Alternative Staffing Approaches for Scalable Online Education:
Case Study Perspectives from Griffith University and Open Universities Australia

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Introduction

Over the past two decades I have held three positions with responsibilities for institutional wide design, development, delivery and support of online and blended learning degree offerings. The following case studies provide an outline of the approaches taken in two of these three organisations, focusing on course development frameworks, staffing profiles, and a specific online tutor staffing pilot project to provide the appropriate background and issues to consider for the think tank on staffing profiles for scalable online education.

Staffing for Flexible Learning at Griffith University

When Griffith University opened its greenfield Logan Campus, it set about differentiating itself by introducing organizational wide flexible learning degree offerings, with a concentration on building online solutions. It established Griffith Flexible Learning Services (GFLS) within the Division of Information Technology as a service unit to support the design, development, delivery of flexible offerings, as well as to provide academic staff development for flexible learning.

GFLS was originally comprised of a small number of key staff including educational designers (4), multimedia developers (4), audio-visual experts (2) and seconded academics (2) to provide these services. Many staff were employed on contracts as the initiative was viewed as a project in first instance. GFLS staff were to work in collaboration with academics, and staff from the Griffith Institute for Higher Education (GIHE), the University's higher education research and overall academic staff development unit, in designing and planning for delivery of offerings, as well as assisting with advice on the quality assurance of the offering. The academic lead was the subject coordinator and was in charge of the overall process.

GFLS was specifically established as a service unit to be in charge of the initiative with professional staff (non-academic) within Information Services, and not part of GIHE. This was a result of concerns regarding the progress on similar activities within GIHE earlier in its history, and following the formal determination to not outsource the activities to the University of Southern

Queensland who had a full design and development infrastructure for such services in place.

The staffing profile for professional staff working in the flexible learning initiative reflected the equivalence of teaching-only positions for academic activities associated with design and development. For example, each educational designer was assumed to have 80% of their workload directly attributed to instructional design activities.

Resistance to Change

As the flexible learning initiative evolved, there was considerable skepticism regarding management's objectives, and ongoing tensions with GIHE who increasingly viewed GFLS as a encroaching on their territory and threatening the role of academics and academic freedoms overall.

The following "Myths" were seen as needing to be addressed from the onset:

MYTH 1 - Flexible Learning is a threat to jobs
MYTH 2 - Flexible Learning is a threat to the budgets of the Schools
MYTH 3 - Flexible Learning is a Substitute for Teaching

With ongoing commitment of senior management, the initiative was included as a component in the budget process within the first year of its operation, but still viewed as a project. At this same time an additional University wide curriculum development and enhancement project and funding protocol was established and operationalized through the PVC - Arts, Teaching and Learning.

Further Catalyst For Change

The Division of Information Services underwent a review within 2 years of the launch of the flexible learning initiative, and GLFS was re-configured to be Flexible Learning and Access Services (FLAS). FLAS now had a remit to provide an even wider services in the design, development and delivery of degree offerings, and was to formally include Faculty Librarians in the FLAS teams to support academics in their endeavors. This prompted the introduction of a faculty based model for providing services. FLAS was also to work with academics in supporting and growing Griffith's involvement with Open Universities Australia.

The professional staff for servicing course design and delivery in FLAS now included faculty librarians (5), educational designers (8), multimedia developers (3), audio-visual experts (4), programmers (4) and a full learning management system support team for the Blackboard product (6). The FLAS faculty focused teams were structured with team members from each of the three professional groups (Faculty Librarian, Educational Designer, Multi-Media Developer) and assigned a team leader from within this group of three. Programmers and audio-visual team members joined faculty teams on a project-by-project basis.

While all of the faculty librarians were permanent staff, about half of the remaining professional staff in FLAS remained on contracts. This was a major source of tension. Along with the concept of casualization of the teaching staff overall, the unions were annually raising the mix of permanent and contract staff across the whole design, development and delivery cycle.

Roles and Staff Development Opportunities

Through both the time as GFLS and FLAS, the roles of the subject coordinator and the teaching team, including tutors, were defined by the traditional academic structures and the enterprise bargaining agreements. Staffing ratios, the use of casual staff, and the rates of pay were all determined in relationship to the enterprise agreement. There were agreed hourly rates for online moderation, agreed marking times per assessment item, and agreed payment schedules for tutorial sessions.

Academic staff (lecturers and tutors), whether they be permanent, part-time/ casual, were all provided with access to dedicated academic staff development resources. These resources were specifically designed and targeted to meet the needs based on a matrix framework of levels of interest by levels of current expertise in flexible learning offerings. They were provided in both face-to-face activities and in online formats. Formal Graduate Certificates in Higher Education were also available through GIHE. The overall staff development was established as a subtle push, but basically pull model for professional development and direct instructional design assistance for both Griffith internal flexible offerings and full online subjects through OUA.

The FLAS model remained operational for over 10 years and ultimately morphed into a more academically aligned entity now known as Griffith Learning Futures. GIHE is now the Griffith Institute for Education Research.

Lessons Learnt

- The first lesson learnt was that given the centralized FLAS funding and structure, the faculty based approach to providing services on the ground was initially, and was always going to be, essential for success. Centralised coordination provided efficiencies, distributed provision of services provided effectiveness.

- The second lesson was that there was always going to be tensions regarding the changing nature of the roles of academics and professional staff when dealing with the increased team based approach to the design, delivery and assessment of subject and degree offerings. This was in effect the issue of disaggregation of roles and services provided in the overall design, development, and delivery of online courses. The need for additional dedicated tutors for the online offers was increasing at a significant rate, and the ability to provide staff development and adequate levels of ongoing support needed to be an integral part of the overall solution for successfully moving forward. It was identified that these

tensions would need to be dealt with transparently, with all parties willing to negotiate flexible employment practices into the future.

Open Universities Australia (OUA) and the Tutor Support Management Trial

Introduction to Open Universities Australia

As Open Universities Australia was operating as a broker for educational products and services with its providers, it had a business model with had each university and OUA dealing in partnership with different components in the overall student life cycle as shown below. Each particular component was to addressed in agreed measures of collaboration as detailed in the contractual OUA/University Provider Agreement.

Figure 1: Overall Student Life Cycle Components
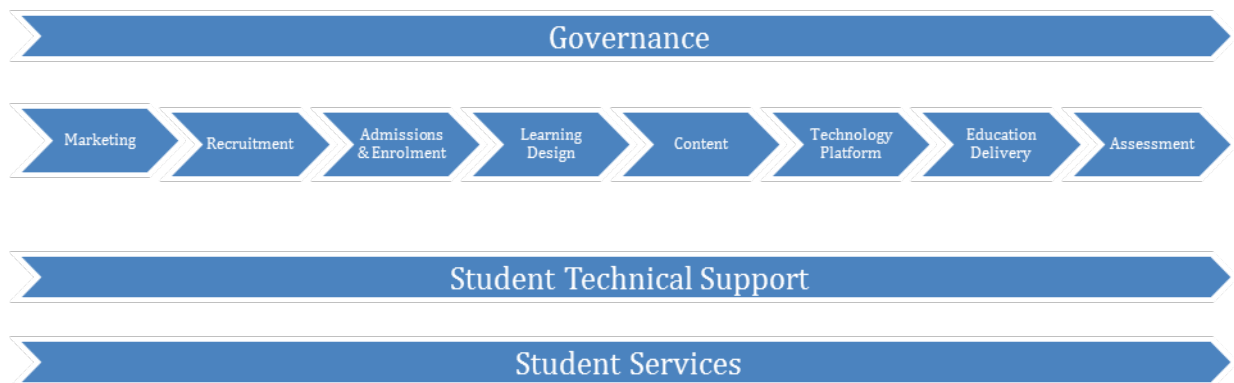
Development and delivery was the key responsibility of the academics from within the University, with OUA providing a guiding framework through its Developers Guide for Best Practice, and operating a Product Development Fund (PDF). This was a fund in excess of one million dollars per annum for new product development or existing product enhancement. These funds were subject to the establishment of explicit project deliverables, with final plans and milestones established and monitored by educational design staff at OUA.

The Tutor Support Management Trial

In response to the exponential growth in enrolments in first year subjects in 2007-2008, OUA introduced the Tutor Support Management trial to see if OUA could become involved in the part of the value chain involving online tutors and moderators.

The key goal of the Tutorial Support Management (TSM) project was to investigate the scalability of unit tutoring resources and, thus, the sustainability of providers' business models for successfully offering online offerings through OUA.

The ultimate objective of the project was to refine and validate a model of tutor training, supervision, and task/time assignment that supported the use of multiple sessional tutors (managed by OUA) to teach high-enrolment units on a cost-effective basis whilst maintaining high quality teaching/learning outcomes.

In order to carry out the trial, three key components were introduced. First, subject coordinators needed to participate in the development of a Online Tutor Guide for potential tutoring staff. This guide was to follow recommendations that had been developed by OUA in conjunction with selected academic staff across multiple universities. It included guidelines for a number of areas such as addressing the need for increasing interactivity, successfully establishing suitably sized virtual study groups, maximizing moderation of open forums, and identifying and addressing FAQ's.

Secondly, tutors would need to be willing to undertake a short 8 week online academic staff development program prior to employment as an online tutor.

Finally, tutors would be required to report their time on activities throughout the semester using a web based timesheet program.

Early Evaluation Results

Early evaluation of the TSM model showed it had the potential to provide significant benefits in terms of contributing to the development of a model of online education for individual OUA units with large enrolments that improved the overall quality of educational outcomes for students in a cost-effective model.

Aside from the empirical evidence assembled in the evaluation at the time, the TSM model was also consistent with the latest research regarding the link between student success and the importance of participation in group settings for student learning.

The costs of the initial TSM project were funded by OUA. However, it was always intended to implement the TSM model on an ongoing basis, with a funding model which included Provider contributions as well.

The TSM model was believed to be applicable to a large range of potential OUA offerings, but was considered particularly effective with OUA units with high enrolments. During the overall course of the project, it was found that Tutors could properly manage a workload of supporting 200 students in an online discussion environment and respond to email queries within a time allocation of 5 to 7 hours per week. Additional workload allocation would be required to cover marking responsibilities if this was preferred task for part-time tutors for a specific provider, and could also extend beyond the standard time frame of the

13 week study period used by OUA. Similarly, if the assessment of particular units were to include some form of online discussion component, then Tutors needed additional allocated time to cover the expected increase in student activity.

Tutor Time and Activity

Analysis of the data from the web timesheet system used by Tutors to record work effort indicated that the actual number of hours worked by the majority of the Tutors in the first study period reviewed averaged 7.8 hours per week for 100 students. This was below the anticipated 10 hours per week. It was in the marking of non-automated assessment and providing feedback for students where the greatest impact of increasing student numbers was obviously felt by tutors.

In the second study period reviewed, when the student:tutor ratio was increased up to 200:1, the hours against activities show that even with a higher number of students the average hours of effort per week was less (6.68 hours).

Financial Analysis

While the actual figures in the financial analysis model developed were, and are, commercial-in-confidence, it has been reported before that based on the increase in retention achieved in the trial, there was empirical evidence that a positive return on investment could be achieved through implementing the program. There was also clear evidence of increased student satisfaction in the delivery and support of the course offering when comparing survey results from before and after the introduction of the program. For the pilot project, part-time or casual tutors were paid between $3250 to $3500 for the online moderation and contact time for the 13 week period, and up to $5,500 if marking assignments was incorporated in the duties.

Lessons Learnt

- The first lesson learned in the trial was that there was still inherent issues of concern from some quarters regarding the casualization of staff when introducing teams of online tutors. While it was recognized that the concept was worth considering, the wider implications for the future of academic roles in online education offerings was still front of mind. Control of the tutors was a concern, and therefore explicit workload expectations and monitoring of activities were both high priorities.

- Secondly there was the genuine acceptance of the critical importance of ensuring that both the course coordinator and the tutors had a common understanding and grounding of what best practice meant in moderating online activities and promoting and supporting efficient and effective online interactions. Understanding that potential tutors needed to have both the attitude and aptitude to engage in change management practices was a lesson for a number of course coordinators. Sheena O'Hare (2011),

one of the course coordinators in the trial, went on to present her perspectives of the role of the online tutor, following on from the OUA TSM trial. Downing et al (2014) also provide a practical look at the role of the tutor in online facilitation.

- Thirdly, that while it was often difficult to discuss at first, is was not inappropriate to be exploring staffing models which were more financially attractive if the primary objective of providing a better student experience was kept paramount. It often suited the needs and working lifestyle desires of the tutors to operate as part-time online employees.

- Finally, while the trial was intended to explore OUA ultimately coordinating and managing the TSM service, progress towards having this level of disaggregation of services to a third party being accepted by universities was not imminent.

Focus Issues for Consideration

As noted in the draft proposed CSU Distance Education strategy, higher education institutions are facing increasing global pressures with respect to competition and the need to truly be innovative to genuinely sustain growth and improve the quality of the student experience.   The listed features of a distinctive CSU DE model are well articulated in the draft document and reflect attributes a number of higher education organisations are also attempting to successfully collectively address to enable sustained growth.

The importance of establishing flexible employment models is one key component to the ability to scale, and more importantly, the ability to scale DE with an enhanced quality of offer. Whitlock & Gordon (2013) present a detailed review on key aspect of flexible staffing in general which is of direct relevance to the issues being raised at the Think Tank.   A follow on related question one may strive towards answering in parallel to establishing flexible employment models is, if you are presented with a zero sum scenario for funding and successfully introducing a distinctive CSU DE model, how do you create the overall framework and governance to correctly align and integrate each of the key initiatives?

Finally, what expectations would need to be set and met with respect to timelines for achieving agreed milestones which are leading to the successful achievement of the agreed CSU DE Strategy? A first point of reflection might be to see how any such milestones address relevant sustainability issues raised in Devlin et al (2012) recent findings from an ALTC grant specifically on leading sustainable change in teaching and learning in Australian universities.

References

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