

Edition 3 – July 2008

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“Student engagement”...

is defined as the amount of time and intensity of effort students invest in activities positively linked by research to deep, meaningful learning. More student engagement typically results in better retention, more learning – and higher graduate satisfaction. In addition to good curriculum design and good teaching, opportunities for wider student engagement on campus can promote better student learning.

For that reason, La Trobe, like many other universities, is now developing approaches to increase student engagement. Ngaere Blair, the manager of our student engagement efforts, is working with staff across all campuses to identify current good practice and new opportunities to engage our diverse range of students.



We cannot improve what we do not measure, however. So, it makes sense for us to measure certain kinds of student engagement.

AUSSE (read on as we need your support)

The research underpinning this approach to student engagement began in the US, and led to the creation of a survey fondly known as NSSE (Nessie) – the National Survey of Student Engagement – which is now administered by hundreds of US and Canadian Universities on an annual basis. In Australia most universities, including La Trobe, have now agreed to participate in a suitably Australianised version of the survey known as AUSSE (the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement). There is also a parallel academic staff survey which gathers data on the way they expect students to engage (totally anonymous of course).

NSSE will target all first and third year students across all La Trobe campuses, as well as the academic staff who teach them. NSSE results should help to identify gaps between student and staff expectations and generally raise interest in and understanding of ways in which student learning can be improved.

The NSSE uses six key, research-based scales to measure engagement:

- Academic Challenge (extent to which expectations and assessments challenge students to learn)
- Active Learning (students’ efforts to actively construct their knowledge)
- Student and Staff Interactions (level and nature of students’ contact with teaching staff)
- Enriching Educational Experiences (participation in broadening educational activities)
- Supportive Learning Environment (feelings of legitimisation within the university community)
- Work Integrated Learning (integration of employment-focused work experiences into study)

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WE NEED YOU! (well, most of you...)

Students get asked to fill in a lot of surveys, and you may feel ambivalent about some of them. But this one is grounded in solid research, and will generate a great deal of useful data if we get a good response rate.

To get a good response rate we are developing a multi-pronged campaign promoting the survey to staff and students. To download a PowerPoint slide for use in your first and third year lectures/classes in the next two weeks, go to:

www.latrobe.edu.au/teaching/teaching-resources/ausse.html

Staff teaching these classes will also receive an invitation to participate in the survey at the end of this month.

For more detail about AUSSE and our involvement contact Ngaere Blair at n.blair@latrobe.edu.au.



ALTC Success

Even though we are not yet allowed to announce their names, I can tell you that a total of 10 La Trobe staff have won five Citations for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning this year. The awards will be presented along with the other Victorian winners at Federation Square in early August. Once the awards are public, I hope you will join me in celebrating our colleagues' success. As many of you know, I believe that effective teaching should be rewarded with promotion and internal recognition, as effective research already is – and not only with external awards.

And speaking of promotions...

The University's Strategic Plan announced that by 2010 we would 'develop a transparent system for the recognition, reward and promotion of staff who excel in curriculum development and teaching'. In response, I am chairing a Working Party of Academic Board which is reviewing the entire promotions process, including criteria for promotion. We hope to provide recommendations by the September Academic Board meeting. As part of this process, a sub-group co-chaired by Professor Tom Angelo and Dr Kay Souter is developing an evidence-based framework for the evaluation of teaching.

The proposed changes will of course be widely circulated for consultation, but I am confident that we will have achieved this particular goal well before 2010! We are also clear that reviewing the promotions criteria is an excellent opportunity to develop a coherent approach to the criteria and processes used in appointments, probation and performance management.

Curriculum Review

In the last Newsletter I announced my intention to establish a Curriculum Taskforce to develop explicit principles and guidelines for the review and renewal of our teaching and learning programs. The Taskforce will be looking at curriculum from a very broad perspective. Implications for staff workload, physical facilities, financial viability, student support and a range of other matters that intersect with curriculum will be considered and debated by the taskforce.

We have received almost 100 nominations of curriculum and teaching opinion leaders from across the university (and all campuses) for this Taskforce. From this impressive list we will invite a group that represents our disciplinary spread, and includes both experienced senior staff as well as younger academics, to work with the Taskforce. As the sponsor of this project I have asked Professor Tom Angelo to lead the Taskforce, and we have also invited an external curriculum expert to participate as a 'critical friend'.

The Taskforce will be launched with a full day workshop on 15 August and then meet fortnightly for the rest of the year to undertake this challenging work. By December we plan to have a series of well-tested proposals to discuss with the wider university community.

In the next Newsletter I will provide details of how you can engage with the Taskforce. There will be a website for the posting of submissions, discussion papers and all other relevant material, and maybe even a blog. We will seek and welcome the widest possible engagement.

And another RADICAL decision

Many problems have been identified with the University's current approach to gathering and using student feedback on teaching and on quality of units. Student feedback is one important source of information for evaluating and improving teaching and curriculum. Students are often deeply sceptical about whether anyone takes any notice, however, and staff often have doubts about how such information is interpreted and fears about how it might be used. Student surveys need to be based on the best current educational research, staff need to be confident about their validity, and staff and students need to know how the results are used to support teaching improvement.

Over the next few months, Professor Tom Angelo will work to develop a new approach to student feedback to be introduced from 2009. Central to this project will be a university wide opportunity to discuss the research underpinning student surveys, as well as the development of a shared understanding of how the material gathered in this way should be used.

In order to create time and space for this work, there will be no requirement for staff to organise surveys known as QAU (Quality Assurance of Unit) for the remainder of 2008. Staff who wish to collect SETs for the purpose of gathering evidence to support an application for promotion, or for their own evaluation processes, are of course free to do so.