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Newsletter - December 2008

This is the last newsletter for the year – and there have not been quite as many as I would have wished. But now is a good time for New Year's resolutions so I'd like your feedback about whether -

- a newsletter like this is of use to you,
- you would like it to stay focussed on matters to do with curriculum, teaching and learning, or
- it should broaden to include other things for which I am now responsible.

So if you have an opinion about any of these questions please let me know by sending an email to dvcac@latrobe.edu.au.

Curriculum Taskforce - Green Paper available

The Curriculum Taskforce (twenty-eight of our highly respected academic teachers plus Professor Tom Angelo and our external friend and critic, Professor Owen Hicks) has been meeting fortnightly since the end of August to develop principles for curriculum design and renewal at La Trobe.

A draft of the Taskforce's report, '*Green Paper on Curriculum Review and Renewal at La Trobe*' was distributed to participants in last week's Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Colloquium (more on the Colloquium later in the newsletter). This Curriculum Green Paper (not to be confused with the Vice-Chancellor's Green Paper of 2007) is now available to download from the Teaching and Learning website at www.latrobe.edu.au/teaching.

The Curriculum Green Paper is intended to promote widespread discussion and debate, informing the development of a White Paper by May. Early in 2009, Tom Angelo and I will hold on-site consultations with Schools and Faculties, and on several campuses. An online discussion forum will also be made available on the Teaching and Learning website in the near future.

It has been a pleasure to work with the members of the Taskforce in a process which Owen Hicks memorably described as 'lurching democracy', and we are thinking about ways to build on the creation of this genuinely cross-university group of experts next year.

Pilot projects to test some of the Green Paper principles

One initial outcome from the Curriculum Taskforce has been the establishment of a number of pilot projects for 2009 to test some of the principles of curriculum design and review discussed in the Green Paper. The aim of these pilot projects is to develop local expertise and capacity to carry forward larger-scale curriculum review and renewal projects. Most of the projects involve first-year subjects and all focus on key aspects of the Green Paper recommendations, such as cornerstone subjects, graduate capabilities, or evaluating curriculum design. These pilot projects are supported by monies awarded to La Trobe by the government's Learning and Teaching Performance Fund and will be provided with staff support and expertise by the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Centre.

Office of the
Deputy Vice-Chancellor

03 9479 3447
dvcac@latrobe.edu.au

Health Sciences have spent the past two years undergoing major curriculum reform that will see a common first year for all their undergraduate students launched in 2009. Their pilot project will focus on developing and trialling appropriate, effective, and efficient methods for evaluating how and how well the new first-year curriculum is working. Similarly, the Faculty of Education project will focus on evaluating and improving the first-year experience, building on work undertaken during 2008 to implement a common first-year cornerstone subject.

In Science, Technology and Engineering, the focus will be on providing academic support in foundation or cornerstone subjects in a number of degrees. In Humanities and Social Sciences, two first-year core subjects and one second/third year core subject will be redesigned. The Faculty of Law and Management project will focus on gathering information on existing graduate attributes/student learning outcomes from the various discipline areas and then mapping those attributes/outcomes across the current curriculum.

Library staff have proposed a project to develop a new, University-wide approach to informational literacy skills in the first year.

There will also be a multi-faculty, multi-campus project around the development, delivery and evaluation of a new, innovative, cross-disciplinary subject, 'Climate, Sustainability and Society'.

2008 Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Colloquium, 4 - 5 December

Nearly two hundred staff attended this Colloquium last week, with a large contingent from our northern campuses, and a further 75 or so joined us online, via high quality webcasts that gave all staff a chance to follow the two day event from their desks. Copies of PowerPoint slides and handouts will be available from the colloquium website early next week (www.latrobe.edu.au/teaching/conference).

The Colloquium was designed and organised by Professor Tom Angelo, Mr Jason Brown and the staff of the new Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Centre. It featured both keynote presentations from national experts and the showcasing of some of the 140 curriculum projects currently being undertaken by La Trobe staff. For me, the highlight was a panel of students who spoke to a large audience about student engagement – what helped them to feel engaged with the University and their studies and what hindered this. The panel followed a presentation by Dr Hamish Coates, from the Australian Centre for Educational Research (ACER) about the Australasian University Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). La Trobe produced one of the highest response rates for the 2008 survey, and a summary report of findings will be released for discussion in February 2009.

Feedback from staff who attended the Colloquium has been overwhelmingly positive on every dimension, with about 80 per cent of staff saying that the value they got for the time invested in attending was extremely high or high. Some have suggested that we put something funny in the drinks to get this response...

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La Trobe wins \$220,000 ALTC Grant on Curriculum leadership

As Owen Hicks noted at the Colloquium, curriculum is increasingly the buzz word in teaching and learning. So it is particularly pleasing that La Trobe is the lead organisation in a project the Australian Learning and Teaching Council has just agreed to fund called 'Leading curriculum renewal, redesign and evaluation: The development of a guide for academic leaders in Australian universities'. The project will be led by Professor Tom Angelo, and includes Melbourne, Griffith and Swinburne Universities.

New Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Committee

This new Committee of Academic Board held its first meeting recently to discuss its terms of reference and its proposed sub-committees. These sub-committees will include the Learning Technologies Committee, a new Admissions, Retention and Success Committee to replace the Selection and Enrolment Committee, and a smaller more flexible Programs Committee (to replace the previous Academic Committee). Details of these committees, their terms of reference and membership are available on Secretariat's directory of committees at www.latrobe.edu.au/secretariatdirectory.html.

Proposal to redesign La Trobe's SET and QAU systems

Earlier this year I undertook to review our current approach to gathering and using student feedback on teaching and on units. Many staff had expressed their reservations about both the tools used, and the uses to which the data gathered was put. This review has been completed with the expert assistance of Professor Tom Angelo and the Associate Deans (Academic). At its first meeting, the new Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Committee endorsed a proposal to replace the instruments fondly known as SET and QAU in 2009 with a new approach to be based on Student Feedback on Teaching (SFT) and Student Feedback on Subjects (SFS). The rationale for making these changes, the details of the new proposal, and copies of the proposed new survey instruments have already been forwarded to Faculties and the NTEU for feedback. A copy of these documents will be available on the Teaching and Learning website next week. It is important to consider the new framework without delay so that it can be fully implemented for 2009.

Bigger things...

Meanwhile the whole of the sector is waiting with bated breath for the release of the Bradley Review into Higher Education which is expected any day now. Professor Bradley has been giving various presentations in recent weeks which signal what she has identified as key problems for the sector, but no one knows what she is going to recommend as solutions. At least it is clear that she believes the sector is seriously underfunded in ways that are beginning to reduce the quality of the student experience, and that underfunding can be shown to have a negative impact on the economy. She is particularly interested in increasing levels of participation in higher education, and doing this in ways that raise the participation of disadvantaged groups.



**Office of the
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03 9479 3447
dvcac@latrobe.edu.au

Review of Academic Language and Learning Support

A review of our provision of academic language and learning support is almost complete, chaired by Dr Kay Souter, Associate Dean (Academic), Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. We have a number of expert staff across the University who provide these essential supports to our students, and the purpose of the review is to recommend ways in which these resources can be used to best effect to support the University's strategic goals.

Data lovely data, again

We have just received the data from our participation in the AUSSE survey this year, but I for one have had no time to look at it. Early next year we will circulate some key findings through this newsletter, and more importantly, organise discussion and reflection on the findings with each Faculty and at the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Committee.

Meanwhile results have been released for the Australian Graduate Survey (comprising the Course Experience Questionnaire and the Graduate Destination Survey). The 2008 survey data for La Trobe University can be found on the survey section of the MIU website (www.latrobe.edu.au/stats/pages/surveys). These results relate to 2007 graduates. Unfortunately, the University's overall satisfaction fell (although one Faculty improved), while generic skills and good teaching mean scores improved (except for one Faculty).

Next year we will be asking Faculties to comment on this data and to suggest educationally responsible ways in which we can increase student satisfaction. Of course, the Green Paper recommendations are meant, among other things, to do just that by improving the student learning experience generally and student learning outcomes in their subjects and courses, specifically.

Season's greetings

The Vice-Chancellor has on previous occasions acknowledged the hard work of La Trobe staff in what has been a particularly difficult year for the University. I share with him an appreciation for the widespread good will and commitment shown about the University and its future. Steps have been taken to turn the University around financially, and I feel confident that a range of new initiatives, such as those proposed in the Curriculum Green Paper, will result in La Trobe University enjoying renewed success in the higher education sector.

So, I hope each and every one of you enjoys the Christmas - New Year break. Put aside all thoughts of work, and relax with your family and friends.

I look forward to working with you next year.

Belinda Probert
Deputy Vice-Chancellor

Office of the
Deputy Vice-Chancellor

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