

**TEACHING QUALITY TASK FORCE**

2019

**Final Report**

**ENQUIRIES**

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# Executive Summary and Recommendations

The Teaching Quality Task Force (TQTF) was established in the first quarter of 2018 to investigate and report on the issues affecting teaching quality and student learning experiences, and to provide advice and make recommendations on strategies and initiatives for the enhancement of teaching quality and student learning at La Trobe. The membership and meetings of the Task Force can be found in Appendix 2.

The work of the Task Force informed the development of the *Learning and Teaching Plan 2018-2022* and this Report is thus well-aligned with the Plan. Implementation of the Task Force recommendations will further the La Trobe learning and teaching mission of providing 'an outstanding student experience to all La Trobe students in the domains of teaching quality, learner engagement, learning resources, student support and skill development'.

An interim report was submitted to Education Committee for discussion in August 2018 and reviewed by SEG and provided to Council for its meeting on 15 October 2018. The interim report was made available on the Teaching Quality Task Force page<sup>1</sup> on the La Trobe University website. A number of issues raised in the Task Force were referred to the DVCA or the Student Success Taskforce. These are listed in Appendix 1.

The matters raised with the Task Force fell within four main themes: digital education, course development, human resources and the student experience. Within the theme of *Digital Education*, the Task Force heard a range of concerns around the use of technologies in learning, from misconceptions that blended learning is a 'lesser' form of learning, or a cost-saving measure, through to the suitability and availability of technologies. These themes have been used to provide a framework for the recommendations. In the theme of *Course Development*, the Task Force heard concerns about the need for course rationalisation, clearer expectations of, and support for, the role of the course coordinator, and a need for harmonisation of teaching periods. In the theme of *Human Resources*, the Task Force heard of a number of issues relating to casualisation of the workforce, and academic workload. Lastly, in the theme of *Student Experience*, concerns clustered around the student survey system, staff reward and recognition and the Learning Management System (LMS) and related issues.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Teaching Quality Taskforce recommends:

### Digital Education

1. That a 3-year plan for digitally-enhanced learning be developed as part of the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Plan 2018-2022. As part of this plan:
  - The use of the term 'blended learning' be reviewed.
  - The practice of passive video conferencing be phased out in favour of more engaging and sustainable use of technology.

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<sup>1</sup> Following redevelopment of the LTLT website, the interim and final reports are available at <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/lilt/about>

- A standards-based approach to the use of the LMS and related digital resources be utilised.
- Digital enhancement be utilised consistently across courses.
- The system for maintenance of audio-visual facilities and provision of self-help resources be reviewed.
- The focus is on student engagement and the integrity of the educational experience.

### **Course Development**

2. That, as part of the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Plan 2018-2022, and in the context of Annual Course Monitoring:
  - A structured and ongoing system of course and subject rationalisation be introduced.
  - The framework for course coordination be developed and the support for course coordinators enhanced.
  - The system of teaching periods reviewed with a view to ensuring greater harmonisation and efficiencies.

### **Human Resources**

3. That, in the context of the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Plan 2018-2022:
  - The human resources processes for recruiting and managing sessional staff be reviewed for opportunities to streamline and simplify the processes.
  - A uniform approach to management and development of sessional staff be introduced across the University.
  - The Academic Workload Planning (AWP) be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure it supports and enables good teaching practice.

### **Student Experience**

4. That, in order to support the Learning and Teaching Plan 2018-2022:
  - The student survey system be reviewed to ensure:
    - A single student survey instrument is used to optimise effective collection of feedback
    - A mandatory feedback button on the LMS be introduced to encourage quick and continuous feedback throughout the subject.
  - The University ensures student feedback is actioned, and the actions communicated clearly to students.
  - The system of staff recognition and reward be reviewed to reflect the strategic goals of the Learning and Teaching Plan.
  - Subject level communications are reviewed to ensure students receive accurate and timely subject information.

# Part 1: The Commendations

The first question asked at each meeting was: *what is working well in learning and teaching?* Based on this prompt, participants identified several positive features:

1. Staff were highly positive about the TQTF process itself. As noted in the Bendigo Listening Post report, staff 'were receptive and appreciative of the opportunity to share their experiences and feedback. They expressed a deep desire to support their students and a willingness to work in partnership to improve the student experience'.
2. It was clear that there are multiple areas of excellent teaching and learning practice, informed by the student voice and characterised by strong collegiality amongst schools and their academic staff throughout the University.
3. Students commended some teaching staff for 'going the extra mile' in supporting student learning. In particular, they identified the following positively:
  - a. staff who are responsive and have a dialogue with students;
  - b. staff who are engaged with students, and who want to take the time to help (e.g. by staying back to answer questions or making extra time to discuss assignment issues); and,
  - c. staff who are interested in students as individuals.
4. The College Education Teams (particularly the Educational Technology support and Quality and Standards Teams), Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Connect Academic, Quality and Standards and La Trobe Learning and Teaching (LTLT) (particularly the Digital Learning Strategy (DLS) team and the educational design team) were commended on several occasions for their support of academic staff; and the Library was commended for its ongoing support of learning and teaching.
5. The Subject Improvement Process (SIP) worked well in several schools where it was used to encourage people to talk about their feedback and engage in conversations about subject improvement.
6. The College of SHE retention plan has provided an opportunity for discussion around what makes quality teaching at the college level.
7. Heads of Campus commended the increase in teaching innovation on regional campuses. They noted an improvement in facilities for students and staff and that, in particular, new teaching spaces have created a new student-centred style of learning. Staff and students at the Bundoora campus made similar comments about their facilities.
8. Staff welcomed the initiatives of The Learning Hub and The Maths Hub and look forward to an evaluation of those initiatives.
9. Staff commended the lead tutor system in the La Trobe Business School, and the scheme of support tutors for first year subjects across a range of areas for the benefits these brought to student learning and efficient subject management.
10. Staff commended the Customer Service Champion Recognition Program as a valuable mechanism through which to nominate staff who go 'above and beyond'. They also commended the introduction of the Feedback button on the La Trobe website and were heartened that feedback had been actioned.

# Part 2: Key Themes and Recommendations

## IDENTIFIED THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The FOUR most commonly themes raised in the meetings were: digital education, course development, human resources and student experience.

At all meetings, issues relating to dissatisfaction with Course Information Management System (CIMS) and timetabling were expressed. These matters are being dealt with in the Course Management Reform project and the Timetabling Task Force, so are not addressed in this report.

### THEME 1: DIGITAL EDUCATION

#### Issues:

Despite the fact that blended learning is a rapidly growing aspect of education across the tertiary sector, the Task Force found that there is a negative view of blended learning held by many staff and students. This view seems to be founded on a misapprehension that blended learning was implemented as a cost-saving measure and continues to be associated with the University change process of 2014. In particular, the Task Force heard that:

- The negative perception of blended learning is particularly strong on regional campuses.
- The negative perception of blended learning also extends to online learning.
- There is some confusion about what blended learning is supposed to be and how a blended subject should run.
- There is a lack of clarity around the benefits of blended learning and how blended learning can be implemented in a subject.
- To date, blended learning initiatives, primarily achieved through the Digital Learning Strategy (DLS), focussed on subjects. However, there was a widespread view that the use of technologies should be considered on a course basis (e.g. utilising technologies to enhance and support learning in first year, while in final year studies, technologies may be utilised to ensure maximum flexibility for students).
- Many academics expressed concern about the fact that, increasingly, few students turn up for face-to-face classes. Some academics blamed this on the move to blended learning, though it was clear to the Task Force that this phenomenon is not confined to subjects that have been blended, nor is it unique to La Trobe. In turn, the Task Force was told that the fact that students were not required to attend class was driving a perception, particularly on regional campuses, that education was not rigorous.
- Internet connectivity can be patchy on regional campuses and in the surrounding community. This creates difficulties for students to engage with online materials and supports.
- Some schools are still utilising passive videoconferencing into the regions, a practice that was intended to be phased out some years ago. This is contributing to a negative perception of blended learning in the regions.
- Staff would like more guidance and professional development in relation to use of technologies to facilitate and enhance learning.

At the same time, the Task Force heard, particularly from participants in the College of SHE, that blended learning initiatives have been very successful. The success of many blended learning subjects sits in stark contrast to the negative perceptions held by many staff and students.

### **Recommendations:**

1. That a 3-year plan for digitally-enhanced learning be developed as part of the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Plan 2018-2022. As part of this plan:
  - The use of the term 'blended learning' be reviewed.
  - The practice of passive video conferencing be phased out in favour of more engaging and sustainable use of technology.
  - A standards-based approach to the use of the LMS and related digital resources be utilised.
  - Digital enhancement be utilised consistently across courses.
  - The system for maintenance of audio-visual facilities and provision of self-help resources be reviewed.
  - The focus is on student engagement and the integrity of the educational experience.

## **THEME 2: COURSE DEVELOPMENT**

### **Issues**

The Task Force heard several concerns about ambiguities and difficulties related to the Course Coordinator role. The Task Force is aware of the Course and Subject Coordinator policy<sup>2</sup> but considering the increase in responsibilities of Course Coordinators, particularly as the University moves towards annual course monitoring (ACM), there is a need to provide clearer expectations of, and more support for, these roles. The Task Force heard concerns about the workload attached to coordination by reason of the sheer number of courses and subjects; and by the plethora of teaching periods, many of which overlap.

### **Recommendations**

2. That, as part of the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Plan 2018-2022, and in the context of Annual Course Monitoring:
  - A structured and ongoing system of course and subject rationalisation be introduced;
  - The framework for course coordination be developed and the support for course coordinators enhanced;
  - The system of teaching periods reviewed with a view to greater harmonisation of teaching periods.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://policies.latrobe.edu.au/document/view.php?id=162>

## **THEME 3: HUMAN RESOURCES**

### **Issues:**

#### *Casualisation*

The Task Force heard widespread concerns around the casualisation of the academic workforce and the implications for quality teaching. The Task Force heard that:

- Some teaching staff, because of casualisation, do not work in the classroom at all. Rather, their workload allocation is wholly taken up by the supervision of sessional staff.
- Widespread use of sessional staff reinforces the belief that research ‘trumps’ teaching, that is, continuing staff do research while casual staff do the teaching.
- Subjects are being designed for the following year that rely heavily on sessional staff to be available for subject delivery. Thus, although a subject may be well-designed, much of its impact, positive or negative, will depend on the sessional teaching staff.
- The processes for recruiting and managing sessional staff, from a human resources perspective, were very complex and time consuming.
- Human Resources and Finance management systems are not integrated.
- More than 80 per cent of teaching is done by sessional staff but there is no way of assessing the quality of an individual’s teaching. At present the Student Evaluation of Teaching is an ‘opt in’ process.

The Task Force is aware that the new collective agreement may ease some of these tensions given that there will be more capacity to give good sessional staff fixed term contracts. However, casualisation of the workforce is a national trend, and the view of the Task Force is that La Trobe needs to provide better oversight of, and support for, sessional staff.

#### *Workload*

The Task Force heard widespread dissatisfaction among academic staff in relation to workload. Specifically, it heard that academics were concerned about the amount of ‘administrative’ work that they were expected to do. This meant that, in many cases, good teachers did no classroom work at all – rather their workload points were expended on course or subject coordination. It further heard a concern that the workload management system does not give sufficient recognition for certain tasks, particularly subject and course coordination, and online teaching. Regional staff expressed concern about the amount of travelling between campuses that they do (often daily) and that the workload management system did not adequately provide for the time necessary to travel safely.

A further issue raised in relation to workload was that of the academic calendar. Schools with multiple external partners, regional, face-to-face and online offerings found the lack of coordinated teaching periods added significantly to workload and to stress. In particular, the Task Force was urged to consider a proposal for a trimester system.

The Task Force heard that staff workload was linked to the number of courses and subjects offered by La Trobe.

The Task Force is aware that the Academic Workload Planning System is currently under review and notes that there is a DVCA-sponsored project in place to refresh the course portfolio.

### **Recommendations:**

3. That, in the context of the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Plan 2018-2022:
  - The human resources processes for recruiting and managing sessional staff be reviewed for opportunities to streamline and simplify the processes.

- A uniform approach to management and development of sessional staff be introduced across the University.
- The Academic Workload Planning (AWP) be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure it supports and enables good teaching practice.

#### **THEME 4: STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

##### *The Student Survey System*

Despite the fact that La Trobe has many high quality and capable casual academic staff, the Task Force heard considerable dissatisfaction with the student feedback survey system. The concerns ranged from the timing of the surveys (the methods and frequency of collecting data needs to be quick enough to allow changes to be made throughout the semester so subject coordinators can adjust the subject based on student feedback); a perception that students are over-surveyed (and thus suffering from 'survey fatigue'); and, that low response rates meant that survey data was unreliable. Issues have also been raised around gender bias in evaluations, and distress caused by derogatory and otherwise inappropriate student comments.

The Task Force is aware of a review of the survey system at La Trobe currently underway.

##### *Staff Reward and Recognition*

The Task Force heard that many academics consider research is valued at the expense of teaching and learning. There is a perception that there is a 'minimum standard philosophy of teaching' which is for the academic to get by without drawing attention to themselves. Recognition and reward are considered to lie in relation to research rather than teaching. This was reflected in the feedback of students who reported to the Task Force that, although the majority of their interactions with staff were positive, there were some teachers who gave the impression that they were not interested in teaching. Students associated poor quality teaching with teachers who simply read PowerPoint slides, who didn't engage with students, or who focussed on content at the expense of learning.

The Task Force is aware that the DVCA is working with James Fazzino and a working party to address the perception that research 'trumps' teaching. The Task Force supports this initiative. In addition, the Task Force heard that the culture of teaching and learning is highly individualised, and La Trobe needs to do more to nurture a culture of teaching teams.

##### *Learning Management System and Related Issues*

The Task Force heard concerns about the LMS, specifically that:

- as used, the LMS does not provide a sufficiently consistent experience for students; and,
- that there is little or no oversight of the use of the LMS.

The Task Force also heard concerns that there are discrepancies in information across different systems. In particular there was concern about discrepancies between subject learning guides and other sources of information about subjects. Students said they cared deeply about how to enrol, timetable allocation, how to navigate the LMS and student online, and were very disappointed with systems that did not communicate properly and were not well laid out. The Task Force also heard of staff being frustrated about the lack of maintenance around audio visual facilities; and, that the University could make better use of technology and Zoom meetings to promote inclusivity.

**Recommendations:**

5. That, in order to support the Learning and Teaching Plan 2018-2022:
  - The student survey system be reviewed to ensure:
    - A single student survey instrument is used to ensure effective collection of feedback;
    - A mandatory feedback button on the LMS be introduced to encourage quick and continuous feedback throughout the subject.
    - The University ensures student feedback is actioned, and the actions communicated clearly to students.
  - The system of staff recognition and reward be reviewed to reflect the strategic goals of the Learning and Teaching Plan.
  - Subject level communications are reviewed to ensure students receive accurate and timely subject information.

## Appendix 1

The following feedback has been referred to the DVCA and the Student Success Task Force.

### **Students with special needs**

- *Student mental health issues are difficult in many respects. Some students are particularly difficult, and staff have very little recourse when managing their issues. For example, a contributor noted that SpeakUp was useful after a staff member was threatened, but that security was not available when needed.*
- *Appointments with Counselling, Equity and Diversity staff have long lead times.*
- *There is difficulty balancing individual needs against those of the cohort or subject (e.g. should the needs or behaviour of an individual be addressed to the detriment of others) and while adhering to policy constraints. For example, Special Consideration doesn't cover situations where students with chronic conditions relapse before submitting an assignment.*
- *Clarity of information and referral pathways are necessary to prevent a disproportionate amount of time being spent on managing student needs, compared with the time available to support their learning.*
- *Lack of quiet and rest space prevents students to attend who have mental health issues, anxiety, and autism.*
- *Educational technology is difficult for some students to understand/manage.*
- *Information needed about visual accessibility standards e.g. colours and colour combinations in printed and online text for those with colour vision deficiency.*

### **Learning access plan (LAP)**

- *Information about the management of LAPs need ongoing dissemination. Questions posed to the TQTF included, for example, "LAP documents have been received well into second semester. Should this have happened earlier?"*
- *Some students have reported issues with their LAP: Course and Subject Coordinators appear not to "believe" them, and they are asked to provide additional information to justify the LAP.*
- *It should be emphasised to students that they should return to their disability adviser if their needs aren't being met based on their LAP.*
- *The TQTF notes the work of the Learning Access Plan working group, and the role of the APVCs Coursework in the oversight of the LAP process. In addition to recommendations that the working group might make, a University-wide communication regarding the purpose and implementation of the LAP should made by the DVCA.*

### **Academic support services for students**

- *Student support tutors/ PLAs are a great resource –there should be more of them, but this cannot replace access to academics to help support student learning.*
- *Student-facing support for successful group work should be developed:*
  - *there is much good practice in teaching students how to work in a group*
  - *many mature age students say they do a lot of the work while some of the younger students are happy to just pass and don't contribute the same amount*
  - *students need conflict resolution tips, advice on how to work with one another and how to deal with difference*
  - *this should be provided from first year*
  - *advice for those with or manging a LAP, because disclosure is at the discretion of the student*
- *Work needed around practicum placements and help to prepare students for those experiences.*

- *Needs of groups identified: online students – what is available for them, i.e. only writing support is only provided face-to-face; language support for NESB students.*
- *Digital literacy support is necessary for 'non-digital natives', or those with particular needs.*

**Policy implementation matter**

- *Need a quick turnaround for advanced standing, to facilitate making and uptake of offers.*
- *Student services – campus-based needs.*
- *There is a concierge (student services role) in the city but the role has changed. Students are unclear what student services at the city campus provides.*
- *Request for support to establish Ask me and Peak Period Support Program at Bendigo, following reports of positive feedback and the success of this initiative in reducing queues and increasing student and staff engagement.*

**Transition**

- *More support for student transition requested, particularly in regional areas where the demographic disadvantage is highest.*
- *Vocational Education Diploma students have trouble transitioning to the University because they start out of sync with the normal orientation session. Staff would like transition support at multiple timepoints across the year, not only during the standard orientation weeks. There is also a need to support students from the accelerated programs with additional information about expectations and the study skills they may be missing.*
- *Potential to expand the residential college orientation sessions to help students connect at a time that is not as busy.*

## **Appendix 2: MEMBERSHIP AND MEETINGS**

The Task Force was chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Learning Quality and Innovation and includes academic and professional staff members. The Task Force also had student representation from the La Trobe University Student Union.

### *Chair*

Professor Paula Baron (Chair), Pro Vice-Chancellor, Learning Quality and Innovation (PVC LQI)

### *Membership*

Professor Jessica Vanderlelie, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Student Success

Professor Mahsood Shah, Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor (Coursework), College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce (APVC Coursework, ASSC)

Professor Birgit Loch, Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor (Coursework), College of Science Health and Engineering (APVC Coursework, SHE)

Mr Michael Iroeche, President, La Trobe University Student Union

Mr Shae Williams, Education Vice-President, La Trobe University Student Union

Mr Peter Czech, Senior Advisor, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic (DVCA)

Ms Neridah Baker, Senior Adviser, Office of PVC LQI

### *Secretariat*

Ms Anita Brekalo, La Trobe Learning and Teaching (LTLT)

### *Initial membership included:*

Professor Anthony Baker, APVC Coursework, SHE (member to June 2019)

Dr Silvia McCormack, Acting APVC Coursework, ASSC (member to September 2018)

## **TQTF MEETINGS**

The Task Force met with groups of staff and students each fortnight to gain an understanding of the issues various stakeholder groups face in ensuring the provision of high-quality teaching and learning experiences for students and staff. Each group was asked to identify issues affecting teaching quality and the student learning experience, and to provide suggestions to improve teaching quality.

Every fourth meeting was a consolidation meeting to allow Task Force members to discuss the common themes, concerns and issues raised in previous meetings.

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>2018 Date</b>	<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
1	15 March	Teaching Quality Task Force members	Introductory meeting
2	29 March	Student Advisory Group, and Peer Learning Advisers	Collect feedback
3	12 April	Directors of Teaching and Learning, and College Education Team Managers	Collect feedback
4	26 April	SHE Course Coordinators	Collect feedback
5	10 May	Teaching Quality Task Force members	Consolidation meeting
6	22 May	ASSC Course Coordinators	Collect feedback
7	7 June	Heads of Schools & School Managers	Collect feedback
8	21 June	Library staff	Collect feedback
9	19 July	ASSC and SHE Quality and Standards staff	Collect feedback
10	2 Augusts	Sessional academic staff	Collect feedback
11	8 August	Regional Heads of Campus	Collect feedback
12	16 August	Teaching Quality Task Force members	Consolidation meeting
13	30 August	International Students	Collect feedback
14	13 September	La Trobe International	Collect feedback
15	27 September	Indigenous Strategy and Education	Collect feedback
16	11 October	Student Services and Administration	Collect feedback
17	25 October	Teaching Quality Task Force members	Consolidation meeting
18	8 November	Equity and Diversity	Collect feedback
19	26 November	Planning & Institutional Performance staff	Collect feedback

**Table 1 – TQTF Meetings**

Data from *Listening Posts* (meetings that followed the TQTF format and included sessions for staff from eight Schools (Bundoora) and staff and student groups from regional campuses) have supplemented information gathered from meetings of the Task Force.

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>2018 Date</b>	<b>Stakeholder group</b>
1	19 February	School of Business
2	26 March	School of Nursing and Midwifery
2	9 May	School of Education
3	28 May	Bendigo Staff
4	4 June	School of Psychology and Public Health
5	18 June	Mildura Staff
6	18 June	Mildura Social Work Students
7	18 June	Mildura Students
8	3 July	School of Life Sciences Staff
9	18 July	Albury Wodonga Students
10	18 July	Albury Wodonga Staff
11	23 July	Shepparton Students
12	23 July	Shepparton Staff
13	25 July	School of Humanities and Social Sciences Staff
14	26 September	School of Allied Health Staff
15	8 November	School of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences Staff

**Table 2 – Listening Post Meetings held in 2018. School meetings were held at the Bundoora campus.**