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Newsletter September 2008

It must be spring. Every day there are a number of rainbow lorikeets in the elm tree outside my office, stripping away the new buds and apparently becoming intoxicated in the process – causing them to career into my windows with frightful thuds. There is also a rather plain brushtailed possum which can be seen running along the Peribolos East rails and jumping into the same trees in broad daylight. Staff are probably doing similarly strange things.

There is a lot to report on so here are the headlines, and wherever possible, links for those who would like to know more.



AUSSE and SSE

After a major mobilisation led by Ngaere Blair, including posters, emails, online reminders and even a sausage sizzle, we had an enormously increased participation rate in the Australian Survey of Student Engagement, and our first cohort of staff filled in the Staff Survey. While we are still awaiting final numbers from the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER), we are confident we have reached our target of over 1000 student respondents and 300 staff. The survey results will be made available to us by November, and all staff and students will be given access to the reports.

While we believe this data will be of direct assistance to the improvement of student learning at La Trobe, we are also now focussing on how to increase the response rate to the annual Australian Graduate Survey (GDS/CEQ surveys) which have provided the key data on which the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund allocations have been made. This year we managed to reach the required 50% response rate only by the skin of our teeth - or rather much late night work on the phones by Glenys Harding and her team in the Management Information Unit. So large sums are potentially at risk.

In the coming weeks we will be distributing a PowerPoint slide for staff to use in lectures towards the end of semester in order to raise awareness about the survey with our final years students. Look out for that in an email from your Head of School.

Visitors

For over a decade a group of Australian scholars have been researching the first year experience and its impact on how well students learn. Last week we were fortunate to have one of these scholars here at La Trobe to work with the Curriculum Taskforce. Professor Kerri-Lee Krause, Director of the Griffith Institute of Higher Education at Griffith University, also gave a seminar on 'The First Year

Experience: Being Strategic in Promoting Student Learning and Success'. The overheads from Professor Krause's presentation are available at <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/teaching/curriculum-taskforce.html>.

Curriculum Taskforce

The Curriculum Taskforce has now met twice, and will continue to meet every fortnight on Friday afternoons until the end of November. We have created a blog to keep the University community informed on the work of the Taskforce - <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/teaching/curriculum-taskforce.html>. There you can find notes from the Taskforce meetings, terms of reference, reading material and so forth. The first substantive area of discussion was the first year experience, using Professor Kerri-Lee Krause and her research to stimulate debate about what the first year at La Trobe should include. The focus was on what are the aspects of the first year experience which lead to the best student outcomes, including retention and completion. At the next meeting of the Curriculum Taskforce we will have Professor Fred D'Agostino, Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Queensland to discuss strategies for renewing curriculum.

Improving our Teaching Infrastructure

As newcomers to La Trobe both Tom Angelo and I have been struck by the gap between the size and quality of the teaching spaces available and the ones that most of you would like and need. Indeed, at Bundoora, we have more teaching space than we need, but the wrong kind. It is pleasing to be able to announce that the University will be able to invest in some major improvements, because of the Rudd Government's Better Universities Renewal Funding Initiative (BURFI) in the last budget.

These works will include new teaching video conferencing facilities at Bendigo and Bundoora, upgrading the IT infrastructure backbone to all regional campuses and providing at least 500 additional informal study seats in an extended library and in a central student services hub. A total of about \$10.7m has been allocated to these teaching and learning projects.

In addition funding has been made available for a number of critical infrastructure initiatives for 2009 including enabling more than four sites to participate in a videoconference; refurbishing medium sized teaching spaces with improved AV systems and standardised user controls; a 30 site trial of thin client technology that effectively places PCs in teaching spaces; major refurbishment of six lecture theatres in Bundoora and Bendigo with all new touchscreen controlled AV systems plus lectern and doc cam, fitted for videoconferencing and Lectopia. And that is not all...

Work Integrated Learning

While there is a substantial amount of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) at La Trobe, there is no university wide policy on its role, and relatively little sharing of experience or resources. The annual IRUA (Innovative Research Universities Australia) Learning and Teaching Forum, to be held in Brisbane at the end of October, will focus on WIL in six discipline areas ranging from Allied Health to Engineering.

I have asked Professor David Spencer, Associate Dean (Academic) in the Faculty of Law and Management to coordinate our representation at the Forum, and to work closely with Anne Stansfeld from our Careers and Employment Service, who has pulled together an overview of WIL at La Trobe. I propose that following this conference we convene a meeting of those at La Trobe with an interest in WIL to discuss whether La Trobe should have some strategic intent in this area.

New Curriculum Committee

At the last Academic Board it was agreed to establish a new Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Committee to provide a major forum for policy debate and advice. The Committee will bring together in one forum the various groups who need to work together to ensure the best possible teaching and learning at La Trobe, and includes the Library, ICT, Student Equity, as well as the Associate Deans (Academic) and others. It is hoped that the Committee will meet before the end of the year. The Terms of Reference will be placed on the Secretariat website in the near future.

The creation of this new committee is part of an overall review of all the sub-committees of Academic Board. It is expected that the review will lead to a reduction in the total number of University committees and more efficient processes for conducting University business. The Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Committee will take on some of the work conducted by the existing Academic Committee. Other straightforward business processes overseen by Academic Committee, such as course and subject approvals, will be reviewed to find more efficient ways for them to be managed.

Subjects and Courses

Staff use differing terms to describe our teaching programs and their components, and this has caused some confusion in various contexts. It appears that the term 'unit' was introduced to comply with Callista, while our Statutes and Regulations continue to specify the terms 'subjects' and 'courses'. Under the new student system we can use whatever we want, so I have recommended that in formal documentation we revert to the terms 'subject' and 'course'. I expect some people will continue to say unit and program regardless.

