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People, Partnerships and Pedagogies

More than the sum of its parts: Reflections on a networked program supporting curriculum innovation at a research-intensive university.

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Curriculum renewal in higher education is a complex process involving multiple stakeholders across faculties, departments and supporting units with priorities and processes that commonly differ, adding to the complexity. Incentives for instructors to modify their curriculum include funded centralised programs that may also draw on the expertise of academic developers, learning designers and media producers. Here we reflect on our recent experiences working together across disparate academic and professional teams within a centrally funded curriculum renewal and innovation program in a large research-intensive university. One year after the implementation of a formalised network of supporting academic fellows, program reach significantly improved, and several projects implemented award-winning innovations. Early reflections on experiences across our supporting teams suggest that collaborative project work has contributed to more effective and innovative curriculum change initiatives. We propose a deeper investigation of these processes in a research project, to further inform curriculum innovation at research-intensive universities.

Keywords: curriculum innovation; support networks; academic development.

Introduction

Although curriculum redesign might not appear to be a top priority at research-intensive higher education institutions, various pressures accentuate its importance. Curriculum needs to be responsive to a multiplicity of demands, reflecting institutional priorities, embracing the potential of emerging educational technologies, and being responsive to student preferences and the needs of faculty, employers and industry. Within universities, fragmentation and separation of disciplines can mean supportive networks for teaching and learning tend to be locally focused, with teaching academics commonly turning to colleagues for informal support grounded in the disciplinary context (Becher and Trowler 2001; Roxå & Mårtensson 2009; Pifer et al. 2015). Processes that facilitate curriculum innovation using ground-up and networked approaches, that allow change to emerge, may be more powerful and sustainable than top-down and managerial approaches (e.g. Kandiko and Blackmore 2012). Identifying opportunities for innovation and supporting the development of complex changes to the curriculum across a university thus involves an increasingly diverse suite of so-called ‘third space’ higher education workers (*sensu* Whitchurch 2012), which may include academic developers, educational technologists, learning designers and media producers. This is a complex process difficult to achieve centrally, particularly in a time of rapid change across the sector that demands more holistic approaches considerate of academics’ broader contexts (Sutherland 2014, 2018; Sumer et al. 2021). In this paper, we describe the implementation of a networked program of support that was designed to facilitate academic capacity building and curriculum innovation across a centrally funded program. We reflect on the benefits that this networked approach enabled and draw on these reflections to propose future research.

A centralised University curriculum innovation program

The enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment at the University has been supported by centrally funded programs informed by the University’s strategic priorities and changing faculty and student needs. Within one program, funded projects receive dedicated professional development support from central units that span both academic advisors in curriculum and assessment design (hereafter AA) and learning designers, media producers and educational technologists (hereafter learning design support, LDS). These supports were delivered through both workshops and consultative processes tailored to individual project needs. Since the implementation of the program in 2019, and throughout the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns (Bridges et al. 2023), support programs have been redesigned in response to the changing needs of the University and academics. For example, in 2021 workshops were introduced to assist academics in adapting to the blended learning environment (reference removed for blind review), with participating academics contributing to

discussions and knowledge-sharing via asynchronous platforms, thus forming nascent communities of practice (García-Morales et al. 2021). A full evaluation of the program at the end of 2021 (reference removed for blind review) showed that participants valued not only working closely with the central unit on tailored projects, but also being connected with other academics through the informal communities of practice that emerged from the workshop activities. These outcomes provided a rationale for further program redesign to incorporate networks of support.

A new, networked support model

As part of the redesign of the support program, members of the AA unit developed an operational programmatic structure designed to capitalise on existing local teaching and learning networks and link these with the centralised support teams. In this program, teaching academics situated within each faculty were appointed as Fellows, acting both as local project supports, but also as ‘spokes’ connected to the central ‘hub’ of the oversight unit (Chancellery) and support units AA and LDS (Figure 1). The goals of the Fellows program were to: improve local awareness of the program; identify opportunities for further innovation; facilitate two-way communication between faculties and the central teams and support scholarly evaluation of funded projects. The AA team supported Fellows through a program of meetings, workshops and professional development activities co-designed with the Fellows themselves.

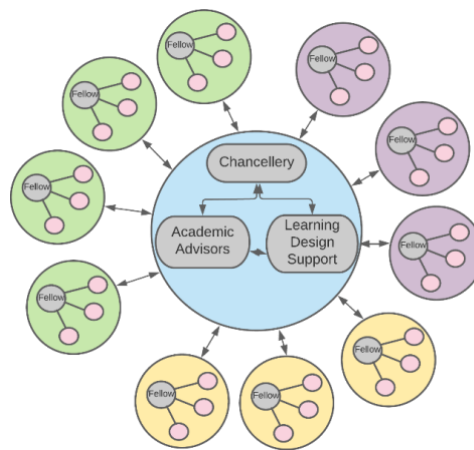


Figure 1. The original Fellows program design framework

Early indicators of impact

After one year, the Fellows facilitated increased local awareness of the program within their faculties, with 58 bespoke projects funded in 2022/23 compared with 27 in 2020/2021, including 20 projects incorporating multiple subjects or that sought to implement program-level change. The Fellows also enabled the development of evaluation plans for all funded projects, resulting in many projects that incorporated ethics-approved designs with intended scholarly outcomes. An ongoing, co-designed and responsive program of professional development also improved the skillset of Fellows.

Participant reflections – People, partnerships and pedagogies

Given the early indicators of impact, and to guide the design of a rigorous evaluation research program, the team embarked on a process of reflective dialogue. Seeking to create a deeper understanding of the ways in which our diverse set of *people* and growing collegiate *partnerships* have influenced the development of *pedagogies* within curriculum innovation projects across the University, we shared our perspectives across our supporting groups of academic developers, faculty-based Fellows and professional staff in learning design support. We reflected on our experiences in developing projects over the last year, responding to prompts about: how we worked with other teams on supporting projects; our perceptions of the scope of innovation across the program, and our perceptions of how the network structure has influenced project development and the way we work. Our reflections were compiled in conversations of duos and trios comprising individuals from differing support teams, with groups constructed across individuals involved in different projects across the program.

Emergent and responsive partnerships

We observed the development of respectful and collegiate partnerships across teams as we supported the design of innovative pedagogical approaches. Participants reflected that several innovations would not have been possible if projects were tightly managed and directed centrally or from a top-down perspective. The process of co-designing activities with the Fellows themselves also brought greater emphasis to the possibilities of collaborative work. For one project lead within the AA unit, these realisations highlighted the importance of softening project management roles and adopting more distributed project leadership (Stanton and Young 2022) that could recognise the depth and diversity of expertise across the teams, and defer to others when needed:

“it’s helped me understand that by not ... tightly managing things, you can build something that’s more important” [academic advisor]

For some projects, innovations emerged through collaborative conversations between subject coordinators and learning design, media and academic development supports.

“there was some really striking examples of... basically transformative models of innovation, like things that really went beyond what the academic had thought about, but that incorporated people from [LDS teams]. And together they built something that was far more exciting and far more bold and innovative” [academic advisor]

Over the last year, microcultures of support (sensu Taylor et al. 2021) have also grown within teams and across Fellows, building a complex system of supportive relationships beyond formalised organisational structures and roles.

“it just creates so much more different opportunities for people to work together. And particularly this group of people are like-minded people, that they all have passions in teaching and learning and you cannot form a better network than from this – that network is absolutely essential” [education fellow]

“we’re all here doing our work, but on top of that, we’re building relationships and trust with our stakeholders, with each other, with different groups” [media designer]

Overall, the interdisciplinary nature of the support teams and relationship-building across teams appears to have contributed to a more integrated way of working, facilitating mutual learning and knowledge sharing. Figure 2 shows how, after one year (where Faculties = yellow circles, Fellows = teal circles and dark blue circles = projects), deeper connections have been developed within and across all teams.

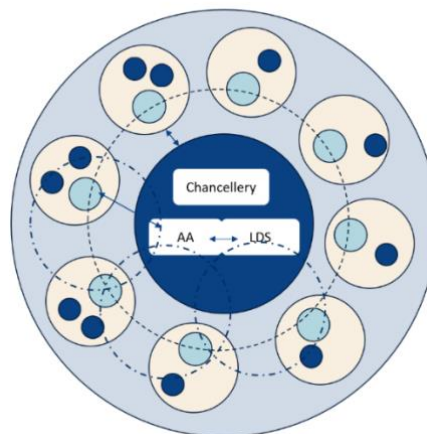


Figure 2. The structure of the supportive network after one year, showing emerging relationships between units represented by dotted lines.

Collaborative support partnerships across our teams form possible examples of unplanned cross-boundary teaming (e.g Edmondson and Harvey 2018). Cross-boundary teaming is evident in other organisations as a facilitator of innovation but appears to be rarely utilised in academic development contexts within higher education (but see Vuojärvi et al. 2019 in the context of student project-based learning). Such approaches may

be difficult to implement across traditional university structures and ‘silos’ (Abegglen et al. 2021), but our preliminary reflections highlight the benefits of working collaboratively and inform the development of future research.

Future directions

Our early reflections highlight that collaborative conversations and ongoing collegiate relationships across interdisciplinary teams are invaluable to enabling curriculum innovation in ways that meet the needs of diverse stakeholders across a complex research-intensive university. Further investigation will provide additional reflections and data from participants across the support teams at the University and richer insights into how these networks may be developed, maintained and supported. We plan to continue this work in a research project to further examine how participants in the networked model of support worked together, and the possible relationships with curriculum innovation program and project outcomes. We plan to use a collaborative autoethnographic approach (Mendez 2013; Roy & Uekus 2020), drawing on co-constructed questions and continuing our discussions in duos and trios of members from all three support units. All participants will be members of the research community and will have full control over their data, with only those interview data approved for use by the broader group included in the analysis. Key themes will be extracted using deductive and inductive coding (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Preliminary reflections from our early discussions across support teams suggest that emergent networks and relationships have been important to managing curriculum innovation projects thus far. Further work will elucidate the process of collaborative development of innovative pedagogies and the ways in which emergent networks may sustain a supportive teaching and learning culture in a research-intensive university.

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