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## Welcome to the First Newsletter



In any large, devolved organisation it is hard to communicate adequately, either up or down or across. Since there are many things happening in my portfolio I would like to have some channel of direct communication with the wider University. Hence this newsletter. Unless I am deluged with complaints I will write one regularly, so please let me know if you think it is useful, if you think it should be shorter, longer or different (email comments to [dvcac@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:dvcac@latrobe.edu.au)).

Professor Belinda Probert  
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)  
April 2008

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## Teaching and Learning

As many of you will know we have been through a period of uncertainty in the leadership and management of teaching and learning at La Trobe, following the review of the Academic Development Unit and the departure of the PVC (Academic) last year. At the same time the University's Strategic Plan sets us some good and significant tasks designed to improve teaching and learning, so I thought I should provide an initial report on plans for 2008.



Professor Tom Angelo

The most important and exciting thing that I have to announce is the appointment of Tom Angelo as Director of the soon to be established Centre for Teaching, Learning and Curriculum, and Professor of Higher Education. Professor Angelo will be known to many of you either by reputation or from his recent visits to La Trobe. He is currently Professor of Higher Education and Director of the University Teaching Development Centre at Victoria University of Wellington. Professor Angelo's doctorate is from Harvard's Graduate School of Education, and he is a widely published scholar in the areas of assessment and learning improvement.

Discussions are underway about the establishment of the new Centre for Teaching, Learning and Curriculum (yes, TLC), and Professor Angelo will be paying a number of visits to the University before he takes up his position on 1 July 2008. I believe we are very fortunate in having attracted someone of his stature and experience to La Trobe.

Do not forget to visit the Teaching and Learning website regularly as it will provide information and news about a very wide range of activities, resources and opportunities [www.latrobe.edu.au/teaching](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/teaching).

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## Teaching Technologies

I hope that through a broader review of existing teaching and learning committees that we will be able to establish clearer and more effective methods of communication and decision making about the use of various kinds of information and communication technologies. I am aware that at the beginning of this academic year there were a few problems that caused raised blood pressure.

Some of these problems were clearly caused by human error of various kinds, and others by conflicting technologies being adopted without an adequate overall management system. I have asked the Learning Technologies Committee to discuss identified problems and ways in which these can be prevented in future.

In the short run there are some principles that will help us to prevent breakdowns, crises and outbreaks of irritability.

- No one should utilise a new teaching technology without first checking with ICT about their compatibility with core University systems. This includes use of Camtasia, simple desktop videoconferencing systems and e-whiteboards.
- It would appear that 65% of videoconference failures relate to lack of staff training. Staff need to attend the room familiarisation sessions offered at Bundoora, Bendigo and Wodonga before the start of semester.
- Teaching involving any significant technological support should be discussed in advance with both your faculty IT support staff and ICT to ensure that appropriate technical capacity or support in fact exists. The first point of contact in ICT is Max Colebourn, Director, Teaching Technology Services ([m.colebourn@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:m.colebourn@latrobe.edu.au), extension 9793).

This is not to imply that technology should be determining how we teach, but rather that at the operational level we need to have far better policies and controls in place simply to avoid unnecessary break-downs.

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## A Teaching and Learning Committee?

The University Operational Plan asks the Chair of Academic Board to undertake a review of academic decision-making. As part of this I am proposing that we consider the establishment of a University Teaching and Learning Committee and a restructuring of the Academic Committee to focus on academic programs. The rationale for creating a committee (when I am sure one overall objective is to reduce committees) is that we need a place to discuss broad teaching and learning policy and its implementation which brings together Faculty leaders with senior representation from the expertise that lies in the Centre for TLC, the Library, ICT and so on.

This kind of policy development will be critical in implementing proposals to evaluate teaching in career development, developing a systematic approach to teaching technologies, creating a University wide approach to curriculum reform and much else besides.

Discussion and consultation about the roles of these two committees will occur through Academic Committee and Academic Board, and as part of the wider review of academic decision-making being led by Professor Malcolm Rimmer, Chair of Academic Board.

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## University Strategic Plan

The University Strategic Plan sets out some very ambitious goals for improving teaching and learning at La Trobe over the next five years, and we now have an [Operational Plan for 2008](#) derived from this. The highlights include:

- Beginning a systematic review of the University's programs to ensure they are 'sustainable, distinctive and relevant'
- Reviewing the University's promotion criteria to develop a 'transparent system for the recognition, reward and promotion of staff who excel in curriculum development and teaching'
- Establishment of the new Centre for Teaching, Learning and Curriculum which will support the Faculties in implementing the Strategic Plan
- Improving opportunities for student engagement and enrichment.

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## Student Engagement

Dr Kerry Ferguson, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Equity and Student Services), is coordinating developments in student engagement at La Trobe. She recently appointed Ms Ngaere Blair to manage a student engagement strategy for the University. The initial focus will include programs designed to improve the leadership skills and employability of our students. Planning is also underway for a colloquium on student engagement to be held later in the year, and a student engagement website will soon be launched to keep us up to date with new developments in this area.

I have provided information below about data gathered through the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) which is designed to measure those elements of student engagement which have been shown to have a major impact on learning at university.

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## Data Lovely Data

We have some very interesting and useful research data about students' experiences at La Trobe last year. The danger with collecting data centrally is that it often doesn't reach the people for whom it is relevant, and who might not only learn useful things from it but make changes to what they do as a result.

The two reports which are available on the [teaching and learning website](#) now are:

[The First Year Experience at La Trobe University in 2007](#) and the [Australasian Survey of Student Engagement](#) which was administered at 21 Australian universities last year, and which will be administered at La Trobe again this year.

Over a thousand students responded to these surveys, and while it is likely that some of our most alienated or disadvantaged students are not well represented, the data tells us some pleasing things and some worrying things. *The First Year Experience* questionnaire has been administered at five yearly intervals since 1994 and provides important evidence on which to base strategies for improving university transition, retention and progression. It suggests, for example, that three quarters of the first year students think that teaching staff are enthusiastic and approachable, but less than a third think staff give helpful feedback on their progress (p 24).

And on a similar vein, the AUSSE survey tells us that only 34% of respondents received prompt feedback on their performance on a regular basis. Despite this 77% rated their educational experience at La Trobe as good or excellent, and 84% said they would choose to come to La Trobe if they were starting over again.

Even this little bit of data provides very helpful evidence about what we might do to improve student learning at La Trobe.

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## **Carrick Institute**

There has been some question about the level of ongoing funding for the Carrick Institute given the new Labor government's need to cut expenditure to manage inflation. However, I am delighted to say that while there has indeed been a cut to this year's budget, full funding has been restored for future years. There is a great deal of excellent work being done at La Trobe which should be developed into applications for Carrick funding, particularly in the area of curriculum development, and I look forward to the new Centre for Teaching, Learning and Curriculum working closely with staff to develop successful grant submissions.

We plan to have a Carrick section of the University's teaching and learning website up and running before too long which will keep everyone informed not just of opportunities to make grant applications but also the projects already running with La Trobe involvement.

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## **Social Inclusion**

At a gathering in February of senior staff from the Innovative Research Universities group<sup>1</sup> it was agreed that we could develop our shared, historical focus on access and equity to resonate with the Rudd Government's focus on 'social inclusion'. As a result a 'Social inclusion coordinating group' has been established to do this work, including the development of a proposal for an IRU Australia Social Inclusion and Higher Education Forum to be held early in the second half of this year. As the La Trobe representative on this coordinating group I will keep you informed on how this project proceeds.

<sup>1</sup> Flinders, Murdoch, Macquarie, Griffith, Newcastle, James Cook and La Trobe University.