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## **Developing New Roles for University Teachers: Grass-roots Local Staff Development Serviced by Top-down Investment and Policy**

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**Abstract:** Effective staff development is the weaving together of many strands. We need to support staff in their current work, while providing them with ideas, incentives and resources to look for new ways to design learning environments which will enhance student learning. Staff development must be combined with specific projects where change is occurring. Ideas are not hard to find. Incentives and resources are another matter. The paper will outline some general principles for effective staff development. These principles will be applied in the description of the substantial investment RMIT has made in order to realise our Teaching and Learning Strategy. We have a model of 'grass-roots' faculty-based work funded by large-scale corporate 'investment'. 'Bottom-up' meets 'top-down'.

### **Introduction**

Staff development can no longer be a pleasant 'cottage industry' on the fringes of academe or the enthusiastic enterprise of a few individuals supported by 'soft' money. Effective staff development is positioned at the centre of university functioning and yet needs to retain connections with the needs and perceptions of teaching staff. This is a demanding challenge. Staff development programs that are successful in meeting the needs of complex modern Australian universities need to be supported strategically (and financially) by their own universities.

McNaught et al. (1999) lists six key issues in staff development:

- The appropriate balance point between centrally provided and local staff development services needs to be determined in each university. Central services can be more clearly linked to university priorities; faculty or department services can be more in touch with local needs.
- As technology becomes more mainstream, support services need to be scaled up. This involves deciding on the level of support that can be afforded and the model of support which is most apposite. The educational design and evaluation, technical, and media production support services that universities currently have are under strain. It is unlikely that the existing examples of good practice at each university will be sufficient to ensure that new or revised subjects will be well designed and evaluated. By modelling good practice themselves, mentors can assist staff make optimal use of resources.
- A follow-on issue is determining the optimal relationship between staff development and production support services. Again, this needs to be decided in each university context.
- Even if an integrated model of professional development is adopted, there are still many professional development providers at most universities. Mapping the services of each provider and ensuring reasonable coordination is increasingly important as the need for support services scales up.
- Academic and general staff work load is a key issue. Careful work planning to ensure that staff have time to learn new skills and manage new processes is essential.

### **Learning Technology Mentors at RMIT University**

RMIT University is an 'old' (in Australian terms; RMIT began in 1887) technological university. It is highly diverse - it is a cross-sectoral (includes vocational sector) university and has the largest number of international students of

any Australian university. There are seven strong faculties which often resist central directions (what's new?). The Information Technology Alignment Project (ITAP) report (1998) forms the basis for a \$A50 million investment by RMIT over the four years, 1999-2002. The report comprises several elements:

- IT infrastructure aligned with the needs of education to deliver the systems and hardware necessary to provide students with an electronically connected learning environment and access to computer-based learning resources;
- a Distributed Learning System (DLS) compliant with the emerging Educom/CAUSE Instructional Management System (IMS);
- an Academic Management System (AMS), fully integrated with the DLS to provide enrolment and subject and course progress records electronically accessible to academics and students;
- an extensive review of all academic processes within the university in a Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) project; and
- extensive staff development.

We have to deliver on our promise that we can provide a flexible set of tools that will enable staff who are not technological whizz kids to develop pedagogically sound, interesting, and relevant online courses in an efficient and well administered way. Quite an ask. How have we designed our Distributed Learning System (DLS)? Here are some of our principles:

- a suite of tools, not just one;
- integrating educational principles into the description of the toolset;
- IMS compliance of all tools;
- a team approach to all online projects; and
- involvement of all seven Faculties in a benchmarking exercise to evaluate the toolset and the effectiveness of the learning environments we are building.

Learning Technology Mentors have been appointed in each department of the University. There are currently approximately 150 Learning Technology Mentors (LTMs) - two in most departments of the university and some in central areas such as the Library. These are mostly academic and teaching staff who have funded one day a week time release to develop online materials and support their colleagues in their departments to engage with online teaching and learning. Each LTM is funded for 26 days time release, and some for longer periods.

These LTMs undertake an extensive staff development program about a week long which covers training in the use of the DLS toolset, key principles in online educational design, and organisational learning within the context of RMIT. Additional staff development sessions are run each week. Topics include hands-on training sessions on all the DLS tools, quality improvement and evaluation of DLS tools, student induction methods, assessment strategies for online learning, evaluation strategies for online learning, the role of the Library in supporting online learning, managing digital resources using metadata, project management, graduate attributes and other curriculum matters, and planning for online development using the DLS support documents.

All LTMs develop a work contract with the first author; if individual staff wish this can be formalised into accreditation for a subject in a Graduate Certificate of Flexible Learning. While one day a week is not a great deal of time, it has been enough to give many staff a space in which to learn new skills and enact them. We are seeing that staff development and support for developing online learning materials and strategies must become distributed across the organisation. Therefore the role of the faculty-based Faculty Education Services Groups (FESGs) is pivotal. Growth needs to occur in these units rather than at the centre. We have been delighted by the enthusiasm of many Learning Technology Mentors. Have we reached critical mass yet, where the appropriate use of technology will roll out across the University? Probably not, but we feel we are on the right track.

## Reference

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