Australia’s University Learning and Teaching: An Experiment in Promoting Quality

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Abstract
The paper is a reflection on the experience of the development and early years of what was a unique Australian experiment to enhance the quality of learning and teaching in universities. That experiment was the development and funding of a national institute for learning and teaching in higher education, known in its later years as the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

Keywords
Learning and Teaching, Educational Quality, Australian Learning and Teaching Council

Introduction
In 2003, the Australian government determined to establish an institute to promote learning and teaching in higher education. This paper is a reflective commentary on that experiment. While I had no involvement in developing the recommendation that would result in the institute’s establishment, I led a small team within the government department which implemented the recommendation, spent a year on a temporary transfer assignment working on the planning, and finally accepted one of three program director positions in the new body where I worked for the next four years. In total, I was involved in this initiative for more than six years, which gives me a unique insight, though one which is essentially highly biased in perspective and probably in judgement. The paper is not based on notes or records from the time; hence it runs the risk of false or selective memory. In my work today I often meet with those who had strong relationships with the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), which was closed in 2011.

Background
In 2003, one of the recommendations arising from an Australian review of higher education, commonly known as the Nelson Review, was the development of and funding for the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. This recommendation was made in the context of supporting excellence in learning and teaching in Australian universities. It was matched with another recommendation for a Learning and Teaching Performance Fund to provide incentive-based funding to individual universities that could demonstrate certain indicators associated with the quality of teaching and learning. The institute’s proposed establishment followed a number of earlier initiatives to support quality teaching and learning.

Australia had already established a body with a charter related to quality assurance in higher education. Following an agreement between the state and federal ministers for education, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was established in 2000 and charged with ensuring universities had quality assurance processes in place. AUQA had limited means to encourage good practice or penalize universities with substandard quality systems. Its establishment was in large part to assure the international student market regarding the quality of all 38 public Australian universities along with the few private providers offering university degrees at the time. (AUQA has been replaced by TESQA—the result of a recommendation of the latest review of Australian higher education).
AUQA was not the only initiative to promote quality. There was a long history of recognition of individual academics through national teaching awards and awards for programs that addressed priorities associated with improving learning and broad access to higher education. For many years there had been a small amount of funding facilitated by committees appointed by the Australian government to improve teaching and learning in universities. The establishment of the proposed institute was in response to lobbying on the part of the last of these committees, the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC). The announcement identified considerably more funding for awards and grants than the earlier committees had received.

A National Focus for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching

In Our Universities: Backing Australia’s Future (Nelson, 2003), the new institute was given a detailed outline of the tasks it would perform:

A National Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education will be established to provide a national focus for the enhancement of learning and teaching in Australian higher education institutions and will be a flagship for acknowledging excellence in learning and teaching. The Institute’s responsibilities will include:

• management of a competitive grants scheme for innovation in learning and teaching;
• liaison with the sector about options for articulating and monitoring academic standards;
• improvement of assessment practices throughout the sector, including investigation of the feasibility of a national portfolio assessment scheme;
• facilitation of benchmarking of effective teaching and learning processes at national and international levels;
• development of mechanisms for the dissemination of good practice and professional development in learning and teaching;
• management of a program for international experts in learning and teaching to visit Australian institutions and the development of reciprocal relationships with international jurisdictions;
• coordination of a revised version of the Australian Awards for University Teaching, including the awards presentation event; and
• secretariat functions to the Australian Universities Teaching Committee.

The Institute will be overseen by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) and be run by professional staff with expertise in learning and teaching in higher education. The AUTC will continue to advise the Minister on the allocation, management, and outcomes of any grants scheme and activities administered through the Institute, including the revised Australian Awards for University Teaching.

The Institute will receive $21.9 million per year from 2006, which will comprise $2.5 million for administration and $19.4 million for grants and other activities. Funding will be allocated from existing program funds to establish the Institute in 2004 (Nelson, 2003).

Following this detailed description, other instructions focused on the number and size of awards for which an additional amount of funding was allocated.

As an experiment in encouraging quality in learning and teaching in universities and building a national profile for learning and teaching, there were many important issues to resolve, not the least of these was to gain the higher education sector’s endorsement of the vision and way of operating the new institute. If that could be done, it would provide the uncontested space for the new organization to become successful. The matters to consider included the type of legal entity, governance, vision, and priorities for funding. A great deal of thought and careful planning began after the government’s announcement. Tasked with the oversight of the development, the AUTC, largely made up of vice-chancellors/presidents, began a process of consultation with the involvement of an external consultant, Alan Schofield who had served as the lead reviewer of an earlier committee, the Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development.

Getting the Blueprint Right

My involvement began with the national consultation, leading a small team supporting the development of the institute from inside the government department responsible for the implementation of this initiative. One of the early challenges was to ensure the engagement of universities with the new institute, as it would have no power, authority, or means of enforcing any expectations within the Australian higher education sector. In addition, the institute would always be reliant on the fickle support of government as all its funding came from the Australian national government. The institute could not afford to be perceived as partisan in its politics or to engage in a way that resulted in difficulties for a government minister. Yet it had to achieve quickly to maintain the goodwill of universities and the support of government.
The initial model envisioned within the department was along the lines of National ICT Australia (NICTA). This type of model ran counter to the views of universities. During the first consultations, university leaders made it clear that they would not support a small group of universities “owning” the institute. The universities argued that, unlike research institutes, no group of universities could or should claim pre-eminence expertise in teaching and learning; they should all be experts. A model like that of the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom was discussed and found little support. Consequently, and given the lack of support in the government for creating the institute under legislation, the new body was established as a wholly-owned government company, a decision which would ultimately result in the demise in 2011 of what was by then known as the ALTC. That demise, however, was seven years after its establishment in 2004. It was originally established as the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education; the name was later changed to the ALTC. (The change of name was due to strong lobbying by the owner of a private education provider who claimed confusion resulting from the use of “Carrick” was losing her international business.)

Emeritus Professor Lesley Parker, the planning director appointed to oversee the planning phase, points out in A Case Study of the Planning of the Carrick Institute in Australia (Parker, 2006) that some aspects of the remit were greeted with enthusiasm and others with some scepticism, particularly the large number of annual awards, 251 in all. Other aspects such as requirements for more explicit standards and benchmarking were greeted with a degree of unease. Within this context a great deal of consultation took place including discussion papers and forums across Australia. Arising from all this work and the responsibilities set by the government, the institute’s mission statement, objectives, and values were determined. The Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education was launched on August 11, 2004, at Parliament House in Canberra in the presence of many university leaders. Despite the hopes expressed by many that the institute would be independent of government, under the constitution, the board was appointed by the government minister responsible for higher education. The first board included a strong contingent of university leaders, vice-chancellors, and deputy vice-chancellors, as well as some representation from other interests including education research, schools, and private education providers. The company was integrally linked to the government, though as a company, it was responsible for its financial management. The government approved the constitution, though the minister appointed the board and controlled the use of funding through a funding agreement. Throughout the time I was there, the minister and government of the day simply reflected the tasks set out in the initial announcement in its funding agreement.

Parker sums up her impression on the early life of the institute highlighting what the planning team believed was important to the successful implementation. She states that the “mixed incremental-organic and step-organic model for change appears to have been critical, underpinned as it is by the early work of antecedent organizations, the commitment of the Carrick Institute to collaboration and inclusiveness, and the respect shown to stakeholders. Further the attention given to evidence documenting what was actually happening in the sector and the development of plans on the basis of this evidence ensured a certain robustness in the planning” (Parker, 2006). This approach to change continued in a more subtle way during the years I was involved. Later sections of the paper demonstrate how this occurred.

In the above summary, Parker captures the early days when the Institute had limited funding. Full funding was not scheduled until 2006. Between late 2004 to the end of 2005, projects were commissioned including research on how to improve the impact of projects. Pilot projects were funded to assist in development work on program guidelines, always in consultation. Further, the systems of governance were developed. From my perspective, three principles underpinned the early development and implementation. These principles were to gain as much value from the effort as possible, that is to make a sustainable impact; to build engagement with all of Australia’s institutions eligible for the new institute’s funding, then 43, while at the same time ensuring high quality and credible project work and awards; and finally to gain the support and commitment of the various groups of university leaders who could promote change along with the teaching and learning enthusiasts and experts. The message was one of inclusion, quality, and impact.

The Importance of Collaboration

There was a strong commitment to competitive processes as the underpinning approach for allocating awards and project funding, two of the key tasks given to the institute. Fellowships were introduced by the board and were also competitive. Since the larger, more established universities were often more experienced and better supported in project application preparation and award nomination development, competitive funding and awards presented a challenge to gaining broad engagement across the sector. One of the ways to encourage broad sectoral engagement and wider uptake of project outcomes, while at the same time building capacity across the sector was to encourage collaboration. Collaboration, though not a requirement for funding was strongly signalled as an expectation in funding guidelines. Although not without its difficulties, including the tick-box
type of “collaboration,” many projects gained enormously from a cross-institutional team, a team that took members beyond the limitations of their own university, even to links with international colleagues, professions, and industry. Fellows also structured their work to build in expert advice and collaboration. The best of this work built capacity and expertise, produced high quality materials, and gave the project leaders and fellows a profile that resulted in promotion and/or international alliances. The underpinning message was that ALTC expected value for Australian higher education from project work and fellowships, regardless of the type or size of project.

National bodies with different types of interest in university learning and teaching supported collaboration. Discipline bodies, which already had creative initiatives such as networks of associate deans (teaching and learning), were able to share those initiatives with others beyond their discipline group, thus strengthening the value of their work. National networks of associate deans (teaching and learning) included professional and regulatory bodies in their projects giving credibility to their work and increasing the likely uptake of the outcomes from projects. This type of collaboration set the scene for beginning the work on national standards, work that was undertaken in the last two years of the ALTC and is continuing through discipline networks. I must acknowledge that without the relationship building undertaken by a colleague, Dr. Janice Orrell, in the first couple of years, engaging in national discipline standards development would have been very difficult. It was her effort that built the foundations for the national discipline initiatives.

While collaboration supported wide sector engagement, appropriate intellectual property (IP) clauses in funding agreements were an essential enabler. The IP arrangements needed to be synergistic with collaboration between universities and support sharing beyond those involved in the project. All work funded by ALTC was to be released under a licence that allowed use and adaptation with appropriate attribution, although it did not permit commercialization. The IP on the work was held by ALTC, which in turn gave a very broad licence to the partners involved in the project. This approach to IP also enabled ALTC to encourage the use of earlier project work in new projects, without the need for permission from the original universities. The ALTC expected that, where appropriate, new projects would build on earlier ones. Gaining the best value from the project work would not have been possible if the individual universities held the IP. This approach to IP, the antithesis of the way research IP operates in Australian universities, led to many challenges from university lawyers and other influential leaders. However, once the reasons were explained, fellows and those involved in the projects appeared comfortable with the arrangement and sometimes sought support to deal with the lawyers in their universities.

One of the unforeseen outcomes that arose from the various collaborations, and the work done across discipline boundaries, was capacity building. Many people have spoken of the impact that the collaborative work, the ALTC-sponsored thematic gatherings, and the encouragement of sharing has had on their professional lives. The principal of a small private higher education provider, Dr. Don Owers, wrote, “It would not be overstating things to say that our involvement with the ALTC has transformed the culture of the college, and that, this in turn, will have an ongoing impact on the quality of teaching and learning offered to students” (Owers, 2011).

Gaining the Support of University Leaders and Experts

The legal structure could have resulted in considerable political interference with the operation of the ALTC, however, Minister Brendan Nelson approved the board to make decisions regarding successful award nominees and grant applications, determine guidelines, and appoint standing committees etc. without reference to him. No earlier committee had this type of authority. Consequently, the board appointed standing committees for each program, led by a board member. Membership of these committees extended the involvement of university leaders from across the sector. It was the members of these committees who made the decisions regarding awards, fellowships, and projects. The committees also provided advice regarding changes to the program guidelines. Despite the fact the committee work brought a heavy workload, ALTC had no difficulty gaining this involvement. I attended many of these meetings over the years and came to the view that university leaders enjoyed finding out what was happening, touching base with learning and teaching, especially if it was their own discipline, and debating issues with their colleagues from other universities. The committees were provided with assessments of the proposals and nominations, which were undertaken by academics who also came together to participate in the assessment process. The arrangements for these meetings meant that assessors found themselves side by side with academics from other universities and disciplines making judgments about the standard of nominations and applications. This type of peer review gave credibility to the grants and awards while at the same time extending the involvement of academics with the ALTC.

Success?

Not every ALTC initiative was successful; some were not and one, ALTC Exchange, was contested all the way through...
development and implementation. Some risky initiatives were successful, often due to earlier work that put into place elemental systems and structures that could be strengthened. Some of these then become models for other disciplines. Listening to the challenges the new level of funding posed for universities gave shape to the Promoting Excellence Initiative developed to assist capacity development and encourage engagement. All higher education institutions eligible for funding were offered the same amount of money if they submitted a two to three-year strategy to build capacity and engagement with the ALTC. Each strategy was evaluated and, in some cases, revisions were required. Surprisingly, universities within some Australian states formed groups of those responsible for supporting the strategy, invited speakers, and shared what they were doing.

At times there were stridently different views about how the ALTC should operate, what role staff with learning and teaching expertise should play within the organization, and how that expertise should exert influence within the sector. In the end, the ALTC provided leadership, though not through developing teaching and learning policy or guidelines or setting itself up as an expert organization. Rather, the ALTC led through facilitating sharing and expertise, building relationships with the universities, encouraging collaborations between individuals and groups through setting funding priorities and funding criteria. It was the importance given to sharing and collaboration that I believe made the difference. Funding was certainly an incentive. It enabled different groups and people with special interests to work and collaborate on projects that fit within a broad set of priorities.

So, was this experiment successful? One could suggest that the ALTC was not successful as signified by the summary announcement of its closure in late January 2011. From many accounts, that judgement would misread the situation. Rather it appears there was an urgent grab for money within the sector. In the end, the ALTC provided leadership, though not through developing teaching and learning policy or guidelines or setting itself up as an expert organization. Rather, the ALTC led through facilitating sharing and expertise, building relationships with the universities, encouraging collaborations between individuals and groups through setting funding priorities and funding criteria. It was the importance given to sharing and collaboration that I believe made the difference. Funding was certainly an incentive. It enabled different groups and people with special interests to work and collaborate on projects that fit within a broad set of priorities.

In a background paper making a case against the abolition of the ALTC, four senior representatives of the Councils of Deans wrote that:

… the ALTC has been characterized by:

- Strategic long-term vision for incremental system wide innovation and development in teaching and learning
- Capacity building in organizational change and leadership
- Collaboration rather than competition across institutions and disciplines, and for the first time with external stakeholders (e.g. employers and professional bodies)
- Significant networking across institutions and, at this critical time, with technical and further education (TAFE) and with private providers, as a key means of achieving national outcomes (Freeman, Koppi, McKeough & Rice).

While it is clear that an enormous amount of activity occurred through projects and fellowships, one strong supporter wrote, “The ALTC is not just about the money; it’s not just about the programs and the other functions; it’s actually about the people” (Goodyear, 2011).

I had completed my employment contract at the ALTC over a year before the announcement of its closure. During the time I was employed, a raid on ALTC funding occurred as part of cost-savings at election time. A number of vice-chancellors lobbied government seeking the reinstatement of the funding. The lobbying managed to get the full funding re-instated, although money was removed from the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund. This was the first signal that the new government was not fully committed to the experiment, despite university support. That vice-chancellors preferred to lose funding that could go directly to their institutions rather than the loss of some ALTC funding spoke of growing confidence in the ALTC’s work.

After the government announced the ALTC’s closure I was amazed to see a public online campaign to lobby against the closure. The effort was not successful in protecting the ALTC, though it did gain the reinstatement of some project, fellowship, and award funding. When I reviewed those who were commenting in the online campaign I expected to see the names of people I knew, it was with quiet satisfaction that I found many names, Australian and international, I did not know.

New arrangements for funding projects, fellowships, and awards are in place within a government department.
Nevertheless, it seems that the government has missed the point of the ALTC experiment. To successfully build national capacity and commitment to ongoing improvement of learning and teaching in Australian universities requires an entity outside government to be the focus, the enabler, the encourager, and facilitator. There are signs that this role is already being missed within the Australian higher education sector.

References:

Elizabeth McDonald, Ph.D. followed up a teaching career with policy and program work in a number of organizations including the Department of Education, Science, and Training (DEST) and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), initially known as the Carrick Institute. At DEST, she took a leading role in the establishment of the Carrick Institute. In early 2006, McDonald was appointed to a leadership position at the Carrick/ALTC where she was director of the programs and networks portfolio, which included management of the grants programs. Since leaving there, she has been engaged in educational consultancy work. Contact McDonald at eamcdonald@ozemail.com.au.

Education Division’s Advancing the STEM Agenda Book
A collection of conference papers from the 2011 Advancing the STEM Agenda Conference. Available through ASQ Quality Press.

This publication is full of collaborative models, best practices, and advice for teachers, higher education faculty, and human resources personnel on improving the student retention (and thereby increasing the supply of STEM workers). Ideas that will work for both STEM and non-STEM fields are presented. The introduction maps out the current landscape of STEM education and compares the United States to other countries. The last chapter is the conference chairs’ summary of what was learned from the conference and working with 36 authors to develop this book. This effort is part of a grassroots effort among educators to help more students be successful in STEM majors and careers.

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