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**Managing the Online Learning Revolution in an MBA
course: Quality Assurance through Strategic
Development**

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Abstract

As online education becomes more commonplace so does the competition for students and the concomitant need to keep up with technology and best practice. In an environment where massive open online courses (MOOCs) are proving to be a disruptive innovation to university education the impact is shifting the boundaries of online delivery and revolutionising online learning. Despite its rapid rise and relative populist approach there remain uncertainties around notions of student performance, the student experience and overall aspects of academic quality assurance of MOOCs. This is particularly important in a higher education environment characterised by regulatory requirements and driven by international accreditation, both of which tend to apply an increased scrutiny on the delivery of online education. In the business education sphere this appears to culminate in the global MBA market that may soon see direct competition from MOOC providers.

This paper considers an approach taken to manage academic quality assurance and delivery of an online MBA course, mostly delivered in an asynchronous environment. It discusses the strategic intent and subsequent steps taken to operationalize its various components. Key elements of the plan include the allocation of staff resources including the appointment of an academic online MBA program leader and a dedicated instructional design team. In addition, a range of support mechanisms and instruments were developed and made available to online instructors to facilitate both the development of the required skillset and continuous improvements.

The strategic approach pivots around the development and implementation of quality assurance (QA) mechanisms and audits, over and above the existing QA measures used for face to face delivery such as course reviews and an extensive student feedback mechanism. The additional audits on 'course delivery against strategic plan' and 'instructor engagement' ensure the implementation of a threshold for online course delivery, facilitates the roll-out of good practice across the program and allows for remedial actions when required. In addition, the online delivery is supported by an electronic lounge in an effort to establish an MBA wide community.

It appears that a strategic approach to the delivery of online university education, particularly with an embedded focus on academic quality assurance has not only contributed to the development of a structured and systematic approach and skillset for online instructors but likewise delivered desired outcomes. Ultimately, the education revolution seems to have taken another quantum leap forward, and a focus on quality assurance can only bode well for any provider, particularly when product differentiation becomes crucial.

The Online Education Background

The historically traditional higher education sector has over the last three decades increasingly been characterised by business drivers, including a clientele that has customer expectations, triggering a revision of underlying models and transformation (Bisoux, 2013). One of the most prominent factors in this climate is the introduction and application of information technologies facilitating online learning and powering Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Private companies in partnership with universities are also now starting to explore course delivery using massive online open courses (MOOCs) (Eight, 2013). While still in their infancy, they have the characteristics of being disruptive (Bisoux, 2013) and the potential to revolutionize higher education.

Grundy (2013) reports that one segment of the tertiary education industry claims MOOCs is to universities what iTunes was to the music industry. At its extreme MOOCs could contribute to the closure of a range of universities and replace them with learning from home. Grundy's own interpretation is more tempered as he does acknowledge that the MOOC has its fair share of challenges. Likewise Kvan (2013) argues that the university campus will survive the age of online learning, albeit not without change. In reality though the presence and relevance of social media is presenting a world of opportunity to influence learning and change education (Orlando as quoted by Smith, 2011).

Despite the popularity of MOOCs, Frederickson (2013) points at the challenges of quality assurance of student learning that go hand in hand with massive online enrolments. While MOOCs create the opportunity for the non-traditional prospective student to sample university learning in a non-threatening environment it is characterised by a significant variance in quality and plagued by difficulties in verifying the quality of student work (Grundy, 2013). This is further reflected in the lack of credit transfer between MOOC and university institutions and the subsequent regulatory and legislative considerations to enforce this in some places in the US (Kolowich, 2013).

Although MOOCs inherently hold a threat to MBA courses, these are argued to be predominantly theoretical in nature as established MBA programs are built on experiential learning and focus heavily on developing skills of motivating, influencing, perseverance and personal effectiveness (Frederickson, 2013) – all difficult to enhance in an environment with limited human contact and physical interaction. Grundy (2013) claims that MOOCs indeed have some way to go before being able to claim expertly guided collaborative team based learning. Although Scheuermann (as quoted by Bart, 2012) claims that graded synchronous course elements heighten the online learning experiences by engaging students, the physical and synchronous experience of the campus is deemed to be irreplaceable by Kvan (2013). The online environment is argued to supplement but not replace the physical environment, mostly due to interaction between the classrooms being rich for learning and research, and seldom replicated in the online delivery mode.

This paper reflects on the realities of online education drivers and provisions, particularly the delivery dynamics and challenges in a quality assurance context. It then shifts focus to a case study of how an online MBA program set out to address these in a strategic context and the developmental outcomes this delivered.

Online Education Drivers

Online educational delivery is here to stay. The past 10 years has seen an explosion in online course delivery around the world with revolutionary changes in how universities deliver education (Arbaugh, 2010). This explosion has occurred because of the rapid growth in educational technology accompanied by increases in bandwidth, higher internet speeds, WEB 2.0 technology, portable devices and a new generation of tech-savvy users. Most universities would now use a range of learning management systems (LMS) to deliver their education. Universities also believe the demand for online education is going to further increase, with many institutions reporting significant growth in enrolments in this area (Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009). For example, in the USA between 2002 and 2009, growth in online courses was 19 per cent compared to only 2 per cent for campus based courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

In the postgraduate education environment, often dominated by full-time working students in management courses, flexibility of delivery has become paramount in assisting to meet time demands associated with work, travel and family commitments (Ladyshevsky & Taplin, 2013). Not surprisingly, this has translated in the take up of on-line education as a learning mode amongst students and on-line delivery by providers. While the availability of learning management systems (LMS) has assisted in setting up an online education presence recent developments around WEB2.0 technology has further facilitated virtual interaction between instructor and students (Yu, Tian, Vogel

& Kwok, 2010) and is expected to continue to enhance the online learning environment. At the same time the increased functionality and complexity of the LMS necessitated the introduction of instructional design specialists to manage the system (Orlando as quoted by Bart, 2011). This in turn contributed to a gradual shift in control over the online delivery from academic specialists to administrators, particularly in determining the look and functioning of the online course presence.

The Online Learning Environment – Creating a Presence

The online learning environment has the capacity to deliver a better student learning in comparison to alternative delivery modes. In an environment of student collaboration, online students reported higher perceived learning than face to face mode as reported by Arbaugh and Benbunah-Fich (2006) and Ladyshevsky and Taplin (2013). Online learning can be separated in synchronous (where instructors and students are simultaneously interacting) or asynchronous (where instructors and students do not interact simultaneously). The US based Sloan consortium focusses on quality online education resources and support and distinguish in their approach between the synchronous and asynchronous nature of online education. While both approaches encourage interactive materials the asynchronous mode is deemed to benefit from more frequent announcements and guidance to ensure a virtual presence in the classroom (Sloan, 2013).

Asynchronous learning invariably creates a learner centred environment, pivoting on rich communication amongst students and the instructor which is reflected in broader student participation and higher perceived learning (Comer and Leneghan, 2012). Advantages over the face to face environment include the notion that students report to be more revealing and participative in an electronic communication environment. Students also report that they put more thought in their online comments and take time to reflect on their engagement.

From a student skill perspective it is imperative that the instructional design is appropriate to ensure that students are guided in how a system is to be used to ensure it facilitates learning. Orlando (as quoted by Bart, 2011) warns that making the assumption that students will pick up new technology on their own is a recipe for disaster. Likewise, Pittaway et al. (2010) contemplate that technical skills applicable to academic tasks such as information gathering, synthesis, problem solving and evaluation are not perfectly aligned with technological skills used in daily life.

This instructor involvement has been termed ‘presence’ in the literature (Garrison & Vaughn, 2008). Three components are described in this framework, social, cognitive and teaching presence. All these are aimed at increasing the sense of community and connection between instructors and students. Because the learning occurs online, building a community is important to heighten participation and motivation to learn. Both the instructor and the students can create social presence through welcoming, supporting and acknowledging each another. Social presence can match that which appears in a classroom if done appropriately (Hostetter & Busch, 2006). Deep conversations and reflective practice is cognitive presence, predominately led by the instructor and aimed at constructing and confirming knowledge and learning (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Lastly, teaching presence is about structuring and facilitating discourse and critical thinking. (Redpath, 2012). The instructor needs to balance social and cognitive presence so the course does not become a social setting or an inflexible course of instruction (Arbaugh, 2010).

Concerns about the efficacy of learning online in comparison to learning face to face have also been addressed in several large scale reviews. Meta-analyses comparing distance learning to face to face learning in university and college education from 1990 – 2009 found that in 70 per cent of cases, students taking courses by distance outperformed their counterparts in the face to face courses (Schachar & Neumann, 2010 and Yuki Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009).

Although the online facilitation of learning essentially boils down to managing the learners and the learning environment through an online medium, similar to face to face learning, Pittaway, Downing

and Osborne (2010) argue that there is no clear picture of what an ideal virtual learning environment look and feels like for a student. The implementation of online learning and the tools that facilitate this give rise to a range of technical challenges that should not be overlooked. This is particularly relevant to the experience levels of online instructors, often the most limiting aspect of the implementation of strategy (Michael, 2012).

Online Delivery Skill Requirements

Clearly, teaching on line requires a different set of skills from the classroom environment. Having the processes in place to measure teaching presence is important along with support staff and training to prepare instructors for this teaching role. The people who work within these environments continually have to learn, upgrade their skills and manage the onslaught of technological innovation that is almost a daily occurrence. Some of these individuals deal with these changes easily, possibly because they are younger and have grown up with technology (digital natives) others are older and struggle to adapt to the constant demands and changes of the online education revolution (digital immigrants) (Prensky, 2001). Working with this latter group can be difficult as the pace of innovation leads to resistance to change and increased workloads. Despite research findings that online learning is equivalent to face to face learning Michael (2012) reports that many academic staff are not only sceptical about the student learning in an online environment but also expressed a preference for the more traditional teaching approach. Other factors such as perceived loss of academic freedom and uncertainties around time commitments added to a resistance to engage in online delivery.

One of the main shortcomings often associated with online learning is the lack of teacher presence and the inability to interact directly with students (Bart, 2012). In this context, a core role of the online instructor is to establish an online presence visible to the student as this not only increases student motivation but also fosters a sense of classroom community and positively influences student learning (Baker as quoted by Bart, 2012; An, Shin, & Lim, 2009). The instructor participation has the potential to negate a significant part of the student learning. While too much instructor participation undermines the student centred nature of the learning, too little engagement leaves the learning without direction or focus. Comer and Leneghan (2012) are clear on the instructor role being determined firstly by an online presence sufficient to show interest and guidance while not dominating the discussion, and secondly being characterised by their natural teaching style. This is claimed to be valid in both synchronous and asynchronous learning environments and can be achieved inter alia through course design, course facilitation and direction of learning.

Universities are also going to need instructors who are willing to work within the online space, supported by a team of instructional designers and learning management system specialists. Research determined that faculty with a positive attitude towards online learning significantly predict greater levels of course satisfaction (Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, & Yeh, 2008). The literature is also clear that the instructor is one of the most important variables leading to student satisfaction in online learning (Marks, Sibley, & Arbaugh, 2005). From a quality assurance (QA) perspective they must understand e-moderation which involves giving feedback to the class on a range of activities, submitted work and communication that keeps students up to date on components related to their learning (Ellis, Ginns, & Piggott, 2009). While there is no question that online education has transformed how education is delivered, what matters most to students given that they are paying for the course is the quality of the interaction in the virtual classroom (Bisoux, 2013).

Academic Quality Assurance (QA)

All of the above pressures mean that senior leaders within universities are going to have to become more knowledgeable about managing the quality of the online learning revolution within their institutions. Universities are becoming more accountable to students, to governments who provide funding and to accreditation bodies for the quality of their programs (Millson & Wilemon, 2008). Maintaining the status quo is no longer an option and individual academics will need to understand

that they too have accountabilities for the quality of the student experience and associated student learning outcomes (Nicoll, 2013). This quality imperative is quite a departure from the traditional university model where faculty teach their courses independently under the guise of academic freedom and independence with little more than a student satisfaction survey to measure quality.

Ragan (as quoted by Hill, 2010) argues that the asynchronous teaching environment leaves the online instructor to a large extent to his or her own devices as there is little or no similarity with classroom engagement, dynamics and experience. While instructors may have a wealth of face to face learning experience and capabilities it would be incorrect to assume that these translate to an online classroom environment. The online student looks to the instructor to serve as teacher, facilitator and guide. This pattern of instructor led course direction and asynchronous interaction not only goes a long way to mirror the presence of a study plan but is also instrumental in scheduling the learning and workload of the course (Ragan as quoted by Hill 2010).

The provision of tertiary education is increasingly contextualised by an environment of institutionalised academic governance and quality assurance. This is reflected by the prominence of quality assurance bodies around the world, all aimed at providing assurances of threshold standards being met by institutional education providers. Although this worldwide trend is partly driven by accountability for public funding it does impact on the modus operandi of providers. Although the online delivery environment does not necessarily cross national boundaries, uncertainties related to its nature and participants do tend to raise questions of quality assurance. In light of this greater scrutiny of online courses has virtually become mandatory to ensure they meet quality standards and are competitive with other programs competing for the same students in the global marketplace.

From a course material quality perspective Ragan (as quoted by Hill, 2010) argues that the reality of instant delivery though twenty-first century information technology threatens quality standards. Materials are at risk of being made available before or in the worst case without proper consideration of pedagogical accuracy and quality. Since all online programs are challenged by meeting institutional quality standards while achieving a dynamic content and delivery, Ragan (as quoted by Hill, 2010) argues for quality assurance on the level of content accuracy, instructional design and systems performance. Because content accuracy is traditionally based on a program or course map similar to the face to face content, it tends to be more static in nature. Due to its technical nature, instructional design is best approached by an experienced designer to ensure pedagogical quality, partly based on faculty experience and student input. Similarly, system performance is best assured by experienced and if possible dedicated staff so as to ensure a user friendly and accurate online presence.

Although the overall quality of higher education comprises a range of elements, in the online sphere the student engagement gets specific attention. In the online classroom environment, and most particularly the asynchronous mode, instructors are seemingly under a higher level of scrutiny to demonstrate the quality of the educational experience for their students (Mandernach as quoted in Bart, 2012).

Evaluation strategies which go beyond the traditional student satisfaction survey will be needed. Satisfaction related to 'feedback' often is scored poorly by students in online courses. This outcome is not uncommon even though attempts to understand and manage this quality issue through staff selection, training and monitoring are put in to place (Bair & Bair, 2011).

So how does one deal with the pressures of managing course quality, supporting the developmental needs of faculty and engaging a cohort of students spread across the world. This next section describes a strategic quality framework put in to place by an MBA program for its fully online course.

The MBA Online Case

The Curtin Graduate School of Business on which this paper is based has a long history of flexible delivery. Offering postgraduate courses to a predominantly part-time student cohort (full-time workers) across a range of sectors in Western Australia invariably translated in a need for flexibility. In practice this implies that traditional face to face classes are scheduled on weekdays after work. In addition, the School schedules a number of or blended learning classes consisting of intensive interaction of 36 hours in one week supplemented by online engagement, activities and interaction across the study period. Alongside this the School also schedules fully online offerings on using a learning management system (Blackboard™). The latter forms the focus of this paper.

Student enrolling in the online offerings reflected that work and/or personal commitments (e.g. fly-in fly-out arrangements, living regionally) left them little choice but to study in the online mode (Ladyshevsky and Taplin, 2013). Effectively the online mode allowed the School to access a market segment that would otherwise not be available to them.

This online MBA program, with the exception of the final capstone course which must be done residentially, is delivered in trimester periods of 14 weeks duration with class sizes averaging around 30 - 35 students. Each course in the program is managed by a controller who is a member of the academic faculty. The controller is responsible for overall course quality and typically works with an instructional designer to develop the course. The course may be taught by the controller or by an industry teaching associate. The latter are employed on fixed term contracts. The program is accredited internationally, including the online component.

Over 80 per cent of students who enrol in the course work full time and study part time. The average age of the student would be mid 30s with a mix of backgrounds in the private sector, the public sector, health, and engineering and mining. The gender ratio in the program is generally 60 to 40 per cent male to female. Since all courses have a standardized template - set up by the School's instructional design team and populated with course material - students develop a high level of competency in using the LMS early on in the program. The program offerings are based on a three trimester per annum cycle. Face to face (including blended) and fully online courses are delivered in these modes with a frequency of about twice a year. For example, Financial Management may be offered in fully online mode in trimester one and three and in face to face mode and blended mode in trimesters one, two and three.

Participants in online education, both staff and students, are geographically dispersed, including across various time zones, challenging the reality of synchronous online delivery and triggering the need for a predominant asynchronous online presence. For example, students in the online program attend from various locations in Australia (various time zones) and countries such as Germany and Chile. Academic staff, including industry teaching associates, are in Australia, Canada, Germany and Argentina.

The Strategic Approach to Quality

A strategic plan focussed on technology enhanced learning was developed by the senior leadership of the school. Core to the plan was the adoption of threshold standards for an online presence through technology adoption, supplemented by expected practices for teaching engagement. The plan was driven by the allocation of resources and structures unique to the online delivery of courses. This was complemented by dedicated operational arrangements and unique academic quality assurance systems supporting existing systems.

Strategic resources

In order to assure the implementation of the plan an Online MBA Program Leader was appointed from the academic staff as part of the continuous improvement effort. The Online MBA Program

Leader also reports on progress directly to the School Teaching and Learning Committee. The School Dean/Director and MBA Director are part of this committee.

Figure 1 outlines the overall strategic quality framework used to manage the online MBA program.

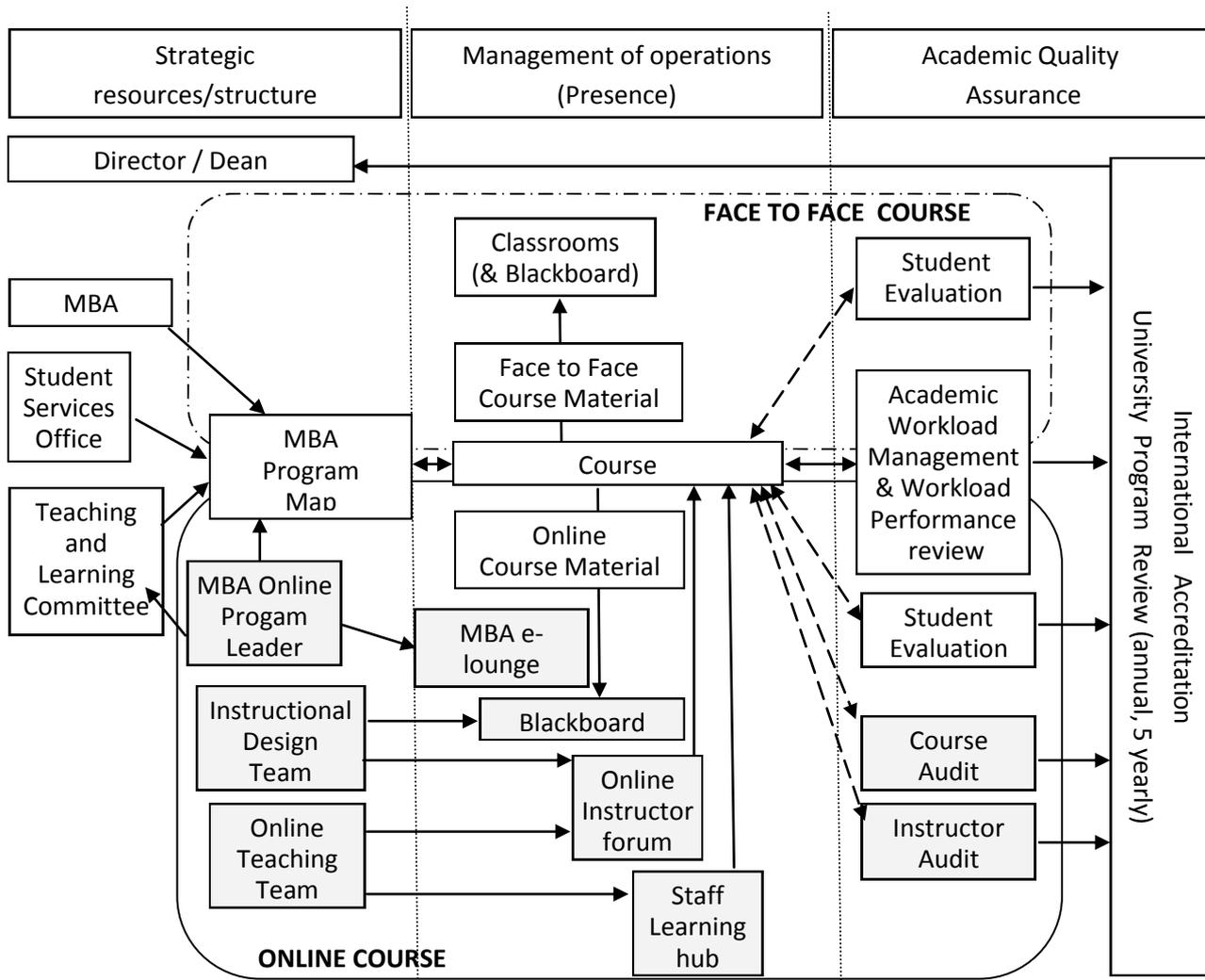


Figure 1: MBA Course Quality Framework

A substantive amount of resources were put in place to establish a dedicated team of support staff tasked to assist with the instructional design of the online presence. Their role is to optimise the functionality of the LMS and to provide ongoing support to staff and students regarding the delivery of online material. Functionally, the focus of the instructional design team is to ensure a relatively uniform use of the LMS so as to facilitate and ensure a uniform online format of the various courses. Likewise, the focus of the online teaching team is to enhance the skillset of instructors and provide support and assistance, or where possible, facilitate the online presence of the unit.

Dedicated operational arrangements

Subsequent to recommendations from a previous course accreditation, a number of other initiatives were adopted and included in the strategic plan and focus on providing information and support for skill development for online instructors and online students. These included the development of a Staff Learning Hub housing a range of help sheets for instructors, both current and new, to facilitate quick access to guides for the most common tasks needed for effective online teaching and course

design. The hub aims to facilitate skill development, enhance the online presence and assure that threshold standards are met. Figure 2 provides a screen shot of the Staff Learning Hub.

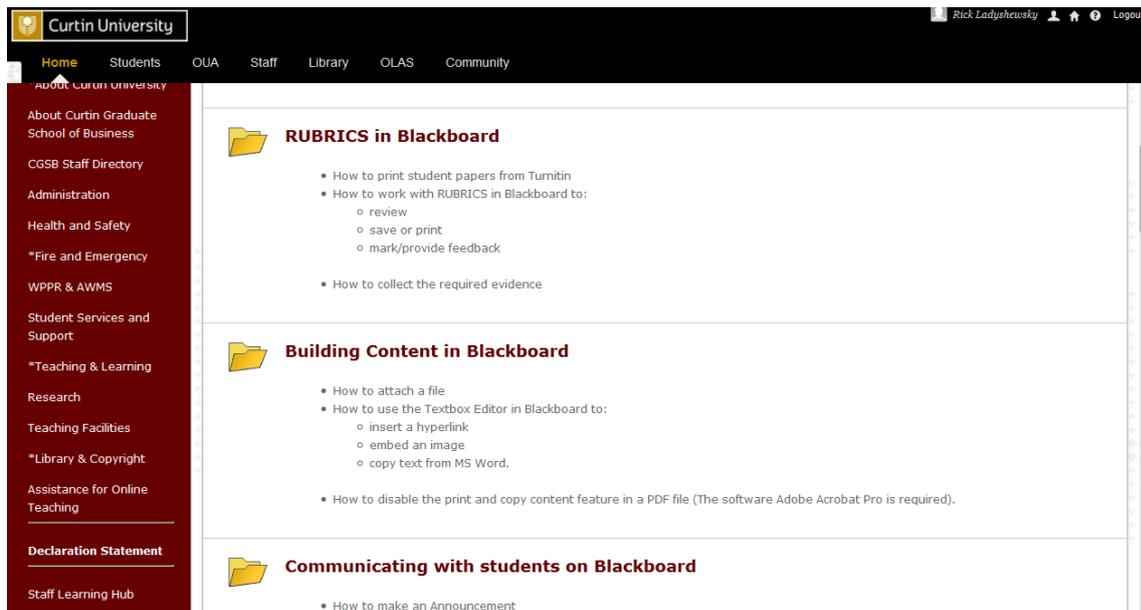


Figure 2: Staff Learning Hub

In addition, an asynchronous online forum was also set up for all instructors who teach online. This provided the Online MBA Program Leader with a means to communicate with all online instructors, many who were not located in the same city as the parent campus. Figure 3 provides a screen shot of the online tutor’s discussion forum.

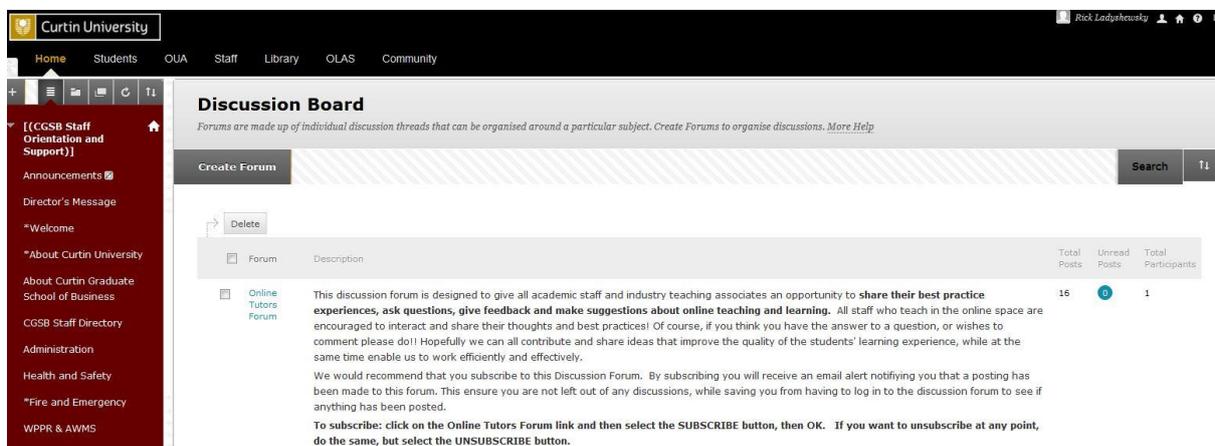


Figure 3: Online Tutor’s Discussion Forum

From the online student perspective an online MBA Elounge was created on the university LMS to bring online students who are geographically dispersed across the globe together. This facility was aimed to enhance the social presence of the program and was in addition to other social media tools such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, used to connect all students in the MBA program (face to face and online). The need for a ‘space’ to connect all online MBA students was an initiative to address accreditation recommendations for an online student community. Figure 4 provides a screen shot of the Online MBA Elounge home page.

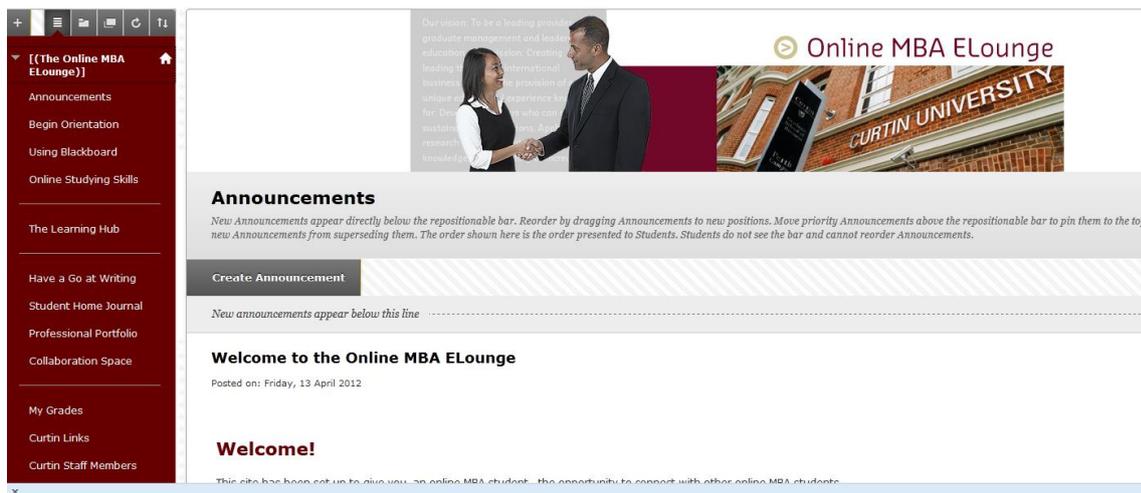


Figure 4: Online MBA ELounge Home Page

As part of the MBA ELounge students are encouraged to publish their biographical details in the student home journal and network with other peers in the site. Despite having an underlying social presence, the ELounge also holds components of a teaching and cognitive development nature. For example, orientation resources to support academic writing and online learning are also built in to the site. On occasion students also have access to key speakers that provide presentations at the home campus through the professional portfolio link. Within this space students and instructors can also communicate directly using a range of tools in asynchronous or synchronous formats. Figure 5 provides a screen shot of the various asynchronous discussion forums they can participate in.

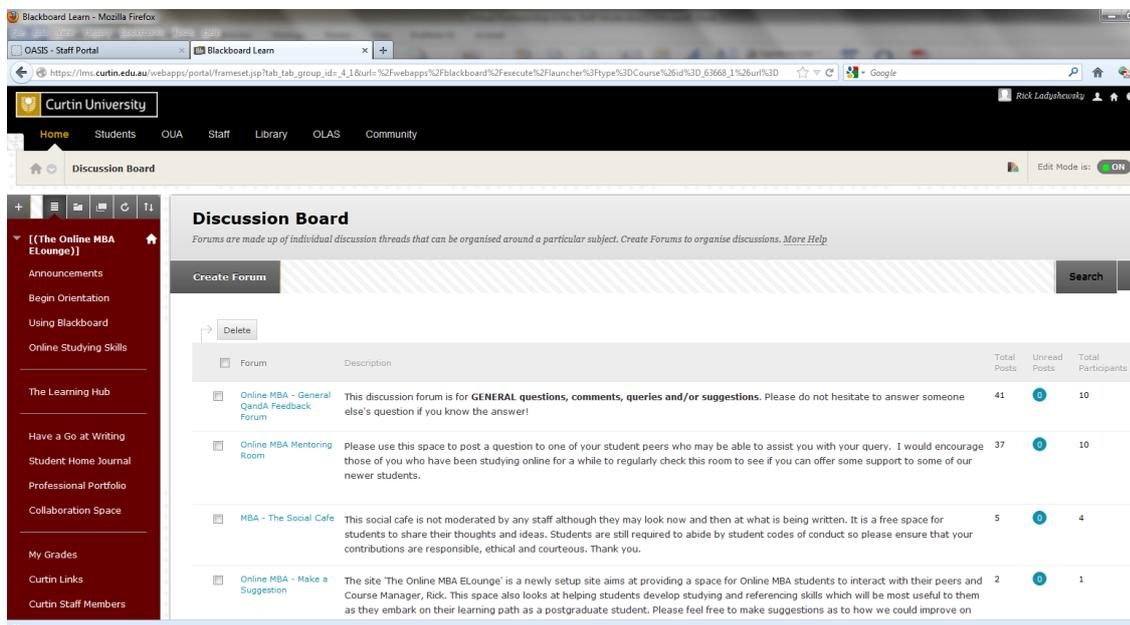


Figure 5: Online MBA ELounge Discussion Rooms

Academic quality assurance

As part of the QA exercise two types of audits were developed and conducted by the Online MBA Program Leader for every online course in the program. The first audit explored compliance with the threshold online presence standards in the strategic plan for technology enhanced learning. The second audit explored instructor interactivity to ensure appropriate and acceptable instructor presence

was achieved (Garrison & Vaughn, 2008). As an additional validation, a longitudinal approach was taken with a repeat of the first audit one year later to reassess compliance with the technology adoption standards.

Online Presence Audits

The key standards in the strategic plan focussed on course presence through design and delivery, as captured in Table 1.

Table 1: Online presence audit focus

Course design and delivery elements	Online Presence
A welcome message by the course controller in an audio-visual format	Social
A minimum of six audio/audio-visual i-lecture captures on course content	Teaching
Expansive multi-media content from diverse sources	Teaching & Cognitive
A LMS journal tool for student biographies	Social
Communication strategy - announcements	Social & Teaching
Communication strategy - discussion forums	Cognitive
Communication strategy - Blackboard Collaborate live session	Teaching & Cognitive
Communication strategy - assignment submission and feedback through Blackboard Grade Centre and Turnitin	(system compliance)

The audit did not explore the academic content of the course as this is governed by a university regulated course mapping and assessment system and disseminated through a ‘course outline’ document. The purpose was to gauge the needs for increasing the online presence and the multi-media aspects of the course. Results of the first audit highlighted that many of the courses and their controllers did not meet the expected threshold presence in the areas that require more advanced uses of technology, in particular, use of streaming audio-visual resources to deliver lectures, integration of multi-media and the use of synchronous collaborative software tools such as Blackboard Collaborate. The skillset of academic staff was insufficient to deliver the expected online course presence.

The audit reports were forwarded to the instructional design support team so they could assist faculty in improving the quality of their units. A copy was also forwarded to the Head of School for use in performance review and work development conversations with the faculty member. Where necessary, staff could undertake training centrally at the university’s centre for elearning.

Instructor Engagement Audit

To explore instructor engagement and interactivity the Social Networks Adapting Pedagogical Practice (SNAPP) tool was applied to undertake social network analysis. Social network analysis can facilitate the development of maps depicting the interconnectedness of communication networks (Chan & Liebowitz, 2006). In the context of online learning the SNAPP tool is described below.

“SNAPP is a software tool that allows users to visualize the network of interactions resulting from discussion forum posts and replies. ... SNAPP uses information on who posted and replied to whom, and what major discussions were about, and how expansive they were, to analyse the interactions of a forum and display it in a Social Network Diagram. This information provides rapid identification of the levels of engagement and network density emerging from any implemented online learning activities.”

(<http://research.uow.edu.au/learningnetworks/seeing/snapp/index.html>)

In addition, the social network analysis is arguably a gauge of teaching and/or cognitive presence. Figure 7 provides SNAPP analyses of an online question and answer forum for two different instructors from the courses audited for online presence. In figure 3A, the instructor is shown to demonstrate a comprehensive teaching presence in this forum. While the node representing the instructor is centrally located, the high level of instructor activity is encouraging other students to respond and answer questions from their peers. This reflects a cognitive presence complementing the teaching presence, achieved through the active and facilitating behaviour of the instructor. This is visually represented by the emerging cross connections.

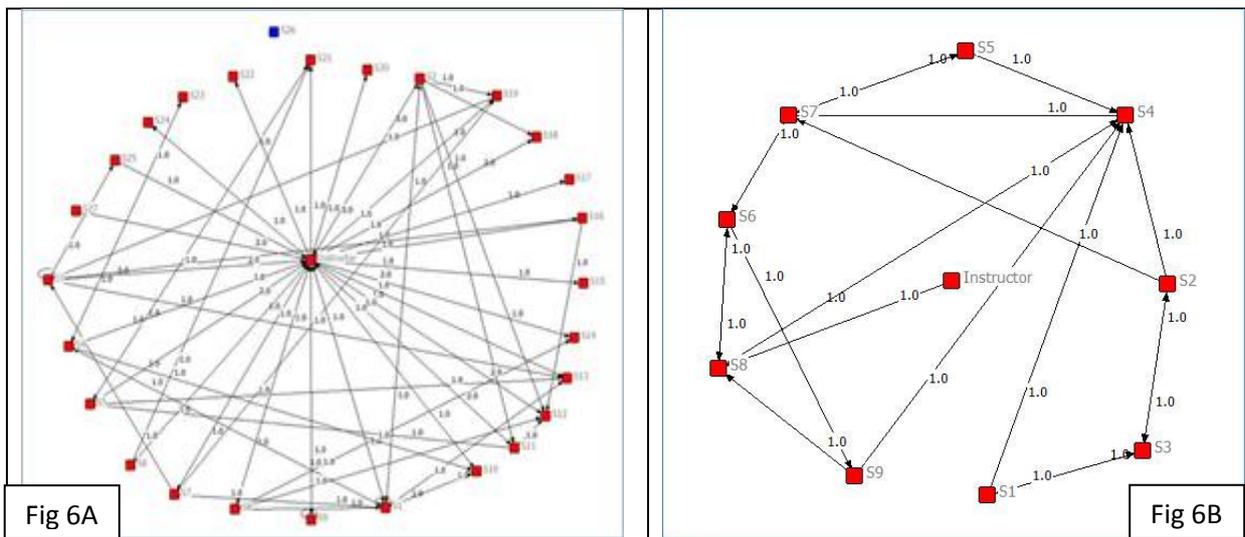


Figure 3: Sample SNAPP analysis reflecting engagement

The instructor presence depicted in figure 3B demonstrates a sub-optimal teaching and cognitive presence in the forum. Participants are located peripherally and the instructor has only made a single contribution to one student. This poor teaching and cognitive presence (absence) demonstrated by the instructor reflects in the reluctance of students to participate broadly, as depicted by the relatively scarce cross connections between students.

As part of the quality assurance, monitoring the results of the SNAPP analyses of all courses were again forwarded to the Course Controllers, the Instructional Design Team and the Head of School for use in performance development discussions with staff. Again, the impact of these audits on instructor behaviour and the online presence arguably contributed to higher student satisfaction scores reported later in this paper.

Measuring outcomes on student learning

It was important to determine if the Strategic Plan and its implementation was producing positive results. This was measured, in part, by using student satisfaction data from the university’s course evaluation system (Oliver, Tucker, Gupta, & Yeo, 2008) . The university’s course evaluation survey has 11 quantitative items and two qualitative items. The quantitative items measure agreement on a 5 point Likert scale and focus on both aspects that helped/hindered student achievement and elements of motivation, enthusiasm and commitment to the learning experience and the overall satisfaction with the course. The qualitative questions invite comments on “the most helpful aspects”, and, “course improvements?” The survey questions are summarised in Table 7.

The survey is anonymous and voluntary, though strongly encouraged through a series of emails and notifications over a seven week period. Once completed, full reports including percentage agreements for quantitative questions and qualitative comments are sent to the Course Controller and Head of

School. Although comprehensive, the survey is a generic student satisfaction survey and is not tailored to online education hence poses some limitations.

Figure 7 provides the online student satisfaction survey data across three years for nine courses in a given study period (T2). While the 2010 data reflects the era before the online strategic plan was implemented, the 2011 data reflects the first audit and the 2012 data captures the second audit after the implementation of the strategic plan and quality framework. All courses showed an increase in student satisfaction during this time except for item 9 (use of experiences) which remained level.

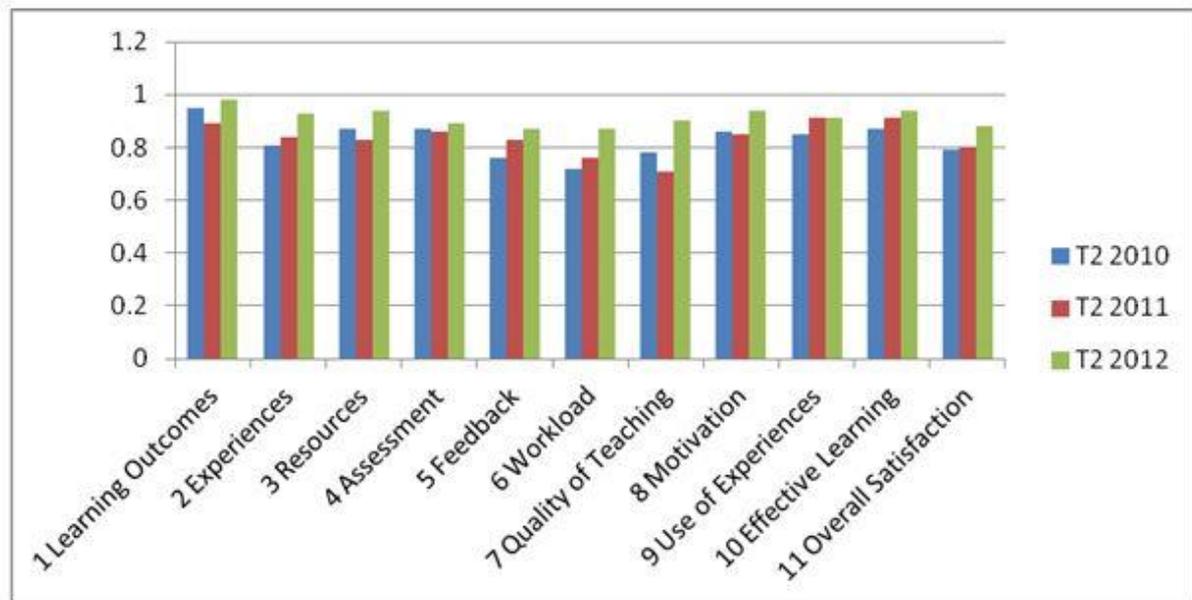


Figure 7: Student Satisfaction Data for Trimester 2 Courses

The 2012 audit cycle also reported a considerable increase in the use of Blackboard Collaborate (55 per cent) as through ongoing support and an emerging relevant skillset of academic staff issues around the use of multi-media and streaming of audio-visual lectures were being addressed. Overall it appears that the improvement in online student satisfaction aligns with the initiatives and efforts of implementing the strategic plan.

Conclusion

Given the revolution in online learning in an environment of national accreditation, universities are going to need much stronger systems in place to evaluate course quality. There is little doubt that the scope and size of online education developments and its results such as MOOCs are a ‘disruptive event’ which interrupts continuity in the way things have been done in the past and requires reflection, re-engineering and reinvigoration to create a new operable system (Nicoll, 2013). Unless there are systems to manage and monitor the uptake of new technologies and to monitor the quality of teaching at far greater levels, an online course can quickly fall behind those of its competitors, disengage students and become irrelevant.

Having a strategic plan for technology enhanced learning was an important step in setting the framework and benchmark for expected quality and performance in this MBA program. It conveyed the importance of the online program and was supported by dedicating resources. Appointing a leader to manage and implement the plan was another important step. The strategic plan and appointment of a leader created signals to staff about the importance of online learning and increased transparency. This in turn made staff realise that they had to engage with the professional development opportunities that were being put in to place and to seek the support of instructional designers to

ensure their courses were compliant with the standards in the strategic plan and that their teaching presence appropriate. Most importantly the implementation of the online strategic plan has facilitated a range of developments. Core to these is a skillset amongst instructors, instructional designers and the online support team. More latent but equally important are the development of relevant systems and tools to both establish, monitor and audit the online presence of the MBA course and program.

While this approach may seem bureaucratic, corporate, and perhaps even invasive to the notion of academic freedom, a university still must ensure that its products are up to date, relevant and using the most appropriate teaching technologies available. Most other businesses would have these processes in place to ensure their products meet industry relevant quality standards.

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