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Getting on the Online Education Train: The Journey of a Small Higher Education Institution

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6. Getting on the Online Education Train: The Journey of a Small Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

Many universities have instituted professional learning centres that support academic teaching staff in their capacity to facilitate student-centred learning. Some of these centres also extend their reach to incorporate scholarship and research. This chapter reports on one such case, in which a small higher education institution in Australia established what has become known as the Centre for Advancement of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL). From its inception, the CASTL's intentions have been multi-dimensional, in that its programs, activities, and resource development span the following areas of scholarship: 1) learning and teaching, 2) researcher education and support of postgraduate supervision, and 3) the teaching-research nexus. This chapter outlines the research-informed processes adopted to design and develop the CASTL, and reports on some of the results that have been achieved since the establishment of this centre of scholarship.

Purpose

Avondale College of Higher Education was established in 1897 with a history representing 120 years of providing workers for the Seventh-day Adventist Church and for the broader community. The College's focus has been on teaching and, until recently, this has been face-to-face teaching only. In recent times, the College has changed this focus to encompass a wider range of teaching modes for two reasons: firstly, to increase its footprint across Australia and the

South Pacific region through the application of online learning; and secondly, there has been a significant emphasis within the College placed on blended learning, where the shift to a more student-centred approach to learning entails the use of both face-to-face and online learning approaches. Though the focus of this chapter is on the support for online education, it is important to understand that the boundary between online and face-to-face mode has blurred significantly in recent times.

The ability of Avondale to attract students from a broader community by offering online courses, instead of only concentrating on students who can attend the College physically, is a positive approach from the perspective of gaining more students, but there is a more important aim associated with this new focus. There are many students across Australia and the region who are not able to relocate to take up full-time study at the College in New South Wales. Furthermore, many people decide to change their career once they have established a family, and this is often the case with aspirational ministers, chaplains, and teachers who make up much of the institution's student population. The prospect of people in such circumstances being able to take three to four years out of their paid careers to study full-time is not always possible. So the opportunity to study part-time without relocating is of great advantage to these students who are typically in the mid-stage of their career and may also have a family to support. Studying online instead of attending classes in a face-to-face mode also allows students with a passion for such ministries as teaching and theology to take these careers up whilst funding their studies from their existing career. It goes without saying that many of these people, because of their life experience, make excellent teachers and ministers.

In recent decades, the College's distance education approach has involved a paper-based mode of instruction, often supported by lengthy on-campus summer school sessions with intensive class sessions or winter school sessions requiring students to travel to the College for one or two weeks for the purpose of engaging in intensive learning experiences. The paper-based distance learning mode was very restrictive in how it was able to engage students as it predominantly relied on textual materials which were sometimes supported by audiotapes. This approach is limited in the way it engages students and the College has been going through a transition to move toward more online education and less paper-based modes of study which

have often required intensive on-campus teaching sessions.

A second consideration is that of blended learning; the potential for blended learning to provide students with an enhanced learning experience is well documented and Avondale sees the opportunity for improving the quality of its teaching and increasing accessibility to students through the medium of blended learning as great benefits. It is possible to sustain student learning outside of the face-to-face classroom through the application of blended learning. The ability to continue the learning into students' out-of-class time through online communication tools provides students with an enhanced learning experience as it sustains their learning, in a guided manner, through the whole week rather than just confining it to the three hours that is typically assigned for on-campus learning in face-to-face modes of study.

With these two purposes in mind Avondale has, over the past four years, focused a great deal of energy and effort into enhancing its online teaching and learning profile. Historically the focus has been on face-to-face teaching, with the advantage of having very small class sizes, but the College has started to broaden its horizons through the adoption of online education.

Theoretical Framework

Enabling academic teaching staff to make the transition to new modes of instruction requires considerable resources. Firstly, providing teaching staff with the technical or IT facilities to teach online is essential. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, such staff also require support to develop their abilities to design and create appropriate teaching resources, the design of which needs to be informed by established principles drawn from the theories of online instructional design (Gunawardena et al., 2006; Herrington & Oliver, 2000; Siragusa, 2006). This need for course development skills also extends to the postgraduate coursework curriculum design. Instructional materials for higher degree and postgraduate students need to be developed with threshold concepts and the specific needs of postgraduate education in mind (Kiley, 2009; Meyer & Land, 2005; Wisker, Kiley, & Aiston, 2006).

The College is moving towards employing strategies and creating resources which are consistent with the learner-driven, self-directional theory of heutagogy (Hase & Kenyon, 2003). In addition to the coursework and supervisor-student sessions that are part of typi-

cal postgraduate courses, self-help resources, in the form of online modules, are also made available for postgraduate students on an ‘as needed’ basis. These self-help resources are consistent with Hase and Kenyon’s (2003) principles of heutagogy, providing *just-in-time* support while also supporting *just-in-case* training activities. The concept is designed around the belief that an approach that “recognizes that people learn when they are ready and that this is most likely to occur quite randomly, chaotically, and in the face of ambiguity and need” (pp. 3-4), again frequently evidenced with postgraduate coursework students. According to heutagogical principles, learning resources can be provided by the teacher or selected for use by students as learning pathways are ultimately chosen by the learners themselves. These principles were integrated into the design of the developed resources.

This approach is most appropriate in the context of postgraduate research students where, under the guidance of their research supervisors, the students develop as independent researchers and acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to conduct ethical research. Subsequently, because of the designed learning context of a community of practice, supervised postgraduate students can quickly transition to supervision of their own students (Morris, Pitt, & Manathunga, 2012). This dynamic process, developed between each postgraduate student and their supervision team, requires an approach to online learning that maximizes the flexibility afforded by a heutagogy-informed methodology.

The bringing together of the above approaches and strategies into a strategic approach has led to the successful development of a professional learning unit, that not only transcends practical approaches to teaching in online contexts but also covers the full range of teaching required in the Australian required academe, including undergraduate teaching, postgraduate coursework teaching, research training of postgraduate research students, and developing faculty members’ research capacities. The initiative is broader in scope than equivalent centres but is also research-based. Following is an outline of the implementation of what has become a very successful centre, which aims to facilitate the development of an effective community of practice within the College.

Research Methodology

Essentially, the establishment of the Centre for Advancement of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) within Avondale

was driven by the institution's strategic long-term plan, as well as by the current and projected needs of its academic staff and students (both undergraduate and postgraduate). As the College is transitioning from an educational institution that had been characterized primarily for its undergraduate offerings to one that has now advanced into postgraduate education, the support offered to staff and students needs to traverse both course levels. The method by which the CASTL was established required a participatory approach that engaged as many stakeholders as possible, the stakeholders being the academic staff (teaching staff and postgraduate supervisors), the administration leadership team, as well as the institution's students. The outcome of this approach ensured that the establishment of the centre was built upon the needs of the faculty it aimed to support. As such, the academic community of the College became the participants in the research project which pre-empted the creation of the CASTL. As well as drawing on the views and needs of the College's staff and students, the way in which the CASTL was constructed also required consideration of the institution's strategic goals and a consideration of best practices in professional development, as reported in scholarly literature.

At the time when the CASTL was established, the institution was conducting a number of research projects which were focused on threshold concepts of online learning, innovative assessment feedback strategies, and the development of a researcher education framework. The ongoing data gathering methods that were embedded in these projects enabled localized information to be gathered from the CASTL's intended stakeholders about their professional development needs as well as expert advice from a number of reference groups. This information shaped the development of the CASTL's resources. Data were gathered from the following stakeholder-participants using a range of questionnaires, interviews, reflective journals, and focus groups:

- 60 academic staff and postgraduate supervisors;
- 12 postgraduate students;
- 44 undergraduate students; and
- 8 reference group members.

As a result, the CASTL's work within the institution was bounded by scholarly terms of reference ranging from learning and teaching support, through to researcher- and supervisor-education. All of these levels of support were underpinned by the teaching-research nexus in which teaching and learning activities were informed by research and,

conversely, research was informed by teaching and learning issues relevant to the institution and its stakeholders. Each foray into the design and development of the Centre's programs was firstly driven by a need to analyse stakeholders' current positions and their projected future requirements and, secondly, the wider context of global research. The institution's vision and strategic goals were used as additional input and incorporated into the Centre's vision statement, programs, and activities.

Once established in March 2015, the Centre used a form of Patton's (2012) utilisation-focused evaluation methodology to develop its programs, activities, and supporting resources. This approach enabled heuristic (Hase, 2014; Hase & Kenyon, 2015) principles of learning, incorporating self-determined and capacity-building strategies which were embedded in the work of CASTL staff. For example, rather than simply designing a professional learning program that was informed by best practice literature about online education to assist academic staff to develop their capacities as online course designers and teachers, the actual staff for whom the program was being developed were consulted. It was their views, along with experts' considerations cited in current scholarly literature, which determined the nature and content of the program that was ultimately developed to meet their needs. Data about their needs were gathered within the confines of a scholarly research project about online teaching, supported by a Seed Grant through a key government-funded initiative at the time, The Office for Learning and Teaching in Australia. Other examples of the outcomes of establishing the CASTL are now presented.

Results

As a result of establishing a centre of scholarship, Avondale was then in a position to move towards designing and developing professional learning programs, activities, events, and resources. A selection of these outcomes is now described and presented as the results of the establishment of the CASTL.

Because the Centre was so focused on integrating the three areas of research, learning, and teaching, the research projects it supported were related to these concerns. While also tending to the needs of academic staff and students within the institution, the CASTL's research projects were situated within a national educational context by attracting key government funding through Australia's Office for Learning and Teaching. Since 2014, the College was successful in

gaining four of these sought-after grants across three funding programs, including: two Seed Grants (AU\$40,000 and AU\$50,000), one Extension Grant of AU\$29,800, and one Innovation and Development Grant of AU\$202,000. The titles of the grants, listed below, reflect their diverse nature and indicate how they spanned undergraduate and postgraduate education, while also addressing issues incorporating students' and teachers' concerns:

1. Using online teaching threshold concepts in transformative professional learning curricula for novice online educators.
2. But when do I get my mark? Students' responsiveness to adaptively released assessment feedback.
3. Developing an institutional framework to support and improve supervision of honours and higher degree research students.
4. Owning the rubric: Student engagement in rubric design, use, and moderation.

The implementation of these scholarly research projects resulted in the growing reputation of the CASTL's work within the institution as well as across the higher education sector. Since its launch, the Centre's staff have collaborated with many national and international scholars from over 19 national universities and 9 international universities on a number of programs, including:

- Visiting scholar program in which 7 national and 4 international scholars have visited and/or resided at Avondale for short stays of a few days through to longer stays of up to five months.
- Virtual Mentoring Program in which first year students' progress was monitored and supported by a Virtual Mentor (now transitioning to LEAP, as mentioned in Chapter 5).
- Evaluation of Avondale's distance education program in conjunction with one of our international collaborating researchers.
- Co-editing of a scholarly international handbook of research (complete) and a set of refereed proceedings for an international learning conference (underway).

While many of the outcomes of the projects conducted through the CASTL have resulted in immediate benefits for staff and students in the form of the programs listed above, some outcomes are of an ongoing nature: many projects have produced self-paced or self-help style scholarly resources, including:

Research Training Support Framework, available at: <http://www.avondale.edu.au/research-training>. This resource provides support, advice, and resources for Avondale staff involved in the supervision of honours and postgraduate students, and candidates enrolled in honours and postgraduate research degrees.

Transformational Assessment Toolbox, available at: <http://assessment.avondale.edu.au/toolboxat>. This online toolbox has been designed especially for use within the higher education sector and may be of particular interest to course designers and lecturers who are interested in rethinking traditional processes of providing assessment feedback to their students with the intention of engaging students in reflection about their own learning by transforming some elements of the assessment process.

Threshold Concepts for Novice Online Teachers site, available at: <http://tcs4nots.avondale.edu.au>. This site features curriculum guidelines to inform the design of transformative professional development for novice online educators, along with the findings of the project.

Other materials produced by CASTL staff include in-house, home-grown resources that provide self-help assistance by offering best practice examples, technical instructions, suggestions for professional learning activities, and links to external resources. Some of these home-grown resources include: *The Researcher's Little Helper* (<https://moodle.avondale.edu.au/login/index.php>), *Moodle's Little Helper* (<http://moodle.avondale.edu.au/course/view.php?id=1317>), *Assessment @ Avondale* (<http://assessment.avondale.edu.au>); the *MOBRIC* (<http://www.moobric.net/>) and a selection of online instructional modules that support the professional learning of research students, postgraduate supervisors, and undergraduate teachers.

In addition to research projects and the development of scholarly programs and resources, the CASTL has also facilitated a range of on-campus and online events that support the scholarly integration of research and teaching, and/or the scholarly development of learning and teaching capacities. Some of these recent events include:

- panel discussion to brainstorm current needs¹ of academic teaching and research staff;

¹ Some of the current needs identified during this consultation session included: access to online professional development modules, permanent agenda item in faculty meetings to advertise CASTL events, and collation of all professional learning resources on one website.

- drop-in sessions to provide advice about the use of online learning management systems;
- showcases of what works and doesn't work in online education;
- informal researcher lunches;
- grant writing circles;
- speed-dating with researchers to share research topics, ideas, and methodologies;
- networking morning teas for research students and their postgraduate supervisors; and
- interviews with visiting scholars.

These strategic initiatives are presented here in this chapter as results of the CASTL's work. These programs, activities, and resources are examples of how scholarship was integrated into learning and teaching, by supporting scholarly research and, conversely, encouraging the incorporation of recent research into learning and teaching activities. The overlapping of ideas, models, and practices between faculties within the institution, as well as between visiting scholars and Avondale's academic staff, shape the success of Avondale's scholarship focus and ongoing development.

The CASTL's programs, activities and resources undergo regular evaluation, the results of which have been or are being reported elsewhere (for example, Petrie et al., 2016). The evaluation methodologies used to assess the impact and effectiveness of these initiatives have adopted a mixture of utilisation-focused evaluation methodologies (Patton, 2012, 2015) and design-based research methodologies (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Kennedy-Clark, 2013).

Scholarly Significance

It is difficult to describe the diversity of activity in a research and teaching higher education context; diversity is represented in varied teaching initiatives, assessment, and engaged learning practices, as well as varied types of student centred, online, blended, and authentic approaches. All are worthy agendas for a scholarship Centre, but these agendas are far from the limits of the Centre's full scope. It was always envisaged that the College would need to assist in the development of a research culture. This is a new area of focus for the College, something that typically takes universities many years to develop. A university's research culture ideally covers the two aspects of research training: the support of postgraduate research students

undertaking PhDs as well as the provision of professional learning experiences for academic staff to develop research skills and abilities. The CASTL has effectively provided these two aspects of research training. Furthermore, the number of competitive grants won by the institution is evidence of such training. The College's research profile continues to extend, with significant growth in research enrolments and completions, as well as a burgeoning publication profile which reflected 400% growth between 2012 and 2014 with 763 submissions made to the ResearchOnline@Avondale (<http://research.avondale.edu.au/>) repository between 2012 and 2014².

The establishment of a community of practice amongst many of the staff augers well for the future. Academic staff at the College are now regularly collaborating on scholarly writing activities related to the innovations implemented in their teaching practice which, eventually, is shared in the form of research publications. The College has changed its singular profile of face-to-face teaching to a profile that now includes online learning, blended learning, research training, and research development. In doing so the College has become multidimensional and its scope continues to grow. Importantly, the CASTL has been the driver of this change and it continues to lead in the enhancement of both practice and scholarship.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how establishment of a centre for learning, teaching, and research has produced a set of scholarly results for a burgeoning higher education sector. By drawing on examples of best practice from scholarly literature as well as consulting with its stakeholders, including the institution's teaching staff and students, the results of the CASTL's work has been presented as a collection of programs, activities, and resources. These initiatives are characterized by an interrelationship between teaching, learning, and research: that is, scholarship that integrates research into all of its work. The participatory methods used to develop this centre of scholarship as well as the stakeholder-focused methodologies used to conduct and evaluate its activities and programs may be of interest to administrators and professional development staff in other higher education institu-

² Data supplied on Friday 8 September 2017 by Avondale librarian responsible for Avondale's ResearchOnline repository (<http://research.avondale.edu.au/>).

tions, especially those who intend to provide professional learning opportunities that are not only useful for the present but provide an educational future that is pedagogically sustained by and grounded in scholarship.

Anthony Williams

Anthony Williams recently joined the University of Wollongong Global Enterprises Unit. The unit manages universities and colleges in four locations in Wollongong, Dubai, Hong Kong and Malaysia. Anthony manages the Academic Governance and Performance Portfolio across the institutions. Before taking up the Wollongong assignment, he was at Avondale where he was Vice President (Academic and Research) of Avondale College of Higher Education. He provided leadership in research and scholarship. Prior to that role, he held the position of the Head of School of Architecture and Built Environment at the University of Newcastle NSW. He has extensive experience in project management in the domain of professional education. He is a winner of multiple University Teaching Awards as well as a National Award for Teaching Excellence. He is highly regarded in this area having worked as a curriculum consultant nationally and internationally.

Maria Northcote

Maria Northcote is the Director of the Centre for Advancement of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) at Avondale College of Higher Education. Maria is an experienced higher education teacher, leader and researcher and has successfully led an Office for Learning and Teaching Extension Grant through to completion during 2014-2015, and is currently a co-researcher on an Office for Learning and Teaching Seed Grant focusing on higher education assessment. She has led and contributed to a range of research projects in three higher education institutions between 1999 and 2015. Before beginning her work at Avondale, she worked at Newcastle and Edith Cowan Universities, in lecturing, research and staff development roles. She was recently appointed a Fellow of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) in recognition of her service to higher education and her commitment to ongoing professional development to enhance teaching and learning.

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