

**FROM THE DESK OF ...**

**From Teaching to Learning**

**Leading Change at a Research-intensive University:  
A Personal Reflection<sup>†</sup>**

Adrian LEE<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Emeritus Professor  
Previously Professor of Medical Microbiology and Pro-Vice Chancellor  
(Education & Quality Improvement), University of New South Wales (UNSW), Australia

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## From Teaching to Learning

### Leading Change at a Large Research-intensive University: A Personal Reflection

#### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*AJSOTL* regularly features the ideas of key institutional leaders in higher education in the column that we term, "From the Desk of...". Past contributors include [Professor Tan Chorh Chuan](#), President, National University of Singapore, and [Professor Anna Kindler](#), then Vice Provost and Associate Vice President Academic, University of British Columbia, Canada. In this issue, we feature a reflection shared by Professor Adrian Lee, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education & Quality Improvement) of the University of New South Wales (2002–2006). We believe that this piece, to be featured in two parts, will enlighten us who lead change in education, and teaching and learning in our own institutional context.

The following text is published in two parts. In this first part, Lee describes how he became Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education) at the University of New South Wales in 2002 and the process of developing a strategy to change the learning and teaching environment at UNSW, and some of the specific strategies that were implemented.

In the second part, to be published in the next issue, Lee describes further strategies that arose out of those that were first implemented; the development of teaching and learning principles; and some of the outcomes of the six-year plan, with a few recommendations.

## INTRODUCTION

It was an unusual request to see the Vice-Chancellor, but here I was in his office. He was explaining that UNSW was performing poorly in student surveys on teaching and thus the University had decided to create a senior management position with a direct responsibility for the quality of education. Next, I expected him to ask for advice on potential candidates, given my long-term interest in teaching, although at the time my research in gut microbiology was dominating my life. But no, he asked me if I would be interested in putting my name forward. “Oh no, John!” was my immediate response. “I retire next year and intend to keep travelling the world talking about my beloved stomach bugs.” Such is the persuasive power of VCs that I agreed to think about it and was given the weekend to make my decision. Two days of lists for and against followed, plus consultation with colleagues. Despite having successfully taught medical and science students for more than thirty years, global interest in my *Helicobacter* bacteria made the retirement and travelling idea very attractive. However, on reflection I had complained about lack of attention paid to teaching, lousy staff development and a dominant culture of research over teaching for many years. Here was the chance to do something about it and to be able to try and change the culture, and so I realised I wanted to take on the challenge. Monday came and my hat was in the ring. After a gruelling interview by the selection committee, here I was crossing to the ‘dark side’ of university administration as Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education) of a large research-intensive university with 40,000 students who were not wild about their teaching and a perception amongst staff that teaching was not valued and research was king.

This article is a description of the strategies used over a six-year journey during which, due to a wonderful group of staff and supportive senior management colleagues, we did appear to change the culture. Evidence shows that students had certainly become much more satisfied with their learning experience. It is written in the hope that some of the ideas and activities we implemented may be of use to others charged with improving the quality of their students’ experience. Prior to writing this paper, three years into retirement, many of the staff involved in the communities described below were surveyed about the impact of some of the activities we had implemented and throughout the text some of their comments are included with acknowledgement and thanks.

## FIRST STEPS

Remarkably, I started with a clean slate. There was no job description. There was no predecessor whose path I could initially follow. True, there were a number of administrative units (e.g. The Learning Centre, The Aboriginal Education Programme) with responsibilities for some aspects of teaching included in my portfolio, but what I did was up to me. Where to start? Instinctively, the first step was to commence an active consultation process—not only to generate ideas but to let staff know that the University was at last taking teaching seriously and there was a champion for the student experience and staff support in teaching at the Executive Group/table. As senior managers, we all too often don't consult enough; we have the experience and already know the answers. Even if we do, consultation with staff is essential to give them some ownership in the processes we initiate.

This does not mean that we have to start from scratch. I had my own opinions and prejudices and knew we could not work on all aspects of teaching. Therefore, four priority areas were selected to work on initially, based on my experience as a teacher, in my activities on the Academic Board and as a Head of School. The consultative aspect of this strategy was the formation of a working group for each of my priority areas. Groups were charged with the generation of ideas working with me as a member of the group. Clear goals were drafted and modified by the groups, which met regularly.

The priority areas selected were:

- GROUP 1: Effective ways of monitoring the quality of education
- GROUP 2: How to ensure we gain maximum benefit from advances in information technology
- GROUP 3: Staff support in teaching
- GROUP 4: The first-year learning experience

All of the ideas and strategies described below came out of the input from these wonderful and dedicated groups. I attended all group meetings and we had some spirited, creative and energetic times together. Each group consisted of between 11 and 22 academics with a proven interest and talent in teaching, general staff with responsibility for some aspect of the student experience and 1-5 student members (except for Group 3).

The groups gave me an opportunity to communicate with key UNSW staff and were the beginning of a mission of convincing staff of my and the University's genuine interest in teaching. However, there was also a need to inform everyone of my new appointment. Most university publications and broadcast emails are

not read by staff, resulting in the great communication gaps commented on in most university audit reports! Thus I sent a personal letter to all academic staff as well as to general staff who were in some way involved in teaching. The opening paragraphs of this first letter are shown below. The wording was important in firstly providing an opportunity to reassure them that there were changes afoot with respect to teaching and also to give them a chance to contribute. Many useful responses were sent in and some group members were invited onto my working groups due to their replies.

Extract from my first letter to staff:

*“The invitation to put my name forward for the position of Pro-Vice Chancellor was an honour and provided a great opportunity for me to contribute to UNSW, an institution that has given me so much. While I will miss the excitement and buzz of research, I look forward to the major challenges ahead in education. I hope to work with you to enhance the quality of the educational experience we offer and to ensure our reputation for effective and innovative teaching parallels our reputation for productive and innovative research. I have a list of evolving goals for my five-year term. Below I identify what to me are the four priority areas and some of my thoughts on these areas. Finally, I invite you to identify the key issues in your School with respect to education. It is my intention to come to each School over the next few months and your comments will help make our discussions more focussed and relevant to your special needs.*

*The decision to create a new position on the executive with a specific responsibility for education is a major step forward and an acknowledgment that more emphasis is to be given to teaching at UNSW. I can assure you that I will take this responsibility very seriously. I have strong views about the need for us to provide a quality intellectual experience for our students. I mean to achieve my goals by working with you and trying to give you appropriate support to help you in your task of providing quality education while also being involved in first-class research. As a first step in the process, I invite you to complete the following page and return it to me. I don't need your name but I would appreciate knowing what School you are in. Should you wish to work specifically on any of the four priority projects described above please e-mail me.”*

## **THE STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FUND: THE MIRACLE THAT MADE IT ALL POSSIBLE**

Having a clean sheet and opportunity to formulate whatever strategy I chose to achieve my modest goal—“To enhance the quality of the educational experience at UNSW such that our reputation for effective and innovative teaching parallels our reputation for productive and innovative research”—was a luxury. The downside was that the portfolio of PVC (Education) came with no budget to achieve this goal apart from the monies allocated to the units under my supervision. There was one chance to change this. The Vice-Chancellor had allocated significant funding in the form of a Strategic Priorities Fund (SPF) to address priority issues which he had identified during 2001-2. The money was open for competitive bidding from all the University. Given support for teaching had been demonstrated by my appointment, there was clearly an opportunity here; I had to write an application for SPF funding. But what was the best way to do it? By now the four working groups had begun to bear fruit and some very promising ideas had evolved that could be the basis of the application. I decided to think big and make a very substantial claim for funding. It was the Vice-Chancellor’s Advisory Committee (VCAC) that had to make the funding decision. How could the large amount of money needed solely for teaching, be justified? My decision was to make the application for both teaching and research and write it on behalf of my senior management colleagues.

Thus I sat down one weekend and wrote a 29-page joint proposal with me as lead author together with the Deputy Vice-Chancellors (DVCs) Academic & Research, and the Presiding Member of our Academic Board. It was entitled *Justification for allocation of a significant proportion of the Strategic Priorities Fund in the year 2001-2002 into initiatives in Education and Research at UNSW*. The proposal was written to achieve two of the six priorities listed in the five-year University Strategic plan, namely to:

- Improve the quality of the educational experience and outcomes for students
- Sustain and improve research performance

To soften the sense of a complete focus on teaching, the application included a proposal for a major funding initiative in research, that is, the creation of the UNSW “Goldstar” Maintenance Grants. Fifteen two-year maintenance grants were proposed for staff members who had received a majority of excellent reviews from the major granting agencies but were not funded. Also, funding for two new postdoctoral fellowships and 25 PhD Scholarships was requested. In a novel initiative to help talented new staff put effort into their teaching but still build a research team, we requested six UNSW Research Relief Grants to

fund a postdoctoral fellow or a research assistant. The Presiding Member of the Academic Board had suggested creation of a training scheme for supervisors of postgraduate students, so funding for this initiative was requested. My gamble was that the request for this huge amount for learning and teaching would be more acceptable when VCAC saw the research initiatives in the package.

I entered the council chamber for the meeting of the VCAC to allocate SPF funding with great trepidation. My bound copy of the proposal document was cluttered with stickers to indicate the areas where I was prepared for a vigorous defence of my requests. We reached the agenda item and I held my breath. The proposal was accepted in full, with not one suggested modification! Without doubt this was the greatest moment in my time as PVC, as it was this funding allocation that made all the initiatives described below possible.

There are two lessons to be learnt here. Firstly, the strategy to package the request to include both research and teaching and include colleagues on the Executive Group as authors was a good one. The appeal of the research initiatives, made VCAC ready to accept the very significant requests for teaching support. Also, if one is trying to change a culture with respect to teaching one has to think big. Significant money has to be invested. Token amounts will ensure failure. It is to the credit of my senior management colleagues and the deans that they were happy to agree to this major funding. It was an investment and in the following years the success of the initiatives has returned funds to the University.

The outcomes of the projects funded by the SPF are described below, with some limited evidence to show the contribution they made to achieving the overall goal of supporting staff and improving the student experience.

### **ITET: THE INNOVATIVE TEACHING AND EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY FELLOWSHIP**

Early discussions on how we could gain maximum benefit from advances in information technology took a predictable course. Some suggested competitive grants on IT teaching projects and our technology experts proposed that two more multimedia experts be appointed. It was suggested that faculties allocate at least one staff member to work with the Educational Technology Centre on faculty-specific projects. However, while all considered the technological skills of some staff would be enhanced by these ideas, the working group felt there was not enough emphasis on the pedagogy and limited opportunity for transference of technological skills. One member then asked: "What about a Fellowship Scheme?" From here, all fell into place and ITET was born.

ITET was a full-time, six-month fellowship for groups of 15-20 academic and other staff involved in supporting learning and teaching. With the support of their Head of School and Dean, each applicant nominated a project that addressed an educational issue of priority for the school and that involved educational technology. Successful applicants were funded for full teaching, administration and, in some cases, research relief for six months. Fellows also contracted to complete a comprehensive programme of group and individual learning activities focused on student-centred learning and teaching, both online and face-to-face. Common components of all ITET programmes were:

- An introductory 3-day workshop run by a professional facilitator to establish the Fellows as a group who would work together for the next six months, using models of experiential learning and group work.
- Mixed discipline action-learning groups, to support project development.
- Workshops on learning and teaching topics, chosen and run by the Fellows themselves.
- Skills workshops in online learning and educational media development.
- A 1-day ITET Symposium for all University staff, run by the Fellows.
- A final 're-entry' workshop to explore how the Fellows were going to share the benefits of the Fellowship with their colleagues when they went back to their former duties.

Components that changed as a result of feedback and/or external events included:

- Workshops to explore educational theories.
- An online learning component.

Lessons to be learnt from this initiative were the importance of Fellows gaining relief from their normal activities, the inclusion of some non-academic general staff (e.g. from the library and a Faculty webmaster), and the importance of me as PVC attending all the three-day intensive group building sessions and other ITET activities where possible. This latter commitment from me was very important. It is too easy for members of the senior management team to be too busy and not become a part of our initiatives. Showing our face, being actively involved in some activities in learning and teaching is essential if we are to be credible and highly effective drivers of change.

There were five ITET Fellowship programmes spread over three years providing funds for 76 staff to undertake projects and the intensive sessions on learning and teaching and staff development. Being an ITET Fellow carried some kudos

and many of these Fellows have had major impact throughout the University, particularly by taking leadership responsibilities (e.g. Heads of School, Faculty Associate Deans, Members of the Academic Board, Presiding Members of Faculty, Faculty directors of learning and teaching). For example, this is an extract of a note from one of the Fellows:

“I would like to thank you sincerely for your role in advancing my career. The boost in confidence and motivation provided by the ITET Fellowship and by developing online formative assessments for Phase 1 Medicine has allowed me to take on a leadership role in Learning and Teaching within the Faculty.”

Obviously ITET is about much more than technology, although the Fellow whose quote follows did indeed introduce a very effective web-assisted, modular structured first year course in English with an emphasis on creative, collaborative learning experiences.

“It taught me to think about a course in terms of learning outcomes. What do I want students to be able to do at the end? It showed me that aligning assessment with the content was absolutely crucial. That was probably the most transforming thing. No longer was I just delivering content. I was thinking about the students’ learning experience and encouraging them to think about it too.”

Others referred to a paradigm shift in their approach to teaching and stressed the importance of freeing up time.

“The ITET Fellowship was a paradigm shifter for me. I had been interested in the student experience—specifically, that of research students, which is why I gained the ITET in the first place—but during the Fellowship I was exposed to (a) educational theory and practice, which was new to me; and (b) a group of like-minded fellow “Fellows” as well as Adrian, Michele and others, which was very supportive and stimulating. I continue to communicate and sometimes collaborate with many from that ITET year, in the form of publications, joint Workshops (e.g. UNILT) and other projects (e.g. Portfolios).”

There was another way ITET spread the word as illustrated in the following comment from a Head of School:

“The real value of the ITET Fellowships extended well beyond the individual projects undertaken by individual academics. The community/network generated among the ITET Fellows and the information networks generated with Heads of Schools at the reporting on project sessions was by far the most significant. These events enabled communication and reflection and engagement with the notion of improvement and innovation. The impact on me as Head of School, was immense. I found the session not only engaging but also inspirational. I began to see new opportunities for teaching and learning improvements more generally and began promoting this awareness to other members of the School. This meant that ITET benefited not just the Fellow but the School more generally.”

Later more will be said about the success of the ITET Fellows as change agents in their Schools and beyond. But this was not uniform. In one Faculty, with a small group of Fellows and entrenched resistance to improving teaching, we appeared to have failed given this comment from their Associate Dean (Education),

“ITET benefited the individual involved, but very little dissemination afterward. This was not for lack of trying but was mainly due to lack of interest on the part of others in the Faculty.”

### **STAFF SUPPORT: FOUNDATIONS OF UNIVERSITY LEARNING AND TEACHING PROGRAMME (FULT)**

In responses to my original letter to staff, 28% of all teaching staff had identified their most significant issue to be addressed as the need for professional development, in training programmes for staff as teachers and educators, and in providing constructive feedback on assessment of teaching. My past experience in staff development as part of the George Miller inspired strategy to improve global healthcare education around the World via staff development of health educators (McGuire 1999) and as a member of the WHO Regional Teacher Training Centre based at UNSW, had convinced me that improved staff development in learning and teaching had to be a major plank of my PVC strategy. Thus Working Group 3 in the original brainstorming

groups was charged with the task of developing a ‘blue sky’ proposal for staff development at UNSW as a first step in devising a feasible plan that acknowledges the inevitable tension between teaching and research.

A major outcome of these deliberations was the Foundations of University Learning and Teaching Programme (FULT) for new staff. This was a much more intensive programme than had existed before and has been very successful. It is not appropriate to describe FULT in detail here, but there are key strategies that I consider contributed to its success. Firstly, it was intensive rather than the usual series of half-day staff-development activities. Staff had to commit to a full five-day programme followed up later in the year by two further full-day sessions. They had the option of undertaking an additional project and thus completing a unit in a revamped Graduate Certificate in University Learning and Teaching. Staff were from mixed disciplines and there were about 20-25 in a FULT group who worked together over the week. The programme “practised what it preached” in that student-centred perspectives and approaches to learning and teaching were modelled throughout the programme. I remember to this day my first exposure to staff development as a fresh new lecturer at a session on lecturing. The person running the session put their first overhead transparency on the screen, which was a completely illegible page of 10-point text! I did not return for more. Staff development has to be good. The contract for FULT was that staff had to like it. If the feedback questionnaire did not show at least 80% satisfaction, the programme would be changed. Fortunately, the results were good. Of the 88 participants in FULT 1-5 in 2004, 90% stated that they had found the five-day workshop a valuable learning experience, with only 3 responding in the negative.

“FULT is a really useful programme and although people often resist doing it at first they are often surprised and delighted by how much they learn from it and how much more effective they can be. I think FULT really has had an impact on teaching across the university – we have changed from a university, which did have problematic teaching in lots of areas to a university where teaching is paid attention and where students generally expect the teaching to be good. That is a difference.”

As with ITET, I tried to be present at the introduction of FULT programmes and the inevitable wine and cheese at the end (more on this later!). Where possible, I ran a session on small group teaching. I have both lasting positive and negative impressions of my attendance at FULT sessions. Firstly, seeing how resistant academics mellow over the week and become genuinely enthusiastic about teaching by the end was very pleasing. Then there were those genuinely

committed and enthusiastic new staff who were attending against the advice of their Heads of School who had told them research was all that mattered if they wanted to progress. The distress of these wonderful young people firmed my resolve to fight harder to change the culture. The working group had rebelled at making FULT compulsory, but there had to be a way to get all new staff to FULT (again more on this later!).

### **TEACHING GRANTS: “NO SUCH THING AS A FREE LUNCH”**

One approach decided upon to support the First Year Experience (FYE) goal was to seek funding for a number of projects that would be openly competed for by groups of staff. Originally the idea was to fund six \$50,000 projects but after running a workshop with students exploring their views on how to make the first year learning experience more fulfilling, it was obvious that more projects were needed. So in the first year, 2002, 24 projects were funded with grants of up to \$15,000. This was not novel: all universities offer learning and teaching grants to staff. However, there are two aspects of the strategy we used that are worth sharing and which are strongly recommended to any university offering a grant programme focused on learning and teaching.

The main, well-documented problem with any grant system, be it national or within an institution, is the issue of transferability and sustainability (Hicks, 2004). Firstly, there are limited opportunities for other staff members in the university to hear about and share the ideas generated by the project. Secondly, once a project is completed or the enthusiast leader moves on, the benefit of the project for students is often lost.

In an attempt to help minimise these problems, acceptance of grants was made conditional. Before they were given the money, awardees had to agree to attend three full-day workshops to further their learning and teaching practice and to share issues, experiences and achievements across disciplinary boundaries. Hence, the strategy was “No such thing as a free lunch.” Examples of sessions included in these workshops were:

- Reviewing and developing project designs
- Inter-project presentation and discussion
- How will your project enhance student engagement in learning and teaching?
- Project evaluation strategies
- Looking ahead; planning implementation and management

Staff with particular expertise in these areas facilitated these sessions, and small and whole group discussions dominated. A useful technique, also used in FULT, was to have a panel of students talking about their own experiences and discussing them with the whole group. Over the four years I was involved in the grant programs and workshops, I was amazed at the networks amongst academic staff and general staff that participation in these workshop sessions catalysed.

“Attending the FYE workshops and symposia also exposed us to people across the university who were tackling similar issues, and sharing solutions. That is, it created another supportive community of practice.”

You are encouraged to reflect on grants on learning and teaching awarded in your institution or awarded to your staff by external bodies such as the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). How often have these groups been brought together to share and learn?

Finally, another part of the contract with the project groups was that they were required to present at a full-day forum on learning and teaching to the whole University. Sometimes they would make a presentation, although based on the experiences of the ITET annual forum, some groups chose to run workshops for groups of staff. The forums were often supplemented by an invited outside speaker and a student panel as well as awardees. They were well attended and provided another vehicle for me to push the line that the University was taking teaching seriously. Getting the VC to come along was also successful. As senior managers we have impossibly busy lives. However, we often forget just how important it is to be at functions like this. It is seen as making a statement. I once attended such a learning and teaching forum at another place and the Vice-Chancellor could not attend because he had arranged meetings on strengthening research in the faculties at the same time. Not a good look!

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## EDITOR'S NOTE:

In the next issue of *AJSOTL* (May, 2017) Adrian Lee continues his discussion of the strategies undertaken at UNSW from 2001-2006 to improve learning and teaching. He describes new (previously unplanned) strategies to engage faculty and staff, building communities, the need for support for associate deans (education), the development of the Guidelines on Learning that Inform Teaching, rewards and recognition and a teaching and learning performance fund. The article finishes with some evaluation of the success of the initiatives and recommendations for universities wanting to improve the overall learning and teaching culture. ■