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Engaging staff in quality learning and teaching: What's a Pro Vice Chancellor to do?

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Universities undertake a number of tasks to assure and enhance the quality of learning and teaching that are dependent on the engagement of academic staff who are pivotal to implementing the 'quality agenda'. Typically, a Pro Vice Chancellor, Learning and Teaching or similar, is charged with leading change and improvements in learning and teaching. This paper provides a personal account of how as a PVC, I have tried over a period of two years to engage staff in this work and some of the insights gained. Specifically, I describe the strategies I used and the challenges I encountered, and what I have learned about leadership and change management. My aim is to shed light on just what a PVC can most usefully do to engage academic staff in quality learning and teaching.

Keywords: Learning and teaching, leadership, change management

Introduction

Universities recognise the importance of assuring and enhancing the quality of educational programs, instructional and assessment practices, academic standards, and the overall student learning experience. Students, employers, professional bodies, the community and government all have expectations relating to learning and teaching. In Australia, government policy underlines the need to demonstrate quality through the annual Course Experience Questionnaire, the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund and the five yearly AUQA audits. University quality league tables can influence among other things, domestic and international student enrolments, and the ability to recruit and retain good quality staff and to attract funding (Dill & Soo 2005; Stella & Woodhouse 2006).

In order to create quality learning experiences for students, universities must undertake a range of complex tasks related to learning and teaching including curriculum design, development of learning resources, facilitation of student learning, assessment of learning outcomes, the management of courses and programs, and all activities that underpin these including academic staff keeping up to date with their academic discipline, undertaking professional development and contributing to academic leadership (McAlpine & Harris 2002). Moreover, "it is students' total experience of university—not just what happens in the traditional classroom—that shapes their judgments of quality, promotes retention and engages them in productive learning" (Scott 2006, p. vii). In addition to relevant and well designed educational programs and capable, knowledgeable and committed academic

staff, students want effective student administration, academic advisement, information technology, library, counselling and learning and language services (Scott 2006).

Not all activities associated with learning and teaching are the responsibility of academic staff. Indeed, it takes a whole university to educate a student and involves the contributions of technical, administrative and professional staff, and students themselves. Academic staff, nevertheless, play a significant role in learning and teaching through their teaching activities and their contribution to scholarship related to learning and teaching, institutional governance, and university wide change initiatives aimed at improving the quality of learning and teaching.

Universities create learning and teaching strategies outlining goals and priorities for action; develop and review academic policies dealing with such matters as program development and review, assessment, and plagiarism; establish systems for student feedback, staff induction and continuing professional development programs; put in place performance review and promotion processes that give recognition to learning and teaching work; and implement university wide special projects such as embedding graduate attributes into the curriculum, aimed at enhancing the student learning experience (see de la Harpe and Radloff 2007 for a fuller discussion). Universities have also created new roles specifically to lead and champion quality learning and teaching such as Directors of Learning and Teaching at department level, Associate Deans for Learning and Teaching at faculty level, and Pro Vice Chancellors, Learning and Teaching and / or Deputy Vice Chancellors, Academic, at university level.

This paper explores my experiences as a PVC at an Australian multi campus regional university with a large cohort of international students. I describe some of the strategies I have used over two years to engage staff and the challenges I have encountered, and reflect on insights gained about leadership and change management. I offer a personal account of my search for an answer to the question, “What’s a PVC to do?” which I hope will be helpful not only to others in similar roles but to all staff who need to engage in assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching.

The Pro Vice Chancellor role

The Pro Vice Chancellor position is relatively new in universities. A recent report (Smith, Adams & Mount 2007) describes the evolution of the PVC role in UK universities in response to the rapid growth of student numbers and related increase in institutional size and complexity. Based on interviews from PVCs and other senior staff in 13 UK universities, the report describes the focus of the PVC role as facilitation of the Vice Chancellor’s vision and initiation of action to achieve the vision. PVCs provide an institutional perspective and focus on university wide leadership and change. PVCs occupy a ‘mezzanine’ level between the VC and DVC and the Deans of Faculty and Heads of School (Smith *et al* 2007, p. 34). The PVC role has both strategic and operational elements.

PVCs usually work on their own with few support staff and use the university committee structure and their role as committee chair to exert influence. The way they get things

done is “to share information, make sensible and defensible analysis, and then enter and lead the debate” (Smith *et al* 2007, p. 4). Some of the characteristics incumbents believe PVCs need to perform their role include engagement with academic life, imagination to extend boundaries and envisage changes, and alignment with the academic and / or institutional enterprise. PVCs need to have strong academic rather than management credibility in order to be effective in their role.

A recent survey of 18 Australian university DVC/PVCs with responsibility for learning and teaching (Scott 2007) provides further insight into the role. The top four areas of concern to the DVC/PVCs were finding high quality staff, clarifying strategic directions, responding to decreased government funding and managing continuous change. Respondents reported that the most challenging/least satisfying aspects of the role were archaic institutional processes, endless travel and meetings that have no outcome, organisational indecisiveness, performance management of staff, and change averse university cultures. Further, since the PVC role responsible for learning and teaching usually operates separately from other PVC roles, notably those responsible for research and community engagement, role confusion and tensions can occur.

In summary, the PVC role responsible for learning and teaching is a relatively new one with a key responsibility for assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. The PVC is part of the senior management group, resides at the ‘centre’ of the institution and often has responsibility for ‘support’ areas such as for example, academic staff development, student learning support and library services. The PVC typically has little direct staff support, limited or no budget and works through university committees and informal networks to influence and enact change. The PVC role may reflect and embody tensions between the values and interests of the academic, collegial ‘heartland’ of the university and the institutional corporate ‘managerial’ drivers for changes that are often shaped by external forces. The PVC thus sits somewhat uncomfortably in the middle needing to engage academic staff in achieving changes in learning and teaching which have been often largely determined centrally. This summary accurately represents my role.

Academic staff engagement

Academic staff are pivotal to implementing changes in learning and teaching and the department where academic staff are mainly found, is the critical unit of activity around change efforts (Knight & Trowler 2001). If universities are to move from a ‘teaching paradigm’ to a ‘learning paradigm’ (Barr & Tagg 1997), and accept responsibility to ‘produce learning’ and not just to provide programs of study (Tagg 2003), then all staff must be willing to make changes to how they design the curriculum, support student learning and assess learning outcomes. Thus, a prerequisite for the success of any institutional initiative to improve the quality of learning and teaching is ensuring staff commitment. As Clark (2004, p. 360), notes, “The most frequent mistake made in attempts to transform universities is for a management team to proceed on its own without involving faculty and their departments from the outset”. A PVC charged with leading change in learning and teaching will not succeed in this task unless staff are engaged in the work.

The concept of engagement has been extensively explored in the context of student learning where a strong relationship between engagement, persistence and positive learning outcomes, has been found (Carini, Kuh & Klein 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). Attributes of engaged students include being curious, enthusiastic and optimistic about learning, being interested in the learning task, persistent in the face of obstacles to learning and positive about achieving learning goals. Further, engaged students are more likely than less engaged students to set realistic learning goals, prepare for class, participate in learning activities, spend time out of class studying and seek help with their learning when they need it.

Academic staff who are engaged in creating quality learning experiences are likely to show similar attributes and behaviours including enthusiasm for their subject and for teaching, commitment to students and their learning, interested in learning about their students and how to help them learn, and scholarly in their approach to learning and teaching. Above all, engaged staff are prepared to be learners themselves in order to achieve change in learning and teaching.

Obstacles to academic staff engagement

While in every university there are staff engaged in contributing to the achievement of institutional goals for learning and teaching, there are many who are not. A number of factors can contribute to the lack of staff engagement including academic identity, work priorities, conceptions of teaching, attitudes to institutional strategies and policies, reactions to the 'quality agenda' and trust in senior management.

The identity of academic staff is closely tied to their discipline (Becher & Trowler 2001). Staff usually describe themselves firstly as members of their discipline and only secondly, as members of university staff. Moreover, academic staff, if they think of themselves as professionals, are likely to do so in the context of their discipline rather than in terms of their role as teachers. Further, academic identity may be associated with notions of academic freedom and the consequent rejection by academic staff of 'top down' managerialism in favour of collegial decision making at the departmental level.

Academic staff may experience conflict in relation to their work priorities affecting their willingness to engage in efforts to improve the quality of learning and teaching. There has been an intensification of academic work (Gordon & Whitchurch 2007) and academic workloads are generally high (Trowler 1998). Academic staff, thus, need to make choices about how they use their time. Further, they may be encouraged, especially early in their academic careers, to focus their energies on research which can bring professional recognition and reward, rather than on learning and teaching which may not do so. Moreover, while most universities have made changes to their academic promotion policies to reflect a greater balance of expectation between research and teaching performance, there may still be a bias, perceived or real, in favour of research productivity in promotion decisions. We continue to talk of research in terms of 'opportunity' and teaching in terms of 'load'.

The conceptions of teaching that academic staff hold (Kember 1998; Kember & Kwan 2000) can also impact negatively on their willingness to engage in efforts to improve their own practice. Staff who equate teaching with 'delivery of content' by a discipline expert and view excellent teaching as simply a matter of technique (Weimer 1997), are likely to see little need to engage in ongoing learning and may be reluctant to participate in professional development.

Academic staff may view institutional strategies and policies aimed at supporting the quality of learning and teaching with indifference or suspicion. For instance, a study of the implementation of a learning and teaching strategy at one UK university (Newton 2003), found that academic staff lacked 'ownership' of the strategy, considered it to have unrealistic goals, and saw it as a threat to their autonomy and a symbol of the bureaucratisation of teaching. Moreover, they complained about 'strategy overload' and the lack of acknowledgement of the local departmental or course context in devising the strategy. Interestingly, academic managers judged the strategy to have been successful in raising the profile of teaching and in improving student learning.

The style in which strategies and policies are written also impacts on how academic staff view them and the extent to which they will engage with them. The language may be highly impersonal with staff portrayed as passive recipients of intended action or even altogether absent (Smith 2007). Moreover, the way academic staff 'read' strategies and policies is filtered by their beliefs about learning and teaching and about their role within the institution (Fanghanel 2007). As a result, academic staff may react negatively to attempts to implement strategies and policies.

Academic staff attitudes towards the 'quality agenda' can also act as an obstacle to engagement. Staff may question the institutional approach to quality which they perceive as compliance driven creating 'busy work' (Anderson 2006; Harvey & Newton 2004; Laughton 2003) with little positive impact on teaching practice and student learning experiences (Harvey 2006). They may therefore try to avoid, subvert or actively reject attempts to implement quality systems and processes. As Jones and de Saram (2005, p. 48) note, "It is relatively easy to develop a system and sets of procedures for quality assurance and improvement on paper. To produce a situation where staff on campus 'buy into' this in an authentic and energetic manner is much more difficult".

Finally, academic staff may lack trust in senior management. A survey of more than 8000 staff from 17 Australian universities found that almost half (48%) judged senior management to be untrustworthy (Winefield, Gillespie, Stough, Dua, & Hapuararchchi 2002). Trust in senior management is a predictor of staff commitment to the university and therefore presumably their willingness to engage in activities associated with institutional priorities such as improving the quality of learning and teaching. The distance between academic staff and senior managers where the former espouse 'academic values' while the latter focus on compliance and accountability is captured well in the following quote in the *Times Higher Education* from an academic, "New-style university managements are, actually, counter-productive. If you piss off your teachers and researchers you are eating the seed-corn, selling the family silver, sapping the life blood...Managerial cynicism is rampant in higher education as never before. They

(THEY) don't care about the poor bloody infantry...People are fed up, they are glad to give up and retire; they are going into internal exile, clock-watching, minimalising their effort" (Cunningham 2000).

Senior managers must accept some of the blame for the sentiments expressed in this quote. In their desire to achieve change, senior managers may be tempted to deal with lack of engagement or even active resistance by staff by trying to ignore or work around them, by creating new staff positions to undertake the work, by making top down decisions or by centralizing control over learning and teaching tasks. Such strategies reinforce staff disengagement and are likely to produce little real change.

However, criticism can also be levelled at academic staff and their reluctance to engage in change. For example, Peter O'Donoghue, joint winner of the Prime Minister's Award for Australian University Teacher of the Year, 2002 says, "without being unduly critical, many academics are apathetic or antagonistic to teaching reform. Many are paternalistic and always know best. Any attempt to change allegedly impinges on their expertise or academic freedom. Many are insular and simply lack vocational experience. Collegiality is not widespread as many staff consider others as political or economic rivals. This is not meant as a gloomy scenario but rather a realistic assessment of many workplaces. Petty issues dominate. How do you then institute change?" (O'Donoghue 2003, p. 28).

Engaging academic staff

So how then *does* a PVC institute change given the obstacles to academic staff engagement outlined above? The usual reply is by exercising leadership. Indeed leadership and particularly leadership from 'senior management' is widely seen as essential for successful change. Evaluation of a range of projects to improve university learning and teaching has identified leadership as an important factor in the success or otherwise of initiatives (McKenzie, Alexander, Harper & Anderson 2005; Southwell, Gannaway, Orrell, Chalmers & Abraham 2005).

How leadership is exercised is important. Having experienced poor senior management leadership in my academic career, I was determined to avoid similar mistakes myself. Instead, when I took up my role as PVC, I focused on engaging academic staff in tasks aimed at addressing the quality of learning and teaching. These included reviewing the university Management Plan for Learning & Teaching (MPLT) and key policies, strengthening professional development, and making changes to recognition and reward mechanisms. Below, I describe two of these tasks – the review of the MPLT and strengthening professional development – and the strategies I used to engage staff in them.

The main aim of the MPLT review apart from updating the Plan, was to reengage staff. The review took several months and involved a number of stages beginning with a one day Think Tank and ending with a launch of the new Plan. About 30 staff across the university selected on the basis of their record of involvement, interest and expertise in learning and teaching, participated in the Think Tank and provided input into the development of the first draft of the Plan including identification of priorities, goals and

actions. Further input into the first draft was obtained through a website and via open forums at seven of the university's campuses, facilitated by myself at which participants responded to questions about what distinguished CQU from other universities and why students and staff would choose to come to CQU rather than another university, and provided feedback on the draft Plan including on the relevance and clarity of the goals, the suggested priority activities, success measures and suggestions for implementation at the local level. Some 131 staff participated in the forums and provided ideas that were incorporated into the final Plan as well useful feedback about the issues that mattered to staff at each campus. One of these was the perceived lack of recognition of learning and teaching in academic promotion decisions. This issue was subsequently addressed through the development of a Framework for Evaluating Learning and Teaching (http://www.learning.cqu.edu.au/evaluation_services/) which identifies the different activities associated with learning and teaching, sample criteria for each and suggestions for types and sources of evidence.

The draft Plan was then considered by relevant faculty and university committees, further refined and the final Plan (http://policy.cqu.edu.au/Policy/policy_file.do?policyid=680)

approved by Academic Board. As part of the launch, every staff member received a letter from myself together with a postcard which summarises the Plan priorities, lists the four Plan goals and includes the challenge question: 'Have I contributed to a goal today?'

The approach I adopted to reviewing the MPLT tried to counter staff cynicism about the extent to which their views would be reflected in the final version of the Plan. The MPLT goals do reflect precisely what staff considered to be priorities including the importance of collaboration and recognition and reward for quality learning and teaching. I also tried to build trust and confidence in myself as a senior manager by following through on agreed actions. In addition, the MPLT incorporated an institutional commitment to a learning paradigm (Barr & Tagg, 1995) and the seven principles for good practice (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), both of which focus on challenging and changing existing conceptions of learning and teaching. These concepts were extensively discussed in seminars, faculty and university committees and presentations to Academic Board in an attempt to challenge staff academic identity and their conceptions of learning and teaching.

Strengthening professional development has involved a number of initiatives including revamping the induction program for new academic staff, setting up a number of Communities of Practice focusing on early career academics, leadership, assessment and e-learning, revitalising the annual Learning and Teaching Showcase, bringing external 'experts' to the university, supporting selected staff to attend learning and teaching conferences and to participate in external staff development courses, and encouraging involvement in Carrick initiatives. A common goal underlying the initiatives has been to increase staff exposure to new ideas about learning and teaching and to encourage their participation in the scholarship of learning and teaching. In this way I have tried to address staff conceptions of learning and teaching and to shift work priorities towards learning and teaching. Moreover, I have taken a personal role in supporting professional development by for example, presenting staff seminars on the scholarship of learning and

teaching, engaging in scholarly activities myself and mentoring staff to submit learning and teaching project proposals for funding.

More generally, I have worked with the PVC Research & Innovation on a number of tasks including input into the development of a Framework for Professional Development, on a review of the Promotions Policy and the Outside Studies Policy, and the establishment of a university Academic Leadership Group which aims to facilitate distributed leadership to support the 'core business' of the university. We have also co-facilitated a strategic planning workshop which included discussion of quality, standards and benchmarking for both teaching and research. We hope in this way to break down traditional barriers between teaching and research that can influence academic identity and work priorities. We also hope that our collaborative approach and active contribution to addressing issues that staff have identified as important, will increase their trust in senior management.

Challenges and reflections

A number of indicators suggest that I have had some success in engaging academic staff. These include evidence of progress towards the achievement of the MPLT goals, more systematic implementation of key academic policies, increased staff participation in professional development activities, more applications for teaching grants, more staff attending external learning and teaching events, the growth of Communities of Practice, and positive feedback about the joint initiatives the PVC Research & Innovation and I have undertaken especially the review of the Promotions Policy. I have been commended in two annual performance reviews for my achievements in this area.

However, a number of challenges remain, notably heavy academic workloads, negative attitudes to the 'quality agenda', and mistrust of senior management. The influence that Heads of School and Deans exert is also significant and may, at times undermine efforts to increase staff engagement. What staff activities they are prepared to resource and reward may be different from and indeed, conflict with those identified by the PVC as important for quality learning and teaching. Further, continuous restructuring, staff reductions, and general budgetary constraint, all impact negatively on staff morale and engagement. Also important is the availability of resources and who controls them. In order to encourage staff engagement, plans, policies, professional development and reward and recognition mechanisms must all be aligned. Successful alignment requires targeted funding and human expertise, both of which are in short supply and over which I have limited control.

So, what should I as PVC be doing? Based on reflections on my experiences in the role to date and drawing from the literature on higher education leadership and change management, I have identified the following activities, some of which I already do and some which I need to do.

First, develop a good understanding of learning and teaching since, as Weimer (2006, p. 200) points out, "an academic leader cannot endorse learning, growth, and change for teachers if his or her own thinking remains stuck in time and space. At some level and to

some degree, academic leaders must be in this literature if they are to advocate successfully on its behalf". Such understanding also provides the academic credibility needed in the role.

Second, support and model an evidence based approach to making decisions about learning and teaching. Leaders need to be scholars who make decisions that are based on "scholarly knowledge generated and validated by higher education researchers" (Ramaley 2000, p. 75).

Third, adopt a leadership style that has been shown to create a positive climate for change such as the authoritative, affiliative or democratic styles described by Goleman (Goleman 2000; Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee 2002). Further, work on developing the attributes associated with emotional and social intelligence namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social skill (Goleman 1998; Goleman 2006), attributes which Scott (2007) also found were most frequently identified by leaders responding to his survey.

Fourth, share, distribute or give away power by identifying champions, assigning tasks to others with the necessary resources to do the work, allowing staff autonomy, giving public recognition and building strong relationships (Hoff 1999).

Fifth, use a change management model such as Kotter's (Kotter 1996; Kotter & Cohen 2002) eight stages of change management, namely establishing a sense of urgency; creating the guiding team; developing a vision and strategy; communicating the change vision; empowering broad-based action; generating short-term wins; consolidating gains and producing more change; and anchoring new approaches in the institutional culture. Strategies derived from analyses of successful change practices in educational settings (Kezar & Eckel 2002; Scott 2003, 2004) also provide useful ideas to guide action.

Sixth, establish shared governance for learning and teaching between academic staff and senior management. The commitment of both is needed for effective governance since, as Burton Clark warns, "Absent the new class of change-oriented administrators, faculty can readily find comfort in old niches. Absent the faculty, and administrators bent on efficiency and effectiveness can become forgetful of educational values. Shared governance is essential, but in new or adapted forms" (Clark 2004, p. 359).

Finally, engage in continuing professional development to hone the leadership skills needed for the role (Bryman 2007) including through peer networks, informal mentoring and study of 'real life' workplace problems (Scott 2007).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have described how my work as a PVC is dependent on engaging academic staff in learning and teaching and some of the leadership and change management challenges that this poses. Reflecting on two years in the role has prompted me to consider my academic identity and values, how these sit against institutional imperatives and, given the dilemmas that these throw up, what I can and should be doing as a PVC. The quote below best captures my current answer to that question.

*Go to the people
Live among them
Start with what they have
Build on what they know
And when the deed is done
The mission accomplished
Of the best leaders
The people will say
“We have done it ourselves”
(Sun Tzu, c 500 BC)*

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