educational endeavour are necessary. Distributed leadership captures the scope and depth of involvement through its recognition of both vertical and lateral dimensions of leadership practice. It encompasses both the formal and informal forms of leadership within its framing, analysis and interpretation. Moreover, it is primarily concerned with the co-performance of leadership and the reciprocal interdependencies that shape that leadership practice (Harris, 2009).

Online learning environments can be conceived of as an ecology made up of many interrelated elements, each influencing the other (Ellis & Goodyear, 2010). Building distributed leadership capacity across the various elements was deemed central to the framework with the mechanism for achieving this being the cultivation of individual and collective agency amongst formal and informal leaders who are interacting in and across hierarchies (Holt et al., 2011).

A general message that comes from the literature on quality is that many areas of an organisation have an influence on enhancing the quality of learning and teaching outcomes and experiences, and that effective management of quality requires a comprehensive approach inclusive of the various elements and contributors, their interests and roles (Holt et al., 2011; Fullan & Scott, 2009).

Within this framing, the first phase of the project entailed a review of current approaches to the development and management of OLEs to identify the key elements and contributors for inclusion in the framework. Six key elements emerged - governance, planning, resourcing, organisational support, technologies and evaluation (Holt et al., 2011). Of these, evaluation can be considered to be the cohesive component that combines all the elements in the quest for quality enhancement. It provides the evidence to inform planning processes, alignment of resources with institutional priorities, the work of governing bodies in monitoring performance and outcomes, the choice and subsequent performance of technologies and the effectiveness of organisational support structures in meeting the needs of staff and students. More broadly evaluation plays a pivotal role in managing the risks associated with the online learning environments and ascertaining impact across the institution.

The second phase of the project involved a series of focus groups to explore each of the six elements and their interrelationships in more detail. The first series focussed on the higher level institutional concerns associated with visioning, strategising, planning, managing and evaluating OLEs. Arising from discussions about the importance of evaluation and its effectiveness was universal recognition of its centrality to quality management. Leadership at all levels was seen as fundamental to the development of a coherent approach to evaluation, particularly in regard to articulating and communicating a strategy, engaging staff at all levels, and providing adequate funding. The importance placed on evaluation, combined with the impression that there was not a strong shared understanding amongst participants of what it entailed, highlighted the need for further exploration.

A second series of focus groups, conducted in 2011, explored the notion of evaluation in more depth to gain insights into the nature, scope and effectiveness of current practice. The findings from this series are reported below.

## **Procedure**

Five focus group discussions were held at each of the partner institutions. Participants were chosen by the respective project team members to represent a wide spectrum of seniority in order to capture the distributed

leadership focus of the project. The total number of participants was very similar in the first and second series of focus groups (46 cf 47). Twenty eight came from central support offices and 18 from faculties which was similar to the first group (29 and 18 respectively).

Each focus group was of approximately 90 minutes duration. All were face-to-face with one having a single off-shore participant who was involved through video-conferencing. The issues canvassed were determined by the project team, with a single facilitator designing the activities and approach and then conducting the focus groups at each of the universities. Questions posed to the participants covered: the importance of evaluation for the success of OLEs; the effectiveness of current practice; who needs to be involved, what information needs to be collected and for what purpose; the effectiveness of dissemination strategies; and how the findings impact decision making for quality enhancement.

Oral and written data resulted from each focus group; discussions were recorded but not transcribed. The findings from each institution were returned for confirmation of accuracy. Individual reports were then synthesised to gain a richer understanding of issues and the differing interpretations that arose from the operating contexts at each institution. Some of the key issues arising from the synthesised report are presented in this paper. It is important to note however, that they do not represent a comprehensive account of all issues, nor do they represent a consensus of views. Rather, the intention is to highlight the range of different perspectives encountered.

## **Findings and perspectives**

The fundamental importance of evaluation to the development, implementation and management of OLEs was established from the outset. When asked to rate the importance of evaluation (on a five point scale ranging from a very good extent to no extent) of the 46 participants, 43 rated it, to a good /very good extent, 2 to a reasonably moderate extent and 1 did not reply. In answer to the question of the effectiveness of the current evaluation of OLEs, eight rated this as reasonably effective, 18 as moderately effective and 6 as minimally effective.

The higher ratings on both these questions were more likely to come from those charged with responsibility for developing and implementing infrastructure – making decisions on technologies and tracking their uptake and performance. There was general agreement with the proposition that OLE evaluation is often conceived of as a technology project and hence the evaluations being undertaken tended to reflect this perspective. Nevertheless, there was a definite sense that pedagogical matters were increasingly considered as an element of any OLE evaluation which is evident in the following responses.

..it didn't take long for the University to realise that, if evaluation were construed as only about the technology; it was a waste of millions of dollars.

People's eyes have been opened to the fact that it's about people, it's about learning and teaching and we're aware of that and we're moving towards supporting it at the moment.

### **What constitutes effective evaluation?**

Emerging from the discussions was an understanding that effective evaluation is cyclical in nature with the focus being on continuous improvement. It is culturally embedded and systematic and while the timing may effect emphasis and focus, the nexus between infrastructure, the technologies and their implementation for learning and teaching is a constant. Moreover, OLE evaluation at the University level ought to be monitored with the process regularly reviewed and refined as necessary. This fuller understanding of what constitutes effective evaluation is encapsulated in the following comment:

We are coming to grips with the system; we are beginning to understand the place of evaluation in a system that is new to us. That we understand that not having an evaluation strategy and not having a workable evaluation framework and the tools to do that is a big problem – that's progress.

The importance of being systematic and linking evaluation findings to key decisions about OLEs was reinforced by several groups who identified the need for a coherent approach within an overarching strategy and framework. This accords with the four levels of evaluation described by Kirkpatrick (1994) namely: reaction to the innovation; achievement of objectives; transfer of new skills to the job or task; and impact on the organisation. Taking this a stage further, Peat (2000) suggests the resources being developed and the process of co-creation can be evaluated in a number of ways: formative (are the artifacts, actions or policies functional in

their context?); summative (are they influencing practice?); illuminative (what is their utility and are there any unexpected outcomes?); and, integrative (how are they best put to use in an organisation?)

### **What information needs to be collected and for what purpose?**

Responses showed differences between the information sought by those from central support units and those for faculties. Faculties tended to be more concerned with the evaluation of online course materials and the quality of the learning experience. Central support units on the other hand were perceived to be more concerned with technical aspects of the OLE gained from server-logs for example, access and usage data. While it was recognised that routinely collected data of this type could provide valuable insights into teaching, learning and course design, there was also recognition that such data only provided a starting point and did not reveal the depth of detail necessary to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the online learning environment. In addition it was noted that the amount of data generated could be ‘incredibly overwhelming’ and it was doubtful whether staff took the time to analyse and act on it in a timely fashion, if at all.

Student feedback gained through standard course surveys was noted as another source of data. For some there was a sense of progress being made with the inclusion of explicit questions about the OLE. However for most, the extent to which issues related to OLEs were captured in student surveys was low. Even when captured there were doubts expressed about its usefulness. As one participant noted, “One question about a whole environment is just a beginning”. Other concerns were expressed about low response rates and also the representativeness of the student cohort.

Some expressed the view that there was insufficient variety in the methods used to collect data. In addition, there was a sense that increased support in analysing data and presenting findings in a more palatable format with follow-up would lead to better outcomes. It was also suggested that faculty staff need to be convinced that evaluation is also their responsibility and their increased participation would lead to more meaningful engagement and hence to local improvements.

There appeared to be less concern about data collection than about its value and how it is being used. As one participant noted:

Yes, the data comes in. Yes, some people look at it and some individuals might do something with it but [the University] as a whole hasn’t made a decision that there are consequences to the data and consequences to it being at different levels. We haven’t even decided what’s satisfactory, what’s acceptable, what’s not acceptable and what’s the trigger point and the automatic action that will follow. Which goes back to the point, don’t ask the question if you’re not actually going to do something with the results that come back from it.

It was agreed that ‘closing the loop’ and using data generated to inform decision making - as distinct from only collecting data – was an important part of an effective evaluation process. If these data were not being used to inform decision making and reports are shelved without their findings being shared with interested parties, the value of such evaluation is severely limited. The impression was that instances of ‘closing of the loop’ were much stronger in the actual selection of technologies than in their application for learning and teaching.

### **Dissemination**

There was consensus that evaluation findings need to be appropriately disseminated so that decision making about OLEs can be evidenced-based. While instances were given where findings are reported and available electronically, there was less assurance regarding the extent to which the findings were accessed and used to inform practice. This was evident in responses to the question of how effective findings were disseminated so they could have a real impact on decision making. Of the 46 respondents only one felt that dissemination was achieved to a ‘good extent’, 12 felt it was reasonably effective, 15 moderately effective, 4 minimally effective, and 11 did not see evidence of dissemination.

Discussions revealed that although staff from central units stated “We’ve been doing a lot of work on the evaluation of the new system”, faculty staff in particular, were often unaware of this activity as revealed by comments such as: “What is being evaluated?”; “No idea. I don’t know who does it [evaluation] and what they do with it” claiming “They’re not communicating with us”. These comments suggest that a greater emphasis on communication, both lateral and vertical, within the institution is needed.

Nevertheless there were examples where dissemination was effective. One good practice cited was where committees and reference groups had been discussing student feedback on learning technologies with both central and faculty staff to increase their understanding of what was happening as various technologies were implemented, so shaping thinking and actions. Another instance was cited where central staff working with individuals and small groups disseminated information and findings that was useful for shaping improvements to learning and teaching.

## Conclusion

Evaluating OLEs needs to be undertaken from multiple perspectives. Multiple perspectives though come from multiple parties with a variety of evaluation purposes in mind. It is not necessarily easy to clearly identify and constructively reconcile these differences for advancing the quality of OLEs as evidenced by this round of focus group discussions. Better aligning of various leadership roles across, up and down the organisation is a vehicle for drawing out different stakeholders' informational and decision-making needs. The focus group findings reaffirm evaluation as being seen by most as an imperative and at each institution examples were provided to evidence that both formal and informal evaluation were occurring. We concur with Fullan and Scott (2009) that much greater commitment to systematic institutional evidence gathering and use is required in the area of OLE implementations.

How evaluation was undertaken was highly variable within and across the five institutions reflecting where they were at in relation to the development of their OLE continuum. Those where choices of key elements are still being made, or have very recently been made, are likely to express different evaluation concerns and objectives from those who have had core elements in place for more extended periods. Evaluation demands will only intensify, along with need for distributed leadership structures, as we see the continued proliferation of social media/networking/cloud-based services growing up in and around organisations enabling more devolved, and less controllable, environments for socialisation and academic learning.

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## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank their own university (Deakin) and the partner institutions (Macquarie University, RMIT University, University of South Australia, University of South Queensland) for their generous contribution to this project, as well as all those participants who contributed to the data collection processes. The authors also thank Dr Di Challis of Challis Consulting for conducting the focus group discussions. Support for this publication has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of ALTC.

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**Please cite as:** Gosper, M., Holt, D., Palmer, S., Allan, G., Hicks, M., Hollenbeck, R., Munro, J., Sankey, M., Solmonides, I. (2012). Leading the evaluation of institutional online learning environments for quality enhancement in times of change. In M. Brown, M. Hartnett & T. Stewart (Eds.), Future challenges, sustainable futures. Proceedings ascilite Wellington 2012. (pp.353-358).

<https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2012.1642>

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