A “one university” approach to ongoing quality enhancement, student satisfaction and risk minimisation in workplace learning across geographically remote campuses of an Australian University.

Abstract

This paper outlines and discusses the role of a small university-wide taskforce, chaired by the author, to facilitate a coordinated approach to addressing and enhancing aspects of student workplace learning across campuses and courses at Charles Sturt University (CSU).

CSU offers on-campus and distance education from five campuses spread across regional New South Wales, study centres in Sydney and Melbourne, Theology campuses in Canberra and the Ontario campus in Canada. This geographical spread can pose some challenges to ensuring a consistent student educational experience.

The University had devoted significant effort to improving practice-based education and workplace learning in its courses, as part of its commitment to ongoing quality enhancement. However, additional opportunities were identified which would benefit from a focussed, coordinated approach to enhancing the student experience of workplace learning.

A series of working parties or committees were established and tasked with addressing key issues to tight deadlines. The working parties were clustered by function into those addressing academic and administrative CSU staff (membership; risk and professional development); those addressing the quality of education and learning (standards for workplace learning and practice-based education); and those addressing the implementation of effective workplace learning (resource support; data management; assessment; course
approvals and student feedback). This paper illustrates the pivotal role played by the taskforce in achieving those “one university” objectives.

**Introduction**

There are forty universities in Australia, with twelve of these being situated in New South Wales on the Eastern side of the continent of Australia. New South Wales is the most populous state in Australia with approximately one-third of the population living within it. It lies below Queensland and above Victoria.

Charles Sturt University (CSU) is one of those twelve universities located in New South Wales. CSU is a public university and a member of the Association of Commonwealth Universities ([http://www.acu.ac.uk/](http://www.acu.ac.uk/)). It has operated as a university since 1989 but draws on over a century’s history of vocational education in agriculture, teaching and policing. The university has consistently focused on becoming the inland university for the professions in Australia.

CSU is a university with a large geographic footprint across the state of New South Wales on the Eastern side of Australia. Courses are offered on-campus and by distance education across five campuses in regional New South Wales, and in study centres and specialized campuses in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra. In addition, CSU operates in Canada from its Ontario campus. This vast geographic spread can, and has at times, posed challenges in ensuring a quality, consistent student educational experience.

Charles Sturt university offers approximately 450 courses leading to the award of a qualification, including specializations within courses. These courses are offered in schools within one of four faculties. The number of schools varies from faculty to faculty. From late
2010, each course has a program leader and a course director, but until then courses were overseen by course coordinators who managed both course marketing and course administration. The University has historically provided professional education across disciplines including education, policing, journalism, psychology, nursing and allied health professions. More recently paramedic, dentistry and veterinary science have been added to the university’s suite of courses.

Education for the professions requires that the teaching and learning is grounded in the practices of each profession which requires effective socialization into the norms and mores of the relevant profession and development of appropriate skills and a sound professional knowledge base. Professional education also includes learning in authentic or simulated workplaces to facilitate graduates entry into their profession as work ready beginning practitioners. Simulated workplaces may be student-led clinics for example that offer services to the community, where the community is made aware that students are the provider, supervised by academics and/or practitioners. This could include marketing students ‘contracting’ to develop a marketing program for a not-for-profit community organization, an animal health clinic for veterinary science students or health provision in podiatry or dental clinics for students in those professions.

Thus, education for the professions including workplace learning ought not to be inherently more difficult or more risky than other learning and teaching activities for disciplines that result in the award of more generic degrees such as Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science. Workplaces do however contain some risks and effective and safe learning occurs where there is a coordinated approach of risk auditing, risk minimization, policy development, information management, and, skills development and training for students.
Originally, workplace learning at CSU operated in a strongly decentralized model but as the commitment to quality and to “one university” intensified, a hybrid model has developed. Under this model, academic and administrative staff support courses, supported by school and faculty workplace learning committees and faculty level academic- administrative or ‘leadership’ positions: the sub-deans.

Although CSU engages in regular cycles of quality improvement in all areas of service delivery, 2009 provided an additional opportunity for independent review. This review was undertaken by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). AUQA was formally established in 2000 by the Australian Federal government to be the principal national quality assurance agency in higher education in Australia. It conducts quality audits of higher education providers, reporting publicly on its website (auqa.edu.au) with the objective of facilitating quality enhancement in the audited domains. CSU was audited in 2009 across two domains: internationalisation, and, professional education and practice-based education. Whilst the university received a number of commendations and affirmations for practice-based education and workplace learning, the audit also recommended that CSU “explore additional means to ensure a consistently high quality of academic experience for students” (AUQA, 2010). It was identified that a coordinated approach would be most beneficial to achieve the desired outcomes and a cross-campus taskforce was formed to coordinate, liaise with and disseminate information among various working parties and committees. The working parties were clustered by function into those addressing academic and administrative CSU staff (membership; risk and professional development); those addressing the quality of education and learning (standards for workplace learning and practice-based education); and
those addressing the implementation of effective workplace learning (resource support; data management; assessment; course approvals and student feedback).

**Literature Review**

**Workplace Learning**

Whilst there are many views, sometimes divergent, about professional education, an agreed key feature of education for the professions in the twenty-first century is workplace learning. This is believed to contribute to the development of generic skills in students, and graduates who enter the market work-ready (Trede, 2010).

Workplace learning in Australia takes many forms – it may be an entire subject (Franz, 2007) or be based as a component of a subject, it may be project based or research-based, it may be situated within term, during vacation, it may be in first year, final year or spread throughout the years, the location may be specified or open to the student’s choice (McLennan & Keating, 2008). Although varying by structure, timing and duration across the various universities, the key feature remains the focus on learning, and the linking of theory to practice (Franz, 2007; McLennan & Keating, 2008). This clearly differentiates workplace learning from other activities such as work experience in which a student may participate in a workplace unrelated to their field of study to gain employability skills.

Workplace learning is a resource intensive activity that impacts on academic and administrative staff workloads and students’ family, work and leisure commitments. Further, placing a student into a workplace creates a specific set of risks separate from traditional academic activities such as lectures and laboratory work, but workplace learning need not be
‘riskier’ than any other teaching and learning activity with appropriate preparation, training, support, insurance, policy and guidelines.

Universities in Australia have organizational support and facilitation mechanisms which follow essentially one of three models: a centralized management model; a decentralized management model and a hybrid model (McLennan & Keating, 2008). The centralized management model utilizes a central reporting unit covering workplace learning for the university, whereas the decentralized model has all support and management within the relevant academic unit such that teacher education, for example, would have academic and administrative support within their faculty as would other courses or faculties. The hybrid model blends elements of these two models such that some elements of support would be managed locally in addition to some support and governance centrally.

Quality

Across the globe and within Australia, national political leaders have been and are seeking to have a greater proportion of their population participating in higher education than previously. By contrast however, there has been a perception over at least the last decade that younger individuals bring fewer work and citizenship skills to their work and community participation than previous cohorts of young people (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007). The education available for young people was thus subjected to scrutiny to attempt to identify and address this deficiency.

During the 1990s in Australia, the focus of higher education centred on the attributes that graduates should acquire when exposed to 'quality' higher education. The graduate attributes from many universities are remarkably alike and usually include most of the following:
effective communication skills; effective problem solving skills; capacity for critical thought and analysis; ability to work collaboratively and an international outlook and cultural sensitivity (Moore & Hough, 2005). This may reflect pressure from employers who want graduates practice-ready from day one and/or community demands that education have a purpose, often with the hidden agenda that the purpose is to obtain a desirable job. This may reflect the perception that because students contribute a part of the cost of their subjects, that they have become ‘consumers’ and are entitled to the same accountability from universities or "education providers" as commercial corporations have developed in response to the consumerism of the 1980s through to the present (Moore & Hough, 2005).

Quality assurance in higher education then is no recent innovation in Australian universities. The Australian Federal government has increasingly sought accountability in exchange for partial financial support of university education. Currently, the Federal government supports public universities through the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS), which supports undergraduate and some postgraduate coursework education for ‘domestic’ students (Funding, 2010). Students in Commonwealth supported places are required to make a contribution towards the cost of their education and this can be funded from savings or government-funded student loans. Other government programs support research and certain learning and teaching activities (Funding, 2010).

The Australian public universities, of which CSU is one, are self accrediting bodies because the enabling Acts of parliament permit them to develop and approve their own courses and awards. However there is a non-legislative framework for quality assurance and courses must meet the relevant levels of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) consistent with the award, and undergo regular audits conducted by the Australian Universities Quality
Agency (AUQA) (Funding, 2010). The most recent, and likely last, AUQA audit report for CSU was published in January 2010.

On 15 November 2010, Senator Chris Evans announced the Australian Government will introduce legislation to establish the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency early in the autumn 2011 sittings of Parliament (Evans, 2010). This body will join together the regulatory activity currently undertaken in the states and territories with the quality assurance activities currently undertaken by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (Funding, 2010).

Change and Innovation

Attitudes to change vary among individuals and groups of people – some welcome change, some accept change, some resist it, some pretend that nothing is different, some wish nothing was different, and others cause change. Thus to achieve organizational change can be challenging, especially where change is significant and affecting well established practices. Understanding employee perceptions of a proposed change is an important role for any agent of change as employee cooperation is crucial to the success of an intended change (Van Dam, Oreg, & Schyns, 2008). Employees reactions to change have been established to vary according to the information provided about the change, the timeliness of that provision, the trust in senior management, the individual’s required participation and the enabling resources and support mechanisms available to assist the individual or team (Van Dam et al., 2008). Institutional change then requires an holistic approach taking account of all stakeholders beliefs and core values rather than a piecemeal departmental level or project-based method. The core values that need to be encouraged during organizational change are those of commitment, collaboration and transformation, leading to a sense of shared purpose
(Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007). Change also must have a focus and within an educational institution, quality improvement needs to transform processes in all departments or divisions that impact on the desired outcome, for example ‘effective workplace learning’.

**Exploration and Implementation**

In preparing for the AUQA audit and as part of routine quality improvement activities prior to and subsequent to the audit, key areas of workplace learning were identified through research fellowships and critical inquiry through online debates with workplace learning staff at CSU. Research fellowships offered by the Education for Practice institute (EFPI) were used to identify workplace learning subjects and workplace learning academic and administrative staff, and also to identify perceived needs for support, resources or training. It was identified that there was a paucity of university-wide documents policies and guidelines which specify CSU’s philosophy of workplace learning, standards of good practice and risk identification and minimization. This had resulted in sometimes significant differences in workplace learning between courses, schools and faculties.

Further there was an expressed need for additional training for workplace learning academics since forty percent of respondents identified that they had no experience of workplace learning as an academic before starting work at CSU (Simpson, 2009). In particular, workplace learning academics indicated they would value regular contact with other workplace learning academics and the opportunity to de-brief in a non-judgmental environment; having the work they do valued by other academics and recognized as workload; shared or collaboratively developed resources and exemplars of good practice and innovation (Simpson, 2009).
Workplace learning supervisors also disclosed a preference for training especially formal training leading to an award such as graduate certificate or diploma in workplace learning. In particular they sought comprehensive training programs available in multiple modes - face-to-face, distance and online modes - to develop the necessary skills, such as fostering reflective practice, that they perceived would assist them to be more effective workplace educators (Simpson, 2009). There was also a perceived preference for a university-wide workplace learning website to support staff, supervisors and students.

In a separate study using an online debate format among workplace learning staff, key topics were identified and discussed. It could be argued that staff who participated may have been especially motivated as there was no time allowance or external incentives available to enhance or reward participation. These topics included quality and authenticity in workplace learning; ensuring learning and a good outcome for students; issues of assessment; resourcing workplace learning and effective engagement with the professions (Trede, 2010). This study identified that CSU attracts approximately fifty per cent regional and rural students who are first generation university attendees and that these students may benefit from some life skills training and an induction to workplaces such as large organizations, for example a metropolitan hospital or a large media organization. In addition, it established the commonality of issues experienced with for example obtaining enough workplace learning opportunities, student issues, assessment challenges, and highlighted the need for a university-wide forum across disciplines and courses to address and discuss issues as they emerge (Trede, 2010). The researchers concluded that the changes identified or discussed required long term organizational cultural change from being dispersed and individualistic to being centralized and systemic.
Subsequent to these and other studies, a series of working parties were established through the university learning and teaching committee, EFPI, and the offices of the deputy vice chancellors (academic and administrative). The working parties were grouped by function with one group concerned with identifying and recording all CSU workplace learning academics and administrative staff and their key concerns of risk and staff development. The next cluster was concerned with standards and the associated benchmarking. The last and numerically largest group addressed structural issues such as data management, assessment of students, student feedback and resources to train or support students. It was decided to establish a taskforce to liaise with and to facilitate the workings of these working parties, and if necessary to occasionally function to re-focus efforts towards the greater goals.

The taskforce was not intended to achieve any of the goals itself but rather to facilitate the working parties’ achievement of their goals. It did meeting regularly to share knowledge of, and achievements of, the working parties and to identify areas where progress was slow or stalled. In addition, members of the taskforce were often viewed as knowledge resources and invited to join ‘think tanks’ run by the various working parties to identify domains of an issue to assist that working party to identify stakeholders that may be impacted by their work and their decisions or to identify existing resources held in another area of the university, reflective of the strongly decentralized management of workplace learning which was under change towards a more centralized model.

The working parties, committees and the taskforce were presided over, with few exceptions, by mid-level academics (senior lecturers and associate professors). Most of these were in the academic category: teaching/research rather than either alternate category: teaching/professional or administrative/leadership. Among the academics, their inherent
value arose from the fact that they were actively involved in providing and coordinating workplace learning in their subjects, their courses, their schools or occasionally their faculty.

Of necessity however, some were chaired strategically by managers within the university where significant changes to policy, procedure or philosophy were required or likely within an entire department or division. An example of this can be seen in the working party within the division of learning and teaching services which was seeking to develop suitable items to assess workplace learning for inclusion in the university-wide, mandatory, online evaluation of every subject offered, every semester. This working party was enthusiastically chaired by the director, quality enhancement and evaluation services, within the division of learning and teaching services, who sought to involve students and academics in the development of those survey items. Participation was sought through a number of different recruitment strategies to maximise representation and the views of all stakeholders. These included inviting academics to submit potential items through the university electronic communication ‘What’s new and news’ to inviting a researcher within the Education for Practice Institute working on the development of standards for workplace learning and practice-based education, to conduct key informant interviews with students to identify domains of interest in workplace learning that are salient to students.

Discussion and conclusions

Charles Sturt University is a young regional university in New South Wales (Australia) with a large geographic footprint. Approximately eighty-five percent of its courses, but not subjects, have one or more episodes of workplace learning, and that number is continuing to grow. Workplace learning has been demonstrated to contribute to graduate employability which is identified by both professional accreditation bodies and employers as a key
desirable objective. This commitment to workplace learning reflects CSU’s positioning as a university committed to offering excellence in education for the professions, broadly defined.

In the early years of the university, workplace learning had been viewed as a course-specific activity and the governance and support were essentially course based, and often subject-based. Lecturing staff in the practice or professional subjects within a course were responsible for workplace learning: developing relationships with the profession, developing learning tasks, workbooks and manuals. As student numbers grew administrative support was most commonly provided within the School.

During routine quality improvement reviews and in preparation for an Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audit, the desirability of change to a more centralized model of governance of workplace learning was established. The changes planned at CSU were significant and involved changing the structure within which workplace learning was facilitated from a strongly decentralized “silo” model to a centralized, coordinated one. Achieving a centralized model required the active involvement of several divisions of the university that were without previous engagement with workplace learning. The groups that needed to be actively involved to effect this change were university wide, spanning both administrative and academic participants. Several of these groups had little previous formal contact or experience of working together, so a centralized model was anticipated to be quite challenging to implement in a limited timeframe.

Senior leaders at CSU utilized strategies of effective change management to facilitate this process – communication was frequent, university-wide and tailored for many different potential audiences. These ranged from detailed reports for department heads through to brief
paragraphs delivered through “What’s new and news”, the CSU electronic “bulletin board” for staff at every level. This communication initially alerted staff at CSU of the need for additional information gathering, and then about planned initiatives. Once these were completed, a university-wide workplace learning taskforce was constituted with membership spanning the faculties and divisions but remaining lean and focused. This taskforce liaised with and provided support to the working parties and committees formed to implement the change. This function proved to be very supportive for those groups whose focus had not previously included workplace learning. For example, the division providing support to students of CSU had little direct experience of the needs of students on workplace learning, being more usually focused on study skills, counseling and accommodation assistance. The taskforce was able to identify multiple issues for students such as avenues of financial support to undertake workplace learning, workplace specific training such as first aid courses, insurance, and general workplace acculturation in occupational health and safety and organizational structure and function.

Key outcomes of 2010 included development of dedicated pages within the EFPI website to support workplace learning staff and facilitate contact with each other to share learning and resources; identification of existing, new and emerging risks plus strategies or guidelines to manage risk; development of practice-based education and workplace learning standards to provide guidance; development of effective information management software; significant consultation with students leading to the development of workplace learning specific items for inclusion in the online student evaluation of subjects. Although not completed during 2010, significant progress was made towards development of formal qualifications in workplace learning for academic staff and workplace learning supervisors. These initiatives now enjoy a momentum of their own and continue to progress. In addition, common
management structures have developed or are developing- three of the four faculties currently have appointed sub-deans to oversee workplace learning, with one of these being a full-time appointment (faculty of science). This is particularly significant innovation given the original view of workplace learning as just another academic activity, but one that only professional practice academics needed to be concerned with.

Thus the use of the university-wide taskforce as a ‘glue’ to link and tie together quality improvement activities without significant overlap yet fitting as effectively together as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. This change management process resulted in successful outcomes and provides a proven strategy to assist others contemplating or planning a significant change in the organization of workplace learning.

References


