LEARNING AND TEACHING AT LA TROBE UNIVERSITY 2005-2008
Supporting and Promoting Excellence in Learner-Focussed Teaching

Preamble

1. One of the defining features of La Trobe University is a commitment to providing teaching and learning that is both student-focussed and is informed by research, scholarship and professional practice.

2. This document, together with the Learning and Teaching Operational Plan 2005-2008, has been developed to expand upon that undertaking, and upon the goals identified in the University Strategic Plan 2004-2008, by providing a practical guide for the organisational units of the University to:
   • foster the ongoing development of best practice in learning and teaching;
   • encourage the development of a coordinated approach to the pursuit of teaching excellence;
   • encourage effective innovation in teaching and learning; and
   • foster the vision of student-focussed learning and teaching.

3. Both documents work within the frameworks already established by other major plans of the University, including the Strategic Plan 2004-2008, the Research and Research Training Management Plan, the Equity Plan, the Disability Action Plan, and the Indigenous Education Strategies, and reflect the changing context of the university (Appendix 1).

4. Both documents are relevant to all campuses of the University, for the period 2005 to the end of 2008. They are living documents, and will be reviewed by the Learning and Teaching Steering Committee towards the end of 2006.

5. Faculties are to use both documents as a basis to revise their own learning and teaching plans.

Values

6. The learning and teaching environment at La Trobe University is shaped by guiding principles that reflect the history and ethos of the University. Specifically, the University values:
   • a supportive learning environment and community for students;
   • teaching that reflects a spirit of enquiry and is informed by research;
   • a diversity of approaches and styles in learning and teaching;
   • the commitment of staff to students, teaching, research and ongoing development.

7. These values are central to the vision, which is the focus of University development over the next three years:

   La Trobe University: supporting and promoting excellence in learner-focussed teaching
Defining our values

8. The education process is reciprocal, involving both teaching and learning. **Learning** refers to the process of gaining knowledge or skills, and is practised by both students and teachers. **Teaching** is delivered by academic staff, and involves fostering learning, imparting knowledge or skills to students, and sharing new ways of thinking and doing.

9. **Excellence in teaching** at La Trobe involves:
   - a focus on student learning;
   - the ability to arouse curiosity in students, and to stimulate independent learning and the development of critical thought;
   - the ability to organise appropriate course material and to present it cogently and imaginatively;
   - a command of the subject matter, including the incorporation in teaching of recent developments in the field of study and, where appropriate, of the results of the teacher’s own research;
   - satisfying the needs of students, employers and the professions;
   - a commitment to continuous improvement in teaching;
   - reflecting critically on one’s teaching; and
   - it may often involve conducting research into teaching and communicating the findings in suitable venues or publications.

10. **Learner-focussed teaching** at La Trobe University encompasses:
   - empowering students to become independent learners, and focusing on the development of learner understanding rather than only on the imparting of knowledge;
   - providing an innovative environment and supportive learning community to ensure the best possible learning outcomes;
   - active involvement of students in shaping curriculum and teaching development; and
   - a commitment to the diverse University community.

11. **Teaching informed by research** means:
   - the environment in which teaching is conducted is one where there are active researchers, and research is valued.
   - the design of degree programs and units directly involves or is informed by people who are active in research in the discipline area, and/or in research in teaching the discipline.
   - lectures are given by people who are research-active or research-aware (i.e., are abreast of contemporary research, participate in scholarly discussions, interact formally and
informally with active researchers) in the discipline or in teaching the discipline.

12. In professional disciplines, teaching also involves and is informed by practice. At La Trobe University this means that:

- the environment in which teaching is conducted is one in which evidence-based clinical practice, and professional credibility are valued;
- the degree programs and units are informed by academic staff who are active professionally;
- the academic staff of the University formally and systematically involve people from the professions in the evaluation and monitoring of professional programs;
- the academic staff have professional credibility

13. **Effective innovation in learning and teaching** means that:

- the University values explicit attention to teaching that goes beyond thinking about the content and includes thinking about effective methods and approaches;
- teachers are responsive to contemporary trends and theories pertaining to teaching and learning;
- *effective* innovation is underpinned by research into teaching and learning;
- *effective* innovation enhances the University's commitment to providing student-focused teaching; and
- teachers are committed to applying innovative approaches to teaching and learning to both curriculum development and delivery.

14. **Diversity of approaches and styles** in learning and teaching is valued at La Trobe because:

- the membership of the University is extremely diverse, in part because of internationalisation;
- teachers accommodate a wide range of learning styles by facilitating different learning approaches;
- the University acknowledges that a greater variety of learning approaches leads to deeper and more connected learning; and
- diversity contributes to a flourishing and stimulating intellectual environment.

15. A **supportive learning environment** refers to both:

- the human community, that comprises the students and the staff of the University, and
- the built environment of the University.
University Strategic Plan

16. This document and the Operational Plan are prepared within the context of the overall University Strategic Plan. There are a number of aspects of the University Strategic Plan which have specific relevance to teaching and learning, including the strategic directions with respect to students and learning and teaching, which are:

- to continue to attract and retain a capable and diverse student cohort and to build on the University’s commitment to equity and access in participation of students;
- to maintain the commitment of the University to facilitate quality learning outcomes while ensuring that the discipline profile reflects a commitment to both traditional and emerging areas, taking account of changing student demand and labour force needs;
- to expand opportunities for staff and students to visit and study at universities overseas, particularly at International Network of Universities (INU) member universities and in other partner universities; and
- to prepare graduates to operate in a global environment.

17. A particularly important objective in the Strategic Plan is the reduction of student:staff ratios, with implementation of this being critical to the success of the Operational Plan. Many staff feel that they are not able to perform as well as they would like in terms of both teaching and research because of workload issues in part associated with high student:staff ratios. Reduction in student:staff ratios will create an improved environment for staff and will facilitate implementation of the directions outlined in this plan.

18. The Operational Plan contains a proposal for improved support structures for staff to assist them to achieve the strategies in this plan. This is an important commitment for the University and demonstrates the priority it places on teaching.

19. In the context of the demands on staff and on the University itself, it is not possible to address all the issues that ideally would be incorporated in a learning and teaching plan. Rather this plan focuses on a selection of high priority issues which will be addressed over the triennium 2005-2008. Accordingly it sets priorities for University-wide action. Faculties and other units are encouraged to continue to work on other high priority aspects of learning and teaching.

20. The Plan has also been developed in the context of a constrained budget for the University, which again forces a prioritisation of the issues to be addressed.

The Learning and Teaching Operational Plan 2005-2008

21. The Learning and Teaching Operational Plan is a separate document that contains detailed steps for the University to implement changes consistent with the vision of supporting and promoting learner-focussed teaching.

22. It consists of three tables covering teacher-focussed actions, learner focussed actions, and
implementation issues, and reflects extensive debate across the academic community over the course of the development of this Plan.

Managing the Change

Resources

23. The successful implementation of the strategies and actions recommended in the Learning and Teaching Operational Plan will require the time and commitment of staff of the University.

23.1 It is recognised that teachers at La Trobe currently experience a student:staff ratio that is higher than desirable. This problem has been targeted by the University in the Strategic Plan, aiming for a reduction in these ratios by at least 5% over the period from 2004 to 2008.

23.2 The Plan will be implemented gradually over five years in order to balance the time commitment required of staff, and to allow for the reduction in student:staff ratios as described above.

24. In addition to time and commitment a number of strategies will also require financial resources. Securing these resources will be a high priority in the University budget process.

Change Management

25. The staggered implementation of the Plan is, as noted above, intended to accommodate staff workloads as they change over time.

26. The Learning and Teaching Steering Committee is committed to ensuring that this document, and the Learning and Teaching Operational Plan remain “live” by way of continued consultation with the wider academic community at La Trobe University.
The Vision

La Trobe University: Supporting and Promoting Excellence in Learner-Focussed Teaching

La Trobe University values the importance of a learning environment and teaching community that is focussed on meeting the needs of the learner. The commitment of both students and staff to learning, and the achievement of teaching excellence, is affected crucially by factors such as resources, policy and support. Through this document and the related Learning and Teaching Operational Plan, the University aims to ensure that policy decisions and resource allocation remain consistent with this vision.

What we will do to achieve this vision

1. Focussing on teaching
   1.1. Foster through University policies and processes the expectation of staff engaging in ongoing development in teaching
   1.2. Provide opportunities for staff development in teaching
   1.3. Provide opportunities for staff to gain teaching qualifications
   1.4. Improve policies and procedures relating to teaching and learning
   1.5. Strengthen incentives and rewards and support for excellence in teaching performance
   1.6. Enhance processes for the evaluation of teaching
   1.7. Encourage research and development in exceptional teaching practice
   1.8. Support new and casual teachers

2. Focussing on learning
   2.1. Develop graduate attributes appropriate to each discipline and/or profession, and embed these into the curriculum
   2.2. Ensure that University processes support learner focussed teaching practice
   2.3. Provide a high quality learning environment
   2.4. Further enhance student support services and introduce student assistance schemes to ensure students are given quality support in progressing and completing their studies
   2.5. Provide increased information technology and information literacy skills training to enhance learning
   2.6. Strengthen support for innovation in teaching and learning
   2.7. Support and further enhance ICT and WebCT support
   2.8. Support and further enhance technology-based teaching
Appendix 1

Context

1. The context within which the University works has changed dramatically over the last decade and indeed change is now endemic in the University. Specific exogenous factors impacting on the University include:
   - mass education (or “massification”) and globalisation;
   - changes in government policies such as those embedded in “Backing Australia’s Future”;
   - changes in student expectations; and
   - internationalisation.

2. There are also factors internal to La Trobe University which have impacted and will continue to impact on the learning and teaching endeavour. Most notably, the history of the University as one where the main campus was established as a 1960s university with a mix of traditional aspirations (research informed teaching) and expectations of challenging the established order (by promoting equity and more diversified student population, and changed organisational structures). Significant change at the Bundoora campus has occurred, especially through the merger in the late 1980s with Lincoln Institute of Health Sciences. Further changes to the structure of the University occurred with the Dawkins-inspired mergers commencing in the early 1990s, adding Bendigo (together with Mildura and Shepparton), and Albury-Wodonga campuses to the University. About one third of the University’s students are now enrolled at locations outside the Bundoora campus.

3. The changed structure of the University following the mergers has resulted in a change in the balance between the vocational/professional and traditional/basic discipline mix. The University, in its Strategic Plan, is now targeting to achieve and maintain a 55/45 balance.

4. The recent Council proposal to disestablish the Faculty for Regional Development and move to a discipline-based Faculty structure across the University, with academic alignment of disciplines across all campuses, significantly changes the context within which many programs are delivered, and where staff work and students learn.

Mass education and globalisation

5. Three decades ago only a small proportion of the population attended universities, but major change has been wrought on universities since then, and now over 50% of the school leaver population attends universities, a trend which has become known as “massification”. Universities have changed from being educational providers to an elite, to being mass educational providers. Subjects taught have changed with an increased emphasis on vocational and professional education.

6. In parallel with massification, Australia and other countries are increasingly part of a
globalised world with trends affecting institutions and cultures. Globalisation has also impacted on universities. The impacts of massification and globalisation require responses from universities.

7. An important impact of the increased number of students associated with massification is an increased complexity of teaching tasks. For example, with an increased number and greater diversity of students, additional effort is required to support them in reaching a high standard.

8. Massification and changing attitudes to disability also lead to an increased diversity of students, as do globalisation and an emphasis on attracting international students. This diversity also impacts on the complexity of the teaching tasks in a number of ways, including the requirement:
   - to cater for the cultural diversity of the student body; and
   - to provide reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities.

9. The increased diversity of the student body brings with it requirements for additional student support.

10. More students are now in employment (about two-thirds of students at La Trobe University are in paid employment) which in turn leads to expectations of greater flexibility in lecture availability and indeed in the whole structure of courses (fieldwork requirements etc.).

11. The increased number of students has a series of knock-on effects including increased space and equipment needs. Moreover, increased workloads of staff erode their availability to students and their time for research, with some staff placing less emphasis on excellence in teaching to meet the demands for research-based promotion.

12. The University needs to respond to these pressures through ensuring efficiency in course and unit design, matching physical facilities and timetabling to teaching and learning requirements, and improving ICT support. It is appropriate that the University demonstrate, support and reward excellence in teaching.

**Government policy**

13. The Commonwealth Government undertook a major review of Australia's higher education system during 2002, and announced a reform package as part of the 2003/2004 budget in May 2003. This reform package is called "Backing Australia’s Future", also commonly known as “the Nelson changes”.

14. Major changes under this reform package include:
   - changes to institutional funding arrangements;
   - the option for institutions to charge differential "student contributions”;
   - the introduction of a seven-year full time equivalent "student learning entitlement“; and
   - the expansion of income-contingent student loan schemes.

15. The key reform that relates to this Plan is the establishment of a Learning and Teaching
Performance Fund, to reward higher education providers that demonstrate excellence in learning and teaching. This fund has been established in the belief that current funding arrangements, internal academic promotion policies and institutional prestige all tend to focus on research rather than teaching performance, despite teaching being a core activity.

16. In order to be eligible to apply for these Funds, institutions must be able to demonstrate their strong strategic commitment to learning and teaching, including the development and implementation of an institutional learning and teaching strategy.

17. A National Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, The Carrick Institute, has also been established under the Nelson reforms. It is intended that the Institute become the national focus for the enhancement of teaching and learning in Australian higher education.

**Student expectations**

18. Student expectations of higher education have changed significantly over the last 10-20 years, and given the increasing competition between providers to recruit students, it is important for institutions to be aware of their students’ expectations, and to meet them where possible.

19. The greatest changes in student expectations are a direct result of the increasing cost of education. Students are paying more for their education, and accordingly they demand ever higher standards of teaching, materials, support and facilities for their money.

20. There is a growing tendency towards litigation, which is another important concern when considering students’ expectations, particularly given the increasing cost of education. Providers must be scrupulous in ensuring that all promises regarding education delivery and outcomes are met, and that students are given every reasonable opportunity to succeed in their education.

21. Students today also have higher living costs, meaning that even at undergraduate level they are often working at least part-time to support themselves whilst studying. For this reason, there is mounting pressure on universities to offer subjects by flexible delivery, including night classes, block-mode, and the use of technology.

22. Developments in secondary schooling have led to changed expectations of tertiary study. For this reason it is important for University staff to maintain contact with developments in secondary schools and for the University to monitor the transition experience.

**Internationalisation**

23. La Trobe places a strong emphasis on internationalisation, covering students, staff, curriculum, research and student support services. Students and staff at the University are expected to contribute to global knowledge, and the global workforce.

24. The University expects students and staff to be increasingly mobile, and receptive to opportunities such as student and staff exchanges, international research collaboration, and the offshore delivery of curriculum.
25. By 2008, the University aims to have at least 2% of students studying overseas on exchange, and an international student body comprising at least 20% of total student load.