Learning Commons

Evolution and collaborative essentials

EDITED
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CHAPTER 8: PUTTING LEARNERS AT THE
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Putting learners at the centre: the Learning Commons journey at Victoria University

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Introduction

Victoria University (VU) implemented an Information Commons in each of its 11 campus libraries in 2005. Since then, VU has begun planning and development to redefine these spaces according to a 'Learning Commons' model. The initiative has been based on the collaboration of three areas of the university: Library, Teaching and Learning Support and Information Technology Services.

The implementation of each Learning Commons has been staggered with the first of the new facilities opening in November 2006 at VU's City Flinders Street campus in Melbourne's Central Business District. Planning is underway for another four facilities. The most significant development will be at VU's largest campus situated in the western suburbs of Melbourne planned for 2009. Transforming the existing Information Commons to a Learning Commons, this facility will be linked to a student pedestrian and retail precinct and will be the most comprehensive expression of this concept.

The evolution from an Information Commons to a Learning Commons model at VU has occurred within the context of larger scale strategic shift in the university's focus from a largely teacher-centred to a learner-centred university. This chapter explores the planning processes to develop a 'shared' understanding of how a Learning Commons with a learner-centred focus could support and engage students given that VU has multiple campuses and a highly diverse student population. While this is still a work in progress, some important lessons have been learnt.

The Victoria University context

Students

While increased diversity in student populations is now universal, this is particularly true at VU. As one of only five Australian dual-sector universities that incorporates both higher education and TAFE (post-secondary technical and further education),[1] VU provides education to students from the full range of qualifications – entry level to post-Doctoral – within the Australian Qualifications Framework.

VU's circumstances are also somewhat unusual among Australian universities because of the fact that it has a specific, legislated responsibility for the western region of Melbourne in the state of Victoria. VU has 11 campuses of varying sizes around the inner and outer western suburbs of Melbourne. This region is characterised by both a high concentration of industry and the cultural and linguistic diversity of its residents. It is home to numerous waves of migrants to Australia. In describing the West, Sheehan states:

> Generally speaking, the West remains a region with a strong migrant focus, with 33 per cent of the region's

population being born overseas, by comparison with a Victorian (state) share of 24 per cent...In 35 per cent of households in the western region a language other than English is spoken, by comparison with a Victorian average of 20 per cent. (Sheehan and Wiseman, 2004; p. 18)

However, there are strong variations within the West. For example in Brimbank one of the local municipalities close to VU a much higher proportion (53 per cent) of the residents speak a language other than English at home (Sheehan and Wiseman, 2004).

Generally the West is an 'area characterised by higher than average unemployment rates, lower than average income levels and under-resourced social capital' (Equity and Social Justice Branch, 2003; 2). For instance, the proportion of persons in the west employed in advanced knowledge service activities – managers and administrators, professionals and associate professionals is lower (32.1 per cent of employees) than for Victoria as a whole (40.1 per cent) (Sheehan and Wiseman, 2004; p. 20). In addition, a comparison of educational qualifications reveals that the proportion of the population of the western region who have a Bachelor's degree is substantially lower than for Victoria as a whole, and in some municipalities in the West the proportion is only about half the Victorian average. (Sheehan and Wiseman, 2004: p. 20).

VU's student population mirrors this diversity, drawing approximately half of its student population from the western region. Of all Australian universities, VU has the highest proportion of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students. In comparison to other Australian universities, VU also has high proportions of low socio-economic status (SES) students, part-time students, first in the family university students and students who work in

paid employment above 15 hours a week.[2] These characteristics are all associated with lower progress rates and higher attrition rates.

The challenge for VU is to embrace the diversity of its student cohorts. Supporting all students in their learning provides some challenges, as a one size fits all approach will not adequately support the diversity of students backgrounds and needs. VU manages diversity in a number of ways. For example, the approach taken to supporting TAFE and higher education students by the University's Student Learning Services department varies. TAFE students are provided with concurrent assistance (CA), which provides individualised and flexible academic support in language, literacy, learning, maths and technology for campus, industry-based and distance students across all campuses. Students can go to one of eight study labs where they work with an experienced CA staff member. This approach allows TAFE students to have ongoing focused and individualised support for their studies. In comparison, the higher education students have access to online resources, they can book an appointment to see a Student Learning Services staff member or they can attend scheduled workshops on academic skills. These varying approaches have had to be assimilated in the Learning Commons model.

Direction of the university

With a new Vice-Chancellor and President in 2003 came a renewed commitment to being the 'major education provider in, and *for* the western region'. The overarching mission of the University became 'to transform the lives of individuals and develop the capacities of industry and

communities within the western Melbourne region and beyond through the power of vocational and higher education' (Victoria University, 2004a). The role of the University was therefore re-cast an enabler of the West. As Sheehan states, VU 'is firmly committed to a strong leadership role in supporting the actions needed to drive the western region towards a prosperous and sustainable knowledge economy' (Sheehan and Wiseman, 2004; p. 2).

The strategic plan that was developed in 2004 embodied the notion of learner-centred teaching. From 2004–2006 a key priority of the University has been to develop a teaching and learning policy framework that supports and facilitates this shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred practice. VU's overarching Learning and Teaching policy highlighted this approach through general policy principles that reflect the values and strategic objectives of the University. The first policy principle states that the University's foremost focus is on learning.

> The purpose of teaching is to enable learning. A central focus of the University is therefore the provision of environments that promote high quality learning. (Victoria University, 2004b).

Another principle states that the University is committed to accommodating the diverse backgrounds and learning needs of our student cohorts. In addition, the policy states that at VU the needs and aspirations of students should be the starting point for the design and delivery of any program or of any student learning support service, and that collaborative learning approaches are intrinsic to 'learner-centredness'.

Two key understandings of being 'learner centred' underpin the move towards aligning VU with learner-centred practice. Firstly, as Weimer eloquently states, 'Being learner centred focuses attention squarely on learning: what the student is learning, how the student is learning, the conditions under which the student is learning, whether the student is retaining and applying the learning, and how the current learning positions students for future learning' (Weimer, 2002; p. xvi). Student learning is therefore placed at the centre of what we do and what we plan to do. Secondly, learner-centred approaches are those that encourage active learning; that is, they engage students in their learning and require them 'to question, to speculate and to generate solutions' (Biggs, 2003).

> Active learning requires students to take responsibility for their learning in both collaborative and independent learning situations, and is dependant on students developing and employing generic skills and attributes. (McLennan and Keating, 2005; p. 5)

The ability for students to work collaboratively is now a requirement for all VU higher education and TAFE students in their courses and in future employment.[3] As the recent introduction of a problem-based learning (PBL) approach to first year Bachelor of Engineering has identified, being learner-centred generates the need for new types of learning spaces that cater and support collaborative groups working together for extended time on projects.

In this environment various areas of the University were starting to consider the implications of establishing a learner-centred culture at VU. It was recognised that this shift needed to involve not only teaching practices, but re-purposing of learning environments throughout the University to promote active and collaborative learning.

The planning process

The Information Commons

When the Learning Commons approach was first proposed, the Library had already begun a process of re-development. In late 2004 VU received an Australian government Higher Education Innovation Program (HEIP) grant to upgrade the library information technology facilities at all campuses to move towards an Information Commons approach. Consequently, libraries were equipped with a range of new computers, wireless facilities for laptop use, casual furniture and new desks suited to both individual and group study. Computers were enhanced with a range of information resources and software that ensured consistency with the University's standard operating environment (e.g. Microsoft Office suite) as well as discipline-based software (e.g. AUTOCAD) for specific campus applications.

In addition, Library staff members were trained in basic IT support. The training program was designed to ensure consistency of skills in client assistance roles at a single service point. As well as basic computer troubleshooting, reference and directional skills, library staff were trained to refer higher order problems to appropriate specialists. A formal evaluation of the program was conducted and positive outcomes and improved staff morale were reported.

New IT staff members were also employed at three of the busiest campus libraries to answer more complex student technology queries. The positions were funded by the Information Technology Services department during semester time, and the new staff members were drawn largely from a workplace training scheme for information technology undergraduates.

These developments were influenced by the notion of the Information Commons as a space where students have access to library resources, productivity software, areas to work individually or in groups, reference assistance and technical support to research and produce projects all in the one location (Church, 2005). It was immediately obvious that these enhanced facilities were popular with students and met their needs in ways that the existing library spaces did not. As a result the Library experienced a rise of 15 per cent in student attendance between 2005 and 2006.

At this point, VU was at the stage of what Beagle terms 'isolated change' (Beagle, 2004). It was still a library-centric model and to a great extent not integrated with other university initiatives. Importantly though the development of the Information Commons was a useful starting point in reconceptualising how the University's learning spaces could support student learning and a first step in the move to a Learning Commons model.

The move to a Learning Commons model

The idea to move from an Information Commons approach to a Learning Commons approach emerged out of a university-wide rethinking of how we support 'learners' and their learning both inside and outside of the classroom. Initially a high-level working group was formed to consider VU's strategy. It included the University Librarian, Deputy Vice Chancellor Education Services, Pro-Vice Chancellor Teaching and Learning Support, the Director of Information Technology and the Director of Marketing and Communications.

At this time, staff members from the Library and from Teaching and Learning Support began to explore the

concept of a Learning Commons in more depth. A number of key staff from both areas undertook study tours to look at Information and Learning Commons at other universities in Australia and overseas including the University of Newcastle, University of Auckland, University of Guelph, Stanford University, University of California, University of Virginia, Cornell University, Columbia University, Sheffield Hallam University, University of Coventry, University of Hertfordshire, and Glasgow Caledonian University.

Staff from Teaching and Learning Support undertook a literature review to inform the strategy group's decision and ensure that there was a balance between operational and learning issues. This report (Keating and Gabb, 2005) explored how the Learning Commons concept could apply to a multi-campus, dual-sector University with a highly diverse student population. Drawing on Remy's depiction of the broad mission of a Learning Commons as 'not merely to integrate technology, reference...and services' as was typical with the Information Commons but to 'facilitate learning by whatever means works best' (Remy, 2004), the literature review explored both what sort of learning could be facilitated and how students could be best supported in these spaces. Different staffing models for collaborative service delivery were also explored.

Based on lessons learned from other universities, a number of general principles were extrapolated in the literature review and were used to guide the planning and development of VU's Learning Commons model. The principles that are outlined in Box 8.1 were agreed to by the strategy group.

In the literature review these principles were contextualised and applied to both the physical and virtual space of the Commons and the service model, which supports the operation of the Learning Commons. The notion that these

Box 8.1   VU's principles for a learning commons

> **Learning oriented**
>
> Facilitates active, independent and collaborative learning.
>
> **Learner centred**
>
> Focuses on student needs, preferences and work patterns.
>
> **University wide**
>
> Part of university-wide development of learner autonomy.
>
> **Flexible**
>
> Responsive to the changing needs of learners for resources and support.
>
> **Collaborative**
>
> Based on collaboration between different learning support areas in the University.
>
> **Community building**
>
> Provides a hub for physical and virtual interaction for staff and students.

Source: Keating and Gabb (2006); 16.

spaces should be learner-centred was key and became pivotal in the early planning of the Learning Commons at VU. This was articulated in the literature review as follows:

> **The physical space**
> The physical space is designed to accommodate student needs rather than those of the organisation. It

accommodates the social as well as an academic dimension of study and provides an environment that is welcoming, non-threatening and not dominated by staff. The place is highly visible, centrally located in the campus and close to other student services.

The virtual space

The virtual space allows students to access online materials and services such as learning support. Online resources range from those for specific units of study to those providing generic support for all students.

The staffing

Those staffing the Learning Commons are approachable, easily recognisable and provide a continuum of service including effective referral to other staff members. Student assistants are used not because they cost less but because they help to shape an environment that is welcoming and non-threatening for students and because they learn a great deal from the experience. Student feedback on the facilities and service is collected in a variety of ways and used to improve the service. (Keating and Gabb, 2005; 17–18)

The strategy group agreed that the Learning Commons concept complemented the University's strategic direction and was supported by teaching and learning policies that emphasised the shift occurring in education from 'institutions to learners and from teaching to learning' (Chappell, 2003). It was also decided that this should be conceptualised as an approach rather than just a building and be implemented in each of VU's 11 campuses. While they would all have to meet the general principles, it was

acknowledged that each Learning Commons would necessarily be different in terms of its size, physical design including links to other facilities on campus, staffing mix and opening hours in response to the student cohorts and courses at each particular campus.

Cross-divisional task forces were set up to undertake planning for each of the campus Learning Commons. This work was initially overseen by a project manager seconded from Information Technology Services and included representatives from Library, Teaching and Learning Support, Information Technology Services and Facilities. These task forces developed a project brief for functional requirements for the implementation of the Learning Commons on each of the campuses.

The implementation of each Learning Commons has been staggered. In November 2006, the first of the new facilities opened at the City Flinders St Campus in Melbourne's central business district. Planning is underway for another four facilities. The most significant development will be at VU's main Footscray Park Campus planned for 2009.

The physical space

The physical space of the Learning Commons varies significantly from campus to campus although still remaining consistent with the principles adopted for VU Learning Commons. The planning process has had to accommodate very different space requirements, budgetary concerns and needs of student cohorts.

In each Learning Commons, the space has been designed to accommodate a variety of learning preferences and work patterns providing spaces where individuals and groups of students can work and develop autonomous learning habits and confidence along a continuum from supported to

self-directed learning. For instance, in the City Flinders Campus there is a continuum of spaces for individuals, small groups, larger work groups and classroom spaces. At the Nicholson St Campus, which is a TAFE only campus, the master plan for the Learning Commons incorporates this range of spaces, however, it also includes a self access area and a study lab that were previously located in other areas of the campus. This acknowledges that while the resources are there for students to work autonomously, TAFE students also seek more structured learning support than their higher education counterparts in the self-access and study labs. These features are not currently planned for in the Learning Commons facilities at other campuses, but are a key aspect of adapting the model to suit the specific needs of the students that attend the campus.

The concept plan for the Nicholson St Campus Learning Commons highlights these features (Figure 8.1).

Another example of how the design of these spaces varies is at the St Albans Campus Learning Commons. In the St Albans Campus concept plan, an area has been created specifically for Careers Support. Within this space students will have access to online and paper-based resources and 'face-to-face' support in careers development.

The concept plans for the St Albans Campus Learning Commons highlights this inclusion of the Careers Support area as well as integrated work areas for rovers, IT, library and Teaching and Learning Support staff members. The plan also includes an integrated service desk.

As Bennet points out a library designed for active learning allows students to spend time on learning (Bennett, 2005). One of the ways a library can do this is by accommodating the social dimensions of study by allowing students to interact with one another. This is being dealt with in a number of ways. For example, comfortable, casual and

Figure 8.1 Nicholson St Campus Learning Commons concept plan
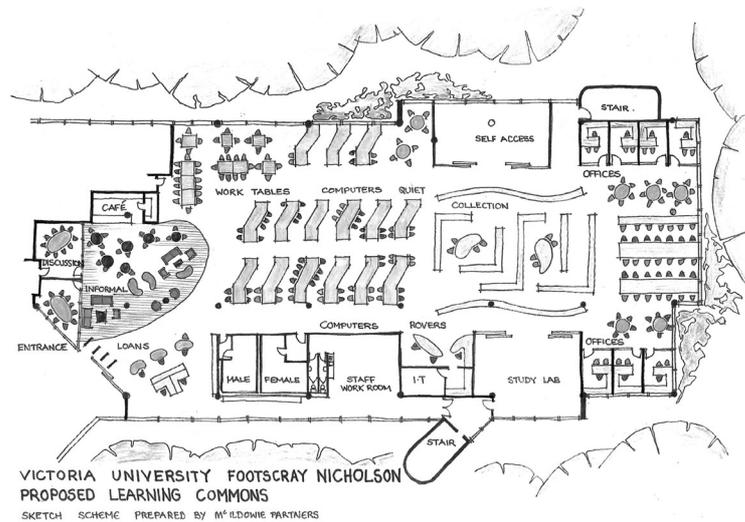
movable seating is a feature of each of the designs to encourage informal group discussion. The range of spaces and the flexibility of the spaces support the diverse ways that students learn and behave and accommodates students working individually or collaboratively.

Students enjoy working collaboratively at the City Flinders St Campus Learning Commons and utilise casual seating areas with wonderful views at this location (Figure 8.2a–c).

Food outlets are either co-located or within the space to encourage longer-term use of these spaces. Food outlets are becoming a standard feature of library design (Bennett, 2005). Bennett notes that conversations about class content (an indicator of active engagement) are more likely to occur in domesticated spaces such as cafeterias and refectories (Bennett, 2005). Again, exactly how food fits into the

Figure 8.2 City Flinders St Campus Learning Commons casual seating areas

(a)

(b)

Figure 8.2 (*Cont'd*)

(c)
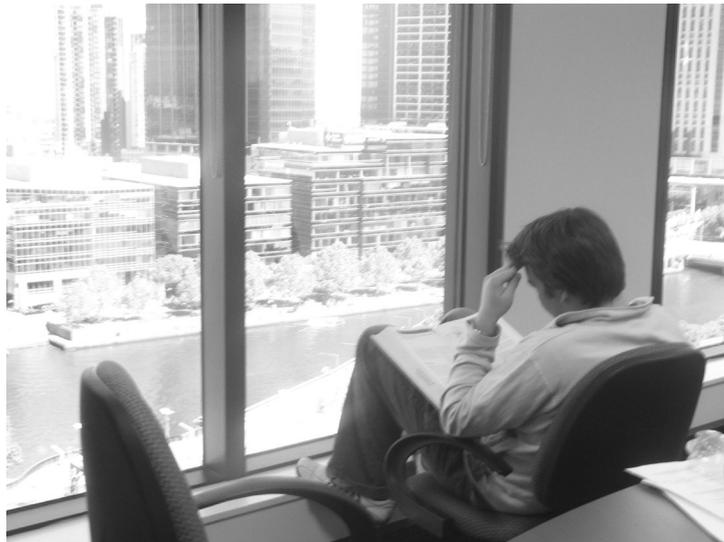
Learning Commons varies from campus to campus. The City Flinders St Campus does not have a café as the campus is located in the heart of Melbourne's busy central business district, which has a multitude of food outlets. However, food and drink vending machines are available for easy access in the Commons. In comparison, the plans for the Footscray Park Campus physically link the Learning Commons to a student precinct with a variety of food outlets. Given that this campus is surrounded by a residential area, the provision of options for students to access food is important. The Footscray Nicholson St Campus plans has a small café within the Learning Commons building itself (see concept map; Figure 8.1).

Each of the Learning Commons is centrally located on the campus. In some cases these developments are being used to help create an obvious campus hub. For instance, the Footscray Park development will incorporate the

transformation of the existing Information Commons to a Learning Commons, new faculty facilities and a student pedestrian and retail precinct physically linked to the Learning Commons. Within this precinct students will have access to resources, assistance, peers and sustenance. The plans for the Footscray Nicholson St Campus transform the existing library that was situated at the back of the campus but also incorporates additional space to link it to the front of the campus. This will ensure that the Learning Commons is easily accessible from the street entrance to the campus and is a visible and prominent part of the campus. Providing a student hub on campus is recognised as a key strategy for increasing the opportunities for students to integrate socially and has enormous potential to assist the University's strategic intent to better manage students' transition to University life. This is especially important for first year higher education students at VU where effective transition to University life is a significant determinant of retention.

Student feedback has indicated a desire for extended access to Commons facilities. VU has a goal of 24/7 access though the logistics and staffing model to support this have yet to be determined. Some campus facilities lend themselves to after hours swipe card access. Planning for new larger facilities includes the need to 'lock down' specific areas or floors of a building to provide flexible, safe and secure access through the various phases of the academic year.

The staffing model

The service model at VU is in the early stages of development and involves both collaborative working arrangements and co-location of Library staff with certain sections of Teaching and Learning Support and Information Technology Services in the physical space of the Commons. While the Library will

act as the manager of the facility, the spaces will be jointly staffed by these three key educational service partners.

A three-tiered service model has been developed and will be refined in practice. The frontline or first tier will be provided by student rovers, which are discussed in detail later on in this chapter. Second and third tiers of support will be provided by experienced Library, Teaching and Learning Support and Information Technology Services staff. An example of second tier support offered by Teaching and Learning Support is regular study laboratories or 'drop in' sessions while third tier support involves face-to-face consultations between student and a learning support staff member in a private office. Other second tier support would include specialist facilities (e.g. laptop loan or IT recovery) while third tier support includes workshops and training sessions.

Second tier staff will operate from an integrated service point in the Commons with a differentiation of activities. As McKinstry and McCracken highlight, the preference for the one desk model is based on the notion that 'a student often does not know if he or she has a technical, productive or informational question' (McKinstry and McCracken, 2002). In addition, as Crockett et al. warn, staff members at separate desks tend to isolate themselves and this isolation may increase over time (Crockett et al., 2002). The intention is to pool expertise in order to develop new collaborative service patterns and systems that are oriented towards supporting both learning and learners. It is recognised though that the process of developing new service patterns will take time.

The services offered to students will be both physical and virtual. The virtual space supports the operation of the Commons but also provides flexible access to many of its services beyond the walls of the buildings. The virtual Learning Commons will be consistent with the principles

adopted for VU Learning Commons and will support users who cannot always attend or who choose not to attend the physical space of the Learning Commons. It is particularly important for those VU students who do not spend a great deal of time outside classes on campus, or who are one of over 4,000 offshore located VU students. The virtual service will seek to integrate more closely with academic delivery. It will include course content material, existing library website services such as database searching, and Teaching and Learning Support services (including online bookings for staff consultations, which may also be virtual).

Student rovers

Early on in the planning process student assistants were identified as a desirable component of the Learning Commons. The rationale for using student assistants is based on the idea that many students 'find it easier to approach Student Rovers first for guidance or assistance, before they approach staff' (Student Learning Services, 2006a). This was also consistent with a drive to enhance the student experience and to employ greater numbers of VU students on campus. During 2007, a pilot program will be funded by Teaching and Learning Support to use Student Rovers in the City Flinders St Campus Learning Commons.

Student Rovers will function as:

- first tier of student support for Information Technology, Library and Student Learning;
- mentors for student communities of learning and the Learning Commons culture of learning.

(Student Learning Services, 2006b)

The need for careful selection and recruitment of students was an imperative. Therefore Student Rovers will be:

> ...later year students who have demonstrated their understanding of academic systems and learning demands through their academic results. Their credibility as first tier in support services will rest on their training, while their credibility as mentors will rest on their perception as successful students. (Student Learning Services, 2006b)

Students may initially be drawn from existing VU student leadership programs such as Peer Mentoring, Student Circles, or the Host program.

Three methods for rewarding Rovers were initially explored and evaluated: academic credit; certification, and payment (casual employee or honorarium). It was agreed in consultation with the University's Human Resources staff that the model used be payment because it assists students financially, is transparent and understandable, and is consistent with the University's focus on students' learning in and through work.

The student rovers will work for up to 8 hours per week during the 12 week higher education semester. Rovers will work in pairs in various shift combinations between 11.00 a.m. and 6.00 p.m. weekdays. Although their day-to-day work will be coordinated by a Rover Supervisor from the Library, the rovers' training and ongoing development will be provided by a Teaching and Learning Support staff member.

The student rovers will undergo both initial and ongoing training conducted by staff from Library, Teaching and Learning Support and Information Technology. A training agenda has been developed from existing training programs at VU in peer mentoring and refined to suit the specific

circumstances. Student rovers will undertake 2 days of paid training, which will include training in helping students with:

- basic IT related problems;
- referring students to appropriate library resources;
- general questions about academic writing, referencing techniques, basic citation and study skills.

The rovers will use social networking software (ELGG) to communicate with one another through a blog, through detailed shift reports and eventually through a Wiki for FAQs. Rovers will be allocated time towards the end of each shift (in a handover period) to use this facility to reflect on their role, refine their responses to students' problems and queries, share insights with their peers and discuss any issues they are having with their supervisors. Both the Rover Supervisor and the Teaching and Learning Support staff member will have access to ELGG and will be able to use it to monitor how the rovers are working in the space and identify what further support and training they need. In addition, rovers will be required to keep basic statistics on student enquiries and whether they have been able to help the student or whether they have referred the student on to a more experienced staff member.

At this stage funding is provided by a one-off grant from TLS (rather than re-current University funding). Although this is not ideal, it was necessary to launch the program. Evaluation of the Student Rover pilot is a high priority in 2007 in order to make a case for continuing the program and obtaining ongoing funding for student rovers in all VU Learning Commons. The evaluation will take a participatory action research approach with student rovers, Library staff, Teaching and Learning Support staff and the researchers being active participants in the evaluation process. A wealth

of formative evaluation data will be generated from ELGG and from the statistics on student enquiries, which will be used to continuously modify and improve how we support and train the student rovers. A key focus of the evaluation will be on exploring the effectiveness of rovers not just as additional staff members, but as mentors for student communities of learning. Qualitative focus groups, interviews and questionnaires will be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the rovers pilot from the perspective of key stakeholders who are not direct participants in the pilot but who either use the rover service (students and academic staff) or who share a workplace with the rovers (library, Information Technology Services and other teaching and learning support staff). In addition, roving as a form of peer mentoring will be explored as a way of helping students to develop their core graduate attributes and reinforce study and learning skills. Such research could help to inform other mentoring initiatives at VU designed to support student learning.

Reflections on progress to date and where do we go next?

A great deal has been achieved to date as VU works towards a Learning Commons approach across its many campuses. A shared understanding of a Learning Commons at VU has evolved over time but it was not without challenges. Although there was agreement about the need for new student learning spaces there were differences in how it was seen to work in practice, what personnel would staff the Commons, and indeed what models would best support students' learning. One example was the notion of using student rovers. When this was introduced, concerns were

raised by some library staff about students being perceived to take existing library jobs while student learning staff saw this as an opportunity to extend existing mentoring programs in the university.

Through working together closely each party gained a better understanding and opportunities for greater collaboration have emerged. An example is the notion of 'triage', with library, student learning and IT professionals as the second and third tier of support after student rovers. This was a helpful concept in understanding how the different parties could work together and maintain professional identities.

While the development of the physical spaces of the Learning Commons at a number of campuses are well underway, the approach to the management and staffing of these new student spaces is still in the early stages of development. The service model needs to be flexible enough to evolve over time and scaleable to accommodate different campuses and student cohorts. The literature highlights the difficulties of merging previously distinct service cultures and warns of a tough period of transition (Crockett et al., 2002). Most commonly the people involved cite different reporting lines, different work culture and lack of knowledge of each other's areas as challenges. Effective referral systems and cross-training to develop multi-skilled staff are also required.

The success of the Commons has been measured thus far by how busy the facilities are and annual student satisfaction surveys. Bennett notes the lack of evaluation of student learning in 240 library construction and renovation projects between 1992 and 2001. He states, 'We need to understand that the success of the academic library is best measured not by the frequency and ease of library use but by the learning that results from that use' (Bennett, 2005; p. 11). Many of the

commonly used evaluation mechanisms do not elicit the type of data that is required. More sophisticated approaches to evaluating the VU Learning Commons are needed, which seek to explore the effectiveness of this space as a site of learning.

During 2007, an evaluation of the Flinders St Campus Learning Commons is planned. This will include collecting evaluation data on students' perception of the facilities, the service model particularly the use of student rovers, and student behaviour and study patterns in this space to determine how best to support students in the Learning Commons. It will also include an evaluation of the staff experience of working in a new service environment. Findings from this evaluation will inform the implementation of the Learning Commons at other campuses.

For the Learning Commons to have a meaningful impact on students' learning, it needs to be integrated with the learning that students undertake in their courses. This is the hardest and most fundamental challenge ahead. It will require a university-wide commitment and culture change to ensure that all teaching at VU is consistent with a learner-centred approach and exploits the learning opportunities inherent in new types of learning spaces. Teachers need continuing support to promote and incorporate the development of independent and collaborative learning in the curriculum and the related role of the Learning Commons. A key determinant to moving forward will be in ensuring that the Learning Commons is flexible and adaptable to ensure that the Commons can best meet the changing needs of the University and its learners.

Notes

1. VU is one of five dual-sector universities in Australia providing both higher education and post-secondary technical and further

education (TAFE). The TAFE sector provides a range of qualifications from Certificate I to Advanced Diplomas in general and preparatory education similar to the Community Colleges in the United States as well as industry and trade specific areas. Although mostly post-secondary, they also offer the final year of an Australian secondary education qualification for adults and or alternatives to the final year.

2. Detailed statistics on higher educations student profiles in Australian universities are available from the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). (see *http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_ resources/statistics/publications_higher_education_statistics_ collections.htm#studpubs*).

3. In the higher education sector, students on all courses are required to meet the Core Graduate Attributes one of which is 'can work both autonomously and collaboratively as a professional'. In the TAFE sector each qualification addresses the need for students to develop teamwork skills.

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