Deakin University as a national leader in teaching and learning

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One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar.
Helen Keller

Deakin University has set itself the ambitious goal of becoming a national leader in teaching and learning and in the provision of high quality flexible education. The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sally Walker, recently reinforced the target of Deakin being in the top third of Australian universities in relation to teaching and learning by 2012.

How did the goal come about?

Decisions about goals related to teaching and learning at Deakin have been made in the context of detailed examination, by expert external reviewers, of a number of sources of data and using a number of methodologies.

The examination included:

- a desk analysis of background information provided by the university to the external reviewers;
- consideration of a range of data from the federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and Graduate Careers Australia (GCA);
- analyses of Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units (SETU), Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) data from Deakin’s Planning Unit;
- Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF) data;
- 143 interviews with staff – senior executive, Academic Board officers, representatives of the Institute of Teaching and Learning (ITL) and the Division of Student Life; Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning) and academic staff at various levels;
- interviews with students including current and former students and representatives of the Deakin University Student Association (PhillipsKPA, 2007).

The reviewers noted that the proposals they made, from which this ambitious goal was later devised, were based on the data they had collected as well as on knowledge of effective practice at other universities in Australia and the United Kingdom.

If you think the goal is ambitious, and I know from conversations with many of you that some of you do, you’re right. But is a little bit less ambitious goal better? Or an unambitious goal? Or an ambitionless one perhaps? What would that goal look like? Let’s not go there.
The value of setting a specific goal

Setting a specific goal is valuable. Goal-setting is akin to setting learning objectives in that it guides activity toward a specified point. There is research evidence that goal-setting leads to enhanced performance. For example, at an individual level, a study by Marsh and Roche (1993) showed that university teachers had significantly more improvement in the dimensions of teaching specifically targeted as areas in which they wished to improve than they did in dimensions not targeted. Note that the goal was not to improve teaching but more specifically, to improve specific dimensions of teaching.

Setting goals is commonly understood as an important part of change processes. However, one must do more than just set the goal for the performance to improve. The teachers mentioned above were in a teaching improvement intervention group where they not only had specific goals but also had strategies to use to achieve the goals.

What does national leadership look like?

So our goal is to become a leader in teaching and learning nationally. Defining ‘leadership’ precisely is a challenging endeavour and we could spend quite some time in attempting to do this. I’d like to suggest that, rather than spending time and effort in abstract definitional issues, we might consider what being a national leader would look like in concrete terms. In other words, we might consider how we will know that we have become a leader in teaching and learning. What are some of the indicators that will provide evidence of national leadership for Deakin in this area?

Here are some possible sources of evidence of institutional national leadership in teaching and learning:

1. An outstanding publication record
2. Exemplary teaching related funding success
3. Excellent performance in the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund
4. A strong, positive national and international profile and reputation in teaching and learning

1. Outstanding publication record

Some of the ways in which such a record would be demonstrated include:

- A very large number of journal articles in international peer-reviewed higher education journals
- A very large number of chapters in peer-reviewed books
- Deakin staff authoring and co-authoring of a growing number of research-based national teaching and learning policy reports
- A strong international citation rate for Deakin staff
- Evidence of significant involvement in the preparation and dissemination of significant creative works related to teaching and learning
2. Exemplary teaching related funding success

Some of the ways in which such a record would be demonstrated include:

- Success in national or international competitive research grants (on competitive grants register)
- ARC success with projects related to teaching and learning or education
- Continuously improving ALTC grant success
- Success in winning national or international research contracts
- ALTC Fellowship success (e-learning and other)

3. Excellent performance in the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund

Some of our newer colleagues may not be aware of the LTPF and how it works. In order to be eligible for the fund, institutions must meet specific teaching-related hurdle requirements including having probation and promotion practices and policies that include effectiveness as a teacher as a criterion for academics who teach, and systematic student evaluation of teaching and subjects – the results of which must inform probation and promotion decisions for these academics (DEST, 2003). Seven indicators are then used to measure each university’s performance:

1. Proportion of graduates in full-time employment
2. Proportion of graduates in further part-time or full-time study
3. Graduates’ perceptions of teaching
4. Graduates’ perceptions on the development of generic skills
5. Graduates’ overall satisfaction with their course
6. Student progress
7. Student retention (DEEWR, 2008).

Indicators 1 and 2 may be perceived as out of the ‘direct line of fire’ of individual academics (although individuals can certainly have enormous influence here) but indicators 3 through 8 are directly influenced by the quality of the teaching and learning that students experience, as well as through other factors.

There has been recent discussion about the indicators and the possibility of including a measure of improvement over time for individual universities but no decision has yet been reached on this (Lee Dow, 2008). While there is much debate about the merit of Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF), and concern about the ways in which performance is measured, the fund is part of the higher education policy landscape for now. (see extra notes for PPP)

4. A strong, positive national and international profile and reputation in teaching and learning

This is a seemingly more amorphous source of evidence of leadership but I believe it is an important component of perceived leadership. The sector must see an institution as a leader and so the perception of others is critical. Some of the ways in which a
leading reputation and profile might be demonstrated, in addition to the three listed above in previous sections, include:

- A constant, frequent media presence from Deakin staff and representatives commenting on teaching and learning and higher education matters
- Invitations for Deakin staff to present at other universities on teaching and learning related topics
- Invitations to deliver keynote addresses at high-status conferences related to teaching and learning and the student experience
- Invitations to contribute to teaching, learning and student experience policy/practice reviews
- Fellowship of learned academies related to teaching and learning
- Prizes, awards, citations and the like for teaching and learning
- Member of editorial boards of high quality higher education journals
- Leadership of significant research and project teams related to university teaching and learning

**Bringing it all together**

I have argued in a recent Deakin University internal discussion paper that the scholarship of teaching is one way in which contributions to achieving this ambitious goal can be made. In essence, my argument in the current paper is that as part of the myriad ways in which we might bring about realisation of our central goal to demonstrate national leadership in teaching and learning, we must move individual teaching practices from the private to the public sphere and underpin this move with the highest levels of research excellence and rigour possible (Devlin, 2008). Such a move will contribute to many of the possible sources of evidence of national leadership listed above.

**Discussion questions**

Some of the questions it is important for us to consider as we discuss and debate the way forward include:

- Would it be preferable for Deakin University to aim for less ambitious goal in teaching and learning?
- As we commit to this ambitious goal, how will we know we are beginning to achieve our goal? What will be the first signs?
- Do we need to change the culture at Deakin in any way(s) in order to achieve our goal? If so, how do we do this?
- What else would help us achieve our goal?
  - From the sector?
  - Institutionally?
  - From the Faculty? School?
  - Individually?
  - Which of these are most likely?
- In the absence of a perfect scenario and full funding for all we wish to do, should we press on anyway or give up and focus elsewhere?

Conclusion

I’d like to end with a quote from the well-known poet T.S. Eliot and ask that each of us consider the idea that this quote embodies as we ponder our possible contributions to Deakin’s goal to become a national leader in teaching and learning:

_Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go._

References


