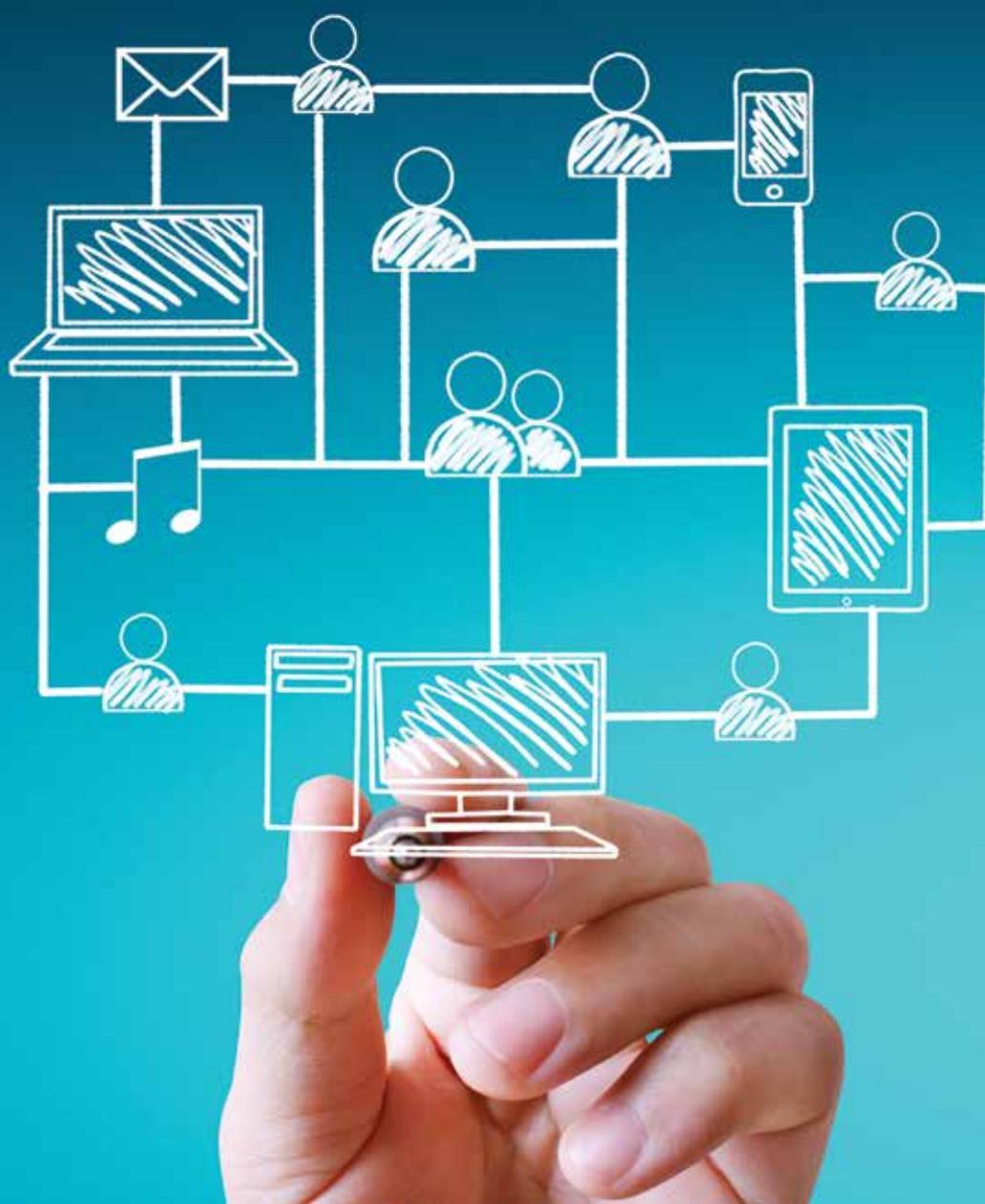# Connecting and Collaborating:

Leading Educational Networks
in Australasian Tertiary Education

Lessons from the Network of Australasian Tertiary Associations (NATA)

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Authors: Mike Keppell, Gordon Suddaby and Natasha Hard

Project Overview

The Network of Australasian Tertiary Associations (NATA) was established in August 2011 as a collaborative network between established higher education associations. The NATA sought to improve the engagement of members of its partner associations through a focus on network leadership. The NATA was comprised of a number of partners including:

- The Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (ACODE),

- Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ascilite),

- Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD),

- Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA),

- Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia (ODLAA),

- Australia's Academic and Research Network (AARNet),

- NetSpot, and the

- Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT).

The NATA formed a unique entity as it brought together these kindred associations to explore issues of common concern. The NATA drew upon and shared their collective experiences within the field of tertiary education. Further information about the NATA can be found on the NATA website.

This resource looks specifically at how the work of the NATA relates to academic associations and educational networks. Understanding educational networks, network leadership, improving networking practices and the role of dissemination are discussed.

Please note: All hyperlinks within this document are listed in full on the final page.

Authors

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Mike is the Executive Director of the Australian Digital Futures Institute (ADFI) at the University of Southern Queensland as well as the Director of the Digital Futures Collaborative Research Network (DF-CRN) – a research partnership with the Australian National University (ANU) and University of South Australia (UniSA). Mike is a life member of ascilite and has a long professional history in higher education in Australia, Canada and Hong Kong. Current foci include digital futures, personalised learning, learning spaces, blended learning and network leadership.

Mr Gordon Suddaby (NATA Co-Leader)

Gordon currently works as a higher education Consultant on a number of funded projects in higher education in Australasia. For ten years he was the Director of Massey University's Centre for Academic Development and eLearning (CADeL) before becoming Associate Professor: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning with the National Centre for Teaching and Learning, a position he held until his recent retirement. Gordon has extensive experience with ACODE, HERDSA New Zealand and DEANZ.

Ms Natasha Hard (NATA Project Manager)

Natasha is a Project Manager and Research Assistant at the University of Southern Queensland's Australian Digital Futures Institute (ADFI). Natasha previously worked with the Flexible Learning Institute at Charles Sturt University where she worked on two DEHub funded research projects. Natasha co-authored an ALTC Good Practice Report with Mike Keppell and Gordon Suddaby on Technology-Enhanced Learning and Teaching during this time.

Educational Networks

Educational networks can be formal or informal and can come in many forms with many foci. The NATA, as a network of networks, was primarily comprised of academic associations – a formal type of educational network with either individual or institutional memberships. Academic associations offer value to the Australasian tertiary sector by strengthening existing connections between institutions, supporting collegial sharing, providing structures that support the dissemination of specific educational material and fostering new connections across disciplines and institutional boundaries.

Networks offer many different roles for individuals to take up. Individuals may join as general members to expand their own networks and engage in professional development. Individuals may also take on the role of representing their institution in networks with institution-based memberships. Members may also decide to nominate for a position on the executive or leadership committee or even put themselves forward to lead the network.

Despite some differences between types of networks, many characteristics, issues and benefits common to academic associations and the experiences of NATA have application in the vast majority of educational networks. Some key questions regarding educational networks are explored here.

Why join an educational network or academic association?

1. Build connections and professional networks beyond your institution and immediate colleagues.

2. Gain access to regular and structured opportunities for professional development such as conferences, webinars or structured workshops.

3. To keep up to date with current news, policy trends, publications and other developments specific to your discipline or interest.

4. Leadership development and experience opportunities.

5. To contribute to the wider educational environment and discourse.

What types of educational networks and associations are available?

- Academic Associations:
  Groups of academics and educators with a common focus and formal structure.
  For example, ACODE, ascilite, CADAD, HERDSA, ODLAA.

- Professional Associations:
  Normally non-profit organisations focused on a particular profession and may include accreditation.
  For example, CPA Australia.

- National Networks:
  For example, the OLT has supported four networks that have a national focus to their specific functions.
  See the OLT website for further details.

- Discipline Networks:
  Including sixteen discipline-based networks supported by the OLT. See the OLT website for further details.

- State Based Networks:
  For example, five OLT supported state-based networks focused on Promoting Excellence (grants, awards).
  See OLT website for further details.

Why become a network or association leader?

1. To establish higher level connections and gain access to knowledge and experience that can then benefit your local context.

2. Be more informed about sectoral changes, challenges and opportunities.

3. To more effectively pursue and support professional values or key causes.

4. Use your skills and experience to contribute back to the sector – 'taking your turn'.

Network Leadership

The principles below are findings from a research project conducted by the NATA titled *An investigation into network leadership within established Australasian tertiary education associations*. Data was collected through interviews with leaders of ACODE, ascilite, CADAD, HERDSA and ODLAA and through focus groups with members of each executive. Transcript data was thematically analysed with the view to developing principles for good practice in network leadership. These principles focus primarily on academic associations due to the scope of the study; however, they have general applicability to a wider range of educational networks.

10 Principles for Good Practice in Network Leadership

1. Network leaders need to have **strong personal networks** to help inform/contextualise network practices and assist network dissemination.

2. Leaders need to have a focus on and **clear understanding of the priorities and challenges** for their association now and into the future.

3. The leaders of networks need to be **cognisant of the needs and interests of their members** so that activities and communication are relevant and offer value.

4. Network leaders need to **understand the capacity of executive members** and have realistic expectations regarding workloads and timeframes given the volunteer nature of their involvement.

5. Executive members need to have **clearly defined roles and responsibilities** in order to foster ownership and provide a specific focus to their association-based activities.

6. The **development of rapport between executive members** is critical for effective functioning: face-to-face interaction can assist the establishment of working relationships, which can be strengthened through the use of communication technologies.

7. Systems need to be in place to ensure that **association knowledge and experience are maintained**, whilst new and innovative ideas are supported.

8. Networks require a **culture of vibrancy and transparency** if they are to be sustainable and maintain a healthy and engaged membership.

9. Communication needs to be **fit for purpose both in mode and message:** consistency and the appropriate use of technology can support a sense of connection and the development of a community of trust.

10. Establishing **financial security enables strategic allocation of funds** for activities aligned with association priorities.

Keppell, M., Suddaby, G., & Hard, N. (2014). *A network of networks: supporting good practice in network leadership and the dissemination of good practice in tertiary education*. Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. http://www.olt.gov.au/project-national-networking-initiative-2011

Improving Networking Practices

The NATA's partner associations conducted a range of projects that addressed issues and/or practices related to member engagement, communication and leadership. These projects delivered value to their own networks and members, whilst also offering general value to all NATA partners and those involved in educational networks more broadly. These projects are briefly documented here; additional information can be found on the NATA website under *Partner Projects*.

Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (ACODE)

Engaging Network Members: A NATA case study of a Contemporary Tertiary Sector Issue

ACODE sought to develop and document a successful process for effectively profiling important issues relating to their members through a case study.

- Wiki for Institutional Digital Video Management.

Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ascilite)

ascilite is developing a research-informed guide that reflects upon the use of social networks for developing online communities of practice and supporting professional networking.

Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD)

Social Media as a Communication Strategy

CADAD developed an online professional development toolkit to support and inform members about the use and affordances of social media

- Online Social Media Toolkit.

Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA)

Leading Academic Networks

HERDSA explored network leadership offering practical guidance to both networks and their leaders as to how to step into leadership roles with confidence.

- Tips for leading academic networks.
- The HERDSA Guide 'Leading Academic Networks' (2014).

Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia (ODLAA)

Ubiquity Online

ODLAA explored good practice in web presence branding and digital communication in a review of literature before applying the findings in a case study of ODLAA's digital presence.

Good Practice and Dissemination

One of the key elements of networks is their capacity to assist in dissemination. As noted by the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), the national, discipline and state-based networks were funded "to support the dissemination of grant project outcomes and embed good practice in learning and teaching in higher education" (OLT website).

As a national network, the NATA had a critical role in supporting the dissemination of a series of Good Practice Reports (GPRs), which summarise Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) and OLT funded projects. The 12 reports were developed to maximise the engagement of educators with the lessons and resources developed from learning and teaching projects. NATA adopted a range of techniques based on its access to partner networks and online and social media presence to assist in the dissemination of the GPRs. One of the key ways in which dissemination was supported was through the development of eResources that summarised the reports and presented the findings in a more engaging format.

eResources

The eResources can be accessed on the NATA website along with a list of completed GPRs.

Technology-enhanced learning and teaching

Professor Mike Keppell, Mr Gordon Suddaby & Ms Natasha Hard

This GPR focuses on examining best practice across 25 complete projects (including 3 fellowships) and 8 ongoing projects (including 1 fellowship) on technology-enhanced learning and teaching.

Click here to view this eResource or here to access the GPR.

Student transition in higher education

Professor Trevor Gale & Dr Stephen Parker

This GPR reviews 19 completed projects (14) and fellowships (5) funded by the ALTC between 2006 and 2010, and identified as contributing to an understanding of student transition into higher education.

Click here to view this eResource or here to access the GPR.

Work integrated learning

Professor Janice Orrell

The ALTC commissioned this report to identify good practices in work-integrated learning in Australia through a systematic review of 28 funded studies.

Click here to view this eResource or here to access the GPR.

Curriculum renewal

Dr Bhuva Narayan & Professor Sylvia Edwards

This report serves as an overview of the work funded by the ALTC in the area of curriculum renewal in higher education based on 40 completed projects and 7 fellowships and also makes recommendations for future work in the area.

Click here to view this eResource or here to access the GPR.

Innovative Indigenous teaching and learning

Professor Nereda White, Dr Jack Frawley & Ms Dang Thi Kim Anh

This report has reviewed 16 ALTC funded and completed projects and fellowships as at March 2013 that are relevant to the topic of innovative Indigenous learning and teaching.

Click here to view this eResource or here to access the GPR.

Links and Resources

Good Practice Report Title	eResource Link	Good Practice Report Link
Technology-enhanced learning and teaching	http://youtu.be/3BKz0AZxwB8	http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-good-practice-report-technology-enhanced-learning-and-teaching-2011
Student transition into higher education	http://youtu.be/ckFAvbmgMYw	http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-student-transition-higher-ed-deakin-2011
Work integrated learning	http://youtu.be/fN6wDgnTOlE	http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-work-integrated-learning-2011
Curriculum renewal	http://youtu.be/3Uu6tuY82eU	http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-curriculum-renewal-2011
Innovative indigenous teaching and learning	http://youtu.be/GpJjX7QzUiA	http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-good-practice-report-innovative-indigenous-teaching-and-learning-2013

All Good Practice Reports can be accessed on the OLT Website at the following web address: http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-library/good-practice-reports

Organisation	Resource	Web Link
ACODE	*Wiki for Institutional Digital Video Management*	http://www.acode.edu.au/mod/wiki/view.php?id=225
CADAD	*Online Social Media Toolkit*	https://sites.google.com/site/natacadadproject/
HERDSA	Debowski, S. (2013). *Tips for Leading Academic Networks*	http://www.slideshare.net/SheldaDebowski/tips-for-leading-academic-networks-deboswki-2013
HERDSA	Debowski, S. (2014) *Leading Academic Networks*. Milperra, NSW: HERDSA.	http://www.herdsa.org.au/?page_id=139

Acronym	Partner Association	Web Address
AARNet	Australia's Academic and Research Network	http://www.aarnet.edu.au/
ACODE	Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning	http://www.acode.edu.au/
ascilite	Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education	http://www.ascilite.org/
CADAD	Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development	http://www.cadad.edu.au/
HERDSA	Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia	http://www.herdsa.org.au/
NetSpot	NetSpot	http://www.netspot.com.au/
ODLAA	Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia	http://www.odlaa.org/

Other Links:

- **Australian Digital Futures Institute (ADFI)** http://www.usq.edu.au/adfi
- **Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT)** http://www.olt.gov.au/
- **CPA Australia** http://www.cpaaustralia.com.au/
- **Network of Australasian Tertiary Associations (NATA)**
  http://www.nataonthenet.blogspot.com.au/
  http://www.olt.gov.au/project-national-networking-initiative-2011
- **Massey University** http://www.massey.ac.nz/
- **OLT Discipline Based Networks** http://www.olt.gov.au/discipline-based-networks
- **OLT National Networks** http://www.olt.gov.au/networks/national-networks
- **OLT State Based Networks** http://www.olt.gov.au/state-based-networks

Acknowledgements