

# Developing deep, widespread and sustained improvements in online learning in a Faculty of Business: An analysis of the change process

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The Faculty of Business at Charles Sturt University initiated the Online Course Innovation (OCI) project in 2012. This project focuses on the transition of 280 print-based subjects into quality online offerings through the mindful redesign of resources, interactions and experiences. It is led by the Associate Dean (Courses), and involves a multi-disciplinary team of educational designers, academics and divisional staff. The aim of this research project is to explore this transition to the online learning and teaching environment and identify critical organisational elements that contribute to achieving quality outcomes. Specifically, this study seeks to identify factors that support or inhibit the academic's ability to effectively *design and teach* quality online subjects, and the impact of leadership on the design and teaching process. Data is currently being collected from a range of institutional stakeholders involved with the project. Initial findings from the data analysis will be shared through the conference presentation.

Keywords: online learning, quality, teaching, design, leadership

## Background

The Online Course Innovation (OCI) project, within Charles Sturt University's (CSU's) Faculty of Business, has a core goal of redesigning 280 print-based subjects for the online environment by January 2015. This project was initiated in 2012 and supports the University's (2013-2015) Strategic Priority to ensure well-designed, responsive and timely online interaction and innovation in curriculum learning and teaching. The project aimed to move beyond pockets of excellence to achieve consistently high quality learning experiences for our 6,000 distance students. At the same time, it aimed to build the capacity of the Faculty's staff to both design and facilitate effective online learning experiences for our students, ensuring continuous improvement and ongoing sustainability.

OCI is on target and making strong progress towards ensuring that the Faculty will indeed achieve its aims of consistent, high quality learning experiences for all distance students. The project has drawn on a range of organisational structures and resources such as Educational Designers, 'OCI champions', online support resources and the provision of additional workload for academics involved in subject redesign. The OCI project has developed strong networks with other institutional stakeholders and initiatives, including colleagues across various divisions. The interconnecting teams provide a structured support network for those directly involved in subject design and teaching, resulting in almost all academic and general staff within the Faculty being involved in the Project at some level. Overseeing the work of the Project is the OCI Steering Committee, and the Project is led and managed by the Associate Dean (Courses) in conjunction with other relevant staff.

This project has highlighted challenges and opportunities around the move to interactive and engaging online learning. Opportunities include the chance to renew curriculum, employ new technologies and challenge existing notions of the learner and teacher. Challenges around culture change, resources, technical support and

effective leadership and management necessitate both short and longer-term responses. For example, an evidence-based Online Design Guide has been developed to establish shared, evidence-based design expectations. Various evaluation tools, including those used to evaluate the subject design as well as the student experience have been developed to capture data and reflect on the appropriateness of the subject design outcomes as well as the need to modify the management of the transition process. However, while these issues are currently being pragmatically responded to by the OCI team, there was no capacity to research the broader process of transition to the online environment. This research paper seeks to assess how the institutional context, leadership and resources contribute to, or inhibit, the development of quality online subjects. Data for this study is currently being collected from a range of institutional stakeholders including institutional leaders, academics, educational designers and students. The findings of this study will help to improve future faculty and institutional approaches to online learning and teaching.

## Literature review

The modern university faces significant challenges in a highly competitive market. Widening participation has resulted in higher student numbers and increasingly diverse student populations, along with demands for more accessible, flexible, relevant and supported courses to meet students' changing needs (Devlin et al., 2012). New pressures are being placed on the curriculum to ensure students develop the skills and competencies required of a knowledge-based, digital economy (Davies et al., 2011) and are 'work ready' upon graduation. At the same time, there are increasing pressures in terms of cost and accountability, as well as rising competition from both new providers and free, accessible learning options such as Massive Open Online Courses (Siemens, 2012). Many universities have looked upon online learning as a solution to these challenges and, as a result, the sector has seen large-scale increases in online offerings over the past decade. However, despite the great potential that online technologies offer for transforming learning and teaching, the expected benefits in terms of improved quality and outcomes haven't necessarily followed (Chao et al., 2010; Roe 2010;). Indeed, most universities tend to use technology to enhance traditional teaching rather than transform the way subjects are designed and delivered (Bates & Sangra, 2011). Several frameworks for ensuring online quality have been developed (e.g. Marshall, 2011; Masoumi & Lindstrom, 2011; Shelton, 2010) and these have been found to be especially useful for inexperienced academics, for reviewing the final product, for building mutual understandings and expectations, and for prioritising what needs to be done to develop or revise a course (Bates & Sangra, 2011; Chao et al., 2010;). However, Zhao (2003) argues that such frameworks need to be approached from a holistic perspective, considering technology, pedagogy and administrative systems, each individually tailored for the specific university. For Bates and Sangra (2011), more effective organisational structures and leadership within universities is critical for effective technology integration if we are to meet current challenges and overcome barriers that exist within the organisational culture, such as beliefs about traditional teaching methods, a preference for research over teaching and a 'mistrust of formal training in teaching'. This supports the work of Zhao (2003) who states that online teaching faces many more organisational challenges compared to traditional face-to-face teaching, including new technical, administrative and pedagogical issues that may adversely affect the quality of online education. While there is growing evidence of individual factors that contribute to quality online learning, such as the value of rich multimedia in sustaining engagement (Sun & Cheng, 2007), less is known about how these various organisational factors interact to contribute to academics' ability to develop deep, widespread and sustained improvements in the quality of online learning. Even less is known about how these factors impact on a large-scale transition from print to online learning.

This research project seeks to identify such factors by investigating the experiences of all stakeholders involved in the OCI project in the Faculty of Business at Charles Sturt University in Australia. This project will also examine the extent to which senior leadership of the university were involved in this change initiative. Past research indicates that the leadership team plays a key role in promoting and managing change. Thus, a leader's ability to powerfully articulate a compelling and viable vision is critical for initiating organisational change by enhancing followers' openness toward change, collective efficacy to radically transform the status quo, and trust in the leader's vision (Groves, 2006). Leaders who encourage employees to identify with their team, and who build a positive team climate, not only support sustained creativity and innovation, but possibly encourage employees to capitalise on the opportunities presented by major change (Paulsen, Callan, Ayoko & Saunders, 2013).

## The OCI Process

As discussed earlier, this research project seeks to identify organisational elements that impact on the transition of subjects to an online learning environment. It is thus imperative to discuss briefly the various stages of the OCI project at Charles Sturt University. The OCI project serves as a vehicle to explore the challenges and

opportunities associated with large scale change in the learning and teaching environment in a higher education institution. Participants in this research project include staff participating in the OCI project as well as institutional leaders and students. Institutional leaders play a key role in supporting the basic strategy of moving to an online environment. The primary beneficiaries of effective online delivery are the students, who will have more flexible access to a variety of high quality resources and experiences for each subject.

OCI runs on a semester basis and has done so systematically since the summer semester of 2012. Schools are asked to identify subjects and suitable academic staff to work with an OCI educational designer over a 12-14 week period. As such, each academic staff member is linked with one educational designer and this affords them the opportunity to collaboratively explore the needs of the particular subject and the most appropriate means to address the goal of high quality delivery, commencing from the subject design. Many subjects have been transitioning from the traditional model of print packages to interactive online subjects. Some subjects were already designed online by the academic staff and these subjects have engaged in online subject enhancements through the OCI work. At the beginning of each semester, the Lecturer for Online and Blended Learning leads a 'launch event', usually over a two-week period which engages both design academics and educational designers in preparatory work. This process is open and collaborative involving exemplars, conversations and exploration of the design and evaluation process. The OCI team of designers and divisional staff meet fortnightly to report on subject progress and each School has a designated OCI Champion who serves as an important conduit between the OCI team and school academic staff. At the conclusion of the design period, the academic and the educational designer jointly evaluate the subject design. In the first offering of the subject online, a student survey is also administered to ascertain the effectiveness of the subject from the student's perspective. Data from both measures is analysed and reported to the relevant Head of School, as well as design and teaching staff. A summary of key overall findings is fed back to students in the form of an infographic, and includes a response from the Faculty to issues raised.

## **Method**

The study project team employed a mixed method approach as part of an instrumental case study (Yin, 1989), collecting both qualitative and quantitative data from four key groups of stakeholders. These included: (a) an online survey of senior management to determine leadership perspectives and priorities in relation to large scale learning initiatives; (b) semi-structured telephone interviews with academics involved in the teaching and/or design of a subject developed as part of the OCI project, both at the commencement and conclusion of their involvement, as well as (c) face-to-face focus groups with educational designers, to determine changing perspectives on quality design/teaching, the effectiveness of processes used to support this and issues encountered; and (d) online focus groups with randomly selected students studying an online subject/s developed as part of the OCI project in 2014. Initial findings from these focus groups are being used to inform the development of an online survey which will be distributed to all students studying an online subject/s developed as part of the OCI project in 2014.

While the focus is on qualitative data, some quantitative data in the form of Likert scale questions gathered through the online surveys will be analysed. Qualitative data (collected through focus groups, telephone interviews and the online survey) will be analysed using content and thematic analysis. NVIVO software will be used to manage the qualitative data analysis process. Following standard research procedures, adequate steps will be taken to ensure confidentiality of data collected and to protect the interests of participants at all stages of this research project.

## **Possible benefits**

In an era of difficult economic times, universities across the world are looking at new ways to increase their revenue. Traditional student 'borders' have disappeared, and students are increasingly selecting institutions not based on location or status but on the quality of the online educational experience they can expect to receive. The importance of maximizing the quality of online offerings, not in terms of 'pockets of excellence' but more broadly and systematically across entire institutions, has never been more pronounced.

The findings of this project will highlight the benefits and challenges faced by Charles Sturt University as it moves rapidly into fully online delivery for most subject offerings. The research project has the potential to illustrate organisational practices, values and resources that contribute to the effective development of quality online subjects. These findings may be of interest to other higher education providers who are currently planning or implementing organisational changes to achieve quality outcomes through online learning initiatives.

The research is anticipated to benefit all the participants as they all have a vested interest in the improvement of the quality of online learning. For individual participants, there may be additional benefits through the findings generated from this study. In particular, papers that report on the institutional elements that impact online subject development will be beneficial to leadership teams at other universities. This may lead to improvements in the practice of academics, educational designers and organisational leaders' decision-making which in turn may benefit the students. This research project also examines the key role that leadership plays in creating the vision, encouraging and sustaining stakeholders in the change process. These findings will be of great interest to university Vice-Chancellors and Presidents.

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